Human Territoriality
and the Downfall of Public Housing

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On February 11, 1974, the BBC’s long-running series Horizon invited its viewers to an hour-long scrutiny (“The Writing on the Wall” 1974) of British and American public housing projects. The topic was unusual for the popular science series, which was known for covering the discovery of DNA and the invention of the silicon chip, but the episode’s central question was posed in a scientific style. “Does modern architecture actually encourage people to commit crime?” the narrator asked while confronting viewers with the now notorious Aylesbury Estate in Southeast London. As the camera panned across the concrete surfaces of high-rise blocks and zoomed in on the nooks and crannies of entrance lobbies and playgrounds, the voice-over discussed anonymity, alienation, inhabitants’ “feelings of territoriality,” and their need for “defensible spaces.” The narrator was Oscar Newman, a North American architect who was enjoying a remarkably successful career as a pioneer of crime prevention through environmental design, a newly invented field exploring how to increase the security of residential areas.

This article is not about Newman or his—by some accounts dubious—brand of social science, which found enthusiastic followers on both sides of the Atlantic.1 Rather, it focuses on the theory of human territoriality that was at the basis of his and other experts’ research at this time and analyzes the relationship of this way of thinking to the historical demise of public housing. From the 1960s to the 1980s, Western Europe and North America witnessed a momentous shift in housing policy. Although the shift was uneven and shaped by different and at times antithetical demands and visions, in many cases it entailed the disinvestment

1. This article nevertheless builds on recent scholarship on Newman, in particular Knoblauch 2011 and Jacobs and Lees 2013.
in public welfare programs and a growing preoccupation with privacy, security, and criminality. The concept of territoriality is key to understanding this change. Historically, territoriality first pertained to the sovereignty of nations. During the twentieth century, however, it was adopted, first, in zoology to refer to the ability of animals to defend a specific area of land and, subsequently, in social science to describe a similar quality of human behavior. This transposition allowed for a reading of the urban environment as the relationship between public space and private dwelling. Moreover, it allowed social scientists, policy makers, and designers not just to expose existing conditions of public housing but to influence its ongoing transformation.

In explaining the demise of public housing, one of the twentieth century’s most ambitious government experiments, historians rely on a political-economic narrative that revolves around the concept of neoliberalism. According to theorists such as David Harvey, the neoliberal turn was a global historical shift, typically associated with the late 1970s and early 1980s, that entailed the reduction of social relations and human action to a particular logic of economic exchange. Even if there is significant tension between the doctrine of neoliberalism and the uneven and ongoing practices of neoliberalization (Harvey 2007), it generally involves the restructuring of state governance away from public welfare (Foucault 2009). The demise of public housing, both through the neglect and privatization of the existing public housing stock and through the withdrawal of the state in directly providing housing, has therefore been cast as a paragon of neoliberalization (see Hodkinson, Watt, and Mooney 2013). Despite its explanatory power, however, such a sweeping account does little to explain why public housing became almost universally contested in North America and Western Europe but continues to flourish in East and Southeast Asian cities like Seoul or Singapore, where high-rise housing estates constitute the bulk of the current stock (see Urban 2012). If the global perspective is too wide and the national too narrow, this article provides a transnational account focusing on the impact and circulation of architectural and social scientific knowledge in the “West.” The shift away from public housing in this part of the world constituted not only an economic transformation, from public to private funding, or a change in design, from high-rise blocks in large estates to semidetached or detached individual dwellings; it also constituted an epistemological shift. This shift, I argue, is one from “habitat” to “human territoriality.”

This article explores how the notion of habitat, which draws on the assumption of a causal relationship between human beings and their environment, underpinned public housing production in the 1950s. It examines how architects and social scientists, addressing the challenges to public housing provision in Western
Europe during the 1960s, adopted this thinking to account for inhabitants’ creative appropriation of space. Subsequently, the article analyzes the emergence of an alternative response—one focused on the idea of human territoriality—that was most clearly articulated by Robert Ardrey and harnessed by Newman in his studies of American public housing projects in the early 1970s. Human territoriality was based on the innateness of private property, which is what ultimately legitimized the ongoing transformations of housing policy and finance during the 1970s. Accordingly, the article examines how theories of human territoriality helped precipitate the privatization of public housing in Great Britain, a shift that culminated in Margaret Thatcher’s “right to buy” scheme of 1980. The article concludes by articulating how this epistemological analysis of the built environment contributes to a history of neoliberalism.

Habitat

Concepts such as habitat and human territoriality, which have shaped not only the development of social science but also modern architecture, public housing, and urban policy, are part of a longer history of metaphors and analogies derived from the natural sciences. Especially with the popularization of evolutionary theory in the second half of the nineteenth century, the natural sciences offered a model of objectivity and an explanatory framework that attracted many observers of urban society. During this period the concept of habitat, which had emerged in the eighteenth century to denote the locality in which a plant or animal naturally grows, became meaningful in a more general sense and was increasingly used to describe the dwelling places of human beings and things. Charles Booth’s (1889) mapping of the London poor in the late nineteenth century can be read as an application of this new, modern way of seeing. With the development of the science of ecology in the first decades of the twentieth century, in particular the work of Frederic Clements, further transpositions into sociology occurred. The urban ecological model developed by Chicago school sociologists in the 1920s shaped not only the social sciences over the following decades but also the work of urban reformers and housing professionals (see Light 2009).

