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FROM TENEMENTS TO FLATS:

GENDER, CLASS, AND 'MODERNISATION' IN BETHNAL GREEN ESTATE

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ESTATE

Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between domestic architecture, spatial memory, and the construction of subjectivities through an in-depth study of the modernisation of Bethnal Green Estate. It illustrates how the architecture of Bethnal Green Estate was the site of powerful discourses of gender, family, and community, which shaped the nature of participants' relationship with its architecture. Situating architecture within the material culture that we produce, consume, and interact with, this study indicates how the participants constructed the nature of difference between the architecture of kitchens, front rooms, and communal areas in the Estate as illustrative of gender, ethnic, and generational needs. The 'spatial loss' of memories of tenement living experienced by elderly participants, also implied a dichotomous relationship between a 'nostalgic' past and a 'modernised' present. In designing certain spaces within the estate, some participants formed an ambiguous relationship with its architecture, perceiving this relationship to be negative or positive at different times and in different contexts. This paper concludes that in critiquing and reshaping the modernised architecture, the tenants did not just challenge the 'conceived' spaces of the architects but also the 'lived' spaces of their own making.

Keywords: Domestic Architecture, Memory, Gender, Subjectivities, Social Housing.

Introduction

They have done alright with this place. There used to be communal bathrooms only in this block. They changed it to two bedroom and put in a bath. I have had to put me own

cupboards on the wall. There isn't a lot of space. I think women think more about space. Space in the kitchen and cupboard space, bathroom. We have to have more cupboards. Men would think is there enough room for the telly, is there big enough space for the fridge. [Laughs] (Amanda)

Amanda's take on the modernisation of Bethnal Green estate highlights the moment when she becomes 'gendered[2]'; the moment when she stakes her claim to a space of gendered subjectivity as a social housing tenant. This paper is an examination of how in performing the spatial practices of everyday life, agents introduce within domestic spaces 'a degree of plurality and creativity' (DeCerteau 1984: 30). Through a case study of Bethnal Green Estate in East London, I analyse how architecture is implicated in the complex interplay between memory and subjectivity, how spaces of domesticity are constructed through intersecting and overlapping positions of gender and class, and how individual and collective subjectivities can transform architecture to produce new and different spaces.

Here architecture refers to a material social construction that is located in between agency and structure i.e. it has both material and symbolic impact. As Gieryn (1999) suggests, both the symbolic and material intent of architecture is 'forever subject to (re)interpretation, narration, and representation'. Evident in Amanda's narrative was her spatial memory, which helped her negotiate through the architecture of the modernised Estate. Connections between memory and architecture are important because it is through memory that subjects negotiate across 'specific spatiotemporal frameworks' (Sargin 2004: 660) and mediate spatial transformations (DeCerteau 1984). Personal and collective memories of inhabiting places thus construct sites of significance (Blunt 2003; Fenster 2004), which are recalled at the moment of loss[3] (Downing 2003), and

hence correspond to particular spatio-temporal meanings inscribed on its architecture (Bastéa 2004).

Lefebvre (1991) suggests that the trialectics of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces are fundamental to the production and consumption of space. The study of Bethnal Green Estate relates to the transformations of architectural meanings that are part of this trialectics of space. These transformations are both material and symbolic; they are mediated both by social practices and spatial ideologies. For instance, in Bethnal Green Estate, some residents were involved with the management in the consultation process for modernisation while others challenged these changes. Through their mediation between agency and structuration, these residents constructed parallel readings of domesticity, and in the process often transgressed real and imagined spatial boundaries to create new kinds of space.

Llewellyn (2004b) further illustrates how subjects reinterpret or reorganise their spaces, and engage in processes of 'adaptation and possession' of material culture. Decades of research on material culture (Csikzentmihalyi, 1981; McCracken, 1988) have shown that the house functions as a 'storehouse of signs' which forms a dynamic relationship with those who inhabit it. Work on consumption (Leslie and Reimer 2003; McCracken 1988) suggest that it is impossible to stabilise meanings of objects because these objects themselves are social constructions and their significance lie in their ability to be constructed from the cultural meanings coded in different subject positions. Once architecture is understood as part of this material culture, the geographies of domestic spaces such as the kitchen can be read as representative of both wider societal positions and subjectivities. Architecture then forms part of a cultural coding of the *nature of difference* (McCracken 1988) that exists between groups divided along socially constructed lines. Hence Amanda, an English single mother's gendered

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perception of modernisation can be read as reflecting these differences between being male or female, and hence the nature and meaning of her relationship to architecture (Cieraad 2002; Nasser 2003; Sargin 2004; Llewellyn 2004a; Llewellyn 2004b).

