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ARBELL, Yael

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## **“A place that is different from the usual capitalist world”: the potential of Community-led housing as safe and just spaces**

**Yael Arbell**

The School of Geography, The University of Leeds

Email address: [y.arbell@shu.ac.uk](mailto:y.arbell@shu.ac.uk)

### **Abstract**

Safe spaces offer relief from oppression, but they can do more and become spaces of social justice. Drawing on two case-study communities in the UK and Nancy Fraser’s theory of justice, this paper argues that safe spaces can become just spaces by responding to three aspects of injustice: socioeconomic, cultural-symbolic and political. Members of the case-study communities perceived their housing as safe and just spaces and contrasted it to the injustice of capitalist society. The communities offered affordable and not-for-profit secured housing; provided stability, respect and support to members, and ensured that members had a voice regarding their housing and community. A sense of safety and justice was achieved through the combination of democratic decision-making, a non-profit legal structure and social relations committed to mutual aid. Nevertheless, communities are not perfect; the paper also reveals the complexities in these communities, such as power dynamics and exclusion, which compromise their safety for some members and limit their potential for social transformation. Finally, the paper contributes to the large body of literature on safe spaces from racism and homophobia by reporting on an under-theorised form of safe space: one which offers protection from the oppression of neoliberalism.

**Keywords:** safe space, community-led housing, justice, cooperatives, neoliberalism

### **Résumé**

Les *safe spaces* protègent de l’oppression et peuvent même devenir des espaces de justice sociale. Cet article s’appuie sur deux études de cas d’habitat participatif au Royaume-Uni et sur la théorie de la justice de Nancy Fraser pour affirmer que les *safe*

*spaces* peuvent devenir des espaces de justice sociale en répondant à trois aspects de l'injustice : socio-économique, culturel-symbolique et politique. Les participant·e·s à l'étude ont perçu leur habitat comme des *safe spaces* et des espaces de justice, en opposition à l'injustice de la société capitaliste. L'habitat participatif propose des logements abordables, sécurisants et sans recherche de profit. Il garantit stabilité, respect et soutien à ses membres et leur permet de s'exprimer au sujet de leur logement et de leur environnement. L'existence d'un processus décisionnel démocratique, d'une structure juridique à but non lucratif et de relations sociales basées sur l'entraide leur donne un sentiment de sécurité et de justice. Néanmoins, l'habitat participatif n'est pas parfait. L'article révèle également la complexité de ces communautés : les dynamiques de pouvoir et l'exclusion, par exemple, compromettent la sécurité de certain·e·s membres et limitent le potentiel de transformation sociale. Enfin, l'article contribue au vaste corpus d'études réalisées sur les *safe spaces* contre le racisme et l'homophobie en rendant compte d'une forme sous-théorisée de *safe spaces* : un espace qui protège de l'oppression du néolibéralisme.

**Mots-clés :** *safe spaces*, habitat participatif, justice, coopératives, néolibéralisme

## Introduction

Jo was looking for a new home. His colleagues urged him to buy a house, but he was reluctant to "risk his financial future with a mortgage". He decided to try a housing cooperative and found "a refuge, or... certainly a place that is different from the usual capitalist world where for a lot of housing associations or landlords it's all about the money and they don't always do what they can to meet people's needs or at the very least give some sense of community". Jo saw the cooperative as a pocket of justice in a society where basic needs are "all about the money". In contrast to the competitive, exploitative market logic, the cooperative offered Jo safety and fairness: low rent, secure tenure, a community where he felt valued and neighbours who looked after each other. Ten years on, Jo still lived in the cooperative and had no intention to leave.

Jo is not alone; this paper is based on research that found that many residents of communities that are managed by their members described their community as a safe and just space. Surprisingly, while this framing was common on the ground, it is under-theorised in the literature. Urban communities are popularly portrayed as safer environments than the anonymity of large cities, but they are rarely conceptualised as safe spaces. Moreover, neoliberalism is a dominant cultural and political current that

inflicts insecurity, oppression and violence (Springer, Birch, and MacLeavy, 2016), but there is no literature on safe spaces from it—as opposed to the rich literature on safe spaces from other prevalent forms of oppression such as sexism, racism and homophobia (Mountz, 2017). This paper brings together the concepts of safe space and social justice and examines them through the case of community-led housing (CLH). Drawing on the work of Nancy Fraser, it argues for a reading of safe space as a form of justice. The argument draws on two case-study community-led housing in the UK, which operates as safe and just spaces, albeit imperfectly.

Neoliberalism is a notoriously broad term (Clarke, 2008), but for the analytical purpose of this paper, its extensive reach made it instrumental in conceptualising different experiences within a single framework. Importantly, this concept was true to participants' own framing of their communities as alternatives to capitalism. Neoliberalisation was interwoven into many of the social and cultural processes that affected participants' lives: neoliberal housing policies, like austerity measures and restructuring of the welfare state (Hodkinson, Watt, and Mooney, 2013; Levitas, 2012; Madden and Marcuse, 2016); the roll-off of state responsibilities onto local communities (McKee, 2015b; Williams, Goodwin, and Cloke, 2014); and governmental aspects that encourage individualism and asset accumulation and lead to shame over financial failure or "non-aspirational" lifestyles (Chandler and Reid, 2016; Barnett et al., 2008; Nowicki, 2018; Wright, 2012). In line with Simon Springer (2012), different meanings of neoliberalism (policy, culture, governmentality) were conceived as mutually constitutive forms of the same phenomenon and taking my cue from James Ferguson (2009), I embraced the use of different aspects of neoliberalism as an opportunity to highlight the relationship between them.

