

damp capital:

A RETROPSECTIVE SCRIPT



IMAGE 1: EXHIBITION PHOTOGRAPH, 2022.¹

Introduction

Loaded into the projector are 30 photographic slides, which you will need to change when prompted via this button. Over the course of a month, these slides have been exposed to damp and mould, becoming media in more than one sense of the word. In some, the damage will be noticeable, in others, barely perceptible. These slides will continue to degrade over the course of this exhibition.

damp capital was an audio-visual work exploring recent media representations of damp conditions in social housing, consisting of a sequence of 35mm photographic slides projected via a Kodak Carousel S-AV2000 and a 10-minute-long audio track. It builds from media analysis of 302 2021-2022 news articles and primary qualitative data (102 survey responses from and 10 in-depth interviews with London tenants). It offers an example of creative urban geography *in action*, using creative, practice-based research methodologies to explore and disseminate urgent areas of critical urban geographical enquiry. The following is 'retrospective script', producing not just a verbatim transcript of the words spoken, but an evocation the sounds and noises listeners would have heard through their headsets.

¹ All images are the author's, taken from her 2022 practice-based research project, *damp capital*.

SCRIPT: //

A low hum sets in. We begin with ALEX,² a young man from Brixton:

ALEX

We moved in in 2018. Um, we had already started
seeing problems with the bathroom-

ALEX moves towards the background, a deeper voice now at the fore. This
is DAVE, a campaigner from a Merton estate:

DAVE

Can you imagine the kind of stress that is causing-

A third joins the chorus, PRIYA, from Newham, overcutting the others
for now:

PRIYA

Uh, so I don't really remember as a kid, but I'm
pretty sure damp and mould has always been an issue-

ALEX

-because it wasn't waterproof-

DAVE

-and you have kids? And they're embarrassed to-

PRIYA

-so I don't remember it not being there-

More join, and soon the sounds become hard to differentiate. As they
move in and out of focus, we catch just moments from each:

VOICE

-yeah, I never brought people over-

VOICE

-was no longer fit for use-

VOICE

-because my home will be demolished, we're told it
isn't worth it-

VOICE

-contacted the Council-

The voices are now blurring into noise, a strange cacophony. One breaks
through finally:

² Here residents are referred to by fabricated pseudonyms. Their testimony remains verbatim, and their own.

DAVE

-I would call it deception.

We hear a metallic sound, something like a computer powering down, before a cold, robotic voice, uncannily non-human, gives us our cue. This is the AUTOMATOR:

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE TWO.

With the voices quiet, we can hear the hum once again. Our NARRATOR begins to speak:

NARRATOR

What does it mean for dwelling to be damp? It's an all too familiar assessment. You press your hand against the wall at the flat viewing to feel for the cold clammy sensation. You upturn your bedroom searching for the source of that stale musty smell. You are surprised at the creeping grey dots on the wall, the perfect outline of your poster once you take it down.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE THREE.



IMAGE 2: PHOTOGRAPH OF SLIDE 3. IT SHOWS A SEQUENCE OF STILLS FROM A VIRAL VIDEO; DAMP AND MOULD DAMAGE HAS WORN THROUGH THE SLIDE, THE HOLE SURROUNDED BY AN ORANGE HALO.

NARRATOR

At its crux, damp is an excess of moisture that cannot escape: water in, greater than water out.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 4.

NARRATOR

Damp has been thrust into the media spotlight. From April 2021, ITV investigated widespread disrepair in the social housing sector, airing the hour-long report, *Surviving Squalor Britain's Housing Shame*, four months later. Following this watershed moment, it has become a topic of daily coverage.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 5.

NARRATOR

This coverage purports to name and shame, to bring light to a quotidian scandal. But what can be said of the broader legacies and ecosystems that it forms a part of?

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 6.

NARRATOR

The representation of social housing as run-down, as derelict, is not new, nor is the ideological mobilisation of representation. Curated imagery accompanies articles welcoming demolition, heralding policies that seek to remake the urban landscape. The transmission of this image of decay becomes a way to manufacture consensus.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 7.

NARRATOR

Such images serve to construct an idea of those who live in social housing, even when they're out of the frame. For decades, tabloids and newspapers have revelled in this very same visual material, shaming not providers but tenants themselves. The framing purports to have shifted, yet still the visual and textual echo this same denigration.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 8.

