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Young People Coping with Austerity in a Hot Housing Market: The Case of ‘Live-in Guardians’

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Live-in guardians

- “Protection through occupation”
- Property owners offer affordable (temporary) housing
- Young, middle-class professionals and key workers
- Properties in desirable city locations
From Amsterdam’s antikraak to London’s live-in guardians

- 1960s: housing shortage and vacant properties led to squatting
- 1980s-2000s: state retreat from, privatisation of social housing
- 1990s-present: increasingly tight, high-cost housing markets
- 2010-present: legal crackdowns on squatting
Context

- **Living in crisis and austerity:** cuts to welfare; unemployment; precarious working conditions (e.g. Davidson and Ward 2014; Emmel and Hughes 2010)

- **Housing and urban life:** getting on the property ladder; lack of new housing builds/building for luxury buyers; being ‘priced out’ of the city; relegation to private rented market; lack of protections for renters; contending with a landlord’s market (e.g. Davis, 2014; Smith 2008)

- **The life course:** being at odds with cultural emphasis on ownership; record numbers of young people in UK living at home; impacts on life course; expectations vs. reality of being an adult (e.g. Eurofound 2014, Heath and Calvert 2013)
Mutual gains?

**Guardians:**
- access to housing stock beyond financial reach/alternative properties
- freedom from constraints of long-term contracts

**Property owners:**
- ‘secure’ and occupied property
- without costs of 24/7 security
- no responsibility for long-term tenants
- control and financial assurance

**Property guardian companies:**
- No charge for lease of the building
- No charge for renovation to basic living standard
- Receive payment for occupation from guardians
Or dispossession and precarity?

“Housing and work flexibility have become the ‘new normal’ and the mechanism of guardianship epitomises this increasing precariousness…” (New Left Project, 2014)

“Decaying pubs and dilapidated office blocks occupied by poor people…paying for the privilege of sleeping in the capital’s empty buildings as a security guard by another name…” (Kleinfeld, 2014 in Vice Magazine)
Affordable urban living

“You’ve got what you want, cheap, great accommodation in a good area, I mean that’s what people want.”
(Guardian Company, May ‘14)

I think that person would struggle to maintain his job [fire-fighter] if he didn't have low cost accommodation in the City of London … property prices are astronomical. So I think for key workers it does offer some relief and quite an opportunity
(Property Owner, July ‘14)

We were looking at, we were hoping to get something which was £450 to £500 each…in a zone where we could maybe cycle into work to get rid of the commuter costs, but anything that we could find was £600 plus, and on the salaries, starting salaries of 18 to 21…with the places we could afford and where they were it was just too much with travel costs, we would have nothing left. (Guardian, April ’14)
Relationships to home, self and society

“The more central you are the sooner you get kicked out normally…I think living in Central London in a nice room will never happen again. I doubt I’ll ever have this ever again… So if this becomes what you love this is pointless because it’s just going to end” (Guardian, May ‘14)

“It’s kind of embarrassing having people over, because people start getting nice houses with living rooms, and running water and no mushrooms in the shower!” (Guardian, April ’14)

“If you’re living in quite a posh area…they see you as squatters, and so you can get quite a lot of negative pushback from the community… I think a lot of people just think that it’s your job and that’s the only way you’re contributing to society.” (Guardian, May ‘14)
Making home in defunct places

“…these places are generally places which have a function. Usually a YMCA or a mental hospital or something like that or occupational health, and they’ve been rendered defunct for that original purpose…that is obviously when they’re given to us, which is great because it gives them a purpose again, but it’s not what they were originally there for.” (Guardian, April ’14)

“I think everyone makes their rooms, immediately, very homely…You spend a lot of money when you first get to a place…just cleaning it, painting it, like a lot of time and effort…” (Guardian, May ’14)

“it’s good to get some form of incense or candle because these places always smell of care home and weird… So it’s about getting your senses to feel comfortable. (Guardian, May ’14)
‘Everyone’s a winner’…?

“They don’t have a tenancy, otherwise the whole benefit of them being there would be undermined … Because they're not tenants…” (Property Owner, May ‘14)

“They’re keeping tabs on us and they’re saying, you can’t wedge the doors open. You can’t have pictures hanging on the wall of communal areas or the hallways for fire safety…” (Guardian, April ’14)

“It was really cold in our flat, and they wouldn’t fix the boiler for us, so we suffered through a whole winter. “ (Guardian, May ’14)

“The fact that you don’t have some of the rights which would normally be yours means absolutely nothing.” (Guardian Company, May‘14)
Commodification of guardianship?

“...even the guardian schemes are getting expensive. When we got chucked out of our one in Deptford we were looking elsewhere. There was somewhere in Kentish Town which was 500 quid a month for a tiny single room with no window and you can rent for less than that.” (Guardian, May ’14)

I was lucky enough to move into a [non-guardian property] house in August last year....I think it was the right time to move out...as it turns out, I pay very little extra on top of what I was paying the Live in Guardians. So I think it’s slowly creeping up and creeping up in price.... It’s becoming a commodity. (Guardian, April ’14)
Conclusions

- Agency and expectations
- The edge of (in)formality
- Property safe-deposit boxes and poverty entrepreneurialism