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UnMaking public housing towers: the role of lifts and stairs in the demolition of a Puerto Rican project

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[article]*Unmaking Public Housing Towers: The Role of Lifts and Stairs in the Demolition of a Puerto Rican Project*

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[a]Abstract

[abs]Through the case of a Puerto Rican public housing project, Las Gladiolas, this article argues that demolitions should be understood as long-term physical and emotional processes of home *unmaking*. It focuses on the diverse appearances of lifts and stairs in public housing representations, residents' everyday life, memories and legal arguments to tell a nuanced story about their meaning and materiality in the *unmaking* of home. Drawing together strands from critical geographies of architecture, geographies of home, and emotional geographies, these internal building technologies are approached as active mediators in the way personal and communal life was negotiated and remembered, as well as in the anti-displacement struggle unfolding in the final throes of the buildings' existence. The loss of home through long-term deterioration and displacement is situated in its historical and cultural context, since the island's public housing trajectory has been continually framed by dominant national aspirations of homeownership.

[a]Introduction

[tx]Public housing demolitions are typically framed as a finite and technical ending to a long trajectory of neglect or disrepair, producing more or less desirable results. This understanding overlooks three important elements. First, demolitions are long-term, complex, and often contested *processes* produced over time through a multiplicity of actors and interests, including material decay and symbolic condemnations. Second, while it appears as the

collapse of a whole structure, this effaces the relevance of its constitutive parts to the long-term process of dismantling. And third, what is *unmade* through gradual processes of intentional deterioration and opprobrium are not just buildings, but homes that are inhabited, subjective, and embodied.

[txt]This article will draw attention to the links between that drawn-out material *unmaking* and the subjective and collective dimensions of home that are entangled with it. To do so, I will focus on stairs and lifts as integral elements to the struggle over home in a now demolished Puerto Rican public housing project, Las Gladiolas, where a core group of residents resisted demolition from 2006 to 2011 through a class-action lawsuit against local and US federal housing authorities and other direct-action activist measures. In a broad sense and in line with this special issue, I am interested in amplifying the analytic lenses through which we consider home and its contemporary dislocations or “*unmakings*.” More specifically, I want to focus on and reevaluate the multiple roles communal lifts and stairs can play as a socio-technical dimension of the extended home in the context of a controversial public housing demolition.

[a]Public Housing Demolitions and Socio-environmental Principles

[tx]The use of demolitions as an enabler of social displacement has been criticized extensively by housing and regeneration scholars worldwide (Arthurson 2004; Droste *et al.* 2014 forthcoming; Gibson and Langstaff 1982; Goetz 2013; Lees *et al.* 2012; Murrie 1990; Smith 2002). In a context where the “retrenchment in the provision of public housing for very low income households” is increasingly common, pro-demolition policies are regarded as a neoliberal mechanism of “creative destruction” (Goetz 2013: 3; see also Brenner and Theodore 2002) that have paved the way for unequal forms of urban renewal and transformation (Cole and Flint 2007; Goetz 2003, 2004; Jones 2008; Newman and Wyly 2006; Wyly *et al.* 2010). Poverty de-concentration programs involving demolition have been widely critiqued in terms of their outcomes or impacts on economic self-sufficiency, health, and social integration (Bennett *et al.* 2006; Cole and Flint 2007; Crump 2002; Fenton *et al.* 2012; Goetz 2010; Goetz and Chapple 2010; Keene and Geronimus 2011; Popkin *et al.* 2000; Venkatesh and Celimli 2004); their links with gentrification, “middle-class revanchism,” and spatial peripheralization

(Kern 2010: 210; see also Engle Merry 2001; Lees 2013; Rodríguez Juliá 2005; Swyngedouw *et al.* 2002); as well as studied in relation to the community activism and resistance they engender (Bradford Hunt 2009: chapter 8; Feldman and Stall 2004; Hackworth 2005; Lees 2013; Pfeiffer 2006). Puerto Rico has not been immune to such forms of vast urban restructuring and to the increasingly globalizing logic of gentrification and urban governance in which city governments are encouraged “to engage in more aggressive programs of place-making, positioning themselves as platforms in an emergent economy of flows” (Blomley 2004: 30). More recently, other East Asian (Bang Shin 2009, 2013; He 2010; Wong 2006), Latin American (Borsdorf *et al.* 2007; Gaffney 2010; López-Morales 2011; Lungo and Baires 2001) and comparative urbanism scholars (Atkinson and Bridge 2005; Janoschka *et al.* 2013; Lees 2012; Porter and Shaw 2008; Robinson 2011) have critically examined new forms of urban renewal (that include demolition) as gentrification within “non-Western” contexts. These vast-ranging studies have shed invaluable light on the multiple sociopolitical motivations and outcomes of demolition and displacement processes in the Global North and South, but they have often done so at the expense of sustained attention to the symbolic and subjective dimensions that also run through them.

[txt]Some critics within housing studies have highlighted this gap, arguing that because “urban renewal and social housing development are still largely construed in a physical way with a focus on buildings and planning...solutions to what are perceived as problems tend to emphasize demolition and refurbishment” (Jacobs 2002). Flint (2002: 625) attributes this conceptual division between the material and subjective realms of social housing to the field’s largely unchanged positivist roots and traditions. Such legacies are in turn related to an environmental determinism most typically associated with Yancey’s (1971) and Rainwater’s (1966, 1970) studies of St Louis’s infamous Pruitt Igoe towers and to Newman’s (1972) theory of “defensible space.” By propagating the idea that high-rise public housing design from the post-Second World War modernist period encourages disinvestment and crime because it lacks “defensible space,” these theorists explicitly linked building height, type, and density (“the high-rise, double-loaded corridor, elevator

tower”) and a lack of social conviviality, where “for the low-income families with children – particularly those on welfare or suffering pathological disorder – the high-rise apartment building is to be strictly avoided” (Newman 1972: 195). With the exception of Rainwater who recognized the influence of societal “indifference and hostility” (1970: 3) to the racial and economic marginalization of residents, early attempts to account for modern high-rise failures through “defensible space” and “failed architecture” were generally divorced from questions regarding their political, economic, and social context. Others have since argued that beyond defensible design, other elements like the preponderance of high youth densities “set in motion...the downward spiral of physical and social conditions in public housing” (Bradford Hunt 2009: 180).

