



# Resisting the rentier city: grassroots housing activism and renter subjectivity in post-crisis London

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## **Abstract**

This article aims to open up a new discussion about the political potential of the renter to urban social movements by providing a ground-level view of renter activism in contemporary London. Drawing on participant observation conducted as an activist-researcher between 2015 and 2017, I offer an ethnographic social history of Digs, a private renters' action and support group based in the east London borough of Hackney. Examining the political and organisational evolution of Digs over a six year period, I explore the group's struggles to cultivate a coherent collective identity for renters, its innovative approaches to mutual support and relational organising, and the difficulties its participants encountered in maintaining participation in a highly intransigent political climate. I argue that although Digs was a relatively small and largely localised group, its members nonetheless cultivated a vital set of knowledge-practices that provided a conceptual and material framework for a citywide renters' union in London. The case of Digs demonstrates that urban social movements are more likely to evolve effectively when they create the institutional capacity to retain key activists and pass knowledge on.

## **Keywords**

London, rentier city, housing activism, subjectivity, urban social movements

## **Introduction**

The growing interest in everyday struggles for housing justice has been one of the more heartening by-products of the continuing fall-out from the global financial crisis. Over the past decade, activists, scholars and activist-scholars have documented the quotidian struggles of those who find themselves subject to displacement, dispossession or endemic housing

insecurity in a wide range of contexts. Such work has highlighted the underlying shifts in political economy that produce housing precarity (Fields & Hodkinson, 2018; Palomera, 2014; Madden & Marcuse, 2016), explored the macro- and micro-politics of foreclosures and evictions (Desmond, 2016; Purser, 2016; Sullivan, 2014, 2017), examined the shifting makings and unmakings of 'home' amid processes of dispossession (Baxter & Brickell, 2014; Nowicki, 2014), and documented the novel forms of resistance that have emerged among those who struggle to defend their homes in a variety of different locations (Álvarez de Andrés, Zapata Campos & Zapata, 2015; European Coalition for the Right to Housing and the City, 2017; Lancione, 2017, 2019; Wilde, 2017a, 2017b; Zhang, 2004). Yet despite this welcome attention to the ways in which housing precarity is both constituted and experienced in political terms, to date there has been less consideration of what may prove to be an equally significant development: the re-emergence of the renter as a political subject.

This article aims to open up a new discussion about the political potential of the renter to urban social movements by providing a ground-level view of renter activism in contemporary London. Drawing on my own experiences as a housing activist and researcher, I offer an ethnographic social history of Digs, a private renters' action and support group based in the east London borough of Hackney. In 2018, after six years as one of the most prominent renters' organisations in the city, Digs became a founding member of the London Renters' Union (LRU) and dissolved itself as an active organisation.<sup>1</sup> This marked a significant shift in political strategy for the group, whose members had collectively decided to scale up their organising to a citywide level and move to a member-based union structure. In what follows, I explore the background to this decision through participant observation carried out as an activist-researcher between 2015 and 2017 and interviews conducted with fellow Digs members between 2016 and 2018. Examining the political and organisational evolution of the organisation in this period, I focus on three central themes. Firstly, the struggle to cultivate a coherent collective identity for renters beyond activist milieus. Secondly, the importance of friendship, care and relational organising to both the group's continuity and its campaigning successes. And thirdly, the difficulty of maintaining momentum as individuals suffered from burn out and wrestled with competing visions of their organisation's future. Drawing on the notion of activist 'knowledge-practices' outlined by Casas-Cortés et al. (2008), I employ these themes to explore how Digs members were able to productively channel their experiences and struggles as renter-activists into the LRU as it gradually took form.

The argument I make below is that, despite being participants in a relatively small and largely localised group, Digs members nonetheless cultivated a vital set of knowledge-practices that provided a conceptual and material framework for a citywide renters' union in London. Specifically, I show how the struggle to constitute the renter as a political subject produced an array of new social relationships, new political experiences and new forms of institutional knowledge that Digs activists took with them as they helped establish the renters' union. In making this argument, I chart the trajectory of a set of knowledge-practices

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<sup>1</sup> Many Digs members are now involved in the Hackney branch of the LRU. The group retains its original Facebook and Twitter accounts.

that emerged through the ‘trial and error’ of everyday activist life in Hackney. By paying close attention to the often unseen micro-histories of activist groups, I argue that we can develop more effective means of analysing our movements and understanding the challenges they face. In the spirit of ‘militant ethnography’ (Juris, 2008a, p. 20), I therefore offer these reflections in the hope that they will prove useful not only for renters’ movements and housing struggles in other contexts, but also for urban social movements more generally.

