

Title	Human Conditions: the Lives of Estate/s
Type	Article
URL	https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/8313/
Date	2015
Citation	Zimmerman, Andrea Luka (2015) Human Conditions: the Lives of Estate/s. La Furia Umana (23). ISSN 2037-0431
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ANDREA LUKA ZIMMERMAN / Human Conditions: the Lives of Estate/s

A tracking shot is no longer a moral issue, but a metaphysical one. Chris Marker



From the window of my flat on the top floor, I am watching the city skyline as it rapidly changes. Strange (or perhaps not) to think that London does not have an *officer for the harmonisation of its skyline* which cities such as even small ones like Florence can claim. Part of me likes this idea of an uncontrolled *mêlée* emerging, forever aspiring higher, and inaccessible to most of us (like the mountains I love, which dominated my childhood view from a tower block). But another part knows why this is: in a city whose unsleeping veins run with the digital gleam of globalised finance capitalism, control of the actually existing is a contradiction the machinery cannot compute.

When there is fog the skyline is shrouded, just as when the sun is especially bright. But, and this is particular to the towers of a city, they are visible most clearly and most

intensely by night. Bright as suspended fireworks, they haunt the view from my soon-to-be-sleeping window. These are lights designed, on an international scale of course, for the purpose of *vertical* illumination (the only way is up, for wealth and power) to *narrate* their contours, like a peacock shocked to an almost military attention, *I am here...*

Often, sometimes with years in between, I dream about the estate I grew up on. It is a place that churns me still, if and when I visit. It is more like a haunting. Because my mother constantly struggled to keep things going, we lived for extended periods in other people's living rooms, then in a one-bedroom council flat, and then in a *two*-bedroom council flat, which seemed so large that I could actually run in it (I was very small still). So home became a flat in an 18-storey block, built as part of a «relief city» on the edge of the official one (Munich), from which I could see those longed-for, snow-tipped peaks. We lived in the orange block. The next was green; another blue. The one and only small shop nearby always ran out of toilet paper and fresh produce (so I grew up with tins and newspaper squares).

But there were *sheep* downstairs, for ours was, in some ways at least, a magical, even alien, one-mile wide, 18 storey tall, circular council estate built in the middle of recently deregulated common ground. My childhood days, interrupted by occasional periods at school, were spent *beyond* its half-finished streets. I didn't like education, especially since the «good» school I went to took nobody else from the estate, and the parents of other children would warn them about kids from the «rough» place.

True enough, rough it was; so much damage, from all sorts of eastern European troubles and spills, and kids who taught me how to fight, carry fireworks for protection and extort money from posh kids in the shopping mall. I bullied and *was* bullied. I was always scared, both inside, because of my mother's temperament, and her daily rain of fists, and outside, depending on the mood of someone fancying themselves leader (almost always aggressively, learning by example from those that woke them into their mornings, broken – like my own mother was – in spirit and purpose). I remember several suicides by jumping from the top floor, leaps into the void without the cameras.

Where, for me this orange block, with sheep below was a new world, for many others it was the worsening continuation of a previous one: the relief city, a utopian dream conjured by those who might have no experience of the primal loneliness and isolation

that certain locations can generate.

As happened for you, Bruce, now so gone from us, who told me that when you came out of prison and attempted rehab, you were housed on the Haggerston estate, known then as the «heroin capital of Europe».

When I moved onto the same site, it was deemed hard to let, a «sink estate». I seem to remember making a joke to the council officer who showed me the flat, asking him where are all the sinks, then; there're only two here... I got my flat because nobody else wanted it. It had been empty for some time. People I knew said that the estate was full of misery. It certainly looked neglected. There was even a film made about it, by the BBC, and then another...

We usually think of sinking as being a movement in water, sometimes in mud. You normally get stuck in the mud. But if you try to swim in quicksand, or muddy sludge, you drown faster. Best to stay completely still and hope for the best (wait for the cavalry...).

However, looking back, I see now that these residents, from that time – myself included – only embodied, admittedly sometimes *in extremis*, what is surely the case for all of us, acknowledged or not. To protect against the unexpected demands *not* a protective cell, but a proper acknowledgement of vulnerability, and the courage, on a daily basis, to honour despair but still to endure. Survivors of abuse know too well what the haunting I spoke of earlier feels like; and, as with many such things in life, when one needs help the most, one probably has the least ability to reach out. Throughout my twenties, I repeated the patterns of my childhood, as is often the case after abuse. But then came a refuge, this flat, albeit in an estate that was sinking.