Community-led housing is an umbrella term for housing projects that are managed democratically by members and often involve sharing and not-for-profit structure (Tummers, 2016). Research participants from two different communities emphasised the importance of security in joining: financial security, secured tenure and the community safety-net. Many members, like Jo, contrasted these forms of security to what they called "the world out there", finding safety and protection from unjust neoliberal policies and culture. The paper reveals the daily practices that create safety and justice, as well as the dual position of CLH: safe and just spaces that respond to the injustices of neoliberalism, and spaces of exclusion and inequality.

The paper is in four parts. The first section conceptualises safe spaces through the lens of spatial justice, drawing on Nancy Fraser's theory of justice. I then develop the concept of safe and just spaces in relation to the empirical context: the community-led housing sector in neoliberal UK. After introducing the research and the methods

used, the findings section zooms in on two case study communities and reports on the ways they operate as safe and just spaces from the insecurities of neoliberalism. That section argues that communities feature material, emotional and political aspects of safety and justice, alongside inherent complexities that make them unsafe and unjust.

## Theoretical context

### *Safe spaces, just spaces*

The concept of safe space, which originated in the Feminist movement in the form of shelters for victims of rape and abuse, has evolved into various forms of protection from oppression. In recent years “safe space” is particularly identified with LGBTQI communities, offering allyship and providing safety from homophobic and transphobic violence in universities and social centres (Fox, 2007). Safe spaces also exist as university minorities clubs, where students of colour can find understanding in predominantly White and sometimes hostile environments (Deo, 2012). In education, teachers advocate for classrooms that allow students physical and emotional safety to express themselves and be part of a thriving and adventurous learning community. In these settings, the teachers are responsible for fairness for—and protection of marginalised students such as LGBTQI and minority ethnic groups (Barrett, 2012; Darrell, Littlefield, and Washington, 2016; Stengel and Weems, 2010). What all safe spaces have in common is an aim to provide a refuge from mainstream violence, openness, acceptance and self-expression. Ideally, it is a space where hegemonic logic is deconstructed, and new forms of relationships are formed (Polleta, 1999).

Safety in safe spaces is achieved through critical thinking, sensitive ground rules and practices of cultural recognition like acknowledging “students of color whose perspectives and experiences are consistently minimised” (Leonardo and Porter, 2010, p. 149). Safety is also achieved through physical segregation, by excluding oppressive people and behaviours (Deo, 2012; The Roestone Collective, 2014). Lately, safe space is used figuratively to denote not a physical space but a set of practices in the public sphere, on and offline. These practices include trigger warnings (used initially to protect rape victims from trauma and now used to protect other members of oppressed groups), and call-outs of individuals and organisations who are deemed harmful. Safe spaces, and particularly the latter type, attracted criticism around issues of exclusion, recognition and freedom of speech, as well as scepticism regarding their

benefits for marginalised groups (Barrett, 2012; Coleman, 2016; Gibson, 2019). This paper does not refer to these safe spaces and practices, but to spaces that offer physical as well as emotional safety.

### *Safe spaces' potential for social justice*

Not all safe spaces function as just spaces: some only create temporary and partial relief from the injustices of an insecure society. However, they have potential to become more than that and be “a way of practising social justice that recognises, emphasises, and in some ways encourages social difference” (The Roestone Collective, 2014, p. 1.360). Some scholars view safe spaces as prefigurative and argue that by using alternative practices and logics, safe spaces can go beyond temporary relief and challenge mainstream cultures (Polleta, 1999). I contend that by maintaining lasting material and emotional safety and cultivating stronger agency, safe spaces become not only safe but just spaces, as articulated by Fraser’s theory of justice. She identified three distinct types of injustice: cultural-symbolic, socioeconomic, and political (Fraser, 2007). Cultural-symbolic injustices are manifested in nonrecognition and disrespect; socioeconomic injustices play out in the unequal distribution of resources, and political injustice denotes limitation of political voice and agency. I employ this model to consider the potential and shortcomings of safe spaces as just spaces. Simply put: the more aspects of justice the space provides for, the safer and more just it is.

Cultural-symbolic justice is the obvious strength of safe spaces. The very heart of safe spaces is an ethics of diversity and recognition (David and Hartal, 2018), where members of marginalised groups are valued, and are physically and emotionally safe from a hostile environment. Physical insecurity stems directly from misrecognition, since “certain lives are not considered lives at all [...] This then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanisation which is already at work in the culture” (Butler, 2004, p. 25). Cultural marginalisation and the violence that comes with it are the main reasons to establish safe spaces for people of colour and LGBTQI people (Perry and Dyck, 2014, p. 52; Leonardo and Porter, 2010).

Safe spaces that are outward-looking and work to realise a vision of justice can increase political agency and equality and respond to disrespect. Recognition is then considered not only an aim in itself but a requirement for solidarity building and political organising (The Roestone Collective, 2014). Patricia Hill-Collins argued that safe spaces “enhance our ability to participate in social justice projects... their overall purpose most certainly aims for a more inclusionary, just society” (White, 2012, p. 18).