### **Producing the rentier city**

Over the past three decades, London has been transformed from a city that was predominantly populated by securely housed homeowners and council tenants to one in which insecure private renting has increasingly become the norm among a sizable portion of its population. In 1981, over 870,000 homes in the capital –almost 35 per cent of all properties– were classified as ‘socially rented’, of which around 770,000 were council houses with lifetime tenancies tied to a local authority. This compared with around 1.2 million owner-occupied homes and just 378,000 properties in the private rented sector (Watt & Minton, 2016, pp. 208-9). Since then, the steady dismantling of council housing by successive governments, coupled with the transformation of London into the world’s prime location for real estate speculation (Beswick et al., 2016), has shaped the city into one in which growing numbers of low- and even middle-income earners find it increasingly difficult to access decent, secure and affordable housing. Though successive governments have presided over this transformation, its origins date back to the election of the Conservative Margaret Thatcher in 1979, who famously championed the dream of a ‘property-owning democracy’ and attacked council housing for fostering a culture of dependency on the state (Hanley, 2007; Murie & Jones, 2006; Power, 1999). As part of a broader drive to promote individualism and win over traditional Labour voters, Thatcher’s government introduced the now infamous Right-to-Buy (RTB) in 1980, a policy that gave council tenants the ability to buy their homes at a discounted price and failed to replace these with equivalent properties in the public sector (Harvey, 2005; Hodgkinson, Watt & Mooney, 2013). Council housing stock fell steadily after introduction of RTB, a process that largely continued under Tony Blair’s New Labour government between 1997 and 2010 (Watt & Minton, 2016, p. 208). Between 1999 and 2010, for example, London lost around 85,000 council houses to RTB (DCLG, 2017), with many finding their way into the hands of so-called Buy-To-Let (BTL) landlords, who took advantage of BTL mortgage products following their launch in 1996 (Leyshon & French, 2009; Watt & Minton 2016, p. 207).<sup>2</sup>

This gradual erosion of council housing as a tenable option for many low- and middle-income earners has not only been the result of national level policies, however. Over the past fifteen years, London’s local authorities have come to play an active role in ‘decanting’ low-income tenants from public land in order to make way for more lucrative private

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<sup>2</sup> Buy-to-let mortgages were launched with the specific intention of stimulating investment in the private rented sector by allowing new landlords to borrow against their expected rents from tenants. They have been blamed for accelerating the steady rise in house prices and rents since their launch in 1996 (Leyshon & French, 2009).

developments. Inhibited by their inability to borrow money and dramatic cuts to their budgets, the city's borough-level councils have increasingly turned to private developers in order to meet housebuilding targets and redevelop public housing deemed to be in disrepair. In many instances, this 'state-led gentrification' (Watt, 2010) has involved the wholesale demolition of council estates and their replacement with denser 'mixed income' developments that maximise profits for investors by skewing units towards the high end of the market (Elmer & Denning, 2016; Lees, 2014). Developers have become adept at circumventing quotas for low-cost rental properties through so-called viability assessments (Elmer & Denning 2016, p. 274), which enable them to reduce social units if profit margins fall below 20 per cent. Such trends not only force low-income residents out of 'prime real estate' in London's inner-city boroughs, but also drive up rates in the private sector by accelerating existing processes of gentrification (Butler & Lees, 2006).

The loss of council housing and the failure to develop new social housing has meant that far more people find themselves looking for housing in the private rented sector (PRS), but this too has been subject to substantial reform since the 1980s. Between two separate housing acts in 1988 and 1996, the PRS was deregulated and liberalised: firstly through the removal of rent controls that had set limits on how much private landlords could charge tenants, and secondly through the replacement of lifetime Assured Tenancies (ATs) with the significantly less secure Assured Shorthold Tenancies (ASTs).<sup>3</sup> Born from a drive to encourage new 'investors' into the PRS, these reforms heavily weight power in favour of landlords by making it far easier to evict tenants. Issues such as disrepair, unreturned deposits, overcrowding and harassment have all become commonplace for London's private renters, who are projected to constitute 60 per cent of the city's overall population by 2025 (Fraser, 2016). Such measures have been worsened by the long-term stagnation of wages in the UK, which means that rental costs consume an ever-larger portion of renters' earnings (Edwards, 2016).

