

'Guarding' London's disused

Deputised to protect vacant properties after the council tenants have been decanted and before the regeneration starts, guardians are the unwitting shock troops of gentrification in the capital

Lauren Van Schaik Smith

Anderson House is slated to be razed: initial notices to tenants said by 1st April 2014, but these manufactured regenerations operate on erratic timetables. Ione, 27, moved here last October, months after the building's fate was decided, and it's come to feel like home.

Her third-floor maisonette is a mid-century relic, a tidy allotment of middle class aspiration tucked into in a row with two dozen others. It's slowly crumbling, and the kitchen is a cubbyhole – today's upwardly mobile white goods look elephantine in there – but Ione has splashed bright paint around, tacked art to the walls, and had the leak in the roof fixed. Her neighbours provided screwdrivers and DIY guidance; they have a lively Google Group where they advertise local volunteering opportunities and coordinate cocktail crawls through the building.

Most of these neighbours are property guardians like Ione, placed here after the departure of the tenants to look after the building before demolition and chase away squatters. They move into stripped flats, vacant shops, and unused nursing homes. They pay low fees, but they can be kicked out with little notice and often have to contend with awkward spaces and decaying buildings, learn to camp out in office blocks or share bathrooms with dozens.

Defenders of the scheme plug the low costs, the maximization of building stock, the sustainability of billeting someone in a decrepit pub rather than constructing him a home. Dot Dot Dot, the company that placed Ione in Poplar's ex-local authority Anderson House, doubles down on the social consciousness: their guardians are required to do 16 hours of community service each month. The scheme has won them accolades, media attention and a waiting list of broke do-gooders. But Ione sometimes wonders about the ethics of the guardian scheme. "Living here has been very useful, but at the same time I'm very aware that really people in their twenties shouldn't have to be living in properties that have been deemed

"White, middle class, creative, volunteering, and young"

unacceptable because they can't afford anything else," she says. "This kind of living is something that's come out of the housing crisis rather than something that's been designed to solve it."

Dot Dot Dot often works with ex-local authority housing. It was the prospect of a flat, and not the deserted churches, nursing home rooms or Kubrickian off-season resorts that commercial ventures like Ad Hoc and Camelot offer, that attracted Ione to the firm. But occupying a council flat after its tenants have been evicted – and likely displaced – and before it's demolished to make way for private luxury towers can't help but put guardians in collusion with property-flipping schemes of pound-eyed developers, socially cleansing councils, and Monopoly-minded landlords, whether they want it or not. Property guardians aren't outwitting market forces and property speculators. They're simply paying higher and higher prices to live in substandard, often non-residential, accommodation in order to chase off 'undesirables.' Like many of gentrification's shock troops, they have good intentions, little money, romantic notions of rough living, and, like Ione, a keen sense of justice. They're also usually "white, middle-class, creative, volunteering, and young."

John* a University of London graduate, lived as a property guardian in a vacant building north of Brixton between late 2010 and last summer. At first he and his girlfriend occupied one of the property's shop fronts; then they moved to one of the upper-floor offices. Together, they paid just £500 a month. Their rooms were expansive and the other occupants quickly became their friends, but the shared kitchen and bathrooms were "disgusting," and "at times it did feel like we were paying to live in a squat," John says. The bills aren't always that low: Camelot advertises space in a former pub in Muswell Hill for £83 per week, but you have to share it with eight other people.

John and his girlfriend were explicitly there to keep squatters from moving in. The firm that placed them, Live-in Guardians, advertises itself to property owners as affordable protection against "the squatting of properties and the associated damage caused to the property [and] the substantial costs

involved in removing squatters."

"I was also aware that long-established squats and housing co-ops were being forced out to make way for companies like Camelot" and Live-in Guardians, John says. His property on Stockwell Road was just up the street from Clifton Mansions, the storied squat and cultural centre Lambeth forcibly cleared in July 2011. The council installed property guardians contracted through Camelot to keep the squatters from returning.

Ione says Dot Dot Dot's guardians are simply in Anderson House to make sure the property doesn't deteriorate, and she's never received any instructions about warding off squatters. But keeping the damp out of a property scheduled for the bulldozer seems like a flimsy cover, particularly when the eviction of council tenants is often as politically-charged, and aggressive, as the uprooting of squats.

Live-in Guardians and the similar Guardians of London are explicit about the type of people their guardians are supposed to keep out. When asked to describe his company, Gavin Handman, head of operations at Guardians of London, describes it first and foremost as an "anti-squatting service." The firm favours key workers and business professionals, provide instructions for guardians to keep out squatters ("What happens if squatters break in while I'm at work?" a blog post frets), and exhorts the public to "report an empty property... before it is squatted." Guardians of London provides an essential service for nurses and firefighters, the people who make London run but earn poor wages, Handman says. But there's clearly more broken with a housing system that forces key workers into vacant shops than a stop-gap guardian scheme can mend.