Recognition is the strength of safe spaces, but also their potential weakness. Firstly, the focus on particular identities leads to exclusion. Exclusion and separation are inherent to safe spaces—they are safe because they exclude abusive behaviours and people. But exclusion can be unfair when it reflects prevalent prejudices regarding class, race, income and ability (Fox, 2007; The Roestone Collective, 2014). Moreover, Fraser criticised the cultural turn in feminism for its focus on identity politics and recognition and move away from politics of redistribution. This turn, she argued, “has dovetailed all too neatly with a hegemonic neoliberalism that wants nothing more than to repress socialist memory” (Fraser, 2017, p. 22). Indeed, studies in other fields found that cultural recognition does not guarantee distributive justice (Fisk, 2011).

Safe spaces respond to socioeconomic or political injustice in complex ways. Mostly, safe spaces refer to oppression on all fronts, but their strategy revolves around recognition and therefore, do not offer direct protection from socioeconomic and political injustice. Safe spaces are seen more as havens or, at best, as *enabling* spaces for political action that takes place elsewhere. The following sections develop the argument that community-led housing can be conceptualised and experienced as safe *and* just spaces, which respond not only to issues of recognition but also to socioeconomic and political injustice.

## Empirical context

### *CLH: Challenging neoliberalism and creating safe-havens*

This section focuses on the empirical context for this paper—Community-led Housing (CLH) in neoliberal UK. CLH can challenge the insecurities and injustices of contemporary housing by offering a safer and more just space. I contend that their actions to counter various forms of injustice in neoliberal society and their potential to become spaces of justice should be theorised through a justice perspective, using Fraser’s theory of justice.

CLH projects are grassroots initiatives that generally focus on homes’ use-value rather than their exchange-value (Madden and Marcuse, 2016), and are collective in nature. Jo Gooding and Tom Johnston offer a useful definition for CLH as “homes that are developed and/or managed by local people or residents, in not for private profit organisational structures. Organisational structure varies but governance should be overseen by people who either live or work in the locality of benefit or are direct beneficiaries. Community housing generally refers to a small geographic identified area of belonging or association” (Gooding and Johnston, 2015, p. 15). Residents of

CLH are typically satisfied with the high level of security, service standards and sense of ownership (Bliss, 2009; Chatterton, 2013; Lang and Novy, 2013).

CLH is a response to a crisis, and its renewal in recent years can be attributed to economic recession (Tummers, 2016; Varvarousis and Kallis, 2016), including rising house prices which leads to gentrification and difficulties for growing publics to buy or rent decent, affordable homes (Field, 2014). In terms of social relations, the re-emergence of CLH can be understood in light of Zygmunt Bauman's (2007) observation that as communities become less assured, there is a growing effort to ensure them.

In the UK, the most common models of CLH are housing cooperatives, community land trusts and cohousing. At present, there are over 600 housing cooperatives in the UK, 253 community land trusts and 20 cohousing projects, with many more in development stages. Each model and each project are different: they may be urban or rural, new built or retrofitted, collectively or privately owned, socially diverse or homogenous, affordable or not, require very little involvement or high commitment like regular participation in meetings and shared meals (Chatterton, 2013; Field, 2015; Bliss, 2016; Jarvis et al., 2016). Generally speaking, cooperatives and CLTs tend to be affordable but vary in direct participation and a sense of community (Fernández Arrigoitia, 2017; Engelsman, Rowe, and Southern, 2016; Rowlands, 2009), while cohousing communities are less affordable but emphasise participation and social connection (Chatterton, 2010; Jarvis, 2011).

### *Three aspects of safety and justice in community-led housing*

In the UK, the neoliberalisation of housing is manifested in policy, culture and governmentality (Larner, 2000; Springer, 2012), and research participants referred to all of these aspects. At the time of research (2016-2017), two major events marked housing insecurity: the ongoing austerity measures and the "very neoliberal tragedy" of the fire at Grenfell Towers on June 2017, which claimed the lives of 72 people (Hodkinson, 2018, p. 6). Stuart Hodkinson points at the neoliberal policies that contributed to the fire in this social housing tower block: privatisation and commercialisation of housing, which led to dangerously profit-based management; deregulation and cuts to public expenditure on fire safety, which led to compromising tenants' safety; and gentrification, which "arguably underpinned" the flammable cladding of the tower in order to make it more aesthetically appealing, and the inability to house the low-income tenants in their area after the fire. These policies not only made housing unsafe but also put the victims in a structurally precarious position in their attempts to be rehoused (Hodkinson, 2018, p. 6).



According to McGrath, Griffin, and Mundy's briefing paper (2016, p. 47), austerity policies have a severe and evidenced impact on mental health, especially in terms of "shame, fear and distrust, instability and insecurity and being trapped and powerless". Interestingly, all these elements were countered to some extent in the case study communities. Distrust was replaced by trust through knowing neighbours and working with them; insecurity and instability replaced by long term, secured rent; and powerlessness in relation to the state and the market was partly compensated through agency within the community. These elements correlate to Fraser's theory of justice, with its three pillars of recognition, redistribution and political voice. It was therefore natural and productive to employ this theoretical framework to analyse the findings. The remaining of this section develops the argument that CLH can be a just and safe space from neoliberalism according to Fraser's model, while also engaging with critiques on the CLH sector for each aspect of justice.