Many of these long-term trends have been compounded by recent austerity measures that aim to bring down public spending on welfare. In 2013, the Coalition government placed a cap on Housing Benefit, the state subsidy that covers shortfalls in income, pushing many low-income private renters into arrears with their landlords. Eviction by a private landlord is now the leading cause of homelessness in the UK (Butler, 2016), with homelessness applications rising annually since the cap. According to the most recent statistics released by the homelessness charity Shelter, around 170,000 people in London are currently registered as homeless, a figure that constitutes 53 per cent of the UK's overall homeless population (Shelter, 2018). This rise has taken place against the backdrop of a wider shift to more punitive models of welfare distribution in the UK, in which idioms of moral deservingness have reduced access to benefits and precipitated the stigmatisation of those reliant on state support (Hills, 2015; Hyatt, 1997; Koch, 2014, 2015; Wacquant, 2009).

Since the early 1980s, then, a succession of policies has fundamentally reshaped the UK's housing market and its connection to broader patterns of social inequality (Hamnett,

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<sup>3</sup> ASTs permit landlords to evict tenants without reason at just two months' notice.

2003; Dorling, 2016). The net result is that a growing number of Londoners now find themselves forced to access their housing through a private rented sector that is among the most expensive, insecure and unregulated in Europe. As Watt & Minton put it (2016, p. 208), far from creating a ‘property-owning democracy’, Thatcher’s legacy in London has instead created a ‘*private landlord owning plutocracy*’ (emphasis in original) that continues to preside over steadily worsening living conditions for the city’s renters.

### **The renter as a political subject**

Digs was formed by a small group of individuals in 2012 when Heather, the organisation’s longest-serving member and one of its co-founders, decided to call a meeting for private renters in Hackney after a string of bad experiences with landlords and letting agents.<sup>4</sup> Although she had worked in supported housing in Yorkshire where she grew up, Heather explained that she only began to view her experiences in political terms after moving to London.

It was like moving down here [to London] and realising how much worse it was because of all the market pressures, and being a private renter myself and just feeling, like, massively screwed over. So I just thought, wouldn’t it be good if there was some kind of an online forum where local people could share information about landlords and letting agents? You know, finding out more about what the market pressures are, and talking to people who are in different points in the PRS.

This initial idea for a renters’ support group in Hackney led to a launch event in late 2012 that was attended by around 30 people. As the group began to take form after this event, Heather and several others attended training sessions on housing law. They used the knowledge gleaned from these sessions to run renters’ rights ‘skill-ups’ for Hackney renters, and this enabled Digs to build up a core of active members and a mailing list of supporters. As interest in the group grew, it became clear that there was an appetite for something more far-reaching than a peer advice forum. Heather described her frustration at seeing the experiences of London’s private renters continually overlooked by both politicians and the media, who tended to view the city’s housing crisis through the lens of potential buyers who had been priced out of their chosen areas by rising house prices. ‘There was still this perception that the private rented sector was for students and for young professionals who appreciated and benefitted from its flexibility,’ she recalls. ‘But you know, this is my life, it’s my friends’ lives... And, you know, there was a huge amount of pain and disappointment at how much we were not being listened to.’ Heather describes how the group was particularly frustrated that large housing charities such as Crisis and Shelter –whom they regarded as natural allies– attempted to tackle problems in the PRS by running campaigns against so-called ‘rogue landlords’. As she put it: ‘The idea that there’s a few bad apples that can be weeded out – that’s just a way to protect the status quo because it’s disguising the reality, which is that there’s massive systemic failure.’

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<sup>4</sup> The names of some individuals in this article have been anonymised.

According to Casas-Cortés et al., knowledge-practices constitute the ‘experiences, stories, ideologies, and claims to various forms of expertise that define how social actors come to know and inhabit the world’ (2008, p. 27). For Digs in that early period of formation, frustration with this inattention to the political roots of problems in the PRS convinced its members that the group ‘needed to be something bigger,’ as Heather put it. After a series of meetings with other fledgling renters’ groups from London boroughs such as Islington, Tower Hamlets and Lambeth, the group helped to launch the ‘Let Down’ campaign in April of that year. Using a Monopoly board game theme, Digs members carried out a series of actions outside prominent high street letting agents in Islington and Hackney, demanding an end to the fees that letting agents routinely charge tenants in return for signing or renewing tenancies (Digs, 2013). These actions proved a powerful galvanising force, giving existing members confidence, bringing new individuals into the fold and raising the group’s profile through coverage in the national press (Kennedy, 2013). As Digs gradually established itself as a prominent voice for private renters in the capital, its position was bolstered by the formation of the Radical Housing Network (RHN), which brought together London’s thirty or so active housing groups into a formal coalition around the same time. Although each organisation within RHN has its own specific goals –its members include groups of squatters, council tenants, benefit claimants, travellers and migrants– the network as a whole shares a long-term commitment to the ‘radical right to housing’ (Madden & Marcuse 2016, p. 191) through de-commodification and de-financialisation (Wills, 2016). Coupled with an effective communication strategy using Facebook and Twitter, the support of RHN meant that Digs was now able to ‘punch above its weight’ (as one member put it) as an influential voice for renters both within and beyond Hackney.

