



INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

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Stream 5

Article nº 5-024

**A NOMADIC WAR MACHINE IN THE METROPOLIS:
EN/COUNTERING LONDON'S 21st CENTURY
HOUSING CRISIS WITH
FOCUS E15**

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**A NOMADIC WAR MACHINE IN THE METROPOLIS:
En/countering London's 21st century housing crisis with
Focus e15**

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ABSTRACT

This conference paper is a much shorter version of a recently published article in *City* (Watt, 2016). It builds upon Colin McFarlane's (2011a) controversial call for an 'assemblage urbanism' to supplement critical urbanism (Brenner et al., 2011). It aims to *supplement* rather than *supplant* critical urbanism. This supplementing occurs via a mapping of the spatio-political contours of London's 21st century housing crisis through the geophilosophical framework of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (2013) and Hardt and Negri's analysis of the metropolis in *Commonwealth* (2009). The paper examines the Focus E15 housing campaign based around a group of young mothers in the East London borough of Newham. In 2013 the mothers were living in the Focus E15 Foyer supported housing unit for young people in Newham, but they were subsequently threatened with eviction as a result of welfare cuts. After successfully contesting the mothers' own prospective expulsion from the city, the campaign shifted to the broader struggle for 'social housing not social cleansing'. The paper draws upon participant observation at campaign events and interviews with key members. The Focus E15 campaign has engaged in a series of actions which form a distinctive way of undertaking housing politics in London, a politics that can be understood using a Deleuzoguattarian framework. Several campaign actions, including temporary occupations, are analysed. It is argued that these actions have created 'smooth space' in a manner which is to an extent distinctive from many other London housing campaigns which are rooted in a more sedentary defensive approach to place and the protection of existing homes and communities – 'our place'. It is such spatio-political creativity – operating as a 'nomadic war machine' – which has given rise to the high-profile reputation of the Focus E15 campaigners as inspirational young women who do not 'know their place'.

KEYWORDS: assemblage urbanism, London's housing crisis, housing activism, nomadic war machine, encounters

1. INTRODUCTION

The temporary occupation of buildings and public spaces – squares, streets, plazas and parks – is one of the main ways that urban politics *takes place*. In the terminology of *A Thousand Plateaus* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2013, 444), occupiers are urban nomads; ‘the nomad distributes himself [sic.] in a smooth space: he occupies, inhabits, holds that space; that is his territorial principle’. By their actions, occupiers transform the striated space of the city; the grids, edges and straight lines of streetscapes and buildings become permeable as the nomads pore through the city’s cracks. It is the actions of denizens as nomadic occupiers which has characterised such prominent 21st century urban social movements as Occupy Wall Street in New York City, the 2011 occupation of Syntagma Square in Athens, and the Gezi Park Resistance in Istanbul (Harvey 2012; Stavrides 2012; Inceoglu 2015). Each of these occupations involved many thousands of people and they have had profound national and global significance; ‘Taksim Gezi Park became *the public space for Turkey*, both physically and symbolically’ (Inceoglu 2015, 542; original emphasis).

In these examples, Deleuzoguattarian ‘striated space’ – that which is delineated and monitored by the state through proscriptive barriers and rules (‘do not enter’, ‘disperse by sunset’) – *becomes* ‘smooth space’ – that which is seamless, open-ended and allows for rising up at any point, as in the sea or the desert. Striated ‘space is counted in order to be occupied’ whereas smooth ‘space is occupied without being counted’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 421). It is the latter where encounters between alterities can be realised (Hardt and Negri 2009; Stavrides 2012) and a ‘new urban commons’ (Hodkinson, 2012, 500) of genuine public space and democracy becomes possible (Inceoglu 2015).

By contrast to the above spectacular actions, the urban activism that this paper examines – the Focus E15 housing campaign in East London – is far less well-known and is on a much smaller scale involving a few dozen rather than thousands of people. Nevertheless, an assemblage urbanist analysis of what such a small-scale campaign has *done* (and does) illustrates how striated space can be eroded and how nomadic smooth space can be opened up in a less immediately obvious but nevertheless *intense* manner. This campaign emerged out of a group of young mothers who were living at a supported housing unit – Focus E15 – in the East London borough of Newham. The mothers were threatened with eviction and faced the imminent prospect of leaving not only their neighbourhoods but the city *per se*. Through a series of high-profile direct actions, the mothers and their supporters successfully resisted this initial displacement threat and then went onto campaign for the housing and urban rights of ordinary Londoners, as encapsulated in their emblematic oft-cited slogan ‘social housing not social cleansing’ (Figure 1). The changing of the campaign’s name from its original ‘Focus E15 Mothers’ to ‘Focus E15 campaign’ reflects this widening scope.