Discourses linking physical environments and social characteristics live on in the current pro-demolition policy language employed by the US Housing and Urban Development (HUD) program, “Home Ownership and Opportunity for People Everywhere” (HOPE VI) (Goetz 2003, 2013; Hackworth 2005), which also determines implosion policies for Puerto Rico due to the island’s “Free Associated State status”¹, which leaves most financial power and political leverage in the hands of the HUD. The unique political, legal, and institutional arrangement linking Puerto Rico to the USA began in 1898 and led to the creation of five local Public Housing Authority (PRPHA) offices in 1938 in an attempt to create decent housing for low-income urban workers (Dinzey Flores 2007: 470–5). Since then, the island’s housing program (consolidated and centralized in 1957) has continued to be financially dependent on federal subsidies and is legally required to follow the USA’s shifting urban development and housing priorities. Therefore, when HUD adopted the “revitalization and mixed income” program HOPE VI in the early 1990s as a way to transform “severely distressed” public housing in the USA by altering their physical shape and introducing market rents and tenant-based vouchers, the PRPHA followed suit. A joint commission set up between HUD and PRPHA in 1991 determined that due to their rundown state and an institutional lack of maintenance funds, all the island’s tall public housing buildings should be demolished. High-rises like Las Gladiolas (see below, “Situating Las Gladiolas”) were to be replaced by low-density, mixed-income

“walk-up” apartments, seen now as the correct social and architectural solution to the problems that had come to be associated with large multi-family complexes. HOPE VI policy was thus founded upon the fundamental (recycled) belief that environmental design can act as a panacea for larger social problems. But, as argued both within the US and UK contexts, the language of “mixed” communities has been a deceptive tool that hides an underlying “moral underclass perspective” (Lees 2013: 5) as well as making invisible the harsher rules it imposes upon the reduced public housing resident population of the new “mix” (Pfeiffer 2006).

The media have also played a predominant role in spreading these socio-environmental principles (see Feldman and Stall 2004; Lees 2013; Venkatesh 2000), representing public housing as deficient or dangerous through textual and visual “regimes of truth” (Foucault and Gordon 1980) that appear “natural.” In Boston and Chicago, for example, the environment and geographies of public housing buildings and neighborhoods were relentlessly linked to residents depicted in denigrating race- and class-based terms as “others” (Pfeiffer 2006; Vale 2002). Similarly, on the day of the demolition of one of Puerto Rico’s most “infamous” public housing towers (Las Acacias), one local reporter said that “if it were not for the island’s 324 public housing projects, or 25% of its residents, violent crime in Puerto Rico would decrease by 80%” (Albertelli 2000). The same day, it was first insinuated that Las Gladiolas would face the same fate. A year later, the then governor Sila M. Calderón confirmed “that buildings like Las Gladiolas would be demolished or replaced, rather than rehabilitated, because of their state of deterioration” (Rivera Marrero 2001). Although this would not be officially approved by HUD for another four years, her statement marked Las Gladiolas as a stand-in (“buildings *like* Las Gladiolas”) for problematic projects in general. Framing public housing space and its residents as “a problem” has the additional effect of implicitly validating paternalistic behavior by policy-makers (as “saviors”), of obscuring the negative effects of demolition as an authoritative intervention, and of disrespecting residents and undermining their confidence or willingness to participate in political activism (which then limits their ability to return to the new communities) (Hackworth 2005: 46; Lees 2013; Pfeifer 2006).

One of the goals of this article is to debunk the ongoing myths that conflate residents' social status with buildings' architectural form and to offer a partial reassessment of the story of Las Gladiolas's failure, a reassessment that takes into account the multiple narratives and subjectivities historically attached to everyday built environments. I will do so by addressing the "physical versus subjective" divide identified before through an analysis of the ways in which the deteriorated stairs and lifts of Las Gladiolas transcended their physical contours to enter the realm of subjective experiences and memory, legal and community actions, and media discourses and representations.

[a]Approaching Lifts and Stairs in Social Housing High-rises

[tx]A few points of clarification need to be made. First, my attention to these building technologies is data-driven; it comes first and foremost from observations and documentary material gathered on the ground between 2006 and 2007 while doing my doctoral fieldwork. It became clear to me then that while the towers *as towers* were at the very heart of the demolition controversy, their stairs and elevators *as component parts* were also key to the physical, political, and personal entanglements that constituted Las Gladiolas as a controversial place (Fernández Arrigoitia 2010).

[txt]My overarching approach to Las Gladiolas' deterioration and demolition is inspired instead by geographical work that extends an understanding of the home to include multiple spatial, temporal, political, and psychic/subjective scales and combines a recognition of the social and material interrelations of the home with imaginary realms; with the political at different scales; the subjective and collective; and the past, present, and future (Blunt and Dowling 2006: 27; Brickell 2012a, b, 2014; Caluya 2010). Rethinking the home and the ways it is *unmade* along such multiscalar geographies allows for an analysis of the deteriorated lifts and stairs as building technologies that contain and evoke past and present personal and community struggles, articulated through narratives of racialized, gendered, and class-based senses of place. These temporal and spatial interrelations do not tend to appear in the mostly impact-driven housing literature discussed previously. In fact, beyond their special place in theories of "defensible space," stairs and lifts have rarely been the focus of any social science study on home, displacement, or demolition.