Much has been written on the links between gender needs, architecture, and planning (Greed 1994; Matrix 1984; Weisman 1992) that highlight gender biases in contemporary architecture and propose 'gender-sensitive' designs. This study seeks to extend beyond such discussions to examine how domestic architecture provides a material basis for the projection of gender and class identities and is also in turn shaped by such. Recent work on critical geographies of architecture (King 2004; Lees 2001; Llewellyn, 2004a; Sparke, 2004) illustrates how economic, political, and cultural forces shape architectural space. Hill (1998) suggests that the designer and the user are not mutually exclusive since they both create architecture through use and design. Critical architectural geographies have also illustrated that symbolic and the material relationships between architecture and subjective positions of gender and class are based on spatial performances (Lees 2001). This paper therefore brings these related issues into a framework of discussion to destabilise the 'structuredness' of architecture, by illustrating how architecture is 'produced' through subjectivities, and how it in turn shapes subjectivities.

Method

The evidence is based on an in-depth case study of a social housing estate in Bethnal Green, East London, which is owned and managed by Peabody Trust. The study was carried out in October 2002, when I examined in detail the architecture of Bethnal Green Estate with respect to the external and internal spaces and the activities that took place there. This involved both observations with respect to spatial practice as well as photographic records during different times of the day. This approach also meant the study of architectural plans in order to identify

spaces of conflict/concurrence with observations and interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted of participants who were living on the estate. The interviews delved into the experiences of the participants through the refurbishment of the estate with respect to their socio-spatial relationships and everyday experiences.

The names used in this study are pseudonyms for the participants. Since the interviews were undertaken during the day, most of the participants were women. The two men interviewed were an elderly English pensioner "Mr Ellis", living with his wife "Mrs Ellis" in a two-bedroom flat on the estate, and "Kadir Mia" a British-Bangladeshi chef who worked night shifts. Mr and Mrs Ellis were also the oldest participants. Hence they were able to describe their experiences in the early years of the Estate. The other English participants "Susan" and "Victoria" had lived on the estate for 26 years, Susan with her husband and two children and Victoria who was then single and retired. "Amanda" who was also English was a single mother and had lived for around 20 years on the estate with her children. "Cindy", another English participant had lived on the estate for two years with her son and boyfriend. "Charlene" an afro-Caribbean mother of three had lived on the estate with her husband and children for around 15 years since she migrated to England with her husband from St Lucia. "Alisha", another Afro-Caribbean single mother had grown up in the Eastend and had moved into the estate seven years ago when her son was born. "Sinnith" a Philipino mother of two teenage children had lived with her husband and children on the estate for 20 years.

Using their narratives and architecture analysis I analyse in the first part of this paper, how the domestic architecture in Bethnal Green Estate was modernised over a period of almost 50 years. In the second part, I focus on how different participants perceived the 'modernisation' of the estate through individual and collective memories, and everyday spatial practices, and how

they constructed parallel discourses of spaces such as the kitchen or front room to produce new meanings of architecture. Finally, the conclusions reflect on the broader theoretical connections between domestic architecture, gender identities, and spatial memory.

The Architecture of Bethnal Green Estate

Peabody Trust's involvement in philanthropic housing has been well documented (Booth 1902; Burnett 1978; Tarn 1973; Conor and Critchley 1984). Set up in 1862 under the funding of an American banker called George Peabody, Peabody Trust initially functioned on a Victorian concept of 'five percent philanthropy' (Tarn 1973), by renting out accommodation to the working classes. While Peabody Trust had been building working class tenements since it was set up, they 'did not come to Bethnal Green till 1910 when seven plain five-storied blocks containing 140 flats opened on a site' (Victoria County History 1998) called the Bethnal Green Estate. The architect of this estate, WE Wallis, had been appointed previously as an architect by Peabody Trust (Cornes 1905) and in 1910, with the help of builders, William Cubitt and Co, the tenements were constructed on a triangular site (Peabody Trust, personal communication).
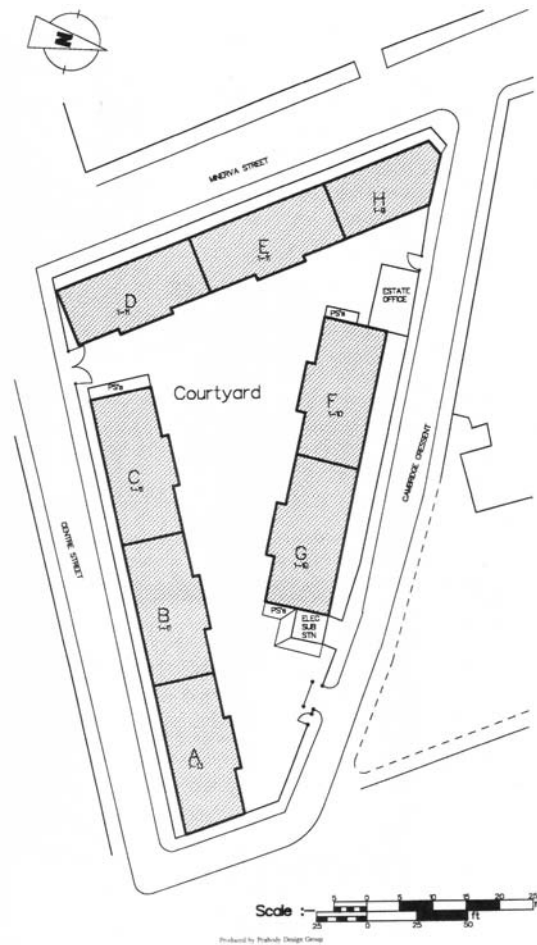
Figure 1. Site plan of Bethnal Green Estate. (Peabody Trust, personal communication,