Firstly, in terms of socioeconomic injustice, neoliberalisation of housing is based on competition on uneven terrain and commodification of housing, which leads to housing inequality (Madden and Marcuse, 2016). More specifically in the UK, neoliberal policies replace welfare redistribution with significant cuts to public spending and particularly to local government. These measures affect vulnerable individuals and the poorest communities the most (Levitas, 2012; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012), and increase anxiety and insecurity throughout society (Atkinson, 2013) as a result of financial speculation and work insecurity (Goodin and Le Grand, 2016). CLH can respond to these forms of injustice by their not-for-profit nature, offering affordable and secure housing and therefore safety from the whims of the market or the greed of landlords.

CLH is a diverse sector, which includes affordable and expensive projects; privately owned but collectively managed, as well as various forms of mutual and collective ownership models. Two models in particular can offer greater distributive justice: Community Land Trusts (CLTs) and cooperatives. CLTs can resist gentrification by holding the land as a community asset that is not for private profit, and ensures long term affordability and community control in perpetuity (Moore and McKee, 2012; Thompson, 2015; for a critical analysis of CLT see Engelsman, Rowe and Southern, 2016). In a similar vein, Maja Hojer Bruun (2015) suggests viewing housing cooperatives as a public asset, and members of cooperatives as guardians of this asset. This conceptualisation entails a responsibility for members to maintain their cooperative as an accessible and affordable option for future tenants.

The second aspect of justice in Fraser's model is cultural-symbolic. In a capitalist society, housing choices involve calculating return on investment and social

positioning, as well as aspiration for independence through home ownership (Allen, 2008; Kleinhans and Elsinga, 2010). Those who cannot make valued choices are seen as “failed consumers” (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) who lack taste and status. Many scholars noted that the individualistic and competitive rationale of neoliberalism and the restructuring of the welfare state increased feelings of isolation, alienation, shame and powerlessness (Bauman, 2007; Kiersey, 2009; Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Mykhnenko, 2016; Springer, 2011). These are the elements that CLH is well-positioned to tackle through emphasis on use-value of homes rather than their market value.

Critiques of CLH are concerned with disaffiliation and exclusion in CLH—the common features of community-led housing and gated communities (Chiodelli, 2015). Cohousing communities, in particular, tend to be homogenous in terms of “affluence, social class, race, education and attitudes” (Williams, 2005, p. 154; for similar findings in France, see Bresson and Deneffe, 2016). This suggests that some of these developments are exclusive and benefit the affluent alone—but other types are more diverse and inclusive. Therefore, although CLH projects often have a cooperative vision for society, they risk promoting inequality, favouring those with enough time, skill and wealth to engage in volunteering and invest in building a community (Garciano, 2011; Moore and McKee, 2012; Wallace, Ford, and Quilgars, 2013). Moreover, some critiques argue that CLH’s grassroots ethos plays into the hand of the neoliberal desire to roll back the state’s responsibilities (Jacobs and Manzi, 2013).

The third aspect of justice in Fraser’s model is political voice. Neoliberalism and austerity measures in particular are known to inflict a sense of lack of agency (McGrath, Griffin, and Mundy, 2016), ignorance about political processes and growing resilience (Chandler and Reid, 2016) and acceptance of the hegemonic logic as truth (Weidner, 2009). These phenomena are the result of the marketisation of government and society (Wrenn, 2014) and development of a contractual relationship between the government and people, who are reconceptualised as autonomous individual consumers (Crossan et al., 2016). In this neoliberal setting, as Aihwa Ong bluntly put it, the government is “no longer interested in taking care of every citizen [preferring] him/her to act as a free subject who self-actualises and relies on autonomous action to confront global insecurities” (Ong, 2006, p. 501). In CLH, members have a greater influence on their community and decision-making that affects their lives. Moreover, some studies showed that members of CLH tend to be more active beyond their communities (Jones, 2017; Poley, 2007)—a claim that was affirmed by this research.

However, political justice according to Fraser requires inclusion. Small groups’ potential to build capacity for social change and issues of exclusion are discussed in similar ways both in the safe space literature and in CLH studies (Polleta, 1999; Brown

and Pickerill, 2009; The Roestone Collective, 2014; Read, 2009; Chiodelli, 2015; DeFilippis et al., 2019; Williams, 2005; Sargisson, 2007). Creating a community inevitably entails some separation between members and non-members. The extent to which CLH can pose a challenge to the current system is a matter of controversy and scholars differ in their views on these projects' position vis-à-vis capital: outside the speculative logic of the market (Ruiu, 2014), well within it (Chiodelli, 2015), somewhere in between (Sargisson, 2012; Jarvis, 2015) or with a foot in both camps (Chatterton, 2013). The diversity of CLH makes it impossible to offer a blanket judgment on its potential.

Overall, CLH has potential to offer stability and security in an insecure and unstable environment. In Fraser's terms, they can offer recognition and respect, fair distribution and political voice. But realising this potential, as this study shows, can be complicated.

## Research and methods

The paper is based on in-depth qualitative research of two community-led housing projects in the UK, conducted in 2017. Both projects offered affordable social housing but were otherwise very different: Beechtree is a housing cooperative in an inner-city neighbourhood in the North of England. The cooperative owns about 40 housing units of various sizes, and has been operating for over 40 years, housing an intergenerational and diverse community. The second community, Seagull, is an emerging cohousing project in a rural area in the South of England, which was still in the development process at the time of writing. The community is entirely White and most of the members are over 50.