Figure 1. Focus E15 Demonstration in East Ham, 5th July 2014



Photo © Paul Watt

As Adkins (2015, 147) suggests, one of the many distinctive features of *A Thousand Plateaus* is that it ‘teems with numerous packs of all kinds’. Unlike Freud, Deleuze and Guattari (2013, 32) refuse to reduce the pack of wolves in the Wolf-Man’s dream to a singular ‘Oedipalized wolf or dog, the castrated-castrating daddy-wolf’. At the same time, whether there are five, six or seven wolves in the pack is immaterial. As Guattari (2015, 67, original emphasis) says, ‘what is in question according to us is not the size of the tools, machines or equipment, but the *politics* of human assemblages as much at the scale of microscopic desires as of grand power formations’. The correct question is therefore not ‘how many are in the pack/occupying the building?’, but ‘which intensities circulate through and are captured by the pack?’ (Adkins 2015, 40). This paper is thus not concerned with numerical extensities (‘how many are in the Focus E15 campaign?’), or with interpretation (‘what does the campaign mean?’), but rather with asking the Deleuzoguattarian questions: ‘what kind of experiment is it?’ and ‘what is it capable of?’ (Adkins 2015, 100, 236).

In addressing these questions, the paper examines the spatial politics of the metropolis with reference to London’s 21st century housing crisis, a crisis for which there is no obvious teleology. The following section examines ‘the Deleuzian tradition of assemblage thinking’ (McFarlane 2011, 205), focussing on various concepts embedded in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 2013) alongside Hardt and Negri’s analysis of the metropolis in *Commonwealth* (2009). A brief account of the London housing crisis and its attendant multiplying political campaigns is then provided. Many of these housing campaigns emphasise protecting existing homes and communities – ‘our place’ – against the

synergistic predatory forces of footloose global capital and neoliberalising states. Notwithstanding the importance of this metropolitan defensive *strategy*, it is argued that the Focus E15 campaign has *tactically* operated as a Deleuzoguattarian ‘nomadic war machine’. *How* this has occurred is examined in detail in the bulk of the paper.

2. ASSEMBLAGE URBANISM

Colin McFarlane’s (2011) paper highlighted the potential of assemblage urbanism to supplement the existing critical urbanist theoretical repertoire and in so doing enrich critical urbanism’s capacity to drill down into the micro-processes of capitalist urban inequality and its contestations. Such supplementing occurs in this paper via ‘Deleuzoguattarian geophilosophy’ and Hardt and Negri’s ‘metropolis’ (2009). Both pairs of authors give ontological primacy to becoming over being. Fluidity and the ongoing creative production of assemblages are prioritised – as articulated by Deleuze and Guattari (2004, 2013; also Guattari 2015) via nomadology, the war machine, deterritorialisation and lines of flight, and by Hardt and Negri (2009) in terms of encounters, the metropolis and the multitude. This approach allows urbanists to grasp how ‘unforeseen and contingent elements are in tension with the governance of striated space’, as McGillivray and Frew (2015, 7) illustrate in their Deleuzian-inspired analysis of mega-sporting events.

The state is a hierarchical organisation which codifies territory via monopolistic physical and legalistic means which, according to Deleuze and Guattari (2013, 416), maintains ‘the perpetuation or conservation of power’. That which is exterior to the state is what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the ‘war machine’ which is the product of nomads: ‘the organization of the war machine is directed against the State-form’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 418). The key to understanding the nomadic war machine and the state is their different relationship to space: ‘smooth space and striated space – nomad space and sedentary space – the space in which the war machine develops and the space instituted by the State apparatus – are not of the same nature’ (Deleuze & Guattari (2013, 552). In the games’ analogy from *A Thousand Plateaus*, striated space takes the form of chess whereby movement is prescribed within tight boundaries, whereas smooth space is akin to Go in which ‘it is a question of arraying oneself in an open space, of holding space, of maintaining the possibility of springing up at any point: the movement is not from one point to another, but becomes perpetual, without aim or destination, without departure or arrival’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2013, 411-12). For the war machine, mobility is not narrowly goal-oriented along pre-defined tracks, but is rather a matter of nomadic wandering punctuated by sojourns whereby space is temporarily held. It is precisely this *temporary* holding of space which is central to that nomadic war machine called the Focus E15 campaign – as one of the campaigners herself Tweets, ‘We could pop up anywhere’.