August 15, 2002)

The blocks on Bethnal Green Estate were designed in the architectural aesthetics of

tenements popular during the time; their 'barrack-like' (Tarn 1973; Burnett 1978) qualities

making them look 'more like warehouses than homes' (White 1980). The design of this estate

was inward looking, with the windows overlooking the courtyard. The Estate's layouts were

based on the Trust's design philosophy of 'associated flats' which were two roomed units

sharing lavatories and washing facilities in each floor (Cornes 1905: 9). Each floor had four or

five tenements, with a central staircase, and the toilet and washing facilities were on either side

of the staircase. The tenements themselves ranged from one to five rooms, the most common being two rooms. As Mr Ellis remembered

> We had two rooms and a communal washbasin outside, toilets, gaslights. Outside at the passageway there was a sink where you wash everyday, and the toilet, you share that with the person next door. And bath was Wednesdays and Saturdays. Different days for the women [laughs]. In those days you didn't get a shower. Those were proper old days.

The main room or the 'front room' as most residents called it, was the centre of home and family life (White 1980) incorporating the boiler and the cooker.

> When I first lived in here with me mother we used to have a stove built in with the fire and we used to have an oven on one side, a water tap, and it was all done by the heater-fire. You used to cook your dinner in it. They had brass taps on it, proper brass, polish it all up with the young Zebra we called it. Brilliant!! When they modernised it they removed them. (Mr Ellis)

Personal and communal spaces in the earlier tenements were closely tied to individual and collective spatial memories referred to by Mr Ellis as 'proper old days', who situated himself within a particular framework of social memory, material geography, and gendered domesticity that had been 'removed' by modernisation. This geography of memory however, masked the class bias of the estate and the wider socio-political divisions (particularly racialised divisions) of the time that were embedded in its domestic architecture (Watson and Wells 2005).

One of the socio-political issues influencing the layouts of social housing such as Bethnal Green Estate was concerns for health and hygiene, institutionalised through the Public Health Act of 1875. In the design of the tenements therefore, each room was provided with a window for natural light and ventilation. However, physical cleanliness also implied moral cleanliness

(Porter 1994). In its estates therefore, there were strict rules on compliance with the Vaccinations Act, rules on washing the common areas (passages, steps, closets and lavatory) before 10 o'clock by the tenants, rules that the washing could only be done in the laundry, and rules on births, deaths, and infectious diseases occurring in their rooms (Porter 1994).

The Estate's register of tenants (London Metropolitan Archives no date) indicate how issues of class and gender were entangled within the social provision of housing for 'respectable people' (Porter 1994). In its register, the remarks against each tenant often include a record of their character, such as 'bad tenant', 'undesirable tenant', 'good tenant', and excellent tenant' (London Metropolitan Archives no date). There were a fair number of those who were labelled as 'Very bad tenant, Ejected by order of Court, Drunk and filthy' (emphasis original), or even 'asked to leave because she was keeping company with married men who were sleeping at her flat'. Later there were those who were given notice to leave because they refused to vaccinate their children.

In 1915, an eighth block was constructed on the same site to house a further 20 units. This block (H) was designed by architect Victor Wilkins in a similar style to that of W E Wallis. Block H ultimately closed off the triangular courtyard and stayed in the same condition for many years apart for regular maintenance. In 1952, permission was granted for the erection of a brick-built transformer chamber (Tower Hamlets Planning Office no date). This was the first time when electricity was introduced in the estate as Mr and Mrs Ellis remembered.