Lifts, however, have increasingly featured in emerging studies of vertical geographies and vertical urbanism. This is linked to a wider turn in cultural, human, and “critical” geographies of architecture (Jacobs 2006; Kraftl 2010; Law 1999; Lees 2001; Llewellyn 2003) that pay attention to the production, experience, and negotiation of affect at the level of individual buildings. Verticality studies are also indebted to a materialist “non-representational” turn within “new” geographies of architecture (Anderson and Harrison 2010; Anderson and Wylie 2009; Bennett 2010; Hetherington and Munro 1997; Kirsch 2013) that considered materials to have “non-human vitality” that can be active and co-constitutive of geographies, places, sites, and spaces, as well as of articulations of identity and difference. “Vital materialists” draw from an agential understanding of materiality developed in “Actor-Network Theory” (ANT) and Science and Technology Studies (STS) (Latour 2005) whereby nonhuman entities (like the component parts of a building) have a priori an agency equivalent to that of humans, that is, the capacity to make other actors act. This socio-technical understanding of the way architecture is produced, lived, and inscribed with meaning allows us to view lifts and stairs non-reductively through their “networked meanings, values situated in a political world, with political grammars and aesthetics” (Tolia-Kelly 2013: 157). Urban theorists operating broadly within this “vital materialist” perspective have further argued that structural breakdowns or failures (of things like lifts and stairs) are a natural rather than anomalous part of the city system, where the constantly disregarded human acts of maintenance are “the means by which the constant decay of the world is held off” (Graham and Thrift 2007: 1), and that it is precisely when things stop working that they become visible and present. This has led to important discussions regarding the relevance of the invisible maintenance of social housing to the successful operations of those estates (Church and Gale 2000; Jacobs and Cairns 2011; Strebel 2011: 244; Yuen *et al.* 2006) and indeed to residents’ everyday sense of security and confidence (Baxter and Lees 2009). I will address this in relation to the de facto demolition of Las Gladiolas (see below, “The Multiple Scales of Stairs and Lifts”). The significance of potential breakdown and disintegration to the life of urban physical entities like buildings was echoed by Jacobs and her collaborators (2011; 2008; 2006: 3; Jacobs and Cairns 2011; Jacobs *et al.*

2007) when they argued that the failure or success of modernist social housing high-rises as physical structures (labeled “big things” and “building events”) is a direct result of the myriad, but generally invisible, economic, political, cultural, and environmental factors that enable them to either remain standing (and get framed within narratives of high-rise “success”) or to get deteriorated and dismantled (and depicted as high-rise “failure”). This is particularly relevant to Las Gladiolas, whose demonized buildings and its component parts were entangled with symbolic questions of what an appropriate urban home and habitation should be.

Vital materialism, however, still requires the inclusion of human emotions vis-à-vis building technologies; of more plural senses of human subjectivity and immateriality *alongside* the materiality of architectural form, or a more complex “geography of big things” that brings together the subjective (and contradictory) emotionality evoked by the experience of buildings and the affective geographies that relate to the embodiment, bodily comportment, and sensory perceptions of buildings (Rose *et al.* 2010: 343). Lees and Baxter’s study (2011) of one man’s experience of fear in a UK social housing estate drew on affective theories and showed that “fear, as an emotion, is intrinsically fluid, embodied and relational” (2011: 115). Their welcome engagement with the emotional nevertheless remains bound to immediate personal histories (of insecurity and fear) without placing them in dialogue with more distant or collective affective/emotional histories that also creep into the now.

I contend that non-representational geographies remain comparatively silent on the role of collective memory in a context of potential displacement “where personal and collective hurt thoroughly infuse politics and memory” (Anderson and Smith 2001: 9). Jones (2011) partially attributes this lack of memory-work to geography’s more traditional concern with collective national memories. In this critical line, I want to

[ex]more fully engage with memory’s role in the affective, performative practices of everyday life, in ways which can address the complex ecologies of memory (and forgetting) which interlink through individual practicing bodies, texts, materialities, past/present/future timespaces to make the present time deep/complex rather than flat/pure. (2011: 876).

[tx]In Las Gladiolas, the subjective emotional geographies of the deterioration

of lifts and stairs are inseparable from histories of “othering” public housing homes and residents. In the context of their collective anti-displacement struggle, technological disrepair can be understood as part of “personal and intrasubjective emotional ecosystems”² (Till 2012: 10) that stretch back in time, connecting historical exclusions to the present. Below, a brief foray into the inception of public housing high-rises in the island contextualizes those relationships.

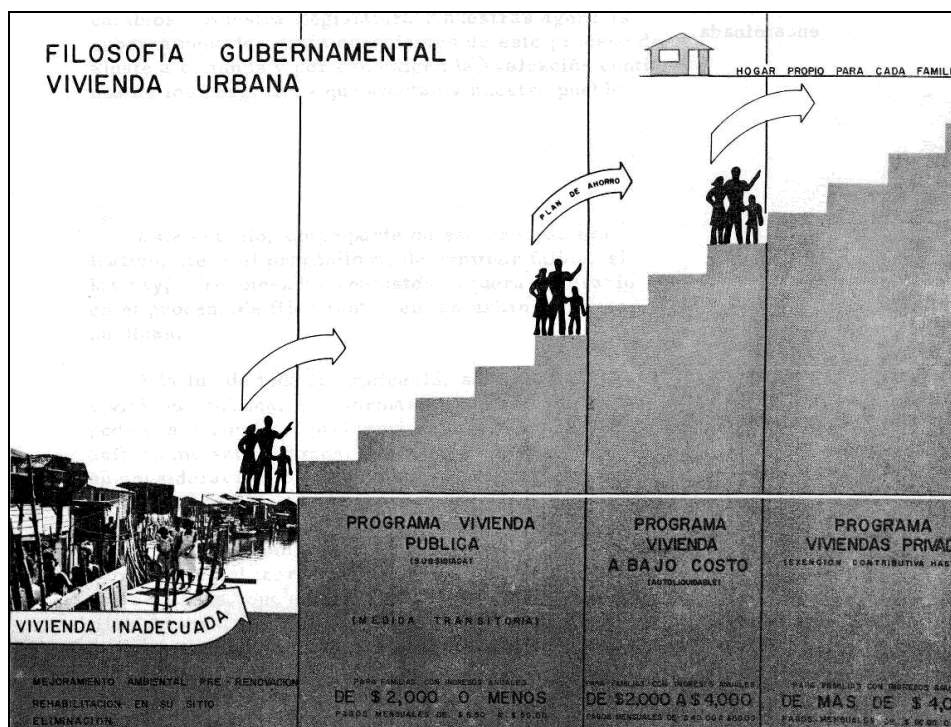
[a]Situating Las Gladiolas: *High-rise Promise and Homeownership*