For Hardt and Negri, ‘the metropolis is to the multitude what the factory was to the industrial working class’ (2009, 25), i.e. the site of exploitation and domination, but also of prospective redemption (cf. Harvey 2012). It is in the city where encounters with alterity, the Other, can occur which have the transformative potential to *make something new*: ‘the metropolis [...] is a place of unpredictable encounters among singularities, with not only those you do not know but also those who come from elsewhere, with different cultures, languages, knowledges, mentalities’ (Hardt and Negri 2009, 252). Hardt and Negri go on to argue that such encounters are at their most politically generative – of novelty and the multitude itself – when they are *joyful*, a prominent feature of the Focus E15 campaign as explored below.

3. LONDON'S HOUSING CRISIS AND ITS ACTIVISMS

London is currently experiencing a profound housing crisis for which there is no clear end in sight. The central contradiction the crisis exemplifies – between a housing production and distribution system geared towards maximising exchange values and a deepening vacuum in terms of meeting use values – is increasingly obvious in London's streets, characterised as they are by the homeless eking out an existence in the shadows of gleaming new apartment blocks that have been sold off-plan and stand empty. This contradiction was highlighted by the Focus E15 campaign who held a 'solidarity sleep out' (Newham Recorder 2015) with the homeless in Stratford, one of Post-Olympics East London's epicentres for upmarket real estate investment (Watt and Bernstock 2016).

London's housing crisis has produced a plethora of campaign groups who highlight and combat its manifestations and causes. The mainstream media tend to discursively frame this crisis in generational terms – 'Generation Rent' – young people under 35 who are struggling to get onto the city's 'housing ladder'. However the city's housing struggles are much broader than this, including direct action, anti-eviction groups, squatters and campaigns challenging the demolition of estates. The dominant approach to urban space is protective, i.e. defending place/s from the coercive, avaricious actions of developers and their state allies. The Focus E15 campaign, on the other hand, tends to tactically operate less via sedentary notions of defending established space – our place – but rather on spatial mobility and *becoming*, as central to the work of both Deleuze and Guattari and Hardt and Negri.

The paper draws upon a range of methods including participant observation, in-depth interviews with campaigners, documents and websites. Since summer 2014, the author has attended numerous events organised by the Focus E15 campaign including their regular weekly stall, campaign meetings, demonstrations, the Carpenters' estate occupation, as well as social gatherings. This participation has involved active support via handing out leaflets, engaging with passers-by and speaking at campaign meetings. Such ongoing academic/activist engagement has facilitated informal conversations both with campaigners and with East Londoners affected by the housing crisis; the latter have also been interviewed and their voices appear in the paper.

4. 'It was quite random' – encounters in East London

The Focus E15 campaign emerged out of a group of young mothers who in the autumn of 2013 were living in the Focus E15 foyer in Stratford, Newham. At this time the foyer, which is part of the East Thames Housing Association (ETHA), was the largest of its kind in the UK with 210 units, mainly single-person flats. In addition to such temporary accommodation, the foyer offered various forms of support for the young people (aged 18-24) who lived there, for example in relation to training and employment. They were a mix of Black and Asian Minority Ethnic [BAME] and white East Londoners from disadvantaged working-class backgrounds; some were also vulnerable, for example as victims of domestic violence.