Mr Ellis: I would say in the 60s it changed. We moved in 1956 didn't we, and that's when we had the electric light. So long ago. First they done the two blocks out there and…

Mrs Ellis: Well before that, they modernised this one. But it didn't have no central heating but we had our own bathroom and we were up there for 32 or 33 years. This was in G block. Then when they was going to do all this they took the three blocks out, whatever, and they gutted them all out. Put in lifts, shower, and central heating, double glazing.

The successive 'modernisation' of Bethnal green estate occurred over a span of 50 years during periods of renewed interest in the quality of housing, formalised by the Parker Morris report of 1961 (Burnett 1978), which recommended standards for habitable space and improvements in heating. Along with these were successive improvements in Building Regulations which prescribed minimum requirements for energy conservation and disabled access. The gradual modernisation of Bethnal Green Housing Estate over a period of 50 years incorporated 'modern' living- introducing electricity, private sanitary facilities, larger living spaces, central heating, installation of lifts, and disabled access. All blocks now consist of self-contained flats with double-glazing and central heating, one mobility flat in each block for disabled tenants, keypad entry, and ramped access to blocks. Peabody's five-percent philosophy too has undergone a radical change. Since they now function as a Registered Social Landlord[4], they accept tenants who are referred by the local authority. Although rents are higher than council housing, Peabody prides itself in its efficient maintenance and management strategies which empower their tenants through regular tenant meetings and satisfaction surveys.

Modernisation of Bethnal Green Estate

Before the modernisation, Peabody Trust management at Bethnal Green Estate sent out tenant survey forms to all the residents, in order to identify tenant needs and demands associated with the proposed changes. This was followed up by meetings with the tenants that aimed at

providing information about the modernisation as well as receiving verbal feedback from

tenants. The chairperson of the tenants' association claimed to have initiated this process.

> If it wasn't for me and my big mouth this would never have got done. And I send around
>
> in the post to the head office and I said look, can we have the flats refurbished? So that's
>
> when all the blocks got done. I was involved in the design … It was Peabody's builders
>
> and it was me and the tenants association. So we was [sic] all discussing. (Susan)
>
> While all tenants were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed

modifications, not all took up this opportunity. Some were also aware of its limitations.

> They did ask what we would like done out there. They had one or two ideas and they
>
> asked what we would like. But inside, that needed someone who knew what they were
>
> doing. But they did a good job anyway. We couldn't have said we want the radiator here
>
> and something else somewhere else. They would have got so many different ideas it just
>
> wouldn't be feasible to do it all. (Victoria)

Self-Contained Flats

When the Estate was refurbished, its architects modified the tenements by adding or

removing internal walls to create self-contained flats of one, two, three, and four bedrooms from

its spaces. The shared toilets and washrooms on each side of the landing were incorporated

within the new flats on one side and into a lift on the other. For Victoria, an elderly retired nurse

who had lived on the estate since 1974, this afforded not just the opportunity of extra space but

also the possibility of an entirely new lifestyle (McCracken, 1988).

> Oh it's lovely. When they proposed to do all these alterations and said I would have a one
>
> bedroom flat I looked forward to it. Because I was only in a tiny bed-sitter. I had to buy

new furniture and things and I thoroughly enjoyed myself going down shops deciding what I had.

In converting tenements into flats however, differences in floor plans became unavoidable since these flats had to be designed within the spatial constraints of the existing structure. In this new arrangement, some flats with fewer bedrooms had larger floor areas than flats with larger number of bedrooms.
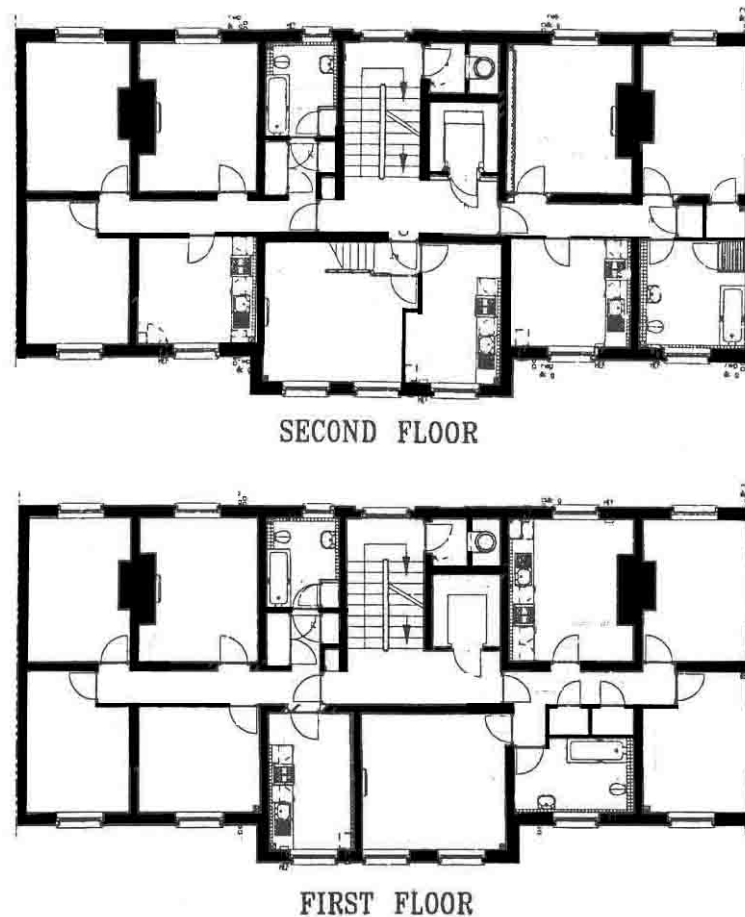