[tx]In 1933 and 1935, respectively, the Puerto Rico Emergency Relief Administration and the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration were created to address the far-reaching effects of poverty and unemployment plaguing the island at the time. These US-sponsored programs allowed the local power elites, in collaboration with American technocrats, to deal with social problems through institutional and political measures that included “Operation Bootstrap” – an extensive economic investment program designed to industrialize the island. A rapid growth in rural-to-urban labor migration followed, as did an increase in shantytowns within the city of San Juan. Soon, that surplus population was portrayed as a mass of poor underdeveloped “others,” inherently dysfunctional and contributing to overpopulation owing to irresponsible (racialized and gendered) “over-breeding” (Briggs 2002; Colon-Warren and Alegría-Ortega 1998; Fusté 2006: 15–16, 2010). As a response to this “invasion of native subordinates” (Santiago-Valles 1994), the popular modernizing governor of the time, Luis Muñoz Marín, set a series of programs in motion including the freezing, surveillance and destruction of slums; zoning ordinances for new suburban districts; and the constructions of new public housing projects (the first one built in 1941) with the idea that

[ex]they exert decisive influence over the physical and mental health, social behaviour, delinquency, productivity and literally in all aspects of the civilizing evolution of a human being. (Muñoz Marín 1964: 1)

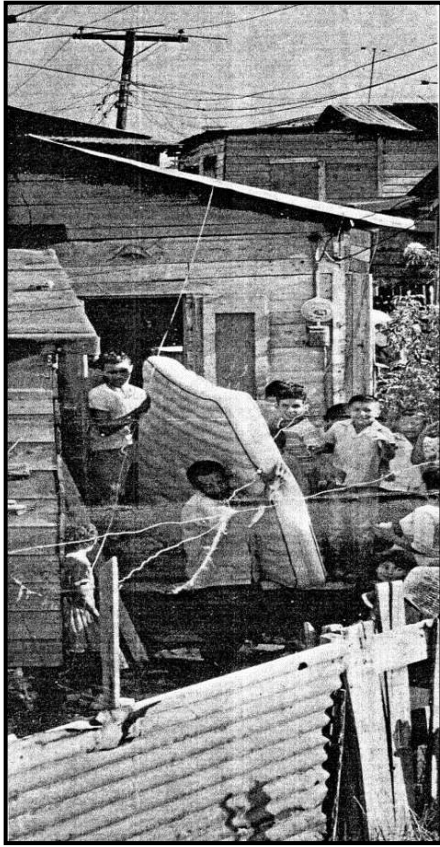
[tx]Multi-family, federally-funded public housing projects sought to express social order and economic efficiency and to provide “a stepping stone between inadequate accommodation and a humble, comfortable and privately-owned nuclear family home” (Muñoz Marín 1964: 3) – to promote the middle-class norm and ideology of homeownership. Conversely, not

buying/owning, or having aspirations to do so, indicated a backwards, inert, or feminized state of being that did not fit in with the new modern capitalist definitions of culture and nation. Connective elevators and stairs (see Figures 1–3) were part and parcel of that modernist narrative of transitional upward mobility that would deliver slum dwellers from their poverty to the dignity of progress. Buying or constructing a suburban detached home with a nuclear family and male working head was something one moved up to in order to reach a higher level of human (gendered) capacity and a more respectable and legitimate cultural status that also contributed to national improvement. [figs 1–3 near here]



[fig]Figure 1

“Government philosophy: Urban Planning,” depicting a nuclear family’s upward mobility, from slums to public housing, to homeownership (CRUV 1966). Source: Archivo General de Puerto Rico, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña.



[fig] **Figures 2 and 3**

“Placido Mercado, leaving Buenos Aires slum and Placido Mercado and family in ‘Monacillos’ Public Housing Project.” A man literally “on the move,” Placido is pictured as progressing up the ladder. The article points out the differences between the two dwellings and describes the fresh breezes and views of the latter an improved form of living (Magruder 1961). Source: Archivo Histórico Fundación Luis Muñoz Marín.

[txt] After the 1960s, the high-rise *condominio* (condominium) introduced a new kind of public housing typology, promising pragmatic, land-conscious solutions that could offer more units faster to a growing urban population. Like the preceding “low-rises,” these condominiums would serve as managed socio-spatial training grounds where, amongst other things, women would be taught “proper” middle-class modes of domestic behavior, including the correct usage of their modern home technologies (Fernández Arrigoitia 2010). These tall buildings, designed to offer an alternative form of habitability to Puerto Rican tropical conditions, were also built during a time of significant

technological developments and tied to specific narratives of national modernization and economic improvement. Las Gladiolas, the second and largest of its kind, was completed in two phases between 1970 and 1974. Its four towers, between 17 and 19 stories high, followed the quick and inexpensive pre-fabricated assembly methods of the time. The earliest Gladiolas residents were individuals resettled from the nearby *barríos* (i.e. slums) of Tokío, Nemesio Canales, and Buenos Aires, which were razed to make way for new highways and urban renewal in the new “model city” center of Hato Rey (Planificación 1970).

The continued existence of high levels of unemployment, an increasingly unequal income distribution, and other factors, such as the abandonment of economic redistribution programs, meant that the policy of socioeconomic integration through transition-based housing made homeownership and the “American way of life” mythical for most (Cotto Morales 2007; Rigual 1962; Safa 1964; Sepúlveda 1997). Most public housing residents and their housing structures were gradually re-signified from hopeful to criminal and abject, with newspapers communicating a growing popular anxiety over their apparent “failure” through images and discourses of criminality and deviance that recalled earlier demonizations of urban shantytowns. The buildings were now depicted not as a promise of modernity, but as “cement slums,” as “scenes of abandonment, dirt and apathy” produced by residents involved in gang-crime, delinquency, alcoholism, gunfights, and drug trafficking (Berrios 1986a, b; *El Mundo* 1973).

During the 1980s, Las Gladiolas was cast as San Juan’s urban center of “drug wars, trafficking and prostitution,” “the place where even ambulances and fire-fighting crews refused to venture in,” a place of “blood and death” – inherently marked by crime and in need of interventions like police raids, CCTV, entrance checkpoints, and separator walls. These stigmatizations were combined with a dominant “ghetto talk” (Blomley 2004: 90) that linked the physical decline of buildings to people’s socioeconomic characteristics in order to mark zones of the city as marginal or deviant – as ghetto. As an aesthetic symbolism of backwardness, deterioration became a central device in the perpetuated “othering” of public housing. It also became a crucial tool for official interventions like privatizing, controlling, “modernizing,” and

demolishing buildings. A similar logic has operated in many American public housing sites and UK ex-council buildings, where dominant media and political discourses misrepresent the towers as “sink estates” and classify its residents as deviant or untrustworthy, thereby justifying paternalistic interventions – what Lees (2013: 12) calls “social engineering, social cleansing, sold as urban renewal/regeneration.”