To explain the modernist form that the development of public housing has taken since the 1920s, historians have long emphasized the avant-garde’s interest in industrialization and the metaphor of the dwelling as a machine. Equally important to the conception of public housing, however, were ways of thinking inspired by the natural sciences. The culture of mechanization itself was founded upon scientific ideas of human nature (see Rabinbach 1992). Not surprisingly, then,
Hannes Meyer, the modernist architect and second director of the Bauhaus, formulated his functionalist theory of architecture in biological terms. He contended: “Building is a biological event. Building is not an aesthetic process. Essentially conceived, the new house becomes not only a dwelling machine but a biological device for spiritual and bodily needs” (Meyer 1928: 12; author’s translation).2 Such functionalist analogies, crucial to modernist architects in their search for new forms of dwelling, suggested a causal relationship between human beings and their environment. This relationship seemed to prove that architects’ work in reshaping dwelling space would also reshape the very people in it. The modern housing projects of the 1920s and 1930s, such as those of Das Neue Frankfurt, are thus implicitly built on an ecological vision—even if the term ecology itself came to imply a more encompassing sense of the natural world only later in the century (see Anker 2010).

Yet only at midcentury did the widespread modernist assumption of a causal relationship between humans and their environment congeal in the term habitat. The massive destruction of housing and infrastructure during World War II precipitated ambitions for equally massive rebuilding. In this watershed moment, architects, planners, politicians, and a new generation of experts were emboldened by the sense that a new world could be built. The notion of habitat became dominant in this context, not just as a way to understand human dwelling but as a strategy to rethink existing conditions in a comprehensive way. Instead of insisting on the separation of functions and biological requirements—objective quantities of air, light, and space—in their housing and urban schemes, postwar architects now aimed explicitly to accommodate people’s subjective, spiritual, and social needs. The concept of habitat encapsulated this “more humane” agenda for postwar architecture. It became central to architectural thinking with the discussions at the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne, CIAM), in particular the 1952 CIAM meeting in Sigtuna, Sweden, and with the transition from CIAM to its successor, Team 10 (see Pedret 2013; Steiner 2014). Even though the members of these groups were unable to define precisely what they meant by the term, habitat was intuitively understood as something more comprehensive than dwelling. Cornelis van Eesteren defined habitat as “the setting for daily life,” at every scale (Pedret 2013). For André Wogenscky (1953), it constituted “all such things in the immediate environment as are necessary for a complete life.”

The idea of habitat in postwar architecture had a particular territorial dimension, which is most succinctly illustrated by Georges Candilis in his diagram for the Sigtuna meeting (Pedret 2013) (fig. 1). In his diagram, people (hommes) are represented as the center of a series of concentric circles. Dwellings (logis) constitute the first sphere of people’s environment. A second, larger circle represents their “immediate environment,” and beyond that lies an even larger sphere, that of the “urban environment” (environnement urbanistique). Habitat encompasses all of these territorial scales. For Candilis, human occupation of land and space thus served to satisfy only human needs, whether biological or “spiritual.” Candilis and many of his colleagues approached such occupation as a collective and not an individual endeavor: hommes and not homme are at the center of his diagram. Following Patrick Geddes’s regional ecology model, Alison Smithson and Peter Smithson proposed a similarly nested concept of habitat. This was a hierarchical framework of “fundamental human associations” ranging in scale from the household to the neighborhood and the city at large (see Risselada and van den Heuvel 2005).

Even though such avant-garde conceptions were far removed from the concrete work of the architects and policy makers in charge of housing construction, they often shared an underlying approach to the relationship between housing design and human dwelling. In the postwar decades, the massive construction of public housing across Europe—a single project could at times comprise thousands of dwelling units built at unprecedented speed—went along with an exponential rise in the production of social scientific expertise, much of which was, if often only implicitly, based on the notion of habitat (see Cupers 2014). The French sociologist Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, who was at the forefront of French housing policy in the 1950s and 1960s and exerted considerable influence through his contacts with architects, planners, and state administrators, conceived of habitat as “the material living environment of a society in space”; that is, as “the image of a society on the ground” (Chombart de Lauwe 1960: 11). In Great Britain, sociologists such as Margaret Willis were influential in rooting a similar approach to studying the human environment within the bureaucratic expertise of public housing production. Willis’s (1952) research for London County Council’s architecture depart-
ment, which was responsible for much of London’s public housing construction in the postwar decades, focused on what she called the “environs of flats” and included meticulous studies of the relationship between private and public spaces of council housing estates (fig. 2).