SECOND FLOOR

FIRST FLOOR

Figure 2: First and Second Floor plans of Block B. Source: Peabody Trust. Information optimised by Author.

We used to live in F block and we move here when they were going to do the F block and they told us that if we want to go back to where we come from. But I said no, because

once you stay here you have to buy another cupboard and everything. But, I regret it because I should say yes. When they modernise it, that one, it's much better than this one. Because in there, when you get a three bedroom flat, you get a nice sitting room. And one thing as well. Usually the three bedroom have two toilets but for us we got only one. (Sinnith)

While Sinnith acknowledged that the central heating and double-glazing had helped her bills come down, the irregularities in the floor plans brought up much resentment because they did not correspond vertically.

They do wrong things. Like downstairs our bedroom is kitchen. It should be kitchen, kitchen, kitchen. No, downstairs is kitchen, then ours is a bedroom, and then on top of us is kitchen. That's why the people upstairs, even 12 o'clock in the night they are eating, and they keep moving chairs. (Sinnith)

Front room and Kitchen

Of all the spaces in the flat, the 'front room' and the kitchen were most critiqued by the participants. Often the kitchen layout reflected the spatial separation of food production from food consumption (Burnett 1978), which conflicted with working class practices where both occurred in the same place (Llewellyn 2004a).

Kitchen is the only thing that I got a problem with 'cause it is a bit small. 'Cause when I moved from that block over there to this block when it was being refurbished, I had a nice big kitchen where I used to put tables and chairs in… and keep the front room nice and clean. I haven't got no dining table now. I have to bring them on trays. And you get crumbs falling on the floor so it's more sweeping up. (Susan)

For Charlene, her small kitchen was a denial of the importance of a family. 'A three-bedroom flat, that's supposed to be a family. I got three children, myself, and my husband. My kitchen is so small, so my table is in my front room' she explained. Further, this modernisation was understood by Charlene as imposed by male architects. When asked why she thought so, she replied,

> Because I think a woman who is a designer knows, men knows as well, but the woman knows about a family, what a family will really need in a house. For a start, she would have put more space where it is needed. Because I think if you are living on your own, you cannot have more space than somebody who is a family. (Charlene)

While Susan's and Charlene's perceptions were based on their socio-cultural positions as mothers and carers within a family unit, for Sinnith, the size of the kitchen was also expected to be ethnically and culturally specific, expressed through the practice of food preparation. 'Especially the kitchen you want big space. Like you know we use to cook all the time like that. But some people they always use the microwave, but for us, no. We always cook things' she explained.

As participants critiqued the modernisation, they also negotiated through its spaces by appropriating and transforming its materiality. Most of the accommodation came unfurnished with plain whitewashed walls. On possession, the tenants created their own living spaces with their furniture and decoration. Each flat therefore was quite different from the other due to tenants' use of wall colours, wall papering, and floor finishes. Hence, while many participants perceived the 'kitchen-living room split' (Llewellyn 2004: 240) as a cultural imposition, there were also those who negotiated, challenged and even transformed these spaces through furniture layouts or spatial practices. Not all participants welcomed this opportunity. For Victoria, this

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allowed her the possibility of imprinting her identity onto the flat as discussed earlier whereas for Charlene, this implied Peabody Trust's lack of responsibility. 'I just get a dirty hollow house and if I wasn't in a desperate situation I should not take' Charlene complained. On the other hand, Susan refused to put a dining table in the front room and preferred to eat on trays 'to keep the crumbs off', Charlene kept a family dining table with six chairs in the front room which made the movement very restricted, and Sinnith put her large dining table in the storage and bought smaller furniture (four-seater dining table and two-seater sofas) to accommodate it all in the front room. These acts of creativity, negotiation, or active resistance signify the ambiguous nature of subjects' relationship to architecture produced through different spatial tactics in different spaces.