The research engagement involved several day visits and email correspondence with the emerging cohousing community, and 8-month intensive interaction with the established cooperative. In both communities methods included individual and group interviews, participatory sessions, observations and participant observation of social events and general meetings, as well as observations of committee meetings. Thirty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted – 11 with members of the cohousing group (out of 20 members), and 23 with cooperative members (out of 36 members). Communities' names have been changed and where participants are quoted they were anonymised and their names changed.

The interviews' sampling, structure and strategy were instructed by a critical realist approach (Manzano, 2016), focusing on "what works" for different people in

different circumstances (Pawson, 2013). So while being open to participants' perceptions and experiences, the interviews did not assume a "deliberate *naïveté*" about the projects. The interviews then revealed several main themes, including the unanticipated theme of safe space, which emerged independently in the two communities. Once the theme emerged, it was included in following interviews to build a theory about the community together with members.

### **Material and emotional safety in community-led housing**

The case studies show how community-led housing can function as just and safe alternatives to insecure housing. Members mentioned three forms of safety in their communities: material, emotional, and procedural. These aspects of safety correlate to Fraser's forms of justice: socioeconomic, cultural-symbolic, and political. Members often referred to three forms of *material safety* in CLH: secured tenure, affordability, and good maintenance. Members contrasted their safe, supportive communities to the alienated world "out there", and mentioned three aspects of *emotional safety*: mutual aid, supportive community, and tolerance. The third aspect of safety was increased agency and control through the communities' democratic procedures. This section begins with findings regarding material safety, continues to discuss participants' views on emotional safety, and explains the synergetic connection between the two as they play out in communities' decision-making. The section ends with a critique of the complexities of safety in the communities: exclusion, inequality, and exploitation of the system.

#### *Creating material safety, responding to socioeconomic injustice*

"It's a way for me to live somewhere affordably with a long-term security and don't have to be worried about being evicted by a private landlord." (David, Beechtree Co-op)

Joining a CLH project may seem like an idealistic move to outsiders, but many cooperative members admitted that although they support the cooperative's ethos, Beechtree was above all financially attractive. This is not an obvious choice in a capitalist society. In order to explain why members considered CLH a safer option than private rent or ownership, I discuss their experiences in the context of neoliberal UK and its housing crisis.

Molly, a single mother of two and a member of Seagull emerging cohousing group, had to leave her three-bedroom privately rented flat and move into a one-

bedroom flat in a different private house. She shared a room with her teenage daughter while her son slept in the living room, and joked that the move was a good opportunity to declutter all the possessions they have accumulated: “He [the landlord] wanted it to go up much more, and he can get much more, he can get £750, £800 for that three bed. And I... [...] couldn’t [be housed in social housing] because [...] you can’t make yourself homeless and then expect social housing. But now I’m—we’re officially overcrowded because there are three of us in here. So [...] I’ve got the status to be housed.”

For members like Molly, the prospects of moving into an affordable cohousing project meant protection from sudden rent raise, since rents level will be agreed by all members; and since there is no private profit to be made, rent raise should be moderate. Moreover, since rent will be invested back in the housing project, maintenance can be done to a relatively high standard. Many members of the case studies communities mentioned maintenance as an important factor—not only in terms of safety and convenience but also in terms of ownership and belonging; having their house done to their taste made their houses a home (Madden and Marcuse, 2016).

Concerns about safety and maintenance, eviction and tyrannical landlords are rising as austerity deepens and the public housing sector shrinks (Hodkinson, 2019; Watt and Minton, 2016). This occurs across many sectors, social classes, ethnic groups and age groups (Clapham et al., 2010; McKee, 2012; Lund, 2013), although some ethnic and age groups are affected disproportionately by the neoliberalisation of housing (Finney and Harries, 2013), for example, low income (often migrants) workers (Field, 2014).

In the face of this ongoing housing crisis, the case-studies communities found ways to make housing affordable, either through collaboration with a local housing association or by owning the properties outright and not-for-profit. The two communities had a significant number of members who received some income support or housing benefits, but unlike tenants in private or social rent, they could expect unrestricted tenancy agreements (Robinson and Walshaw, 2014). In Beechtree cooperative, 61% of members stayed for over ten years. This is significantly more than the average in the private rent sector, where the median rented tenancy is about eighteen months, and the mean length is four years (Alakeson, 2013). This reflects both a lack of other affordable options (like private ownership) and the high level of security in the community, as the example below suggests.

Daniel has been living in the cooperative for thirteen years, joined by his wife and later their children. Daniel was not interested in home ownership: “effectively we

have a secured tenure as if you own the house, with none of the liabilities, really—personal liabilities. Our repairs get done, and they don't cost us anything really. [...] And like [when you buy with a mortgage]—*you* don't own the house—the *Halifax* [bank] owns your house, you know."