In short, the construction of public housing during the 1950s and 1960s went hand in hand with a particular way of thinking about the relationship between human beings and their environment, which coalesced in the concept of habitat. It was now defined by modernist architects, and increasingly by sociologists, as “the territorial configuration of social activities.” The concept proved fertile ground for ideas about how to produce housing in a comprehensive way, including not just the mass production of dwelling units but all the facilities and amenities needed for everyday life. This technocratic approach obfuscated the class and racial dynamics underlying housing policies in different national contexts. In Great Britain, public housing estates had been built by municipal governments in the first half of the twentieth century and continued to be built in the postwar period primarily to house the industrial workforce (see Glendinning and Muthesius 1994). Similar public housing areas were centrally planned in postwar France to house both working-class and middle-class French families from the provinces; they became racially segregated in a context of decolonization (see Cupers 2014). In the United States, where public housing never enjoyed strong political support, it was built only as a “way station” for the urban poor and was racially segregated from the beginning (see Bloom 2009; Hunt 2009). Habitat, as a technology of governing, cloaked the politics of class and race in vaguely humanistic rhetoric.

Despite the aspirations of some architects and policy makers, the bulk of housing was built without any input from local citizens or future inhabitants. This hubris of design and policy was in part legitimized by the lofty ambitions that resided within the idea of habitat, which was founded on an understanding of human beings as both shaping and being shaped by their surrounding environment at hierarchically organized territorial scales, from the home to the city to the

Figure 2  Margaret Willis’s (1951) sociological research for the London County Council on the environments of housing estates in the early 1950s. From Willis 1951
regional and national territory. Human inhabitation was thus understood not only in collective terms but from a specific human ecological perspective. Even if in the United States this way of thinking did not nearly dominate as much as it did in France or Great Britain, it was nevertheless prominent across national boundaries during the 1950s and 1960s.

**Appropriation**

The massive construction of public housing in countries such as France and Great Britain during the 1950s and 1960s generated as much criticism as enthusiasm. Journalists denounced the “inhuman” scale of high-rise towers and slabs, inhabitants lamented technical deficiencies and the lack of local amenities, and experts warned about the psychological ills of estate living. Even though Willis’s (1951) surveys showed that the majority of inhabitants in fact preferred to live on the upper floors of their high-rise blocks—despite the inconvenience of not being able to watch the kids play from the kitchen window—medical doctors such as Robert-Henri Hazemann (1960) went as far as to claim that the inhabitants of such apartments suffered a specific pathology. Sociologists eventually gained the upper hand from physicians and psychiatrists in diagnosing the problems of everyday life in public housing, while a younger generation of architects focused on offering architectural alternatives to the monotony of slabs and blocks.

What propelled both sociological research and architectural design of public housing during the 1960s, throughout Europe but particularly in France, was the spatial concept of appropriation. To counter the problems of alienation in modern housing estates, so experts argued, inhabitants needed to be able to personalize and creatively appropriate their everyday environments. With this in mind, a team of French sociologists (Raymond et al. 1964) turned to the suburban single-family home, which had been overshadowed by mass housing construction but had nevertheless remained a cherished ideal of many French families. Their study, partly published as *L’habitat pavillonnaire (Single-Family Dwelling)* in 1964, revealed how inhabitants marked their dwelling spaces materially and symbolically and demonstrated the creative possibilities and changing uses of attics, basements, garages, and front lawns as particular forms of spatial appropriation. In the book’s

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3. Single-family homes, especially those in suburban allotments, were often derided by French intellectuals as a haven of petit bourgeois values and as a site of antimodernity. See Magri 2008. In France, publicly funded housing blocks in separate estates had constituted the majority of newly built dwelling units since the mid-1950s. At the same time, the single-family home had long been a stated ideal of the French, confirmed by opinion poll in 1947. See Girard 1947.
preface, a sustained reflection on the poetics and science of habitat, Henri Lefebvre (1964: 16, 23) argued that “appropriation is the goal, the sense, the finality of social life. . . . What do human beings, being essentially social, want in dwelling? They want a supple appropriable space, at the level of private as much as public life, of the town and the landscape” (author’s translation). A second landmark study in France, by the sociologist Philippe Boudon, focused directly on public housing. Boudon (1969) studied the process by which the inhabitants of Le Corbusier’s housing estate in Pessac had altered their homes over the years since its construction in the late 1920s, adapting them to changing needs and popular tastes (fig. 3). Rather than dismissing Le Corbusier’s design for failing to foresee people’s needs, his study, which was also prefaced by Lefebvre, celebrated the project for its success in accommodating this creative process. Unlike previous sociologists (such as Chombart de Lauwe), Lefebvre, Boudon, and their colleagues emphasized the transformative nature of appropriation and its potential for fundamentally reorienting housing policy and design.

The architect John N. Habraken, in his book *Supports: An Alternative to Mass Housing* (1972), first published in Dutch in 1961, had already articulated a similar approach to housing based on appropriation. In his opinion, popular discontent with the monotony of public housing resulted from the denial of inhabitant initiative, and this denial signaled the end of mass housing. The much-needed revision of the “housing process,” as he called it, should be based on “the need for a personal environment where one can do as one likes; indeed it concerns one of the strongest urges of mankind: the desire for possession” (ibid.: 12). Habraken believed that council estates and high-rise blocks impeded this fundamental human desire. Yet he did not promote private suburban homeownership; rather, he insisted on distinguishing possession from property: “Property is a legal term, but the idea of possession is deeply rooted in us. . . . Possession is inextricably con-
nected with action. . . . To possess something we have to take it in our hand, touch it, test it, put our stamp on it” (ibid.). That is, inhabitants’ appropriation of their everyday environment was a basic means of self-expression. For Habraken, the problem with mass housing is that inhabitants “cannot possess their town”: “They remain lodged in an environment which is no part of themselves” (ibid.: 13). Vandalism and graffiti, in Habraken’s view, were the logical result of the frustration of our “biological” impulse for the creative appropriation of our surroundings. The architect went even further, arguing that “nature knows no uniformity, but seeks ever greater variety” (ibid.: 22); therefore, the current production of uniform mass housing projects was artificial and doomed to wither.