Scholars of social movements have long emphasised the struggle to create and maintain collective identities as one of the principal challenges for grassroots political activists. As Holland et al. (2008) argue, a movement’s ability to reproduce itself often hinges on the fragile relationship between belonging and action among its constituents. Building on work that underlines identity-formation as a decentred, dialogic and place-based process (Melucci, 1995, 1996; Satterfield, 2002), they show how nascent collective identities can be challenged or compromised by factors that are often beyond a given group’s control (Holland et al., 2008, p. 99). In the case of Digs, questions of scale were inherent to the challenges the group faced as members struggled to carve out a coherent collective identity. In 2015, when I first became actively involved in the group after several years as a supporter, a major preoccupation among long-standing participants was the difficulty of reaching private renters beyond a fairly narrow group of already-politicised activists. At that point the group had some 300 people on its mailing list, but only around 30 of these had attended meetings or taken part in actions or campaigns. During the time in which I was most active (2015-2017), around fifteen of us formed a core of activists, with supporters from the mailing list turning out for larger actions and others being involved for shorter periods. Most individuals in this core group were white and university-educated, a fact that made many of us uncomfortable given Hackney’s large black and minority ethnic population. Digs was also a small group relative to the local population of private renters: around a third of Hackney’s 270,000 residents fall into this category (London Borough of Hackney, 2019), meaning the



group's members and supporters represented a just tiny fragment of its potential constituency.

While Digs activists were in no doubt that significant numbers of private renters across Hackney and London were unhappy with their housing situations, converting this discontent into a self-identifying political subjectivity *as renters* was by no means a straightforward task. According to Heather, one of the early decisions the group made was to focus very specifically on issues facing private renters rather than the host of related problems that characterise London's housing crisis. Although this strategy had been an effective means of establishing a core group of committed members, reaching beyond activist milieus proved far more difficult. Part of the problem lay in the very thing that had spurred Digs's formation in the first place: the absence of an adequate public debate about the entrenched injustices of the PRS and its political roots, which meant there was no readily available counter-discourse for disgruntled renters. Digs thus faced the twin challenge of struggling to force open a political conversation through personally demanding public actions at the same time as undertaking the patient work of building a fledgling renters' organisation. The burden of operating simultaneously in these different 'political temporalities' (Wilde, 2017b, p. 48) proved a constant source of concern for Digs members. As I discuss below, however, it also proved to be a vital learning process that spurred the group into developing new organising strategies.

### **Relational organising, friendship and care**

Although Digs struggled to attract new members from beyond activist circles, it proved much more effective at retaining existing members who had lost faith with other forms of activism. One core group member from 2013 onwards was Emma, a Hackney renter who had been involved in climate activism for several years before taking a break from political activity following the birth of her son in 2009. In the summer of 2013 Emma was introduced to Digs by Jacob, an experienced activist who became a vital link between Digs and RHN. Emma described how she was immediately attracted to the emphasis that the group placed on organising around its members' everyday problems.

What really struck me early on with Digs was, like, how much I preferred the housing stuff to all the other activism I'd done before. Because like with climate stuff, it's always really "other" – it's for other people and a bit distant and a bit abstract. Then I started with Digs it was like: this is an issue that affects me and the people around me and I could feel the power in that... One of the things that was really fundamental for Digs was that we really took being renters as the core. Like it really wasn't to help others, it was there to help ourselves in a way that would help everybody.

Alongside this focus on the immediate and the everyday, Emma recalled the social side of Digs being central to the group's appeal:

I think I just really liked all the people that I met. It really suited me on a kind of personal level, and I started making friends through this thing. You know we'd always go to the pub after meetings and these things were actually really important to what we were doing.

A critical part of this sociality was the fact that Digs was rooted in Hackney, which meant that members could socialise together with ease both within and beyond the group's core activities. As Emma's words make clear, the strategy of organising around the everyday issues of Hackney renters was central to the development of 'thick' social relationships that went beyond the bounds of the group's political objectives. The strong friendships formed among members as a result became integral to both the organisation's continuity and to its growth in the coming years.