What writer and archivist Ken Appollo has written strikes me with the truth of experience: «the mouse isn't supposed to beat the cat. The mouse wins by surviving».
[\[1\]](#) In this coming through is where extraordinary spaces of possibility can develop.

And I realised this once I started to live on the Haggerston estate. After a decade there, we were told we would eventually have to move, as the block would be demolished within seven years, and so I started to think what it was that made this place feel like home to me. This is how the filming started.

To build (positive) memories, like an orchestra of growing and related instrumentation,

can be done only when one has a safe and not immediately precarious accommodation. This allows one to begin to shed the haunting, and to build in its place memories that are complex in texture, not only a bruise or a scar. This was indeed a place where I felt I belonged, if only under the umbrella of low-cost living, and being moderately well organised, but with a canal view, (*amazing...*). This is what home means to me. It means being stable enough to live, and home is also where I met my fellow travellers of *Estate, a Reverie*.

I have always been drawn to large cities because they are spaces of multiplicity, of shared and distinctive experience, and also, crucially, of dialogue; with sites like the Haggerston estate, an open-access red brick «Neo-Georgian Flatted Dwelling», built between the wars. Anyone could walk up to the landings (and regularly did). All the kitchens faced the inner courtyard, which anyone could walk into. Most of us had metal gates on the front door, of course, and for a reason. The doors provided were so flimsy that anyone leaning hard could force them. Similarly, the windows could easily be pushed out of their frames.

So we were told that our buildings were unfit for purpose, they *themselves*, not the structures by which they were allowed to be run into the ground, abandoned by politically motivated structural flaws in the system, preventing councils from maintaining their stock. Neo-Georgian Flatted Dwellings were built to last, and certainly to endure beyond the 30-year lifecycle that new buildings are finding themselves within. Built to last a lifetime, but whose lifetime, and what life looks to last only 30 years anyway? Maybe these are seen as the *productive* years, those that measure the period in which one (used to) work; but not where one is younger, or older...

But today, if a neighbour wishes to find another resident, she cannot with any ease; not in the new buildings, thanks to «secure by design» architectural separation, where a key fob allows access to one floor only, the floor one lives on. Architecturally, we exclude our neighbours. We desire, allegedly, our private islands within congested space. How does this change human experience? It changes everything. Now, we can no longer reach out through the walls behind which we hear cries. Not that we probably wanted to before, but, if so inclined, there was the *architectural* possibility of this reaching out.

We are told that, after getting helped out of the mud, and with the old buildings torn

down, we are no longer sinking, but instead part of a brave and brand new world, a territory of aspirational naming: «Art House», «Ability Plaza», «Avant-Garde Tower», «Canelatto», «Visionary Circle», «Mettle and Poise»...

Isn't all this a profound *unmaking* of the possibility of seeing with our *own* eyes what reality might or might not have to offer?

The high towers of finance and the so-called luxury flats, the privatized sites and gated communities all reflect the dominant official values of our times and, as such, they change the way in which we all experience the cities in which we live and work. Those that do not fit into these new settlements – be they the less wealthy (or, increasingly, even the normally comfortable), the poor, the physically challenged, the nomadic, animals, dreamers and the charitable, anyone who lives a life that is not part of the productivity chain as evidenced by the buildings with fantastic names – are deemed, in the dominant «narrative» to be, and treated henceforth, as marginalized. I, who have come from the mud, and my friends and fellows in *Estate*, have been rescued, saved from our fever dreams of fire and belonging, and housed in a warm and open-armed development advertising itself as «vibrant, diverse, and lively», which we, in our unbranded naïveté, so far from what the clichéd estate agent advertising slogans on hoardings term «people texture», had thought we already occupied.

As the ground beneath our feet is being financially and architecturally internationalized, how does one propose a counter-narrative to what is so tiresomely called «progress» by the stakeholders of privatization, whose calls to growth and constant movement «forwards» imply, of course, that what is there now is insufficient in every way.

I am very interested in the languages produced by this process, and the subtle shift in perception of those at the mercy of these languages. What lies on the other side of success, ability, security, luxury?

The privatized city, or one that encourages a privatized space (including quasi-militarized private cars, private healthcare, private everything), has as its mirror image, as the *threat* it suggests, the «other». It produces clichés and stereotypes that both reinforce the abject, as well as public fears, but also marginalize those dispossessed from this process even further by making them feel actively unwelcome; unable to participate, and in fact undesired; strangers in their own time and place.