Habraken’s solution was to “try to make provision for what cannot be foreseen” by “creating the rules for a game designed to make creativity possible” (ibid.: 42, 44). This did not imply giving up on prefabrication or machine production. On the contrary, Habraken contended, “it should be possible to discover a method in which man and machine, natural relationship and mass production, are given full opportunity to unfold side by side” (ibid.: 56–57). Technically, this method implied the design of “support structures” that would not be buildings or dwellings in themselves but instead would be capable of “lifting dwellings above the ground; constructions which contain individual dwellings as a bookcase contains books, which can be removed and replaced separately” (ibid.: 59).

Many public housing experiments inspired by such ideas took place in the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. They included housing units with flexible interiors and exteriors; adaptable or evolving dwelling types (habitat évolutif); intermediary housing (habitat intermédiaire) that would hold the middle between collective housing and the single-family home; and a range of low-rise, high-density housing, including maisonettes and walk-ups. Many experts called for some of the qualities of single-family homeownership to be combined with the industrialized production model and economies of scale of mass collective housing. Instead of a predetermined private dwelling, their goal was to offer individuals and families the possibilities afforded by spatial appropriation. The architects and social scientists at the forefront of such experimentation continued to rely on the assumption of a reciprocal relationship between human beings and their environment. Only now they recognized that individual inhabitants needed to be given an active role in making their habitat.

Territoriality

The idea that the human species is an intrinsically territorial being gained further traction in the 1960s, when a variety of critical observers and social scientists turned to zoology to advance new understandings of human behavior and society (Knoblauch 2011). Working largely with analogies, popularizers such as Desmond Morris, in particular with his 1967 book *The Naked Ape: A Zoologist’s Study of the Human*, harnessed the scientific observation of animal behavior for the explanation of human nature. In zoology, the notion of territoriality had first been introduced by Henry Eliot Howard in his *Territory in Bird Life* of 1920. Four decades later, the concept was imported into social science by Ardrey, who with his 1966 book *The Territorial Imperative: A Personal Inquiry into the Animal Origins of Property and Nations* became the most influential theorist of human territoriality.

Ardrey’s (1966: x) fundamental argument was that “man is a territorial species, and that the behavior so widely observed in animal species is equally characteristic of our own.” Like Morris (1967), he employed a primarily analogical method. Rather than demonstrating the intrinsic territoriality of human beings through direct experiment or observation, Ardrey relied on existing zoological knowledge. Yet his understanding of animal behavior was itself implicitly colored by human social constructs. Most important, his very definition of *territory* was based upon the notion of human property: “A territory is an area of space, whether of water or earth or air, which an animal or group of animals defends as an exclusive preserve. . . . A territorial species of animals, therefore, is one in which all males, and sometimes females too, bear an inherent drive to gain and defend an exclusive property” (Ardrey 1966: 3). Ardrey’s argument that “ownership of land is scarcely a human invention, as our territorial propensity is something less than a human distinction” (ibid.: 4) was thus based upon circular logic. The result was the naturalization of territorial behavior in people: “If we defend the title to our land or the sovereignty of our country, we do it for reasons no different, no less innate, no less ineradicable, than do lower animals” (ibid.).

At the base of the late 1960s and 1970s concept of human territoriality lay the science of ethology. This new discipline, advanced by Konrad Lorenz and Niko Tinbergen in the 1930s (see Burckhardt 2005), focused on genetically determined patterns of behavior. In many ways it was opposed to behaviorism, in particular, to the experimental psychology of scientists such as John B. Watson, who studied behavior from the perspective of present experience. Ardrey and others proposed instead that human behavior was shaped and could thus be predicted by both heredity and environment.
This scientific position did not preclude a particular diagnosis of contemporary culture and an agenda for reform. In Ardrey’s view, current societal problems such as juvenile delinquency or discontents with mass housing were direct consequences of the nefarious “deterritorializing” of humanity (fig. 4). If territoriality was merely a learned behavior, it could be unlearned, and “we may assume that man will adjust himself to collective existence or to the lonely crowd” (Ardrey 1966: 103). But “if man is a territorial animal,” as Ardrey contended, “then as we seek to repair his dignity and responsibility as a human being, should we not first search for means of restoring his dignity and responsibility as a proprietor?” (ibid.). Ardrey was suggesting that, because “our attachment for property is of an ancient biological order” (ibid.), it should guide social organization.