While part of Digs' decision to focus specifically on local private renters had emerged organically, it was also an outcome of the group's adoption of a particular organising strategy in 2013. A key individual in this process was Hero, a qualified community organiser who had received training from Citizens UK, a large NGO that specialises in training community organisers across the country. After adapting Citizens UK's trainings, Hero ran a number of workshops for Digs members based around the concept of 'relational organising', a model premised on the idea that successful organising emerges from strong interpersonal relationships and ties of mutual support within communities. Proponents of relational organising argue that these relationships form the foundations upon which campaigns can be launched and demands levelled at those in positions of power (Christens, 2010; Divakaran & Nerbonne, 2017; Ellis & Scott, 2003; Saundry & McKeown, 2013). Although its roots are in the community organising models originally popularised by figures such as Saul Alinsky in the United States (Alinsky, 1971), relational organising seeks to move away from hierarchical divisions between 'professional' organisers and community members and takes a less instrumentalist approach to gaining 'easy wins' in order to build collective power (Ganz, 2002, 2010; McAlevey, 2016). The version that Hero developed for Digs also aimed to move away from a focus on institutional leaders, instead concentrating on building a network of individuals who were each personally invested in empowering private renters in non-hierarchical ways.

Emma recalled how the period following Hero's workshops was a particularly rewarding one for Digs members. Drawing on their trainings, throughout 2014 the group ran Saturday stalls in central Hackney in order to increase their visibility. They used these stalls to take down the names of local renters who showed an interest in the group and then followed these up via email. Those who responded were offered the opportunity to become involved in the group after an informal one-to-one conversation with an existing member. These one-to-ones were designed to find common ground between Digs's goals as a renters' organisation and the self-interest of each renter in question, in the hope that the individual would then make a commitment to being involved on a long-term basis. After several months of stalls and an online campaign titled 'Tell us your story', the group had collected 50 personal accounts of the myriad problems that renters in the borough faced. These were then presented in theatrical form – a 'renters' bingo' game featuring common renter problems such as 'deposit not returned', 'broken boiler' and 'extortionate agency fees' – to representatives from Hackney Council in an effort to pressure the local authority into improving its regulation of the PRS. Emma remembered how the meeting was notable for the visible discomfort of local councillors when they were confronted with the realities of



their constituents' housing problems. For Digs members, the experience of using personal stories to directly confront local politicians helped build further confidence in their ability to shift the terms of the public debate around renting.

While relational organising provided a coherent structural and strategic form for Digs to carry out its work, the everyday content of what its members were doing was equally important to the group growing in size and efficacy in that period. According to Emma, this was a time in which a fusion between fun, socialising and more confrontational political actions became central to the group's approach. She described the following regarding the group's anti-gentrification fly-posting around Hackney:

We got quite good at doing fun activities together. So we'd do like picnics and socials and that was a really big thing. And then we used to do fly-posting, and that was where ten or fifteen of us would meet at someone's house, print off like 400 posters at the Common House [a radical social centre in East London], cook up the paste and get drunk, and then go off in little groups of four or five and send each other pictures [of the posters]. And we found that those types of social activism really worked.

Taking part in actions that were both social and transgressive was thus integral to the friendships that came to anchor Digs as an organisation. As Emma put it when I asked her what had kept the group going during periods of relatively low activity: 'I think interpersonal relationships. I don't think you can underestimate the work that Heather put in to making it all hang together. We were all doing quite a lot of work and thinking about it quite a lot.'

Much of this thinking returned to the question of how to diversify the group's membership and widen its appeal among local renters. Acutely aware that the core membership of Digs was largely white, university-educated and constituted by individuals who were already politically active, discussions were regularly held about how to reach out to more marginalised renters and foreground their voices in the group's strategies and campaigns. After deliberating this issue for some time, in 2015 the group took the decision to make advice and support a more central component of their meetings.

By the time I became involved later that year, Digs meetings always began with a half hour slot in which people were encouraged to converse with the person next to them and share their renting experiences. This approach aimed to give those attending the opportunity to listen to each other informally before going into discussions about actions or campaigns. If an individual wanted to discuss her housing situation further with the wider group, her conversation would then be fed into a group discussion so that advice, support and potential collective actions could be planned in order to help resolve the issue. In one instance, for example, a woman who was attending her first meeting became very upset as she explained how the threat of eviction and a falling out with her flatmates was causing her mental health to deteriorate. The group took the time to listen and, over a cup of tea and samosa, helped talk through her options. In the end, the woman decided against fighting the eviction and told us she would instead look for a new place to live. She expressed her gratitude to the group for listening to her problems and spent the second half of the meeting contributing her ideas for forthcoming actions.