Several of the mothers lived with their young children in a mother-and-baby unit at Focus E15 while others had their own flats. Funding for the mothers was provided by the Supporting People budget (£41,000), but this funding stream was removed as a result of government cuts which were passed on to ETHA by Newham Council (The Guardian 2013). Consequently the mothers were issued with eviction notices. Cath describes her reaction:

‘Just pure panic, like when I got the eviction notice, because I suffer from quite bad depression, so when I got that I just sort of gave up. I thought “do you know what, if this is what is going to happen, what is the point of anything anymore?” It’s only because my Mum said to me, “look don’t feel like that, you can do something about it”, and then I wrote a letter to the council and then got all the other mums who were feeling the same, they just felt what is the point anymore. But we got the strength to get together, and then we decided to fight back and we didn’t stop, as soon as we saw a little bit of progress we thought, “we have got nothing to lose any more, we are going to be sent away from our family let’s just do it, let’s just put everything into it”, and we did’.

The mothers, who were now operating as a collective, devised a petition and proceeded to collect signatures in the local Stratford area. It was whilst they were doing this that they came across a ‘grouplet’ of the Revolutionary Communist Group [RCG] who at the time held a semi-regular stall against welfare austerity in Stratford Broadway. The RCG is a Marxist-Leninist group with a strong anti-imperialist and anti-racist ethos, as indicated by its newspaper, *Fight Racism! Fight Imperialism!* (see Figure 1 above). The initial meeting between the Focus E15 mothers and the RCG was ‘random’ as Laura explains.

‘It was quite random, because we used to just go and sell our paper and do our petitioning wherever. So we were an East London based small grouplet, so we used to go to Dalston, go to Stratford, go to Hackney, go to wherever we felt. So it was one of those amazing chances of history that we happened to be in Stratford the day they happened to pass. We used to occasionally go to Stratford, it was very boring, we had a small table, a newspaper and a petition about the Bedroom Tax. [...] One day in September 2013, four young women came past the stall and they had a hand-written petition and a letter to the council, and they told us about the hostel they were living in, and that they’d been given an eviction notice’.

It is this initial coming together on a densely populated, thus far un-gentrified East London street which formed the basis for one of the city’s ‘unpredictable encounters’ (Hardt and Negri 2009, 252) in which two singularities with limited knowledge of each other’s life-worlds – East London mothers and revolutionary communists – came together to forge something new. While the original impetus for the petition came from the mothers, the RCG helped to provide material resources and a certain campaigning know-how: ‘they [the mothers] didn’t have access to a printer, they didn’t have access to any of the stuff that we could help them with, so we produced exactly their wording, but on a printed out petition and that sort of stuff’ (Laura). This coming together in practical material ways (McFarlane 2011) was important in helping to build trust between these two quite different singularities. Following the hostel meeting, the mothers went along to the RCG stall in Stratford and from then the latter morphed into the regular weekly Focus E15 stall, as discussed below.

5. A ‘turning point’ – going to see the Mayor

Out of growing frustration at the lack of information and recognition, the campaigners decided to appeal *directly* to the Mayor of Newham, Sir Robin Wales, who they genuinely believed would help them.

‘We walked in [to the Mayor’s office] ... and by then we’d done a few street stalls and had made the *Newham Recorder*, but what we’d said was just about our hostel, it wasn’t about anything to do with the Council. The Mayor saw us and I introduced who we were and he said “I think it’s disgusting what you’re doing” ... and he’s our *Labour* Mayor [original emphasis]. And we was completely shocked and at that point we was still quite weak, we were a bit shaken up by him, when we got out of the meeting we were actually in tears, cuddling each other, “he’s our Mayor”’.
(Cath)

The local state, in the personage of the Mayor, closed down any kind of right to the city for the young mothers. According to several interviewees, his response was ‘if you cannot afford to live in Newham, you cannot afford to live in Newham’. Social housing (which includes public ‘council’ housing) was not on the agenda, or at least not for them. It was the starkness of the rebuff – the pulling up of the castle drawbridge – that galvanised the campaigners into further action: ‘in a way that was a turning point, we just thought if that is how we are going to be treated then we are going to show them that we are worth more than that’ (Laura).

6. ‘We just walked in’ – the war machine arrives

The Mayor’s response and his subsequent inaccessibility prompted a shift in tactics by Focus E15. They embarked on a series of direct actions notable for both their high-profile visibility – on both social and mainstream media – and their capacity to ‘pop up’ and hold space within the cracks and interstices of official striated space with its manifold inside/outside, permitted/proscribed, speaker/listener binary distinctions. They became a nomadic war machine.

