

Social Housing Maintenance and the Ethics of Care

'I've had 3 o'clock in the morning knock on the door just with a leaky tap. I said, you know, this can be dealt with in the morning, you don't need to do it now. You literally have to go to their flat, put a cloth under the tap, say, look I can't hear it now, we'll sort it out in the morning.'

This quote comes from a local resident involved through a Tenant Residents Association (TRA) in the maintenance of a social housing estate. It refers to an exchange over to a routine maintenance issue – a leaky tap. But it also illustrates how maintenance work can be about far more than just responding to the demands of a leaky tap. The person whose tap leaks is vulnerable, and their vulnerability becomes apparent when this happens. They can't cope with it, it stresses them out, and the simple act of putting a cloth under the tap as well as coming out at no charge in the middle of the night are also acts of care towards the person.

A lot has been written about maintenance and repair over the past decade and more. Much of this has focused on the maintenance or repair of physical entities, of technical artefacts or of systems (Denis & Pontille, 2014; Henke, 2007; Jackson, 2014; Metzger, 2014; Stephen & Nigel, 2007). Looking at the maintenance and repair of such things, Thrift and Graham (2007) tell us, reveals the instability of all forms of order, the entropic tendencies of materials and systems. Nothing endures the predations wrought by use, consumption or weather – all apparently firm and solid things must be maintained, a labour that has much to say about the values and contingencies of things.

The maintenance of things, Denis and Pontille (2014) suggest, can be understood as a kind of care. This, they argue, is because maintenance is attuned to the fragilities of materiality but also because, in directly engaging with them, it seeks to stabilise and strengthen, to make good and continue.

Such actions resonate with Fisher and Tronto's broad definition of care as:

"a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web."

(Fisher & Tronto, 1990; J. Tronto, 1993; Joan Tronto, 2001, 2013).

They resonate with the phases that Fisher and Tronto regard as key to understanding care not just as a practice, but also as an ethic, a practice shaped by values and moral principles (also see: Sevenhuijsen, 2003):

- caring about (attentiveness)
- caring for (responsibility)
- care-giving (competencies)
- receiving care (responsiveness)

Thus, in Denis and Pontille's work, the maintenance and repair of signs in the Paris metro is shown to embody an ethic of care involving close observation, 'bodily commitment' to care-ful work and the exercise of professional competencies.

Springing from the issues I identified in that opening quote, in this paper, I want to build on these ideas by emphasising how maintenance and repair, as ways of care for things, are actions that are (or are not) also caring towards their users, to those who might benefit from these actions, those for whom how and when a job is done, and how they feel that they are handled in the process, matters.

My motive: to ground an observation that 'good maintenance' in social housing, rather as Mol showed in her study of 'good feeding' in nursing homes is as reliant on communication, interpersonal competencies and empathy towards people as thinking, feeling inhabitants and service users as on skill in dealing with technicalities and materialities (Mol, 2010).

My case study is a group of housing estates in Bermondsey, South London, a traditionally working-class area that grew up around the London docks and leather industry. The estates embody different eras of responsiveness to housing need – from the Meakin Estate which formed part of a huge housing programme carried out under the London County Council (LCC) in the 1930s to 1970s tower blocks built by the LCC in the context of the post-War mass housing boom.

Historically, the estates were managed and maintained by Southwark Borough Council. However, in 1996, a Joint Management Board, called the Leathermarket JMB, was created by residents making use of the introduction of new legislation enabling council tenants to assume responsibilities for the management of their own homes and to form Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs).

This was driven by the imperative to improve day-to-day repairs and estate cleaning activities, seen by the JMB to have become neglected at least in part as a result of the remoteness of the council bureaucracy from the everyday lives, needs and priorities of tenants (JMB, 2018, p. 8).



Leathermarket, Bermondsey (Juliet Davis, 2018)

The JMB's goal is to manage the estates in a more 'resident-facing' way, seeing this a key to sound financial management as well as resident satisfaction and wellbeing. It refers to its approach as a form of 'organised compassion' involving approaches to the cleaning, maintenance, repair and, increasingly, the adaptation of the physical environment that are attuned, not just to buildings, but to patterns of everyday living, forms of social vulnerability including mental health issues, ageing and financial hardship and to issues of collective living in multicultural, gentrifying neighbourhoods.

Before moving on, I should briefly explain that there is a broader backdrop to the JMB's goal. Across London, maintenance and repair issues, and the pressure on social housing providers to meet the Decent Homes Standard introduced by the Labour Government in 2000, have helped to shift the focus of housing governance towards market-oriented, asset management strategies (Morrison, 2013, Davidson, 2008) and, in many cases, regeneration efforts geared to improving the built environment have been seen to erode the 'social purpose' of housing (Till, 2012; Manzi and Morrison, 2017). Embedded in the JMB's notion of organised compassion is a commitment to maintaining both buildings and social purpose – thereby avoiding the environmentally costly demolitions that have been characterising regeneration across London and the 'social cleansing' that this has been associated with.