During the 1960s and 1970s, urban researchers and housing professionals in the United States adopted the idea of human territoriality in their work, either implicitly or explicitly, although not all of them were directly inspired by Ardrey. In The Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs (1961) had already argued against an urbanism of impersonal, anonymous relationships and in favor of various forms of social control on the street. Her basic postulate was that streets and neighborhoods would flourish only if the inhabitants took active possession of them. Even though Jacobs reversed the dominant antiurban ideology to which Ardrey subscribed, casting the city not as the problem but as the solution, she shared Ardrey’s conviction about the territoriality of human behavior.

In Personal Space: The Behavioral Basis of Design, Robert Sommer (1969: viii) used the notion of territoriality more explicitly, equating “the processes by which people mark out and personalize the spaces they inhabit” with personal space or “the emotionally charged zone around each person, sometimes described as a soap bubble or aura, which helps to regulate the spacing of individuals.” Even though he refrained from claims about the innateness of territorial behavior, he concluded that “people actively defend certain spaces against intruders using the entire repertoire of defensive techniques in the animal king-

5. Sommer’s conceptual approach corresponds closely with that of Erving Goffman (1971).
dom as well as a few new ones” (ibid.: 43). As an architect, he was intent on applying knowledge of human territorial behavior to the design of schools, hospitals, prisons, and other institutions.

The most influential application of human territoriality to architectural and urban design was Newman’s *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention through Urban Design*, published in 1972. The architect’s starting point was that “housing officials in the late 1960s had already come to recognize that certain building types were having disastrous effects on their occupants” (Newman 1972: xviii). His research, funded by the New York City Housing Authority as well as the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice of the US Department of Justice, was in fact a direct response to the urban crisis of the 1960s and the consequent reallocation of federal funds to studies of crime and urban violence. But Newman focused not only on crime; following in the footsteps of modernist architects as well as Jacobs, sociologist Lee Rainwater, and housing professionals such as Elizabeth Wood, he was concerned with community formation.6 Newman had gained experience working for the Dutch architect Jaap Bakema in the 1950s and had participated in the CIAM and Team 10 architects’ discourse on habitat (see Newman 1961). Starting from the environmental determinism of this concept, Newman adopted Ardrey’s ideas of human territoriality in his study of American public housing.

At the center of Newman’s thinking was the concept of “defensible space,” which he defined as “a surrogate term for the range of mechanisms—real and symbolic barriers, strongly defined areas of influence, and improved opportunities for surveillance—that combine to bring an environment under the control of its residents” (1972: 3). Following Ardrey, Newman saw a “latent territoriality” in the inhabitants and believed that the task of the designer was to capitalize on this “natural impulse” (ibid.). The underlying premise was that people could extend their territory from their private dwellings into the street and beyond: “Defensible space can be made to operate in an evolving hierarchy from level to level in the collective human habitat” (ibid.: 9). The approach to territoriality as a biological hierarchy of cells allowed Newman to transform Candilis’s basic diagram for habitat into a more complex cellular structure of territorial spheres, which could then be read into a variety of existing environments (fig. 5). Inspired by the work of Aldo van Eyck and Christopher Alexander, Newman had a particular interest in spatial thresholds. He understood traditional stoops as the symbolic and physical boundaries between private and public space and, like many postwar modernists,

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aimed to distill the essential lessons of vernacular architecture. Yet, unlike the architects of Team 10, Newman harnessed this approach to denounce the failings of architectural modernism.

To illustrate the importance of territoriality, Newman compared two housing projects: Breukelen Houses in New York City and Pruitt-Igoe in Saint Louis, Missouri. With its high crime rates, vandalism, and neglect, Pruitt-Igoe, completed in 1955, served as proof to many housing experts at the time that public housing was failing. Newman added proof by condemning the project’s design. The main problem, as he saw it, was the absence of any spatial threshold between private and public spheres. The project’s high-rise slabs sat on entirely open grounds, and each building’s elevators opened directly onto these vast public spaces. This was the reason why the buildings’ corridors, initially designed to be multiuse public galleries, were in such dismal condition, Newman contended (fig. 6). By contrast, Breukelen Houses, a medium-density public housing project built in 1952, served as an example of good territorial definition or defensible space. Its L-shaped buildings created small triangular enclosures from the street, “semiprivate territories” abundantly used by inhabitants for recreation. All building entrances led directly to this space, so that any visitors were immediately

Figure 5  Sketches illustrating Oscar Newman’s concept of defensible space. Left: “territorial definition reinforced with surveillance opportunities.” Right: “defensible space hierarchy in multi-level dwelling.” From Newman 1972: 9, 10

Figure 6  View of an internal gallery area in the Pruitt-Igoe housing project, published by Newman (1972: 58) to illustrate his point that because these corridors are not juxtaposed with apartment units and therefore do not constitute defensible space, they “are feared by residents and [remain] unused.”
spotted. Because of these qualities, Newman interpreted the space as a natural extension of inhabitants’ private dwellings.