We cannot precisely «see» how power works, and mostly we don't even notice it, until we are subjected to its undisguised scrutiny and service. Power (of the «behind the scenes» kind, from covert military operations to city planning) is evasive, slippery; and it is making this new city in its own likeness, where buy-to-let rents are set so high that some people, faced with the inevitable fact of losing their home of a lifetime, losing the «extra» room they need, being disabled, losing the housing welfare that secures their payments when work is too hard to find, may actually die as a result of such actions, may take their own lives (to a place perceived as not being worse) or become so isolated, so dislocated, that those deemed, or narrated as hip, fashionable, able to participate, winners, might as well be another species, let alone another class.

So, what is the meaning of home and where does it reside?

Here is a strange, cruel but appropriate analogy: if you throw a frog into a pot with boiling water, it jumps out. However, if you place a frog into a pot with cold water, and you increase the temperature slowly, the frog won't notice it is boiling until it is too late.

Dead frog.

I remember first meeting you, John, my neighbour for all those years on the estate, when you were trying to entice my cat Oskar to live with *you*. I never forget how you bought him chicken and cheese, and actually believed that Oskar was *your* cat. Then John B downstairs claimed Oskar was his. I was looking for Oskar when I saw him on the kitchen draining board in John B's flat looking out at me. Then both of you Johns started a daily argument about Oskar, who by now had become both of yours...

This is how I got to know *you* both, elderly men, for whom a shared cat was your only real sense of family. You didn't buy anything new for decades, because it was OK still to darn socks instead of throwing them away when they got holes in them. I learnt from you about how your values expressed themselves, because what you needed you had already.

And Eric, you too, 84 now and sharp as a pin, who didn't change a thing in your flat for 20 years after your Mary passed away. And when your TV gave up the ghost a turn-dial set not adaptable for digital reception, you didn't want it smashed up in the trash so you carried it gently downstairs to the salvage men, in the hope that someone might make

use of it still.

Mathilda, you'd grown up in Hoxton in the 1920s, and then moved into your flat on the estate during the Queen's coronation, and nobody else had lived there before you, so all the memories of the place were yours, for over 50 years, and your grandchildren were born in it. In your 90s, you moved away from this London neighbourhood because your flat was being demolished. You appeared to be very scared. You taught me about being alive together in a block *full of time*, and your curiosity and warmth accepted me for who I was, regardless of how I felt, how I looked, or my age. And you mended, with your frail, slightly shaking hands, our clothes.

When my friend had cancer, Teddy, you were in your 60s then, and you offered to give him a blood transfusion, and plasma too, but you said, with tears in your eyes, that it may not be any good because of your drink problem (that soon after killed you). After you died, I found out that you held a one-person protest each Friday after betting, in the landlords' office, because you disagreed with their policies.

When I had a foot operation for arthritis and was on crutches, Majiek and Steve, you carried me up the four flights of stairs every day when I came home from work. Majiek and Marcin, who lived there with Lila for seven years, you were all finally evicted. We fought and fought to make you legal, you were shining neighbours. One of the neighbours took Marcin and Lila into his new build flat, and so, by faith and with love, you are still here.

From you, Ruth, I learnt what it means to have a real friend living just downstairs, to fall into each other's homes, to laugh, to cry, to eat together. And to stay and bear witness on behalf of young people in our neighbourhood, mainly black, when they are so frequently stopped and searched by the police.

And you, Lorna, whose presence was and is so strong and who once said to me that you hoped nobody would again complain about loud music. Instead we must learn to talk with each other, and to come to an agreement, without calling on the authorities; to be tolerant and generous, but also able to express our needs.

Jeff, when you were still alive, you made a «cat car» with Sammy (whom you kind of looked after) out of one of the abandoned cars on the estate; and you turned it into a refuge for all the strays. And soon after there was «fox station», where the old pub had

been, and which was now an overgrown patch with hoardings high around it. Left over food never went to waste; it went over the top for the night feast.

You, and others like you, are the people that make home, and not just for humans, but for all the creatures.

Such was my old estate.

So how could I tell this story, and my experience in this place, making a film with my friends? What were to be our methods of resistance, as storytellers of our time?

Walter Benjamin argued for a history of the oppressed, as this history is otherwise delegated to oblivion, being not so easily spoken or heard; a history of bodies, of agency, of obstinacy, of connection, of reaching out a hand.[\[2\]](#) How to make visible (and challenge) the sets of values in our society by which we are made equally visible - and invisible?