While the kitchens were redesigned, the kitchen layouts were reorganised to increase efficiency in domestic work through equipments such as washing machine, dishwasher, oven and stainless steel sink. In the tenements, the sink had been the only water tap in the absence of a bathroom and had been used for a variety of purposes including washing dishes, clothes and even oneself (White 1980). The removal of the large ceramic sinks and their replacement with smaller stainless steel sinks in the flats prescribed different spatial practices and behaviours than those which older participants such as Mr and Mrs Ellis were familiar with.

> Mr. Ellis: You could do the washing in it [sink] and everything, in the old flat. Still got a scrubbing board, don't use it now but still got it.
>
> Mrs. Ellis: I had a sink like that. Now I have one like that. [hand gestures] Oh massive reduced. … I got a little green bowl like that and I used to do me washing up in the bowl. But mainly to save water really. But now I got to use the machine cause I couldn't get me plates and the bowl. But up there, beautiful. I do miss that.

Storage

For Mr and Mrs Ellis, the changes were not just restricted to the kitchen, they were more fundamental in the way rooms were used and perceived. The cupboards in the earlier flats had been built into the alcoves of the living room, kitchen, and bedrooms. During modernisation, these cupboards were removed from the living room and installed in the hallway.

> Mrs Ellis: And the cupboards, lovely cupboards. It was all built into the flats, and in the passage, two lovely cupboards, and then in the kitchen we had one, and it went right the way back till the door there, and I call that plenty of cupboard space. I used to keep like me linen in one, and one was like working cupboards and that. But now I got to put them all in the wardrobe. To me, I have not got enough storage.

> Mr Ellis: The draining board and the storage, that's the one she complains about. It's all women things you know.

Mr Ellis gendered the domestic practices of washing and housekeeping by labelling its associated domestic objects as 'women things'. This gendering influenced his perception of 'modernisation' which he understood as one which reduced the importance of women's position within domestic spaces. Mr Ellis then engaged in relocating this position by restructuring those objects associated with Mrs Ellis's convenience and safety. 'I will give you an idea of what it was. See in this recess, they were all cupboards. They were double wardrobe doors and I put a shelf along that but she misses that. … I made a platform so that she could get in the bath. 'Cause she is so small she couldn't get in the bath. I don't want her falling in the bath. It is dangerous' he explained.

These narratives illustrate how participants perceived their modernised flats by constructing discourses of gender and family that were then used as justifications for certain

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types of spaces. The notion of 'family' was an important justification for the nature of difference that was suggested to exist between front rooms and kitchens. Ethnicity was a position from which Sinnith made claims to particular kitchen spaces, justified through the cultural practices of cooking. Mr and Mrs Ellis accessed spatio-temporal memories which provided as Mr Ellis claimed, the 'women things', which Mrs Ellis now missed. Participants' relationship with the modernised architecture was thus shaped by how far back in time their spatial memory could access, which they consequently used to reflect on their current spatial condition. The conscious awareness of some participants of their gendered position also indicates how domestic architecture is intimately connected to spatial practices that continue to define gender roles among working classes.

Communal Areas

Different places on the Estate such as the staircases and the courtyard were sites where various notions of 'community' were evoked. For Victoria, a community was created through the casual encounters in the stairs. 'I can't really say there is a community because so often you don't see people for days. Because they got the lift. See, we used to see each other because we had stairs and, you would see people then everyday. But here you don't', she explained. This was perceived as safer by Sinnith due to the controlled entry into the block. 'In '88 when I was pregnant with my son and I used to come back from work and they just mugged me. Inside the building, on the stairs, and I used to live right at the top, and there is no lift. But now it's much better. Cause you cannot get in if you don't button.'. Sinnith's narrative suggests a certain fear of outsiders within the community which influenced her relation to the staircase. This was also reflected in Cindy's narrative. 'We've had the police come the other day. There was like people upstairs. they were doing drugs upstairs. They weren't from here'.

For Mrs Ellis, the familiarity of faces was an important part of a community. 'We have been here for a long while that the elderly people that we know such as us, have either moved away or passed away. And then youngsters come in that we don't know, and you just can't get friendly can you?' she explained. For Amanda too the modernisation of the estate brought in new and different people, severing her from the social networks which she was familiar with. 'There was different people before, more old people. Not so many old people now. But then again everyone keeps themselves to themselves.' she explained.