Newman framed the problems not only of public housing but of contemporary society more generally in terms of human territoriality. His research was based on a variety of sources—particularly police records and interviews with inhabitants, project managers, and police officers—but despite its scientific ambitions and abundance of quantitative data, several social scientists criticized its methodological flaws. Newman’s arguments were not always supported by the data he provided; often they relied on biological metaphors and assumptions about human nature. The basic problem, according to Newman, is that “we have become strangers sharing the largest collective habitats in human history” (ibid.: 1). Rash urbanization and rising social heterogeneity have led to a disappearance of social control. As a result, “collective community action, once easy, is now cumbersome” (ibid.: 2). The solution was simple: design needed to foster a community of people, even “if only for the limited purpose of ensuring survival of their collective milieu” (ibid.). Such collectivity was not to be identified with the state, however. Newman aligned his study with political movements calling for local participation and self-help and thus implicitly against the predominance of an anonymous or centralized bureaucracy.

Newman’s and Jacobs’s approach to community differed from that of earlier modernist planners and policy makers, for whom community and the state had been, for all practical purposes, synonyms. As such, even though the concept of defensible space was meant to promote community rather than strict individualism, it dovetailed with emerging political theories that explained collective welfare as the outcome of individual economic interest and autonomy. Like Garrett Hardin’s (1968) “tragedy of the commons” thesis, Newman implicitly placed older ideals of citizen participation and organic community in the service of what was essentially a neoliberal management approach. As such, the application of human territoriality to public housing ultimately came to support the position that individual private property was an innate tendency in human beings and therefore the logical basis on which to organize contemporary society.

**Privatization**

Whether Alice Coleman, a professor of geography at King’s College in London, saw Newman on the BBC that evening in February 1974 is unclear. In any case, she eventually became a fervent follower and, as Thatcher’s right hand in housing policy in the early 1980s, imported Newman’s defensible space concept into Brit-
ish housing policy. Such “knowledge transfer,” geographers have recently argued (Jacobs and Lees 2013), is key to the transnationalization of neoliberal urban policy. Yet how did social science actually inform privatization policies such as Thatcher’s flagship right-to-buy scheme of 1980 that allowed tenants to buy their homes and was extraordinarily successful in the privatization of British public (i.e., council) housing?

Privatization was not at all unprecedented in British housing policy during the late 1970s. Government-owned housing was sold—albeit in much smaller numbers—throughout the postwar period, and the sale of such housing became a feature of council housing policy during the 1960s. Although the Left favored council housing and the Right favored private ownership, their goals became irreconcilable only during the 1970s. The expansion of owner occupation could no longer be achieved by new construction and transfers from the much-diminished private rental sector (Jones and Murie 2006). Homeownership, now for the first time since the Second World War in direct conflict with council housing, thus became central to the rise of the New Right in Great Britain.

During the 1970s, however, attacks on public housing did not just come from the political right but from the anarchist left. Both sides criticized the centralization of property that public housing represented. And both focused their criticism on the problem of vandalism, which they saw, rather literally, as the writing on the wall. Vandalism had begun to receive increasing national attention in the late 1960s, coinciding with rising economic challenges faced by the British working class. In Blackburn, a typical northern postindustrial town, no less than 45 percent of local newspaper reports at this time concerned vandalism of some sort (Marshall, n.d.). Despite the variety of places and objects being vandalized, from subway cars to post offices, the problem quickly became associated with council estates and a particular group of perpetrators: unemployed white working-class youth.

The British anarchist and social historian Colin Ward (1973) noted that public spaces were less prone to wanton vandalism if they appeared to be private. He and the other contributors to his edited volume on vandalism—a mix of architects, sociologists, and psychologists—relied on exactly the type of assertions about the effects of environment on behavior that were being harnessed by Jacobs, Newman, and others across the Atlantic. Ward used Southwark’s Canada Estate to demonstrate the need for spaces that could easily be privatized by inhabitants

8. The city council of Birmingham played a pioneering role, as did the Conservative Horace Cutler as chairman of greater London’s housing committee. See Jones and Murie 2006.
One of the most vandalized estates in all of London, its saving grace was a few ground-floor maisonettes with private gardens. These spaces were the only ones left unvandalized. Inhabitants had instead turned them into well-tended flowered “sanctuaries” (Ward 1973: 16). Despite the variety of measures he discussed—including Peter Shepheard’s “law of diminishing vandalism,” which suggested that persistent repair and maintenance would ultimately break vandals’ incentive—Ward’s central answer seemed to be privatization of some sort.

Ward was not the only one who used vandalism as ammunition for the denunciation of public housing, but his antistate approach aligned with Newman’s managerial approach with surprising ease. This convergence became evident when at the 1975 conference of the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO), Ward (1975: 3–4) held up Newman’s *Defensible Space* to reinforce the point that “the kind of housing that is unlikely to be subject to vandalism is small in scale, low in height, and a place which does not look like a council estate.” Of course, Ward did not defend private homeownership in the same way British Conservatives did. Ward promoted radical decentralization of ownership as the only solution to both vandalism and public housing, which he considered to be merely two aspects of a single problem. Both the Left and Right in Great Britain thus seemed increasingly to embrace the terraced house with private garden not only as an ideal but as a natural need.