Ione's Anderson House is levered between the two arms of the famous Robin Hood Gardens and from her balcony, Ione looks out over the playground and mounded green between them. "They designed it so mothers could see their children play from their windows," she says. Last summer she and some of the other property guardians climbed the hill and looked up at the stars. There aren't any children playing in the yard now, but Robin Hood Gardens doesn't

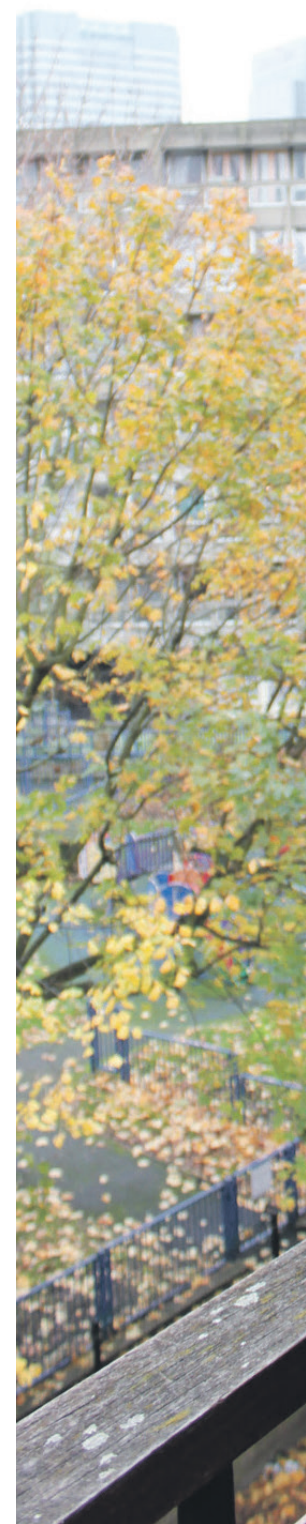
look like a building ticking past its expiry: cooking smells still drift onto the access decks and laundry stills snaps on lines. There's little evidence of demolition: just the signs in the entrance of Robin Hood Gardens advertising the watchful eye of a security firm and the guardians, deputised by Dot Dot Dot to care for the buildings.

Robin Hood Gardens is out of place in Tower Hamlets council's new scheme for the area: two great steamers of utopian Brutalism beached in a gilded age, metres from Canary Wharf. And its residents, mostly large Bangladeshi families in council flats, are equally unwanted. After regeneration, the new Blackwall Reach will have all the banal luxury, gimmicky cladding, and palliative landscaping the banking crowd loves. The plan is to lure them across the DLR line and persuade them to piggybank their bonuses in new office-side pied-à-terres and buy-to-let flats.

Property developer Swan has planned a thousand new flats destined from the private market and designated the remaining 700 as shared housing, 'affordable' or 'social.' As usual, 'affordable' will be defined by the people who crown every building with a regulation penthouse and think Buy to Let is social leveling, and 'social' is slippery.

Tower Hamlets promised local flats for the displaced residents of Robin Hood Gardens and Anderson House, but their track record isn't encouraging. Tenants in Balfron Tower – the Goldfinger cliff-face up the road from Ione's place, Grade II-listed and destined for a lavish refurbishment – have been uprooted with no promise of return or rehousing, a predictable outcome to years of promises and one that's drawn allegations of social cleansing. There are now property guardians in Balfron Tower, through both Dot Dot Dot and Ad Hoc. As of August 2012, the borough had more than 50,000 people on the waiting list for a council flat.

Still, there are a few local authority stalwarts in Ione's building and Robin Hood Gardens, clinging to their homes in the face of Poplar's transformation. There's one woman still here because her son is enrolled in the primary school across the street; she has dispensation to remain until she can find another flat in the school's catchment area. Ione doesn't know about the others:



Property guardian Ione's living is due to be demolished

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*Name has been changed

buildings



stands on the balcony of her flat. The council estate where she has been shed.

maybe they're just stubborn. They could hold out for years: the last tenant in Southwark's Heygate Estate was forcibly removed last week. The so-called 'decanting' of residents began there in 2007.

A number of the Dot Dot Dot guardians here have been active in the local community, reaching out to tenants before they're displaced and helping them tend to and replant overgrown beds on the Robin Hood Gardens estate. Ione's low housing costs – £217 a month plus bills and council tax – have enabled her to continue her voluntary work at nearby Stepney City Farm and Hackney Pirates. Before she became a guardian, she thought she'd have to move out of London and give up this

work. But Dot Dot Dot isn't yet able to measure the impact its guardians are having on the local communities, Ione admits, and she sometimes wonders about the family who lived her before her. The woman who lived next door had eight children packed into one of these two-bed maisonettes, she heard. Ione doesn't know what became of her.