Speaking about Las Gladiolas, the ex-director of the Puerto Rico Public Housing Administration Agency (PRPHA) summarized these connections to me in the following way:

[ex]It has been proven that those structures, in any project – be it a high-rise or a traditional walk-up – if it has more than 200 units, it’s a problem. Large communities where you are “rounding up” people are not gonna work... I lived many years in the United States and everyone lives in apartments and in New York everyone is happy. It’s another culture. In the particular case of Las Gladiolas, *like in every place where there are towers*, you bring in other elements... With other communities we are demolishing and reconstructing I haven’t had the problems that I have with Gladiolas... But you start to understand when you see *the different places from where these people were taken* – you’ll see why our clientele is so varied, from a family that has an education to others that are truly families nobody wants (Carlos Laboy, pers. comm., December 2007, emphasis added).

[tx]Echoing Newman’s (1972) theories of defensible space, Laboy identifies over-densification as a problem when combined with the tenants’ culture or lack thereof (“the different places from where these people were taken”). Mentioning these “different places” discursively “others” the buildings and residents through its spatial referent, implicitly understood as the racialized, class-based, and gendered slums that preceded them. It also puts the blame both on density *and* on the culturally deficient nature of *some* public housing residents. Crucial, then, is this second layer of internal “othering” where a clear distinction is made between “good versus bad” residents and families – those who contribute to criminality and stagnancy on one side and those who were “good” and involuntarily caught in a context of generalized depravity on the other – an internal typecasting also used by residents and the media, as I

will discuss in more detail below.

[a]The Multiple Scales of Stairs and Lifts

[b]Personal and Memory Spaces

[tx]Since demolition was announced in 2006 and relocation officially got underway, the elevators of Las Gladiolas were increasingly and, many thought, conveniently out of order. In my year of fieldwork, the elevators of two Gladiolas towers never (or hardly ever) worked, whereas those in the other two worked sporadically. At every level, their external metallic doors were at least dented and scratched. In the year I spent visiting, I never rode one, partially due to my fear of it getting stuck, but mainly because they were not in working order. For anyone living above a first floor, these “vertical people movers” (Graham and Hewitt 2013: 83) were an important everyday mechanism through which to reach their homes.

[txt]As an icebreaker of sorts, it was usually one of the first things brought up whenever I came around, opening up conversations with and amongst neighbors about their hardships and discontent. Complaints ranged from the lifts’ outright malfunction to their putrid conditions or nauseating urine smells. Indeed, I was often told I would not want to ride them because of it. This situation forced residents to re-establish their relationship with their home space. For some of the older residents, in particular, walking up many flights of what had turned into rusty, dark, and damp stairs felt both tiring and dangerous. For Sheila, who was close to sixty, descending fifteen flights of stairs every morning at dawn to go to work long shifts as a security guard was a slow and difficult process. When she came back exhausted, at about 5:30 p.m., she would often stay to chat with some of her neighbors for a little while in the open courtyard below. During that time, she would gather the strength and courage to go back up the fifteen floors despite her long-standing bone and respiratory problems. When the elevators had worked properly, she would have dinner and come back down to spend time with her friends in the courtyard, or visit people she knew in their apartments. Now, the treks left her without the energy or desire to do so, even when it was still relatively early. She therefore stayed indoors and alone for much longer than she used to, which depressed her. Still, she remained put and resisted relocation because she had realized that housing officials “who live in houses” did not really care

about public housing residents, and that they had been dishonest in their stated intentions to provide better homes or improve the conditions of Gladiolas.

An important example of what many described as their “agony” was Mirta, the last resident occupying the eighth floor of her tower. This single mother of three, who was also the outspoken leader of the resident activist organization “Gladiolas Vive” (GV, on which more below), had been confined to a wheelchair for months due to a knee operation. In order to carry out necessary daily errands or even see anyone in the common areas, she sometimes had to resort to calling firefighters to carry her down the stairs. This was an incredibly laborious process that could take up to an hour. Once done with her day, she would then have to wait for enough residents, friends, or family members to be around to lift her back up.

Another lifetime resident who lived with one of her daughters and some grandchildren rarely left her apartment because of the ordeal it entailed. In her eighties already, she described this “voluntary” seclusion with an attitude that was at once sad and angry. In her many years in the towers, she had lived in at least three different apartments and become part of a community. Now, because of the broken lifts, she had to rely almost entirely on her family and was unable to interact with her decreasing number of neighbors. When describing her pain, she elaborated on the stories of other residents who were believed to have suffered heart attacks or committed suicide because of the growing sense of desolation. According to her, the run-down conditions had catalyzed a chain of physical and deeply affecting emotional events: decaying technologies led to concerns over personal and community safety that pushed residents further into the space of their apartments, which led to further deterioration and personal sense of loneliness, dreadful feelings of fear and entrapment.

As people left and informal social controls weakened, the personal sense of insecurity increased. For some of the residents interviewed, this generated a kind of internal “fortress mentality” (Caldeira 2000) leading them to devise and install do-it-yourself security devices. One woman wrapped a wire around her front doorknob and attached it to crystal bottles that would fall and crash in the event of a break-in. If necessary, she would defend herself with a machete

she kept with her in bed. The empty feeling of the buildings also impelled them to install additional layers of metal fencing around their window and gates over their front doors. Others devised creative anti-burglary methods like spreading oil around balcony bars to prevent break-ins by jumpers. All these low-tech responses to their new feelings of fear demonstrated a remarkable awareness of the inner workings/uses of the materiality of their towers, an ability to adapt to the complex social consequences of material deterioration, as well as expressing a determination to stay. These demonstrations of commitment to *making* (and defending) home contradict the rhetoric described earlier of high-rises as unsuitable for “un-modern others.”

For those who were younger or more able to deal with the consequences of faulty elevators, they still had to negotiate what many called treacherous (*traicioneras*) stairs. With no lights, nighttime proved particularly dangerous down those rusty steps that were in an advanced state of disrepair (see Figure 4). One older but fit neighbor had almost suffered a broken hip and accumulated growing health bills after falling down the slippery steps one evening. Another had required a tetanus shot after being bitten by a rat “with shiny pointy white teeth” when she accidentally stepped on it in the darkness. [fig 4 near here]



[fig]Figure 4

Rusty stairs in Tower B. Source: Author.