Although it was not always easy to move swiftly from the mutual support part of the meetings to the strategic –on occasions, strategic discussions took place in the pub afterwards– there was a consensus among members that it was vital to prioritise support if pressing problems presented. Danny, a Digs member who became involved shortly after me, described being particularly impressed by this approach during his first few meetings:

I felt very welcome at those early Digs meetings I attended, and that was interesting to me. To be honest with you I'd never thought seriously about how to create welcoming organising spaces while I was mostly involved in student politics. In retrospect, I can think of a couple of occasions where groups I was in were criticised for not being sufficiently welcoming, but in general they had always been carried along by their own momentum – the momentum of events... But there wasn't much attention paid to the question of how to create spaces which were open for, and accessible to and warmly welcoming for people who might not immediately be drawn to activist politics.

In Danny's view, the prioritisation of mutual support was integral to the development of strong social bonds that could then be put to political use. As he put it:

It's really small stuff, like letting people talk to the person sat next to them rather than immediately launching into an agenda, trying to introduce some element of mutual aid and advice within the meetings in addition to a discussion about a campaign or an action... The presence of people who are trying to think about getting some food, making sure there's tea – all of that stuff.

Recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of affective experiences to the participants of twenty-first century social movements (Garces, 2013; Graeber, 2009; Juris, 2008b; Razsa & Kurnik, 2012). Yet while much work on the alterglobalisation movement and Occupy stresses performative forms of protest, a distinctive feature of London's recent wave of housing activism has involved a redirection of political energies to material struggles in local and everyday settings. In the spaces of London's anti-austerity groups, a focus on collectivised and 'militant' forms of care (Gann, 2015) has become integral to the work of those who resist evictions, challenge local authorities and self-organise as precariously housed tenants and benefit claimants. As I have argued elsewhere (Wilde, n.d.), these practices constitute a different mode of affective experience to performative protest: one in which the act of taking care for others constitutes not merely a vital survival strategy, but also a means of fashioning embryonic moral economies and 'alternative circuits of value' (Skeggs 2011, p. 503). In a similar vein, Digs' interpretation of relational organising functioned as both a method and an ethos: it was a means of reaching out to renters who needed support, but also a knowledge-practice that formed an ethical framework for action and a means of producing a collective identity as renters.

### **Campaigning, 'capacity' and burn-out**

In early 2016, Digs launched a campaign that aimed to bring together the immediate struggles of its members with a wider housing issue. It has long been acknowledged that letting agents and landlords routinely discriminate against benefit claimants by refusing to let properties to those who require Housing Benefit to cover their rent. This ubiquitous practice

in the UK's private rented sector appears most visibly in the form of 'No DSS' on lettings adverts – DSS being the acronym of the now defunct Department of Social Security, which is still used as a byword for benefit claimants in housing circles. The group had raised this issue in its campaigns before, but in late 2015 the decision was taken to focus specifically on 'No DSS' after Emma received an eviction notice from her landlord. Emma's situation was typical of the endemic insecurity that many of London's renters face: although she had always paid her rent, her landlord opted to start eviction proceedings using the infamous Section 21 law that allows landlords to seek possession at just two months' notice and without needing to provide a reason. For Emma, this was compounded by the difficulty of finding a new landlord who was willing to let to a tenant claiming Housing Benefit. At the time she was working full-time, but since her wages fell short of the going market rate in Hackney, she received Housing Benefit as a top up. In her search for a new home, letting agents repeatedly told her that 'our landlords don't accept DSS,' meaning her prospects of finding a home close to her son's school looked bleak.

Emma's situation was the spark for a new Digs campaign –appropriately titled #YesDSS– that aimed to draw attention to the role played by letting agents and landlords in effectively barring benefit claimants from properties. After deciding on a campaign strategy in late 2015, Digs members carried out a 'mystery shopper' survey of 50 estate agents in Hackney in early 2016, with the aim of finding out how many would accept benefit claimants as tenants. After weeks of telephone calls to letting agents, the survey revealed that there was only one landlord in the whole borough that might accept a 'DSS tenant'. In our meetings following the survey, a clear consensus emerged for a series of theatrical and high-profile actions targeting letting agents who had been particularly derisory in their language towards benefit claimants.