The denunciation of public housing and the growing attention to vandalism were part of a cultural shift in which private ownership of space was increasingly cast as the *natural* manifestation of dwelling. The increasing focus on privatization in 1970s Great Britain thus corresponded with the concept of innate human territoriality developed by Ardrey and applied by Newman. While territoriality could just as easily be used to promote collective ownership or community formation, social scientists increasingly identified it with the need for private property and the primacy of the private housing market. Particularly in Great Britain, the
alignment of territoriality with privatization allowed vandalism to be cast both as an attack on the sanctity of private property and as a scream for more of it.

With journalists regularly portraying council estates as “incubators of vandalism” (e.g., *Times*, August 12, 1976), vandalism perhaps not surprisingly became an increasingly important concern for policy makers in the central government. Regarding it as a “symptom of deeper social and economic alienation in our society” (Minister HC to the Home Secretary 1977), they were quick to adopt the environmentally oriented approach to crime prevention championed by Newman and others in Great Britain, even if they did not altogether abandon other strategies, such as increasing police patrols or social and educational programs. Researchers such as Sheena Wilson at the Department of the Environment eventually transferred Newman’s ideas from the American to the British context. In 1977 Wilson (1977: 795) compared rates of vandalism on fifty-two housing estates in two Inner London boroughs, “looking to see if they varied with factors such as building design and the number of children resident in the blocks.” Explicitly based on Newman’s *Defensible Space*, Wilson’s study claimed the causal relationship between environment and design as “eminently sensible” (ibid.). Yet, she was quick to guarantee, the emphasis on environment would not preclude the recognition of social factors. Wilson interpreted Newman’s concept of human territoriality as the positive instinct of public housing residents to create safe communities. Her research suggested that vandalism in communal areas of housing estates could be reduced by the design of secured entrances to limit access to strangers. The hypothesis was tested at new housing developments such as Thamesmead, Great Britain’s last “new town” (Roberts 1984). Other researchers at the Home Office, such as Tony Marshall (n.d.), suggested similar design solutions to crime prevention, relying directly on Jacobs’s ideas about informal social control. Few experts actually explored the underlying social and racial dynamics in council housing, which resulted from a complex cocktail of urban economic decline, postcolonial migration, and an increasingly disaffected working class.

By concentrating on vandalism, social scientific studies prompted the government to focus policies on crime prevention, which changed during the 1970s from the materiality of locks and bolts to the physical and social environment at large. In 1970 the Greater London Council (GLC) still approached the security of housing as a simple matter of locks and fastenings, doors, windows, and fencing. At the same time, as crime reports were rising at housing estates, police patrols came

9. For archived reports from the GLC Housing Department Feedback Committee, see Greater London Council, n.d.
to be focused on such estates.\textsuperscript{10} By 1980, NACRO concluded that petty crime and vandalism on housing estates were “linked with unsuitable and inadequate home surroundings” (Greater London Council 1980: 1). And thus, if the problem was the environment, so was the solution. From the mid-1970s onward, the GLC had been investing serious funds in physical improvements—from special vandalism-proof fittings to entry phones. Such interventions were often accompanied by social surveys and consultation work with local inhabitants. Rather than just locks and bolts, “involving the community” was increasingly emphasized as a prerequisite to successful crime prevention. Ironically, community became the central rationale at the time of public housing’s ultimate demise.

Crime prevention through environmental design, an approach pioneered in Great Britain by NACRO and the GLC, became standard business as soon as it was adopted by the central government in the early 1980s.\textsuperscript{11} A 1983 circular on crime prevention confirmed how dominant the new approach had become. While policy makers proposed what they saw as comprehensive approaches to crime prevention, they emphasized first and foremost that “housing designs and neighborhood plans which enable residents to exercise greater surveillance and control over their homes and surrounding areas can give them a sense of ‘territoriality’ that makes them readier and more able to prevent crime” (Home Office, Department of the Environment 1983).

By the time of this circular, British public housing was already being affected by the most important of the privatization initiatives introduced by the Thatcher government, namely, the right-to-buy scheme (Jones and Murie 2006). The New Right had come to power in part by casting private homeownership as an inalienable right, denied for too long by Labour’s “socialist” housing policies. The large-scale sale of council housing sanctioned by the Housing Act of 1980 thus became Thatcher’s flagship policy, one of the first of her new government. At this point Coleman, Thatcher’s right hand in housing policy, began to take a prominent role by promoting Newman’s approach in British policy. Her study, published in 1985 as \textit{Utopia on Trial}, reiterated Newman’s theories and criticism of public housing, only furthering his influence across Europe and sealing the downfall of public housing (fig. 8).

\textsuperscript{10} For relevant correspondence from around 1970 and lists of “crime prevention officers,” see Greater London Council, ca. 1970.

\textsuperscript{11} In 1983–84 expenditure of GBP 6.38 million was programmed for environmental improvements to both transferred and retained interwar stock and was aimed at reducing vandalism and increasing security. A further program of GBP 8 million was being undertaken in postwar multistory blocks. See Greater London Council [1984?].
Social scientific knowledge linking environment and behavior precipitated the British shift away from public housing and was used to promote several types of privatization. First, it participated in the criticism of public housing based on vandalism, which during the 1970s led to design interventions focused on a clearer demarcation of private and collective space in housing estates. Yet another logic was at play as well. Conservatives had long argued that councils were bureaucratic landlords insensitive to tenants’ needs. Their proposal was a rescaling of government toward what might be perceived as a more intimate style of housing management, which could simply mean the transfer of ownership to the local boroughs. Only with the rise of the New Right at the end of the decade was the explicit privatization of publicly owned stock cast as the sole solution to “the problem” of council housing.