The first major action was an occupation in the front offices at the East Thames Housing Association [ETHA] building in Stratford in January 2014. Following a protest outside the offices, the women, along with children in buggies (push chairs), went inside: ‘it was excellent, we just walked in and they have a show flat, so we had a party in the show flat and we got press down’ (Martha). In Goffmanesque terms, the campaigners had walked straight into the ETHA ‘front region’ consisting of shiny corporate offices which were out-of-bounds since the mothers were relegated to the ETHA’s ‘back space’, i.e. the hostel with its draconian appearance (Goffman 1971). The show flat Martha mentions was a mock-up to illustrate the kind of accommodation that East Village residents would occupy as part of the 2012 Olympics housing ‘legacy’. The ETHA is one of two housing associations which forms part of Triathlon Homes which in turn runs the so-called ‘affordable housing’ element at the East Village, the converted Athletes’ Village (Bernstock 2014). The audacious occupation unfolded in a celebratory, carnivalesque manner as Martha explains (see Figure 2).

‘There was a party, it was a lot of fun, we had lots of cakes, lots of hats, balloons, everything so we just marched in and just immediately got to work and decorated it all. Everyone had little hats on, so yes it was excellent, it worked very, very well’.
(Martha)

Figure 2. Occupation at East Thames Housing Association, 21st January 2014



Photo © Focus E15

The decoration of the show flat involved a material transformation of what was already a temporary structure. It also turned a faux home (‘just for show’) into a momentary ‘real home’ – a space for a joyful encounter of laughter and togetherness. This ‘socio-material interaction’ (McFarlane 2011) at the show flat contrasted with the routinised deprivations the mothers faced in their actual real homes in the hostel, homes which were being taken away from them (Belgrave 2014). Cath described living with her daughter in a cramped studio flat: ‘we decided that we would have a party for our children there, because we had all missed out on birthdays, Christmases, all sorts of things, because we was in this horrible little thing [flat], and we was always scared, so we just enjoyed ourselves for that day’. Despite its exuberant character, the occupation reinforced the mothers’ awareness of the gulf between their own denuded domestic circumstances and the spaciousness of the show flat. Cath was ‘really upset’ by this contrast.

‘They had an Olympic show flat that was absolutely beautiful and this is just a show flat and it was like four times bigger than our flats. It was beautiful, perfect home, perfect place for anyone and it was just sitting there for people to look at, in an office and like if they have got that many, they was boasting about them being in the East Village and how nice they are, and they called it affordable housing as well, and we was thinking, ‘why can’t we be put in somewhere like this, you have given us these eviction notices, you should rehouse us and not just other people. [The flats were] complete opposites, we was living in one room, we had a separate kitchen and bathroom, but you could touch the walls either side of the kitchen, our flats were kind of damp, we was infested with mice, fruit flies ... it just felt really claustrophobic’.

The show flat was on view but out of reach. This contrast reinforced the significance of the mothers wanting answers from the ETHA. In fact the ETHA manager *did* come down to speak to the campaigners. For once officials were listening and responding to them rather than the stone-walling they typically faced. Their actions accumulated power in the Spinozian sense ‘as capacity or ability, not domination’ (Adkins 2015, 161), that which underscores Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of becoming as a virtue: ‘I mean the ball was

really in our court, we were completely in control and we were determined what we were doing, so when we were singing those songs we were really involved and especially when there is children there, so it's good that we got this chat as well' (Martha). In Deleuzoguattarian terms, their breach of the off-limits space of the ETHA front offices and show flat, coupled with the material transformation of the latter, formed an assemblage with intensity and power, a nomadic war machine. The party atmosphere combined with the strong female and maternal presence wrong-footed the male security guards who were milling around: 'it's very difficult on their part because they can't just get a load of securities come and chuck out loads of mums and babies and the rest of us' (Martha).

Following this first successful occupation, the invigorated campaigners went to the nearby housing department offices of Newham Council: 'after we came out everyone was on a bit of a high and we said, "OK let's go to Bridge House", so we just did an impromptu march straight to Bridge House' (Laura). In this war-like 'march', as in similar actions, it was the pack and its mother-child-buggy assemblage combination which gave the women a sense of their own accumulating potency.