What does its approach teach us about care in housing maintenance?

Research for this paper involved spending a week based at the JMB in Bermondsey in July 2018. During this time, I observed parts of the estate undergoing maintenance and repair work and carried numerous interviews with members of the JMB's core team, the local councillor, and with resident directors of two of its Tenants and Residents Associations (TRAs).

The interviews focussed on unpacking the JMB's approach to 'resident-facing' housing maintenance, and endeavouring to understand what care concepts of attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness meant in the context of this work.

Seven key points came to the fore.

1. *The importance of being 'hands-on'*

Attentiveness, or the capacity to 'care about' is facilitated, according to the head of maintenance Ron Elston by being 'absolutely hands-on' (as he put it).

Being hands-on relies means working on-site rather than remotely, immersed in the life of the estates, and having a dedicated team to carrying out inspections and arising maintenance works rather than, say, relying on piece-meal contract work, which has been one of the key ways in which housing maintenance has been privatised in England. Ron stressed the significance of this for fire safety maintenance in particular, a major focus of work post-Grenfell, given that fire risk is generated at the interface between building technology and the everyday use of buildings. Attentive to this, Ron's inspections focus not just on the fire systems and compliance with regulations but look for 'anything that's been left on the stairs, anything that can catch fire' – on the maintenance issues generated by everyday life.

But being hand-on also involves being accessible to residents. As one resident put it:

'Southwark have a call centre for everything [whereas] the JMB is more of an independent, personalised thing.'

One of the ways in which a personalised maintenance service is facilitated is through a 'surgery' held daily at the JMB offices. This enables it to stay abreast of the multiple technical issues arising constantly in buildings, from plumbing leaks to drafts windows to lifts, by drawing on the expertise of residents in how their environments are working. It has also enabled the JMB to become aware of how differently people experience maintenance issues, how they affect them – the anxiety, for example, of an elderly person unable to leave her block because of the broken lift - and how, on occasion, maintenance needs go beyond issues of plumbing or damp – that are needs for

conversation because of loneliness, frailty or insecurity. The offer of conversation and the 'repeat prescription,' as Ron put it, of an empathetic ear followed, sometimes by a visit and chat, has hence become an established part of maintenance and repair work.

2. Attention as the 'recognition of plurality' (Sevenhuijsen, 2014)

Attentiveness, as Sevenhuijsen has argued (2016), involves a preparedness to see beyond one-size fits all solutions and recognise maintenance issues as arising as result of different or 'plural' patterns of living. For example, Ron explained that maintenance issues have arisen as a result of the increasingly multicultural demographics of the estates as different cultures have different approaches to bathing and cooking, or to how they care for themselves and their families. The damage created when the bathing habits of a neighbour in an upstairs flat cause a leak or flood have the potential to add fuel to forms of local intercultural and racial tensions.

In such cases, maintenance and repair team must decide what to do. One solution is to adapt the bathroom in the upstairs flat, recognising as legitimate that, for cultural reasons, some residents would live better with a wet room than a conventional British bathroom, but the significance is the diversion of precious funds which the whole estate needs to those tenants. Another is to simply repair the damaged paintwork in the lower flat and speak to those that caused it – an approach that could reinforce a sense of difference and alienation on the part of those residents. Care, for Ron, involves a combination of these approaches, recognising the commonality of resources and the specificities of uses and needs at the same time.

Another example is when people make different sorts of demands on the maintenance team. As Ron Elton put it 'Some [tenants] don't even come forward when there is work to be done' requiring the team to be alert beyond mere reliance on residents' capacities to articulate claims to ensure needs of dry, safe shelter are met.

3. Attention as a recognition of complex 'objects' of maintenance

Thirdly, attentiveness involves a recognition that what is maintained is often, for residents, not just fabric, not just asset, not just a set of technical specifications, or a unit with an allocated budget, but people's homes. Setting out to maintain a home may require different sorts of or levels of work to simply maintaining dry shelter, with implications clearly for how finances are managed.

Ron gave the example of an elderly person living up three flights of narrow stairs and in a flat with a bathroom that has been difficult to use for some time. In the short-term, she needs a

walk-in shower and soon she will need a chair lift. She could be moved to a lower-level flat which would have the advantage of allowing her four-bedroom flat, which is in excess of her needs, to be freed up for a family. There would be care in this. But, on the other hand, she has been there for thirty years, and she doesn't want to move. The decision is taken to make the adaptations even though, as Ron explained with a certain weariness, 'when the property comes back to the landlord, [we] will have to take all those adaptations out.'

The decision is facilitated by financial resources, of course - but driven by an evaluation of what material actions would do least harm to the resident, most maintain the meanings she connects to her home while making it more liveable, more comfortable.