In early February the first #YesDSS action took place in central Hackney. It featured cardboard boxes bearing slogans about homelessness and discrimination, a theatrical speech from a Digs activist dressed up as the 'Lord Mayor of private renters' and more serious speeches from those who had suffered as a result of 'No DSS', including a highly moving one by Emma. Around 70 people attended, including housing activists from across London and members of Sisters Uncut, the direct action feminist group who campaign against cuts to domestic violence services. A colourful caravan of activists and supporters then carried out flash occupations of several Hackney letting agents, during which the morality of 'No DSS' was debated with an assortment of bemused, hostile and uncomfortable letting agents. Several agreed to amend their policies as a result of these conversations. Six weeks later, a second action was carried out with slightly smaller numbers. On this occasion, Digs members 'blacklisted' letting agents who still refused to change their policies by sticking cardboard signs on their doors. In what was a clear victory for the campaign, many others simply chose not to open their doors on what would ordinarily be their busiest day of the week.

**Figure 1**

#YesDSS action in Hackney, East  
London, February 2016.  
Source: Author



The immediate response to this action was highly positive. The campaign received coverage in the national press (Foster, 2016), local politicians made public statements denouncing the discrimination of benefit claimants, and several new people began attending meetings after being inspired by the actions. As one later told me:

Both of those [#YesDSS] demos were really vibrant. I loved the spectacle of this big crowd of people dancing down Mare Street [Hackney's main high street], going into letting agent offices and making some noise, expressing dissatisfaction but in a theatrical and performative way. I enjoyed the way that people were drawn into that and the energy of it... I remember watching people coming out of JD Sports next to the letting agent and immediately picking up the chant because something was happening in the street.

Much like previous Digs campaigns, the momentum of organising #YesDSS initially had a galvanising effect on the group, with new members giving impetus to the Saturday stalls, providing much-needed support with online communications and bringing fresh perspectives to strategy meetings. But as the months wore on following the actions, the collective energy that #YesDSS produced began to dissipate as Digs members struggled with the question of where to take their campaign and their organisation. While some were keen to repeat the actions in order to maintain pressure on local letting agents, others felt that this would lead to inertia as the protests gradually diminished in size. Some advocated for a more concerted effort to reach out to marginalised local renters through a concerted door-knocking campaign, but others argued that the group lacked the numbers to carry out such endeavours effectively.

These discussions signalled a deeper problem for Digs members, which was that in spite of the justified anger that was expressed during #YesDSS, the campaign also highlighted the numerous legal and institutional barriers that stood in the way of significant PRS reform. Some letting agents could be shamed into changing their policies in Hackney, and some local politicians could be encouraged to push for better regulation, but solving such issues



**Figure 2**

'Blacklisted' letting agent in  
Hackney, East London, April  
2016. **Source: Author**



ultimately required a seismic shift in housing policy at the national level. For all the creativity and determination of its members, it was clear that Digs on its own would struggle to achieve such goals. From the summer of 2016 onwards, regular discussions about group's ability to carry out its activities as a collective, and expressions of burn-out from a number of individuals, suggested that Digs might be running into its organisational and strategic limits. Danny, who was at that point still relatively new to the group, recalled hearing the word 'capacity' regularly and feeling that it reflected a struggle to reconcile people's ability to practically commit to Digs in spite of their emotional attachment to the group.

I don't think I had encountered [that word] in an organising setting before. Everyone in Digs was always thinking about "capacity", which I think I understood as a kind of internal vocabulary – an idiom for being worn out. I feel like people were talking about their own individual experience to some extent, but also they wanted to do so on behalf of the organisation, which they are individually important to.

As Jeffrey Juris observes, 'sustaining a mass movement is a complex art, requiring a delicate balance between periodic outbursts of embodied agency and their controlled management, improvisation and staged repetition' (2008b, pp. 90-91). Although Digs was never a mass movement, it had nonetheless been based around a similarly delicate balance that seemed to have been lost in that period, and this certainly chimed with my own feelings around that time. While I had been closely involved in the #YesDSS campaign, I found myself frustrated that we had been unable to build on our actions after what had been an enjoyable and inspiring campaign up to that point. I was also aware that various looming changes in my personal life meant I would be unable to commit as much time to the group in the coming months, and was concerned that this would put more pressure on friends such as Danny, Emma, Heather and Jacob. In this sense, as much as Digs members wanted to push further and harder, the challenge of being a relatively small group with limited geographical and institutional reach had gradually worn down those who formed its core base.