[txt]But perhaps the most dramatic of all consequences was the accidental death (by electrocution) of a neighbor as he carried a refrigerator up to his apartment in a *guinche* – a replacement goods-elevator placed temporarily behind each tower for housing relocations (see Figure 5). The peculiar twist of this story is that while the *guinche*'s main purpose was to facilitate displacement and moving out, the individuals involved in the accident had been subverting its use to bring in a refrigerator. They had avoided trying to get it up the stairs. Owning this new domestic appliance, a literal piece of the home, was not benign since spending money on household goods has come to symbolize residents' cheating the system and "staying put," rather than acquiring a home. In public housing, these items often represent inhabitants' skipping the steps towards the most important act of consumption of all: the acquisition of a house. But for residents, not reporting income increase and using disposable income freely was also a way to exercise agency and redefine public housing space for themselves as permanent homes. Rather than "ascend" according to the middle-class homeownership model, many felt a strong and unexpected sense of community safety and belonging, which impelled them to want to stay (Dinzey Flores 2007). In this slightly more complex light, a refrigerator conspicuously exposed in a broken elevator, then, is both an affront to the discipline required of public housing tenants and an active and resistant display of the home.

[fig 5 near here]



[fig] **Figure 5**

The *guiche*. Source: Author.

[txt] Residents who spoke about the elevator breakdown often slipped into narratives about the past, when those technologies worked. But these “good old times” were associated with other kinds of difficulties. Specifically, it reminded them of when public spaces were under the control of drug lords and their young dealers. One neighbor recalled how she would be charged a daily fee to use the lifts as a form of wanted or unwanted protection. Another remembered being forced to pay even after having to run across the public yard in the middle of a shoot-out. Taking the stairs, as an alternative, was not altogether safe either because dealers or junkies would frequently occupy them. Many mothers in particular spoke about the anxiety that this violent environment inspired. They would live in constant worry, nervous that their children could become involved with the drug world. But for others, like Maria, who had also experienced those fears and anxieties, the current deteriorated conditions of the buildings made her feel even more nervous and insecure. She neither revered nor glorified delinquent figures. Instead, she recalled stories of banal everyday conviviality that tied her sense of security to homely

practices of “respect” (like saying “good morning”) that were no longer there. Nearly all residents I spoke with distanced themselves rhetorically from those “bad” influences of the past, yet those criminals who also happened to be their next-door neighbors were felt to be better than the current environment of repression enforced by the state and deterioration. While such memories evoke nuance and ambiguity, the “us versus them” classificatory system that distinguishes good from bad residents is also firmly in place. Narrating the past life of elevators and stairs provoked uneasy emotions and conjured complicated stories of comfort and loss, which were not purely nostalgic and revealed the complexity of community life (see forthcoming Fernández Arrigoitia 2014).

[b]Legal and Technical Spaces

[tx]Above, we saw how lifts being “out of order” (Graham and Thrift 2007) constituted a major disturbance to the taken for granted spatial and social flows of everyday life. Their absent materiality was painfully palpable and alongside deteriorating stairs had deep isolating social impacts. The embodied interaction with lifts and stairs and the memories prompted by them brought to the fore some of the emotional elements integrally linked to their materiality. Residents also saw the frequency with which lifts broke down and the long waits for repair as a deliberate disregard meant to push them out of their homes by making routine life difficult, if not unbearable.

[txt]This became a regular complaint of Gladiolas Vive (GV), the resident organization set up in early 2006, immediately after demolition was announced, to communicate with external individuals, groups, and the media; to meet regularly in the community center to discuss the latest news and plan future strategies; to organize frequent protests and demonstrations on the streets; and to participate in public hearings and a range of social movement events. GV also allied itself with the University of Puerto Rico’s pro-bono legal assistance clinic to wage the first class-action lawsuit of its kind in the island against both local and federal housing authorities, claiming that there had been a lack of required consultation with residents in the development of the application for demolition approval, and that the bad maintenance displayed by the private “American Management” company was directly and intentionally linked to the determination of demolishing Las Gladiolas. This

conscious disrepair is also called a de facto demolition – a claim pursued in many similar cases across the USA since the 1980s and generally understood to mean

[ex]repeated patterns of neglect, physical deterioration, tenant complaints, difficulties keeping the project fully occupied, deliberate decisions not to rent vacant units, and judgment to consolidate the remaining tenants into some portions of the project while leaving the rest of the units vacant and boarded up. (Clayton-Powell 1994: 887)

[txt]The argument is that if a building ends up warranting a demolition approval because units became physically obsolete, then it can be considered a violation of the housing authorities' federal statutory requirements of tenant protection (Goetz 2013: 54; Pfeiffer 2006: 48). While residents can sue local housing authorities and HUD, the legal interpretation of strategic intent (to demolish) in a situation of disrepair is controversial in US courts and difficult to prove. In the five-year-long case of Las Gladiolas, local and appeals courts eventually ruled in favor of the housing authorities. My interest, however, is not in that outcome or the validity of its legal statements but rather on how, alongside activism, the deterioration of stairs and lifts became players in it. Both sides of the lawsuit introduced the functionality of elevators as part of their official evidence against one another. Residents like Arcadio – a long-term and much respected community leader – used their opportunity to provide testimony about intentional neglect by asserting facts like “out of the ten elevators, only two are partially working” (Cerezo 2008: 21). By inserting this kind of technical statement, he was drawing on lessons learnt years earlier when the PRPHA had begun using the language of “Total Development Cost” (TDC), the mathematical cap point fixed by HUD to determine rehabilitation or demolition, in order to argue that remodeling Las Gladiolas exceeded the 90 percent TDC limit, thus making razing inevitable. Indeed, in interviews I conducted with housing authority personnel, architects, and engineers, TDC was often quoted to explain to me the “objective” validity of the Gladiolas demolition. After an official investigation by San Juan's Commission of Municipal Development of the House of Representatives found the TDC to be “unsubstantiated,” Arcadio seized that opportunity by rallying residents to gather many amateur images of all elevators and stairs,

as well as soliciting independent studies from an architect and structural engineer to offer counter-evidence about the costs and possibilities of rehabilitation. While these efforts did not have any legal consequences, it did bring the importance of focusing on the technical and financial aspects of deterioration of lifts and stairs into activist dynamics.