Like Daniel, a significant number of members were reluctant to take financial risks in order to own a house and felt that the cooperative was a safer option. This is an unusual view; the capitalist market is driven by the idea that the most secure and cost-effective form of tenure is ownership (Flint, 2003). But research shows that even outright homeownership does not guarantee safety or wellbeing. Many of the substandard dwellings in the UK are privately owned (Bramley, Munro, Pawson et al., 2004), and in the years just before the research, homeowners were up to 37% of those in poverty (Tunstall et al., 2013). Poor homeowners may suffer from gentrification and lose their support networks and sense of belonging (Watt, 2013), or face repossession if they are unable to pay their mortgage (Wallace, Anwen, and Rhodes, 2014). At the time of research (2016-2017), the UK faced a housing crisis: prices were high and the market was characterised by a decline in the number of first-time buyers, decreasing numbers of younger homeowners (ONS Digital, 2015) and increasing numbers of private renters with children (DECC, 2015). Attempting to promote homeownership, the government initiated more affordable ownership schemes (rather than more social housing or regulated private rent). The communities were undoubtedly going against the mainstream.

### *Providing emotional safety and symbolic justice*

"I bought jeans with more attention to details than this house. Most people don't talk about the houses but about relationships." (Iris, Seagull cohousing)

Emotional safety was almost as important to members as material safety. This section reveals aspects of emotional safety in Beechtree and Seagull communities: a sense of community and belonging, mutual aid and tolerance. These aspects correlate with Fraser's cultural-symbolic forms of justice by providing recognition to marginalised and vulnerable members.

Firstly, and most importantly, knowing and trusting their neighbours made the community a safe space for members. Hannah, a cooperative member, said: "it feels emotionally safer. [...] I guess it's not usual to have so many people that you know a bit and you're kind of friends with living so close to you." Social activities like parties and film nights and the daily acts of mutual aid maintained the social bonds that enhanced members' commitment to each other: "The social connections you make is

gold dust; if this was private property, there were no possibilities for security or connections between neighbours [...] and the house works better if we all get on. [...] It is something that brings really different people together, different personalities, background, whatever" (Adrian, Beechtree co-op).

Perceiving the entire house as a unit rather than a collection of individual flats made the cooperative a stronger community and made members emotionally safer. These findings echoed studies on the benefits of mutual aid to givers' and receivers' mental health and emotional safety: helping others increases people's sense of worth, meaning, belonging and agency (Post, 2007; Schwartz et al., 2003).

The second aspect of safety focuses on people of particularly vulnerable groups: single parents, disabled and older population. Community life, members felt, offers a more holistic solution than individualistic and marketised solutions such as private care, care homes or gated communities. In terms of justice, the communities offered recognition and respect where society often offers discrimination and disrespect.

Older people are probably the most thoroughly researched in relation to benefits from community-led housing (Scanlon and Fernández Arrigoitia, 2015; Glass and Vander Platts, 2013). Participants saw community life as a way to tackle social isolation, and older members with no children or with children abroad found the community could provide some elements of care that would usually be provided by the family. Communities are generally seen as a more consistent and holistic safety-net than individuals, often paid, care: "the safety net in the [elder cohousing project] is the residents themselves, while in other types of retirement communities, there is an internal organisational, service-oriented safety net" (Glass and Vander Platts, 2013, p. 429). For Gail, age 64, cohousing was a strategy for successful ageing: "[a] set up for ageing people that will be more successful than the current model of, you know, residential care and care at home, because for me that's a poor system". Her parents, she said, made "poor choices" on their retirement: moving to a remote house that meant complete dependence on a car, with no access to shops, culture or nearby neighbours. They were isolated and had to employ a carer at home. Gail wanted something better.

Disability was another reason to look for a supportive community. For Iris, a single mother to a disabled young adult, moving into cohousing was an alternative to "having to only have paid carers in his life", which she saw as an impersonal and limited relationship. She felt the community offered "loads of benefits in terms of his freedom, the fact that people would know him on a much more personal level [...] and there will be support for me". Her son, said Iris, was isolated after his return from care during the day, where he only met professional workers and other disabled young people. Her



current neighbours did not make a special effort to know and understand him, and she did not expect anything else.

The third aspect of emotional safety was protection from shame. Connor from Beechtree cooperative described the shame around cultural expectation to own a house: “In this country you’re told and encouraged you should own your own home, even if the mortgage breaks your fucking back, even if paying the amount out every month practically does you in. You have to be a home owner: ‘Oh, renting is for losers’—that’s the mentality in this country.”

The cooperative offered a safe space from disrespect, where members were surrounded by like-minded people. Within the community, Connor was reassured that he made a sensible housing choice and was never judged according to his financial status. Returning to McGrath, Griffin, and Mundy’s report (2016), the findings shows that where society inflicted shame, the community created a safe space, “[allowing] for temporary safety and ease, and enable the possibility of creating a home, a space of being ‘one’s true self’” (David and Hartal, 2018, p. 6).

### *Safety in democratic decision-making: building political justice*

“I didn’t set out to live in a co-op, but now I live here, think it’s important politically, especially with the bedroom tax, austerity, etc.” (David, Beechtree Co-op)

What made the communities a safe space was the interplay between the formal organisational structure and the informal culture of care. The organisational structure guaranteed democratic decision-making and collective ownership that is not-for-profit. These structural qualities allowed members to exercise flexibility, make decisions that did not prioritise financial profit, and organise politically to resist neoliberal housing policies. The following are three examples of safety in cooperative social relations, and justice in fair decision-making processes that give voice to vulnerable members. These examples show procedural justice that offers not impartiality but recognition of difference, and commitment to members’ wellbeing above profits.