Privatization at this time was part of a larger project to reconfigure the relationship between the state and the economy at large. The Labour government of the past was thus cast as “an overextended state, stifling freedom and entrepreneurial flair and inculcating a habit of dependency” (Forrest and Murie 1988: 4). As many scholars have since pointed out, this shift did not entail a withdrawal of the state but rather led to an increase of centralized authoritarian power. What legitimized
privatization was not just the ideal of individual homeownership but a larger cultural shift in which social science played a significant role. Concepts such as innate human territoriality or the primacy of personal space were thus part of a shifting mentality, one the British government translated into “an approach to housing problems and solutions which is predominantly flexible and person-centered in the sense of being geared to the needs of individual householders” (National Economic Development Office 1977). Even in countries where neoliberal ideology did not have the same grounding as in Great Britain or the United States, left-leaning governments steered housing policies toward privatization. French policies in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, increasingly promoted individual homeownership instead of publicly funded rental housing, and the rehabilitation of housing estates came to be focused on the privatization of its public and collective areas. This process was termed résidentialisation (turning housing into homes) (see Loudier-Malgouyres 2004) and was inspired explicitly by Newman’s theories.

**Conclusion**

Social science served to legitimize a range of housing designs and policies throughout the twentieth century and across national boundaries. Housing form, finance, and tenure are less a matter of scientific knowledge than of historically specific political-economic regimes and cultural values. And yet, as Newman’s television appearance and entire sections on housing studies in university libraries attest, social scientific knowledge guided (and misguided) both the rise and the fall of public housing.

That knowledge, guided by the assumption of a causal effect of the environment on human behavior, was first used “for” and subsequently “against” public housing. In the 1950s, the concept of habitat, defined as the territorial configuration of human activities, legitimized the mass production of public housing across postwar Europe as a comprehensive solution to dwelling and social progress. A few decades later, human territoriality was conceived first and foremost as an individualized “personal space,” which suggested that the right to private property was inalienable and that privatization was the logical solution to the failings of public housing. That conviction did not grow out of thin air. The notion of human territoriality was in fact rooted in the older human-environmental concept of habitat.

12. This article follows the argument of Simon Richards (2012) about architectural culture, namely, that environmental determinism did not wither in the 1950s but instead deepened and diversified.
Such epistemological continuity, however, does not mean that the trajectory of public housing in the second half of the twentieth century was historically inevitable. On the contrary, the assumption of a causal relationship between environment and human behavior does not incontrovertibly lead to the singular conclusion that public housing has failed and private homeownership is a natural human impulse. While the growing expertise in public housing during the “long sixties” was a factor of the broader development of research economies in the postwar period, it was also shaped by growing public criticism of public housing and specific concerns with everyday life in these new environments. Many academics, designers, and policy experts poured into government-aided housing areas—and not only infamous ones such as Pruitt-Igoe, Aylesbury, or Sarcelles—to study and learn. On both sides of the Atlantic more than a few of them pointed at the physical environment in search of a cause and a solution. Yet they did not all discover the same causes, nor did they propose the same solutions. Most significant in this regard is the concept of appropriation, which emerged in response to perceived problems of mass housing in Europe and informed formal and social experiments in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In hindsight, this was a road not taken, as the approach did not determine the eventual course of housing policy and design—not even in France or the Netherlands, where it found the most fertile ground. Instead, what did was the concept of human territoriality. The idea of inhabitants appropriating their everyday environments was ultimately a celebration of human creativity, while that of human territoriality turned out to foster a preoccupation with criminality. This particular approach to housing production and management was eventually grafted onto and ultimately came to reinforce neoliberal theory, particularly in Great Britain but also elsewhere.

To account for the historical trajectory of public housing would require a much broader perspective than I can offer here. Such an account would entail a history of global and national economic restructuring; the everyday politics of class, race, and gender in different types of housing; changing policies of finance and management; the role of the private housing market and real estate developers; spatial and social representations; technical failures and innovations; and many other things besides. My far more limited aim here has been to articulate how large-scale political-economic change is itself dependent on the appropriation of existing intellectual frameworks and visions. Ideas matter—but only to the extent to which they are mediated, appropriated, and translated into action by individuals who might or might not be conscious of their actual effects.
Such an intellectual history of public housing might ultimately suggest a more fine-grained approach to the history of neoliberalism. Private property in general—and individual homeownership in particular—is a cornerstone of neoliberal doctrine. In order to undo the seeming historical inevitability of this doctrine and expose the violence of its logic, notions such as property must be taken out of their “natural” state and given historical specificity and contingency. In the last century the qualities of homeliness, of people’s ineffable relationship to the place where they live, were theorized and subsequently reduced to the logic of private property. This reduction propelled a specific course of privatization that, ironically and sadly, has left more people homeless than could ever have been imagined by the often well-meaning theorists of human territoriality.

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