In subsequent depositions, the elevators were described by the PRPHA as “public monies wasted in favour of these residents’...self-inflicted actions” (Defendants 2008: 2–6). The use of the word “waste” in this argument was not innocent. First, it moves the discussion away from the lifts’ technical deficiencies and frames them as a welfare device. This conflation tacitly places the residents in the position of the non-deserving poor, evoking and tapping into the popular imaginary of the vilified welfare-dependent subject who is inherently blameworthy. This sentiment was echoed to me in an interview by PRPHA’s then director:

[ex]In the particular case of Las Gladiolas, we repaired an elevator which cost me twelve thousand dollars to fix. Five minutes later they’d broken it. It was as simple as grabbing one of those pools you can put in corridors, one of those they sell in K-Mart; they put it there, emptied it and the water that fell, “Pap!”, broke *our* elevator. And then they talk about community...

[txt]By making residents responsible for the elevators’ disruptions while asserting the housing authority’s ownership of the machines (“*our* elevators”), his paternalistic portrayal of the technological failure questions the very nature of Las Gladiolas as a cohesive “community.” The discourse reimposes the logic of responsibility onto residents themselves who are depicted as incapable, given their lack of middle-class adaptation, of managing their own homes. By mentioning “K-Mart”³ as “the kind of store” where residents would buy the culpable inflatable pools, he employs a highly class-conscious discourse in what I call a “politics of blame” that conjures up images of the lower classes’ consumption of cheap goods. This discredits residents in a way that again goes back to the sense of gendered, class-based, and racialized disorder historically linked to the elimination of urban slums. In this way, government actions like demolition are implicitly reframed as inevitable altruism. Like the “objective” TDC, framing maintenance neglect in financial

terms (the director went on to tell me “there’s not enough money in the world” to continue repairing those elevators) alongside references to residents’ non-communal, abject or uneducated characteristics provided an additional justification for demolition. But residents were aware of this financial logic and used it as well, for opposite purposes, by publicly foregrounding the exact cost of repairs that the government was refusing to pay for over a six-month period (in one media statement, it was US\$41,000), thereby quantifying neglect and translating the tactical pressure to force them to abandon their homes into a literal figure.

For activist residents and their supporters, the deterioration of lifts provided an important collective narrative of neglect and injustice and made the de facto demolition manifest; whereas for the authorities, they symbolized the culpable nature of the Las Gladiolas community in their own demise. As part of the legal and technical discourses, these contrary uses of the materiality of elevators were integral and instrumental to the development of the terms and parameters of the conflict over displacement.

[b]Representational Spaces

[tx]As discussed earlier, public housing has featured centrally in media discourses as an excluded space of socio-physical marginality, with its buildings and residents constructed through narratives of failure and success. They have been particularly linked to representations of criminality and deviance, as well as inhospitable deterioration and disrepair. But, in Puerto Rico, these discourses also existed alongside more “benevolent” and resident-friendly accounts. These apparent contradictory messages were able to coexist because, since the times of the slums’ eradication, the media has contributed to larger national narratives that, on the one hand, linked fear and crime to destitution in certain places (like slums and, later, public housing) and its residents; while on the other, it revered the “humble” and “good” residents of those same places as unique models within an otherwise corrupt environment, deserving a helping hand. This was evident, for instance, in the “Comunidad” (community) section of the island’s most important newspaper, *El Nuevo Día*, which was set up (in theory) to remove poverty from its discursive “criminal” milieu and recast it as something that *also* existed along the less violent axes of humility and perseverance. The column usually

presented a (usually female), positive, and more colorful “face” of poverty, *at the same time* that crime and violence continued to be covered in other sections of the same newspaper, keeping with the old associations to public housing. The section revered and exalted the “communities” being portrayed, while tacitly domesticating, condemning, and infantilizing them in highly gendered, racialized, and class-based terms. Like the “good versus bad” resident classifications described earlier, this discursive double-take allows for a narrative of *some* exceptional goodness to exist in a way that perpetuates the dominant paternalist system of assistance while justifying interventions like police incursions and resettlement.

[txt]Las Gladiolas was depicted along highly criminalized lines from the 1980s onwards and particularly during the 1990s and early 2000s when the security policy of “Mano Dura” (Hard Hand) led to SWAT operations in the towers, followed by indefinite occupations and the erection of border walls and a police-controlled access point (between 2000 to 2007, crime featured in headlines about Las Gladiolas up to forty times in one tabloid newspaper alone). This was also the time when criminality, physical obsolescence, and demolition were being causally linked to justify displacement. Arcadio described the results of one such incursion in the following way:

[ex]The last “operation” created a negative image of us. It brought 300 police officers. They brought dogs; they brought fire trucks, ambulances and the civil defense. They surrounded Las Gladiolas with patrol units. And then, in came Carlos Laboy, the Public Housing Administrator and superintendent Toledo with a number of police with them that it looked like the Vietnam or Kuwait war. They said they were coming to rescue us from criminality and violence... After breaking everything and pointing their huge guns at children, in hall-ways, they occupied all of the halls in all four towers. The result: two illegal immigrants (Dominican), registering 5 drug addicts, some of whom had a couple of capsules or needles. And a dismantled car they said was stolen. All that money for what? It didn’t matter; the purpose was to create a negative image of us.