'I think that is another reason why this campaign got quite far because a very big visual is seeing a girl with a buggy and like us all, we all looked quite military with our buggies like big tanks or something. So yes I think that is something that made it a little bit more powerful'. (Cath)

Initially the campaigners struggled to gain entry because of security staff, but eventually they got inside, 'all of us and banners and children and buggies' (Laura). However their reception was a good deal frostier than at the ETHA since not only did no-one come to speak with them, but the security guards tried to evict them and called the police. Before the campaigners eventually left Bridge House as a result of the police presence, they had a crucial *encounter* with two mothers who were being sent to Birmingham that day, an encounter that indelibly confirmed the reality of social cleansing for others as well as themselves.

'They were homeless with their bags and everything, one had a really tiny baby that was only a few weeks old, and they, as we was chanting they was crying, so we went over and spoke to them. The council didn't give them any emotional support ... and we asked them what their situation was, and both of them were being sent to Birmingham, they [council] paid for a removal van and a taxi to take them away on that day, and so we was saying this is evidence right here. That was when we started doing it for everyone, because we really felt how upset they was, because we were in the same situation, we knew that would be us next if we didn't carry on'. (Cath)

Even in the relatively brief time the campaigners were in the housing offices, their potentiality was massively raised:

'Cath confronted Jacob who was one of the council officials who dealt with them, who was very patronising and rude to them. They had a very tough time and it was just like the tables were reversed. Suddenly they're in a situation of control. Cath was very brave and just told him what they thought of how they'd been treated.' (Laura)

The power imbalance between vulnerable young mothers and intransigent council officials was reversed. The eventual *institutional recognition* of the campaign's accumulated power came when nearly all of the mothers were eventually rehoused in Newham with council financial assistance, albeit within the insecure and expensive private rental sector.

Throughout this early period, the campaign attracted considerable attention from the local *Newham Recorder* newspaper, as well as national journalists covering the impacts of welfare austerity, notably Kate Belgrave (2014) who filmed many of their early actions. This media interest ballooned during what was their most audacious action to date, the occupation of a block of flats at the Carpenters estate.

7. ‘These people need homes – these homes need people’ – occupying the Carpenters estate

During September-October 2014, the campaign created an ‘open house’ social centre by a two-week occupation of an empty and boarded-up block of flats at the Carpenters estate in Stratford. This council estate has been subject to a long-running ‘regeneration’ programme by Newham Council since 2005. As Watt (2013) discusses, the entire estate was due to be bulldozed in order to create a new Stratford campus for University College London (UCL). This plan collapsed in May 2013, ostensibly for financial reasons. Nevertheless Newham Council continued to decant tenants even though it lacked a development partner. By autumn 2014 the estate was becoming increasingly depopulated with many low-rise flats ‘tinned up’ (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Decorated flats at the Carpenters estate, June 2014



Photo © Focus E15

The campaigners became aware of the estate and its emptied-out status in summer 2014 via encountering an ex-Carpenters’ resident who stopped by at their Stratford Broadway stall. Cath describes her bewilderment on first seeing the half-empty estate.

‘We were really upset with the fact that people are forced away and they are now left empty, like it’s been over seven years and these properties there is nobody in them. I thought it’s wrong, that people who want to come back to Carpenters Estate and people that need accommodation, why should someone be sent to Birmingham when there’s a house around the corner? It really doesn’t make sense at all’.

The first action on the estate was in summer 2014. The campaigners decorated a low-rise block of boarded-up flats with blown-up photographs of Newham residents (Newham Recorder 2014a; see Figure 3). One of the campaigners used her artistic skills and contacts with artists who had done a similar project at the Haggerston council estate in Hackney which was decorated with residents' photos prior to its eventual demolition. As they began putting the posters up, the campaigners met one of the Carpenters' residents.

'He said, 'oh yeah great idea, but if you don't get them up onto the first floor windows they'll just come down tomorrow'. We went, "oh yeah we can't really reach them". He said, "don't worry", and then he went away and about 20 minutes later he came back with this massive ladder. Then we got them up to the next level, it was really good. Then we hung around all day and met a few people from the estate'. (Laura)

On Sunday 21st September 2014, the campaigners held a party outside the same block of flats. This presaged their pre-planned opening up and occupation of the flats. The removal of the grill on the front of the window was a key transition moment in the shift away from the flats being sealed striated spaces, to their opening up and out as smooth space, a moment whose significance was not lost on the campaigners, as one said, 'I was really nervous when we broke into the flats and I was looking outside at all the people stood there when we lifted the grills off' (Figure 4). The prominent pair of green banners they hung outside the flats – 'these people need homes – these homes need people' perfectly captured a central contradiction of the housing crisis whereby dwellings lie empty while the bodies outside have no place to call home.