The first example is Beechtree cooperative’s resistance to welfare restructuring known as the “bedroom tax” which was introduced in 2013. This reform reduced eligibility to housing benefits for social tenants “deemed to be consuming too much housing (14% for one spare bedroom and 25% for more than one)” (Gibb, 2015). As a result of this policy, tenants relying on housing benefits struggled to stay in their homes but equally struggled to find suitable alternatives. The cooperative decided to



resist this legislation by absorbing the shortfall for people who were affected. This entailed a substantial ongoing loss of rent income, but members of the community proudly supported this move.

The second example is Beechtree's approach to arrears. The cooperative's administrative worker, who previously worked in social housing, said: "[The co-op] is a lot less strict on arrears than a conventional social landlord would be. Quite substantial arrears will be tolerated if there is some contact with the tenant and some evidence that they are trying to pay them back." My observations showed that flexibility in dealing with arrears was practised when members were perceived as acting in good faith; in such cases, discretionary measures were happily approved. Member Hannah said this made the community a safe space: "I think some people in this co-op would really struggle in independent housing [...] the co-op gives this little bit of extra support [...]. You know, a neighbour who got an eye on them, kind of... a little bit of flexibility if they don't manage to pay their rent on time." The cooperative *legal* structure meant that properties were owned collectively not-for-profit, and policies agreed democratically. The *social* structure carved out room for *manœuvre*, implementing policies in a flexible and forgiving manner, creating space of justice for the vulnerable.

The third example is from Seagull cohousing community, which was extraordinarily adaptive to members' needs. Two members were environmentally ill, which meant they were affected by "everyday chemicals in the environment at levels politically conceived to be 'safe'" (Coyle, 2004, p. 62). They also suffered from electromagnetic hypersensitivity, a condition "associated with decrements in general health status, increased levels of distress, increased levels of health service use, and impairments in occupational and social functioning" (Rubin, Nieto-Hernandez et Wessely, 2010, p. 2). To make the development more inclusive, members agreed that one house will have (more expensive) chemical-free paints and no wi-fi connection to protect from electromagnetic fields. This decision limited the ability to rent units in this house. It is even more unusual considering that the condition is rare, and at the time of the study had no scientific evidence (Rubin, Nieto-Hernandez, and Wessely, 2010). The decision to accommodate these needs against the market logic suggests an exceptional level of trust.

The communities' willingness and ability to make decisions that were not economically driven made them a safe place for their tenants. This synergy between a structure that ensures democratic decision-making and relationships that create a sense of community is vital to the creation of a just and safe space from neoliberalism.

## Complexities of safety in CLH

“We’re very, very open, but there’s been points where people have taken really bad liberties with that.” (Daniel, Beechtree co-op)

No space is entirely safe; some argue that the very term “safe space” is misleading because it is essentially unrealistic (Wallin-Ruschman and Patka, 2016). This section identifies two areas of potential insecurity and injustice in the case studies: power dynamics within the community, and the inherently exclusive nature of safe space which may hinder its potential for broader political transformation.

Safe spaces rely on relational work (The Roestone Collective, 2014), and therefore dysfunctional relationships make spaces unsafe. The case studies communities had procedures to support members in disputes and offered mediation or intervention where sanctions were needed. Ostensibly, these measures could make the community a safer space from bullying, but its success was limited. Fear of conflict in a small community often led members to put up with bullying for years before acting on it. It is well recognised in Feminist literature that small communities can be oppressive and pressurise members to conform (Young, 1990). This was the case for Stephanie, who stopped attending community meetings following daily aggressions from other members. The internal conflict-resolution mechanism was not helpful for her. Peer pressure could also make community living stressful and unsafe. Some members felt marginalised and powerless in the “tyranny of structurelessness” (Freeman, 1970) of informal social dynamics. Three members of Beechtree cooperative discussed the difficulty to voice unpopular opinions. Olivia said: “if you speak up against it they will turn out against you—that thing that’s ‘they’. / Ruth: The clique – / Steph: There’s certainly a group of people who’ve been running the show. / Ruth: But we all have a vote, we can all go to meetings.”

This exchange demonstrates the tension between the formal procedures and informal power dynamics. Less popular members could feel alienated, restricted or excluded.

The second limit to safe spaces is their own boundaries, limiting not only the number of beneficiaries from the safe space, but also its potential for wider impact. Political organising and transformative politics are considered the benchmark for safe spaces’ success (The Roestone Collective, 2014). But safe spaces often fail to realise this ambitious goal. This section discusses two limitations of CLH safe spaces in a quest for greater social justice: exclusion and inward lookingness. As mentioned above, the CLH sector is diverse, and some forms of CLH are more inclusive, affordable or sociable. The case studies differed in their relationship with wider society: Beechtree

was already established and members worked hard to maintain it, while the Seagull group was still forming and reaching out to potential members. Moreover, Beechtree cooperative was in a large, multicultural city, while Seagull cohousing project was in a small and almost entirely White British rural town. These differences affected their position on diversity and their level of community engagement.

Many CLH projects are not diverse. Although the case study communities were affordable, they grappled with other aspects of diversity. Seagull cohousing attracted mainly older people; Beechtree cooperative, set in a South-Asian neighbourhood, had mainly white British members (although the minority Black members was similar to that of the general UK society). Homogeneity was increased by the word-of-mouth recruitment strategy within similar social circles. From a safety perspective, this is a reasonable strategy; but from a social justice perspective it appears exclusive. Diversity in CLH is an important issue beyond the scope of this paper (for an elaborate discussion see Arbell, 2020). Here I focus on the communities' impact on society, and this is where the two communities differ.