Judith Butler observed that bodies are not just agents of resistance but also fundamentally in need of support.[\[3\]](#) But where the official narrative delegates pity towards vulnerability, and therefore becomes disabling, instead, the challenge and struggle is to accept vulnerability as a condition we all share, human and non-human, and to find common ground within it.

For Doreen Massey «space» is a social dimension. When we are able to look at what is present in a place all at once (in areas where the homogenisation of architecture and experience has not yet risen to its fullest «flowering»), we see, quite literally, different time zones at work, diverse generations, values, experiences and communities, all brushing, blurring, merging and shifting with and against each other, to produce (a feeling) a history (of space) that is multifarious. This is the exact opposite of what we find in, say, London's «Olympic Village» or Westfield in Stratford, but precisely what we find in a place such as Hoxton (even now, just), or Haggerston and other such districts.

Importantly, for Massey, space is initially «a moment of respect», and time is «the subsequent responsibility for the interaction that will follow». Initially, there is a «looking at each other», a possibility of seeing, which is something we can *feel* when it happens, and which we all experience when we walk the city and pause for reflection.

So, for Massey, «space is the dimension of radical simultaneity», a convivium of spaces and stories, a possibility for co-existence. How, then, do we ever *evade* that particular given of coexistence? Time is the dimension of sequence, of before and the future (and never the now, as even the now instantly becomes the past for this promised future). Developers and historians of «progress» turn *space* into a sequence: to claim as a positive all that is brand-new, vibrant, lively and «diverse», convenient, better, modern, safe. What this implies is all that is not new is old, that what is not now vibrant, lively and diverse is inconvenient, outdated, impoverished, unsafe or risky. There seems to be no alternative allowed.

Such an attitude completely destroys and denies the genuine and valuable differences that exist in space, in the spaces described and advocated in this piece. In this vision, the futures (history) is already fixed, laid out towards the inevitable – the inevitable need (without deviation) for modernisation, the need to raise the rents, the need to demolish, etc., as if this were the only one way forward. This narrative of inevitability masks the conditions by which we end up in this dilemma in the first place – be it through laws, policy, inequality, the perversely impacting power of corporations, all the derogatory machinery of marginalisation for everything that does not fit this narrative of progress.

For Massey, «difference is reduced to a place in the historical queue», whether that means the peasants, the global South or all those not yet arrived in the promised land, where, according to the law of capital, we should all be actively headed.

Making *Estate, a Reverie*, I sought to express how we might tell these marginalized stories authentically. So, for the past seven years, I made a film with and for the residents and homes of the Haggerston estate as a way of reaching towards another kind of meaning-making, towards another kind of attention, one founded upon the sometimes smallest gesture, on creaturely and bodily time, and on lived detail; one entirely dependent on the people encountered on the way.

It feels important to say that *Estate* has not been made *about* this community, but has been made *from* it. Through a variety of filmic registers and strategies, the film seeks to capture the genuinely utopian quality of the last few years of the buildings' existence, a period when, because demolition was inevitable, a sense of the *possible*, of the emergence of new, but of course time-specific, social and organizational relationships

developed, alongside a fresh understanding of how the residents might occupy the spaces of the estate.

Estate focuses on the «structure» of its eponymous architecture not only because it is where we lived, but also *how* we lived. The film explores the multiple implications of what most explicitly defines us to other people, while simultaneously challenging that often all too mono-cultural definition and revealing the complex diversity of the population it houses.

Estate is, inevitably therefore, *about* housing, and about the policies that lead us to live lives at the mercy of governmental and financial decisions. But, much more, I hope, it is about how we belong in the world and what structures of meaning exist to define personal and social lives. How do we resist being framed exclusively through class, gender, ability or disability, through geography even? How can we express the fullest possibility of our being, creatively and collectively?

It is a fever dream about the mud; the mud not as a sinking, stinking, purifying mask that people put on in saunas to clean their skin, but the mud as our home; not only a location, as Appollo said, in which to simply survive, but a site in which to thrive, and fully to be; a territory that some, those that can afford to, pretend does not even exist; a space that *could*, if we worked hard enough, be the future.

Thank you to my fellow travellers on the Estate project, for everything they taught me, and to Gareth Evans.

Andrea Luka Zimmerman

[1]. Ken Appollo, *Humble Work and Mad Wanderings: Street Life in the Machine Age*, Carl Mautz Publishing, Nevada 1997.

[2]. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, *Illuminations*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York 1968.

[3]. Judith Butler, “A Politics of the Street”, *The Wall Exchange Lecture*, Vancouver, Spring 2012 www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-bPr7t4tgA (accessed 12 December 2014).