As with the occupation at ETHA, the socio-materiality of the Carpenters' occupation was highly significant. The women were surprised at the flats' good condition, as can be seen in the campaign's own 'show flat' (Figure 5). In many ways it was the flats' material condition – *not* rundown – which confirmed, for the media and the hundreds of people who went through the centre, the disingenuousness of Newham Council's claim that the estate was 'not viable' (Newham Recorder 2014b). Furthermore the women made strenuous efforts to keep the flats clean. They wanted the occupation to be a convivial, welcoming 'open house' and also one that did not alienate the local estate population: 'when we had to leave, we went to incredible lengths not to leave a trace, to clean and scrub out the toilets, we spent the whole day cleaning that place up, hopefully to get it ready for the next person, but also to show that we weren't the stereotype of "dirty squatters"' (Eileen).

Figure 4. The Carpenters Estate, September 2014: creating smooth space – opening the social centre



Photo © Paul Watt

The open house occupation became a hub for people concerned with London’s housing crisis from all over the city. They were visited by women from the New Era estate (who were near the start of their own campaign; see Beswick et al., Special Feature), as well as trade unionists and a daily throughput of journalists and well-wishers, including existing residents. The occupied flats became a space for the kind of cosmopolitan encounters that McFarlane (2011) highlights, those which criss-cross existing identity fault-lines, as explained by Tom, a postgraduate student.

‘I think it’s been a very exciting place to be the last week and a bit because it’s not only in terms of the ... more traditional conception of it as a protest, but also as a space that is basically a lot of encounters that I think it will be quite remarkable in ways. As someone said yesterday ... he was sat here and he was a squatter of many years, not that we are squatting of course [laughs]. But he said that what amazed him was the fact that he couldn’t tell who exactly was who, and I think he was right in the sense that the narrative we get from the people like *Evening Standard* [newspaper] and the Labour Councillors is that it [the campaign] has been hijacked by activists and that is all about denying political agency to working-class single mothers. But always what has been amazing is that it has brought together people from these incredibly different backgrounds. I mean I come from a very privileged educational background, and the kind of people I have spent my week with, and

the ways in which we have kind of like affected each other and lived together has been, it's been really interesting, I mean very intense but for all the right reasons'.

Figure 5: 'Uninhabitable' flat at the Carpenters open house occupation, October 2014



Photo © Paul Watt

During the Carpenters' occupation, mainstream media interest mushroomed especially following *The Guardian* newspaper article by Aditya Chakraborty (2014). The campaigners estimated that they gave over 100 media interviews in two weeks, and in so doing helped to push the London housing crisis up the political agenda.

8. Conclusion

Focus E15's restless nomadism and occupational sojourns in East London have given rise to the high-profile reputation of the campaign as a group of young women who do not *know their place*. The term which is most often used to describe the Focus E15 campaign among London's proliferating housing campaigners is 'inspirational'. In fact they won the Ron Todd/Inspiring Young People Award in 2015, and have had plays written about them including 'E15' (2015) and 'Land of the Three Towers' (2016). The campaign has also demonstrated an unerring capacity to discursively crystallise the political economic and social contradictions underpinning London's housing crisis – 'social housing not social cleansing', and 'these people need homes – these homes need people'.

Deleuze and Guattari tend to emphasise micro-political movements – in the case discussed here, these are those movements whereby Focus E15 developed from monadic mothers into a nomadic war machine. This has involved multiple *becomings* predicated on shifting

human-material assemblages: from a fake show home to a temporary real home; from a disused 'rundown' block of flats to an open house; from a 'boring' anti-austerity stall, to a vibrant, joyful weekly 'social housing not social cleansing' stall. In each of these becomings, space is smoothed and new encounters emerge whereby genuine cosmopolitan interaction *takes place* (McFarlane 2011).

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