It may not come as a surprise that the emerging group was more optimistic about its potential for change than a disillusioned community that has been running for decades with limited success in making waves. Cooperative members often commented that even their immediate neighbours did not know what a cooperative was and never tried to become members. This did not diminish their political commitment, though: unlike the CLTs in DeFilippis et al.'s study (2019), who rejected politicisation of their development, Beechtree members generally believed their project had greater political potential than they could realise.

Members of Seagull cohousing were outward-looking, as Gail's representative quote indicates: "the main driver for me is to start to challenge the status quo. I don't think through [party] politics there'll ever be able to overthrow the system, I think it has to come from making different models and really showing people that there is a different way." Gail articulated the cohousing community as a prefigurative space, in the sense that it "[performs] life as it is wished for, both to experience better practice and to advance change" (Cooper, 2017, p. 335). Cohousing members were outward-looking; when the site adjacent to theirs went on sale, members decided to develop a second phase to their cohousing project. This is a tremendous undertaking: most cohousing projects fail to establish one community, let alone two. Explaining their decision, Anna said: "well if we don't [buy it] somebody else will—it could just be a private developer."

Members of the cooperative, on the other hand, tend to argue that the political value of the projects lies in serving their own members. David said: "providing cheap,

decent affordable housing is political, isn't it?" and Heather explained that "the politics that tends to be the most long-lasting is that which is rooted in your interests rather than campaigning around some dam somewhere else or something like that."

Critics of CLH evoke two main counters to members' rationale. Firstly, "community" is often used as a cover for neoliberal welfare restructuring rather than a social change towards a just society (McKee, 2015a), and scholars are concerned about the common features of community-led housing and the neoliberal desire to withdraw state's responsibilities (Jacobs and Manzi, 2013). Secondly, as in response to David's argument, DeFillipis argues that "those of us centrally concerned with issues of social justice should not minimise the importance of getting low-income people into decent, stable housing when they would otherwise be excluded from it. But we are most interested in exploring if there are moments of transformation, which we see as building blocks towards other worlds (DeFilippis et al., 2019, p. 6).

Do all these complexities make CLH safe spaces truly paradoxical, as the Roestone Collective argues (The Roestone Collective, 2014)? Not necessarily. Safe space should be seen as an aim rather than an achievable goal; a useful concept for prefigurative spaces challenging hegemonic logics. Community members admitted that their high expectations sometimes led to disappointment; as cooperative member Ruth said: "I think it probably is a less judgmental and a more tolerant place than the outside world. But it still doesn't live up to unicorns skipping through the meadow."

## Conclusion

This paper offers a new conceptualisation of safe space and contributes three interrelated arguments to the literature: 1. safe spaces can become just spaces when they respond to three aspects of injustice (socioeconomic, cultural-symbolic and political); 2. Neoliberal violence should be recognised as a type of violence that requires safe spaces protecting people from the insecurities of neoliberalism (profit-driven markets, disrespect for the poor, isolation and individualization); 3. Community-led housing can be an example of such a space. This is a novel addition to a large body of literature on the injustices of neoliberalism and on safe spaces from other forms of oppression.

The case studies showed that members felt particularly safe in their communities, and revealed the practices that made them just and safe spaces by offering three aspects of safety: material, emotional and political. These aspects correlate to Fraser's aspects of (in)justice: distribution, recognition and political voice.

Fraser's normative framework highlights the *potential* for justice in CLH, although it is not always realised. In terms of distributive justice, the communities offered affordable and not-for-profit secured housing. In terms of recognition, communities provided respect and support to members of all walks of life and protection from shame in a competitive and materialist society. They also offered stability and security in an ever-changing environment. Politically, members had a voice regarding important decisions on their housing, from rent rates and disability adaptations to membership and its termination. Finally, and importantly, I argue that the combination of a democratic, non-profit organisational structure and a cooperative and supportive social structure led to just political procedures and decisions that put members before financial profit. This was evident in the examples of support for bedroom tax victims or discretionary flexibility on arrears.

Alongside the advantages of CLH, complexities were also identified. Safe spaces are imperfect; in order to maintain safety, exclusion is vital; as recognised in the literature, safe spaces often reproduce various forms of unjust exclusion and oppression, such as racism. Moreover, power dynamics among members could lead to injustice and abuse. Other complexities regarding CLH as safe spaces relate to their potential to be inward-looking rather than a starting point for wider social change. However, members tend to argue that collective organisation for improved housing and a supportive community had important political value in themselves. Not all CLH projects are similar: some are financially or socially exclusive, some offer little social connection and participation. Finding the right balance is a challenge for CLH on its way to become not only safe but also just.

As society becomes insecure, with threats ranging from rising populism to climate crisis, there will be more need for safe and just space. Naomi Klein pointed at the rising of "Green Zones"—luxurious and exclusive safe spaces for the elites in the midst of disaster areas affecting the poor (Klein, 2017). CLH offers a different, community-led model of a just and safe space. There is therefore scope to develop the concept of community-led housing as a safe, just and inclusive space, and to further explore the concept of safe spaces from neoliberalism—not only spaces of contestation but also nourishing spaces which allow members a break from the widespread market logic of neoliberal society.

## Note

All interviews took place in 2017, and where interview quotes appear they were conducted during that year.

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