I should add that this does not necessarily typify decisions made in relation to elderly building. In some cases, they are moved, but are always involved in the decision.

4. The temporality of care

Attention, it was clear, has a lot to do with the time between having an issue raised whether that was to do with a home or a common facility, such as a lift, and when the work is done. One of the residents interviewed compared their situation under the JMB in contrast to the local authority as:

[With Southwark] if you wanted anything done, you had to wait for it. You could wait up to three weeks for it to be done, even longer [...]. But, luckily for us, all we need is to phone over and hopefully, touch wood, we get seen within three days.'

It may of course not be as stark a difference as this but what is important is that, implied in this statement is a sense that *reliability* in terms of response times is also key (Sevenhuijsen, 2016), itself a form of recognition of the impacts of waiting and uncertainty, particularly as a maintenance issue develops, on emotional wellbeing, as on trust, everyday routines, etc.

5. A commitment to quality

Responsibility for maintenance is matter of contractual obligations between landlord and tenant. Care of course is not a matter of adherence to contractual agreements but about 'taking care' in the process of doing so, about the attitudes that characterise adherence to such agreements and the work required to perform them. As Ron put it 'we pride ourselves on making sure that it's the standard of the tenancy agreement'. This is key to avoiding the need for court settlements. It is

key to avoiding a situation such as Grenfell where it took an accident to prompt adequate attentiveness, and a court case to expose fundamental failures of care.

In reality, Ron seeks for more than a mere adherence to standards. He instructs his team 'to deliver what they would expect to deliver in their own homes [as] I don't think you can fall short of that,' implying that the standards of care for the self, of protection of self-interest, should govern the ethics of workmanship.

This reflects a broader, institutional commitment on the part of the JMB to 'go the extra mile.' At Leathermarket, Ron said, there is an 'institutional commitment that feeds into the work that every individual does.'

From the resident side, prescribed responsibilities relate to the upholding of the terms of the tenancy agreement. But care is evident, again in how they do so, in those who, in looking after their flats understand, as Ron put it, that they are 'taking responsibility for our budgets'. Some take on additional responsibilities through DIY clubs that help people accomplish small improvements that fall beyond the duties of the JMB such as putting up shelves. Others do so by volunteering to play key roles within the Residents' Association, by participating in gardening projects, by helping to maintain outdoor spaces for the benefit of the whole community. As the Chair of the Residents' Association put it, 'people take on the responsibility because they live here [...] We want to help; that's why we're doing it.' The work they do allows funds to be available for goods such as adaptations of flats for the elderly. But while recognising this as care-taking, it is of course important to recognise that this work, like so much care work, is unpaid, though highly valuable, and this necessitated by broader financing issues in social housing. Like many other forms of care work therefore, it is work that could and *should* be better rewarded.

6. Competencies

Maintenance involves care-ful compliance with regulation – building regulations, the Decent homes standard, etc.- meeting standards of good workmanship and safety. It involves, as other repair scholars have noted, improvisation and ingenuity in relation to historic buildings, and diagnostic competencies to solve 'the puzzle of the broken thing' (Houston et al, 2016). Often, it involves picking up latent defects related to design or poor-quality construction workmanship. But, as Ron put it, is also involves competencies in talking and listening, piecing together the fragments of an account, or several accounts, to understand what has happened and what might have caused it. It involves competencies, inevitably, in terms of stress management, as worry about vulnerable people and fire issues can become overwhelming, as can frustration with others' attitudes of course.

7. Responsiveness as trust

Finally, residents highlighted that the practices of hearing their needs and responding in a timely way had enabled them to become increasingly trusting of management over time and more secure in their neighbourhoods. This did not mean that they were entirely confident they would be able to stay in the neighbourhood; they understood that broader forces governing rental values and funding could make the JMB's business plan unviable.

Responsiveness could also be understood to include community cohesion in cases where maintenance was able to resolve issues arising from different ways of using buildings and the conflicts these could produce. It includes the maintenance of place-attachments as all actions that keep the estate going as a liveable place as also ways of maintaining a sense of home and community. It includes the evident desire among residents interviewed to play a part in maintenance if only by taking care of the plants outside their front door.

Reflections:

In much of the literature that deals with maintenance and repair, these activities are invariably presented as good. This paper has shown how important people are in understanding these activities in this way in the context of social housing maintenance. Maintenance is care when it is attuned not just to fabrics, not just to buildings, but to those who experience its effects on their homes and, for whom how the process is carried out and how they are involved in it, matters.

Maintenance is an act of social and not just physical care, a care of complex social-material assemblages. Seeing it in this way has important implications for understanding maintenance, but also, I would argue, for how decisions regarding the governance, funding, management, design and, most importantly, the continuity of social housing in London and elsewhere are approached.

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