Although these participants lamented the loss of a generation, there were those such as Susan who engaged in creating new kinds of spaces where new forms of friendships and 'communities' could be realised. Perhaps the most significant manifestation of this was in the transformation of the triangular courtyard into a children's play area along with planted seating areas, which Susan stressed, was her initiative. 'The play area was my idea. Most of this design on here was what tenants wanted, and they wanted seating and everything else at the park' she explained. Susan's involvement with the creation of the play area allowed her to experience places in very different ways than other participants, primarily in the ways that she created and sustained her friendships.

> We meet in the square. In the night time, or in the afternoon, or something like that. We all will make a cup of tea or coffee, and sit around here and chat. And if it's a really warm night we all have our kids down there, and we are like, not a lot, but we might have a drink. We all meet down there. (Susan)

Figure 3. Bethnal Green Estate showing internal courtyard, with play-area and garden.

Photo: Author, August 2002.

For Alisha, a single mother of a six-year old, the square provided security and visual control over children's play areas. She said, 'a lotta time he [son] is out near the play thing and a lotta time you hear the kids, you can hear them from here. And now and again I just pop me head out and see him'. Such feelings of security constructed a unique spatial identity where Bethnal Green Estate was compared with other estates in the vicinity and perceived as one which was sensitive to children's geographies. 'Any Estate that you go around in Tower Hamlets you won't see that but only in those private estates' Alisha explained.

For some tenants therefore, the communal places thus became reminders of the importance of family, community, and ultimately physical markers of tenants' creativity. It encouraged physical encounters between its tenants, incorporated places where women socialised and kept an eye on their children, and created conditions for community activities. More importantly, these places were produced and consumed through active negotiations between the tenants' organisation and Trust's management.

I have got on well with them [Peabody Trust] and they have got on well with me. I do a

lot for them and I got the keys to the office, I lock the gates up, so I am part caretaker and

all. I change the cameras, and I do this all voluntary and … I can get minibuses to get the

elderly people out which don't cost me anything. … I have the bottom part of the

[Peabody Trust] office 'cause I have a homework club for children. (Susan)

Susan's narrative should not suggest that spaces were homogenous in their consumption.

When the children's play areas were created, security cameras were also installed and rules were

imposed forbidding ball games or skate boarding in the square. Hence, while the square

promoted notions of family and children, it also imposed new forms of surveillance and

restricted youth cultures. Moreover, children's activities were defined within a certain age group

as Cindy explained, 'The Estate is nice but I think the parks, the parks need some more things in

it. Because I can't take my son, unless he is on the bike, I mean there is nothing there for the

little 'uns [sic] round here'.

The 'parks' that had been initiated by the tenants had not 'delivered' the aesthetic value

to the Estate as Susan pointed out- 'This big lump of green outside was not supposed to be like

that way now. But the kids are just ruining it. Because you got that piece there they just run

across it and they just ruin the flowers and everything'. While Susan perceived children as

parasites of green space, Charlene extended children's presence in the square to disruptions of

peacefulness. 'There are children who is out there especially in the summertime. At nine or ten

o'clock you have noise in your head' she complained.

Figure 4. Entrance gates showing bollards to restrict entry. Photo: Author.

Aspects of enclosure and visual access in the square, which were hailed as important physical markers of the persistence of family and children in the estate by Alisha and Susan, were perceived by elderly Mrs Ellis as restrictive to the rituals of death, disease, and emergencies. 'The only thing is that the grounds down here. Ambulance can't come in, fire engine can't come in, they blocked all the entrances and to me, I think that's ridiculous. In B block they gotta carry that person through there. Now, who wants to be on show like that?' she asked.

Architecture

> They call this estate the model estate. Because we have people from other places and
> other parts of London that are coming to see this. (Susan)

Susan's pride in this 'model' estate was partly due to her own involvement in creating new kinds of spaces and social relationships with the tenants and the management. It was also due to the architectural qualities of safety, enclosure, and 'family-friendliness'. This architectural uniqueness in the way it reflected social hierarchies but was also shaped by them was articulated by Victoria.

Oh, it's [architecture] alright. I quite like it. People say, I heard someone say, 'Oh, it looks like a tenement'. It doesn't look like a tenement does it? I like the bricks; they are not all the same colour. You got the stripes and the bits around the windows. The ones they built later are sort of like boxes.

For Victoria then, the architecture not only differentiated her social class from erstwhile council tenants but was also a critique of post-war council housing which was 'sort of like boxes'. Yet, it was this larger setting that emphasised new social divisions for other participants. This was a time when the council was demolishing tower blocks and allocating its tenants to Registered Social Landlords such as Peabody Trust. There was a desire among the participants for new-build houses; articulated from the visible contrasts between the Trust's contemporary architecture of terraced houses with gardens, and the multi-storey architecture of Bethnal Green Estate.