[txt]Like many others, the images published of that raid created a picture of the towers as a menacing enormity to be controlled through military order. The

visual show of force vis-à-vis the spatial referents of deviance sealed the discourse of criminality. This stance contrasts with one peculiar but widely covered story from 2001, when the two police guards stationed at Las Gladiolas delivered a woman's baby in the hallway of the fifteenth floor after the elevator breakdown had forced her to walk up all those stairs. The birth had to take place in the corridor, with a blanket brought by some neighbors, next to her crying two-year-old, because the faulty elevator made it impossible to get her to a hospital in time. After delivery, the grandmother descended the stairs with the baby in her arms, while the police carried the mother down. Even though I was told a few times in confidence that the "Mano Dura" police had fathered and abandoned a number of the community's babies, here they were presented as the brave and benevolent "helping hand," saving women's lives. While this was a remarkable one-off scenario, the exceptional element highlighted was the policemen's actions rather than the conditions under which the labor took place. The broken elevators, the need to walk up and down fifteen flights of stairs, and the police presence were all presented unquestionably as the natural constitutive setting of Las Gladiolas. In the year 2004–5, once debates over demolition had already entered the public domain, lifts began to feature regularly and centrally in stories with headlines such as "Elevators will be in service in 48 hours," "Gladiolas residents relieved," "Residents protest for lack of elevators," "Sick of not being able to go down and up." In all of these, the language used expressed and evoked strong senses of indignation over the state of their living space. In one story (see Figure 6) the two leaders of Gladiolas Vive were featured complaining about a compounded lack of basic services (elevators and water). The leaders were already adept at using elevator breakdown in the media and other filters, such as in an anti-relocation documentary film, to provoke indignation for the de facto demolition being pursued – to produce an emotional and affective politics of blame.

[fig 6 near here]



[fig]Figure 6: *Primera Hora* article, 'No water in Las Gladiolas' (Cobián 2004).

The two community leaders, Mirta and Arcadio are pictured in front of faulty domestic technologies.

[txt]In this story, the images are meant to denote a “personal” home (through Mirta’s laundry room and Arcadio’s caring domestic activity, pushing a child) as well as a politicized homely domain, tied in to processes of displacement. But other paradoxical domestications take place in those images that hark back to public housing histories and the “othering” depiction of its residents, which have the effect of restituting binaries. By picturing Mirta’s body in front of a broken-down washing machine and Arcadio’s figure caring for a child in front of a faulty elevator, the dysfunctional technologies get linked to the narrative repertoire of public housing residents’ modern inadaptability. While the traditional tenets of “the domestic” get challenged and politicized in these representations, the rebellious role of both activists is also being domesticated and depoliticized by, on the one hand, “feminizing” Arcadio in his caring role and, on the other, re-situating residents as dependent on the help of others (i.e. the maintenance authorities). This mixed message is not unlike those of

the “Comunidad” section described earlier. In the end, then, even though the story featured the activists as the agents of recriminations accusing the government of neglectful maintenance, the subjects responsible for the technological demise remain vague.

[a]Conclusions

[tx]This article drew on the relational materialist stance of vitalist perspectives, which consider that everything in the world “takes-part and in taking-part takes-place: everything happens, everything acts. Everything includes images, words and texts...even representations become understood as presentations...[that]...have an expressive power as active interventions in the co-fabrication of the world” (Anderson and Harrison 2010: 17). It analyzed how the deteriorated lifts and stairs of Las Gladiolas can be understood as actors, or vital public housing building technologies with a history and role to play in producing certain experiences, sensations, ideas, and therefore actions (or inactions) regarding public housing at a number of different intersecting scales. Their lack of maintenance, on the one hand, actively and authoritatively “undid” Las Gladiolas, while on the other, it co-fabricated new and old senses of home, while also mediating a politics of blame that precariously held the high-rise towers together. The breakdown of elevators and their role in the wider decomposition of Las Gladiolas was being used as a material emblem and representation by both sides of the displacement struggle within their legal claims; it was also being lived, felt, reacted to, and dealt with in subjective and collective ways that are not normally addressed in unison within the housing studies literature. Moving beyond simple descriptions, then, the multiple elaborations of deterioration help to highlight the “politics, grammars, and productive powers” of the lifts and stairs, “[how they are] making a difference to place and the place of each other” (Tolia-Kelly 2013: 154).

[txt]I have sought to address a noted negligence of ANT-oriented scholars in engaging with the symbolic and immaterial; specifically, with the links between emotional experiences, memory, and representations in the context of a contested de facto demolition. A geography of memory grounded in the material can help fragment the temporal and spatial dimensions of the present and, as Jones (2011: 882) puts it, “can help trace out the legacies of the past

we carry through memory as we practice the present and enter the future.” In Las Gladiolas, these legacies were also about the highly symbolic “rise and fall” narrative of public housing in Puerto Rico and the historic inscriptions of difference and meaning according to appropriate forms of belonging to the nation and to an urban middle-class homeowner society. The entanglements of (emotional) meaning and materiality found in stairs and elevators and expressed through representations, expressions, and subjective memories reveal the complex and historic socio-technical emotionality of belonging, or “what belonging feels like” (Wood and Waite 2011) in a place whose materiality is imbued with political and cultural significance of urban marginality and displacement at a number of scales and whose future is in question, thereby enhancing the realm of the home.

I began this article by saying that the technical definitions of demolition and its “outcomes” do not quite capture the grounded, lived experiences of the long-term process of deterioration, embedded in lifts and stairs. To conclude, I would make the final point that framing public housing demolition as home *unmaking* offers a more appropriate language that helps to capture persistent histories of urban displacement and politicizes the technical “implosion” by incorporating the emotional and embodied dimensions of the breakdown of homes. Far from neutral, it centers subjective experiences of how physical dwelling space is *unmade*. But, as above, it is important to bear in mind that that the *unmaking* of home described here is inextricably tied to processes of homemaking as well. Las Gladiolas was evidently a case where materials, spaces, and temporalities expanded and refracted in ways that were expressive of a particular current political struggle. But together these were also creating new and shifting representations and understandings of the personal and collective home.

[a]Notes

[nt]1. In 1952, following 400 years of Spanish colonialism and more than fifty of American occupation, Puerto Rico became an “Estado Libre Asociado” (Free Associated State), an arrangement that translates into American citizenship for all Puerto Ricans and partial political autonomy through self-administration with an ultimate adherence to the US federal machinery (judicial, monetary, political, and tariff systems).

2. Karen E. Till (2012: 9) likens the damaging impacts of urban home dislocation by demolition to Fullilove's "root-shock" concept of displacement: "the physiological shock experienced by a person who loses massive amounts of fluid as a result of injury, a shock that threatens the whole body's ability to function [where place has] a central function in an individual's emotional and social ecosystem...a kind of exoskeleton...place as always becoming, as within and beyond us, and as functioning as a kind of social protective shell..."
3. An American discount retailer chain store like Walmart.

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