As for John, he was given notice and moved out of the office block where he was a guardian last summer and doesn't think he'd be a guardian again. "I have big ethical concerns with the whole thing," he says. "I felt exploited, as someone who was struggling to live. But obviously not strongly enough to take the moral high ground."



From Putney Bridge through Fulham to Shepherd's Bush

I never thought much about west London until recently. I've only had two good experiences of note west of Marble Arch: a drug-infused social gathering in an estate agent's unreasonably luxurious Knightsbridge flat, and a protest in support of the Syrian revolution which ended

The Routemasters were impractical in almost every conceivable way a bus can be

up in embassy country. From the platform someone from Amnesty International praised the non-violence of the Syrian protesters while a man next to me held up a placard with a photo of the sewer system in which Gaddafi was shot, with the caption – in Arabic – "reserved for His Excellency President Bashar al-Assad."

And yet, I have family roots here. While I am a provincial, my ancestors just one generation back made their living in the railyards and factories of west London's long-vanished industrial belt. I thought it was worth walking, to see if I could recover any submerged ties binding me to the place.

Putney Bridge sits on one of the Thames's ponderous bends: you can't see very far in either direction. From here, my dad used to start his summer job shifts as a conductor on the number 14 bus. The Routemasters were impractical in almost every conceivable way a bus can be. Still, the dead profession of the conductor has been resurrected with their reincarnation, and I suppose I should feel some sort of ancestral pride at such a mawkish waste of everyone's time.

I once went mudlarking here with a friend who lived in Roehampton. The river was low but rising, lapping around the holds of the abandoned recreational boats that are parked down this bank. In

front of the famous church where the Levellers put their manifesto to the Army Council during the Civil Wars, we looked for pieces of the past. Much was forthcoming, from 1950s sparkplugs to a menagerie of animal bones, presumably from some old slaughterhouse. I was particularly excited by what I thought was an antiquated piece of glasswork from imperial times, which was in fact a fragment from a Cobra beer bottle.

Over the river to Bishop's Park, where stands a somewhat out-of-place memorial to the International Brigaders from Hammersmith and Fulham who fought for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. Round the corner, near Craven Cottage, a great uncle of mine used to work in a long-gone factory, during which time he was on the business committee of the *New Leader*, the socialist paper for which Orwell wrote his dispatches from Catalonia. A pacifist himself, during the war he got himself a reserved occupation, working in Fulham Power Station, a smaller sibling of famous Battersea, where, he maintained, all the union reps were put on night shift so that if the Luftwaffe bombed it, at least there'd be a silver lining for the management.

Craven Cottage itself, the home of Fulham FC, hardly gives the impression of hosting a top-ten Premier League side, what with its red brick groundsman's cottage and quiet terraced surroundings. Mercifully, its one bit of glamour, a bizarre statue of Michael Jackson, has been removed by the new owner. One stand backs straight on to the

Here my dad's childhood played itself out on bombsites still untouched from the Blitz

river. My dad recounts stories of men too clever to fall for the old trap of buying a ticket, who would swim or row over the water and clamber up the wall just in time for a match, the only problem

being that kick-off had to coincide exactly with high tide.

North through Parsons Green I come to my family's old home streets. Here my dad's childhood played itself out on bombsites still untouched from the Blitz. There were no fences or cordons, and who knows how many unexploded bombs – as late as 2009 two were uncovered near the BBC building in Shepherd's Bush.

The old family home was the middle floor of a terraced house near West Brompton station. On the ground floor was another family, in the attic lived an old couple. The family did have their own toilet, but had to go round to a relative's for baths because the heating often broke. Many buildings like this in London have gone through a cyclical process of being broken down into flats and remade into grand suburban homes. Looking at it now, I shudder to think how much it's worth. Here some of the first post-war migrants from the Caribbean settled, at one end of the street. There was, says my dad, one mixed family, exactly halfway down.

On the final stretch to Shepherd's Bush the memories of two job interviews I had close by come back to me. In 2012 I applied for a job in a pub in the Stratford Westfield ("the last pub before the Olympic Park"), and the interview was here, in the other, or classic, Westfield. As it was a new pub, they were hiring a whole slew of us. Cue many a ridiculous exercise in team building. We had to throw a ball of elastic bands to each other, the thrower saying the name of the catcher before the catcher said "something interesting" about him or herself. One Italian guy had the ball thrown at his face and got as far as "I like to play football..." before his nose started bleeding down his shirt. Rather cruelly, he didn't get the job.

That was a job I got but, fortunately, didn't stick at. More recently, here at TfL's 9-storey training centre off North End Road, I went for a job on the Tube. I failed the role-play assessment because I couldn't get a guy from Wembley to Elephant during engineering works. Oh well, walking's always been fine for me.