Although this is modernised, it was built long time ago. I think its wrong planning. All they do is washed the bricks outside, and they put double glazing on the windows to make it look new. These are very old houses. (Charlene)

Well, look at across the road there. Peabody have got some beautiful townhouses there. They got a lovely townhouse and nice big gardens at the back there, and what do we get? Do we get offered them? No. We just get this junk. (Susan)

These narratives suggest how architecture can be produced and consumed, and adapted and possessed from different subject positions. It also indicates the extent to which social agents stake their claims to a space. For example, for Victoria, the architecture of the Estate was a matter of pride while for Charlene it was embarrassing. Significantly, Susan's narrative also suggests how social agents can form an ambiguous relationship with architecture perceiving this

relationship to be negative or positive at different times and in different contexts. Her involvement both in the production and consumption of the courtyard spaces emphasises the ambiguity and the stakes that agents use to negotiate their relationship with domestic architecture. As in the case of the interior layouts, the architecture of the communal spaces too suggest how issues of generational differences and family orientation become discoursed as agents use particular spaces to align themselves with it materiality.

Concluding Thoughts

This paper illustrates how the architecture of Bethnal Green Estate and its subsequent modernisation was the site of powerful discourses of gender, family, and class divisions, which shaped the nature of participants' relationship with its architecture. It illustrates how notions of family and community are created and implicated in the way participants construct meanings of domesticity through the kitchens, front rooms, the layouts of self-contained flats, and the communal areas. The 'spatial stories' (DeCerteau 1980) of the participants also indicate the importance of memory in structuring spatial meanings. For example, elderly participants' discourses of tenement living illustrate how spatial memory can separate a nostalgic past from a 'modernised' present influencing subjective interactions with architecture.

While the history of Bethnal Green Estate indicates a certain moral hegemony over its tenants, its subsequent modernisation through tenant participation and Peabody Trust practices has destabilised this understanding. The participation did not extend to all tenants, but nevertheless suggests how the complex politics of gender, class, generation, and ethnicity are produced by the 'users' of spaces both through spatial discourses and practices that occur within architectural space. It indicates how spatial practices traditionally understood as specific to

gender, class, ethnic, or generational positions are used to illustrate the nature of difference that should exist between different places such as the kitchen, front rooms, and communal areas.

These places were part of gendered histories and subjectivities experienced through moments when subjects became conscious of occupying specific positions of gender, class, ethnicity, and generation. These moments occurred when particular interactions with architecture produced contradictions with spatial practice traditionally housed within these subjectivities. These moments were also part of a notion of 'spatial loss' constructed by elderly participants, whose geography of memories implied a dichotomous relationship between a 'nostalgic' past and a 'modernised' present. Domesticity therefore, was defined by discourses of family; community was defined by discourses of visual access and safety; and the position of women was understood to be central to domesticity, which was perceived as 'missing' in the modernisation of Bethnal Green Estate. The domestic architecture of Bethnal Green Estate was therefore situated between those moments of spatial loss, production of domestic architecture and the construction of subjectivities.

Significant here is how the tenants' representative was able to create new kinds of spaces (such as the children's play areas) and hence new social relationships by negotiating between the Trust's management and tenants' association. It implies how in critiquing and reshaping the spaces of modernisation, the tenants did not just challenge the 'conceived' spaces of the Trust's architects but also the 'lived' spaces of their own making. A critical geography of Bethnal Green Estate's architecture reveals that it is impossible to separate spatial strategies of designers from users since with the involvement of the tenants' representative this distinction was blurred and brought into question the production and consumption of place. Not only was the representative able to 'self-critique' her own initiative but also to rethink the spatial meanings of different

places on the Estate and by extension the formation of new types of class divisions through

architectural representation.

Acknowledgements

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[1] 'Modernisation' in this paper refers to the term often used by housing associations to indicate the refurbishment of social housing. This refurbishment may include some or all of the changes needed to bring up older housing close to the level of current building regulations standards. This might mean addition of extra insulation to external walls, increase in habitable spaces through reorganisation of internal walls, improvements in heating and sanitation, installation of double glazing, loft insulation and so on.

[2] In using the term 'gender' in this context, I mean the subject's conscious awareness of occupying a particular social position (ie woman) and its relationship to another position (ie man) often perceived as oppositional to each other.

[3] This not to suggest that memories are always positive. It is in the way that even negative memories can be mobilised after the passage of time to represent a nostalgic 'return' to a steady positive state is an important aspect of spatial memory and its tensions with architectural manipulations.

[4] For a detailed discussion of the role of Registered Social Landlords in UK social housing context refer to Malpass (2001).

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