## **Scaling up**

In their articulation of knowledge-practices, Casas-Cortés et al. highlight the importance that social movement activists place on ‘listening, tracing, and mapping the work that they do to bring movements into being’ (2008, p. 28). In the case of Digs, I argue that the group’s discussions around strategy, capacity and burn-out proved highly productive even as the organisation itself gradually succumbed to inertia. As these debates periodically surfaced and then receded, they produced ‘situated knowledges of the political’ (Casas-Cortés et al. 2008, p. 51) that filtered into a project which, since the summer of 2015, had been running in tandem with Digs: the drive to build a London-wide renters’ union. This idea had already been mooted by Digs members several years before, but had taken several years to gain momentum. After around a year of meetings between various housing groups and interested individuals from across London, by 2016 the renters’ union had become a tangible project that several Digs members, including myself, were involved in. Although there was an array of different ideas about what this union might look like, one major motivation was to move beyond the limitations of volunteer-based local groups like Digs, who tend to rely on a small number of activists in order to function. The hope was that by forming a member-based renters’ union that covered the entire city, funding could be raised to pay community organisers (at least during the first phase of the union’s formation), thereby giving these individuals the means to carry out more time-consuming activities such as door-knocking and organising events. Several activists, myself included, also felt that a citywide union would prove a more appealing and convincing entity to renters who were yet to become politically active. By mid-2017, an initial framework for the LRU had been established and funding was starting to arrive.

The foundation of the LRU as an established renters’ union coincided with Digs becoming largely dormant by the end of 2017. The group carried out one final action around letting agent fees in the summer of 2017, but by the end of the year most core members had either stepped back or committed their time and energy to the LRU. In September 2018, Digs formally announced that the group would be amalgamating with the LRU and helping to establish its Hackney branch, which is now one of union’s three active branches. Over the past year, the LRU has grown rapidly in size and now has over a thousand members. The union also has two paid members of staff and is looking to expand further. A number of successful actions against local authorities and landlords, coupled with an active support group in each of its branches, suggest that the LRU is set to play a leading role in London’s renters’ movement in the coming years. Jacob, who was involved with both Digs and RHN from early on in their formation, explains how the struggles he experienced with Digs were vital processes of learning that have now been channeled into the LRU’s structure:

We found you can’t get people to view themselves as a renter solely through a shared experience of oppression. Building a collective entity, a union of people, as a membership organisation gives us something to identify with, and it’s through this organ of collective power that we see ourselves as renters. Becoming a political subject comes out of a history of real shared experiences together and not just an abstract understanding that we are in the same boat.



In their work on emotion in social movements, Brown & Pickerill (2009) advocate for a closer attention to emotional reflexivity in political spaces. Activists who seek radical political change, they argue, should set about ‘making explicit the link between understanding our emotions and prefiguring social transformation’ (2009, p. 11). In the case of Digs, the struggles its members faced around identity, scale and capacity were often articulated emotionally, but they were ultimately analytical in content. The determination of key individuals to use such reflections productively was instrumental to the creation of the nascent renters’ union that built on the achievements of local housing groups but also sought to move beyond them. Individuals such as Heather and Jacob acted as vital repositories of knowledge for this new political body, and in doing so contributed to the political evolution of London’s renters’ movement as a whole.

### **Conclusion: longevity and reflexivity in urban social movements**

This article has ethnographically documented the development of Digs from its inception in as a small private renters’ group in 2012 to its eventual incorporation into the LRU in 2018. In the six years in which Digs was active as a distinct local entity, the group played a pivotal role in forcing private renting onto the political agenda. It also established a number of organisational strategies and everyday practices that have since been adopted by the LRU, most notably the centrality of mutual support as a means of reproducing affective ties among members. That Digs also struggled to create a collective identity for renters beyond a relatively small number of ideologically committed activists highlights the challenge of organising across multiple scales. The local is essential as a site for forming ‘thick’ social relationships, but it also has a limited scope for producing broader collective identities and effecting change in wider terms. Such struggles, however, do not mean that Digs was by any means a failure. Instead, I argue that the strong affective bonds established among the group enabled Digs to maintain itself in spite of the political challenges it faced. Indeed, the importance of these enduring social relationships was not merely that they meant something to the individuals themselves, but also that they helped to retain these key activists and their knowledge within the wider movement. In this sense, the value of investing in social relationships and mutual support is that it nourishes a repository of knowledge and experience that can be put to use as political terrains shift and organising strategies evolve.

It remains to be seen how successful the LRU will become as London’s renters continue to struggle for decent, secure and genuinely affordable homes. But the fact that a union exists at all is testament to the determination of Digs’s members, whose dogged commitment to housing justice in an intransigent political climate helped to create the conditions for a wider renters’ movement. To view such developments in broader terms, the case of Digs demonstrates that by paying greater attention to the fine-grained micro-histories of political organisations, we may find ourselves better placed to understand the future directions that our movements need to take.

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