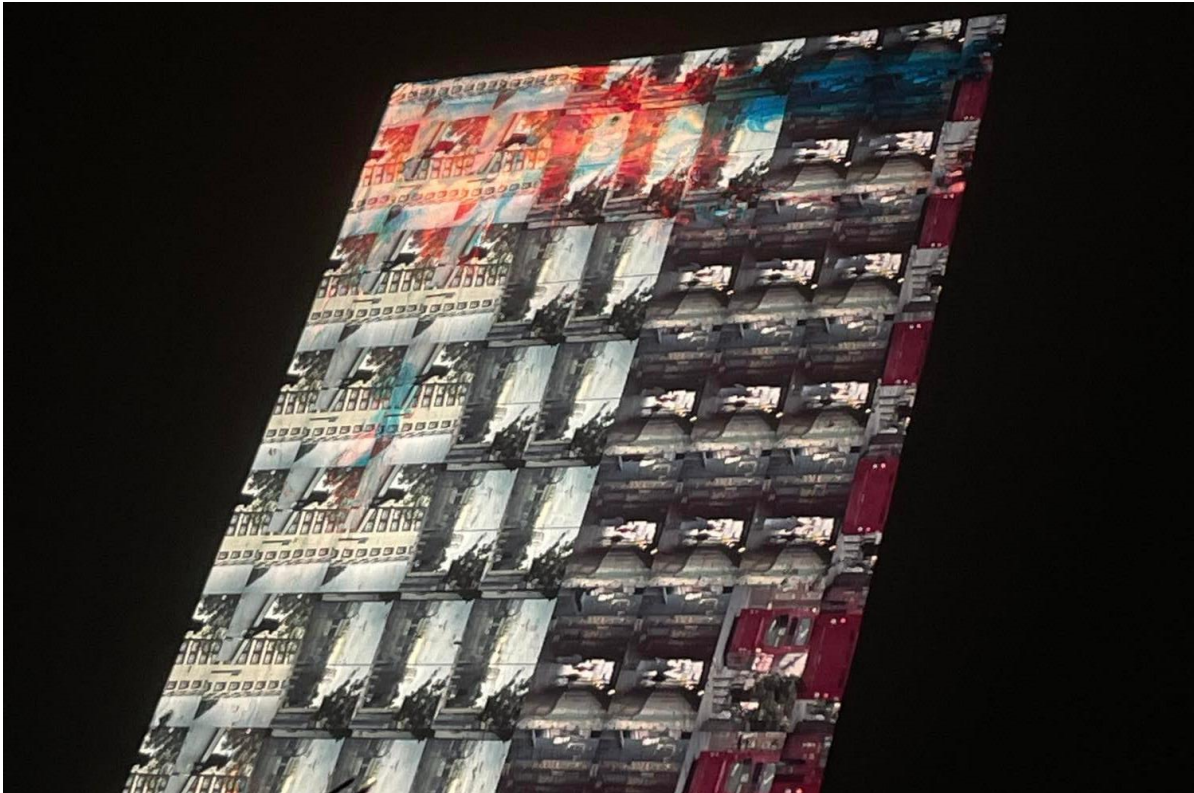


IMAGE 3: PHOTOGRAPH OF SLIDE 8. THE SLIDE SHOWS A SEQUENCE OF STILLs FROM SURVIVING SQUALOR. TO THE RIGHT, AN OIL-SLICK-LIKE MOULD BRINGS A FLASH OF RED AND BLUES.

NARRATOR

In exposition shots, the gaze shifts outwards, drawing on recognisable tropes that frame inner-city council estates as the root source of moral and physical decay.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 9.

We hear the voice of an ITN presenter, vowels and consonants precisely placed, from 1997, wind rustling behind him:

MICHAEL BRUNSON

The choice of this, the Aylesbury estate in South London for Mr. Blair's speech was no accident.³

NARRATOR

And while focus is often rested on the way the idea of criminality has been mobilized to similar ends, overlooked is a thread that runs alongside this: the condemnation of what Tony Blair once called 'derelict

³ Michael Brunson in 'Tony Blair gives speech on welfare,' *ITN England*, June 2, 1997. Archived by Getty images: <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/video/tony-blair-gives-speech-on-welfare-itn-england-south-news-footage/811183452>.

concrete.’⁴ And so derelict it was seen, and derelict
it was allowed to become.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 10.

In Channel Four’s ident of the Aylesbury estate –
broadcast for over a decade – abstracted chunks of
tower blocks move in and out of resemblance of the
number four, as the camera moves through a raised
walkway. Rubbish and graffiti, strewn across the
frame and scribbled in corners, were added by the
production team. Material disrepair becomes
manufactured, staged for public consumption, in
between chunks of scheduled entertainment

Some music, nostalgic of mid-noughties television, comes into earshot.
As quickly as it enters, it is cut off by the same power-down sound we
heard earlier:

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 11.

NARRATOR

The damp housing we see today is not staged in the
same sense. It is not fabricated. People across the
country live in the country. That the media
represents and that we, the public, consume.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 12.

NARRATOR

But what is fabricated is the space of abjection. It
is constructed at one scale inside the homes of
social tenants, and at another scale, discursively
for us all to see. These two scales move in tandem.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 13.

NARRATOR

With the same sleight of hand, the blame gets shifted
to tenants.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 14.

⁴ Tony Blair, quoted in: Anthony Bevens, ‘Blair’s pledge to the dark estates,’ *Independent*, June 2, 1997, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/blair-s-pledge-to-the-dark-estates-1253883.html>.

We return, briefly, to the cacophony:

VOICE

-quite often the implication of that is-

VOICE

-pretty much if you get damp pretty much fault-

VOICE

-they say try to limit the condensation in-,

VOICE

-that it's our fault as tenants-

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 15.

NARRATOR

Housing providers produce dampness: through long-term neglect, through lack of funding, through mismanaged resources, through conscious choices.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 16.

NARRATOR

On urban regeneration schemes, the production of dampness gains utility - a means through which to both beguile residents to favour the plans and pre-emptively quell resistance to them.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 17.

NARRATOR

Responding to the conditions on one estate, a London housing association chair was quick to remind journalists of its impending regeneration. 'How,' she asks, 'can you encourage people to move while you are doing the work?'⁵

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 18.

⁵ Jack Simpson, 'Capital conundrums: G15 boss Geeta Nanda assesses the issues London landlords face,' *Inside Housing*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/insight/insight/capital-conundrums-g15-boss-geeta-nanda-assesses-the-issues-london-landlords-face-72078>.

NARRATOR

Dampness is produced brazenly. There's not much left to reveal as Keenan writes, 'mobilising shame presupposes that dark deeds are done in the dark.'⁶

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 19.

NARRATOR

Dampness does not just dispossess people at the point of eviction, at the point of demolition. It works to unhome people in slower ways, barely perceptible as violence at all.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 20.

NARRATOR

Residents perform a sort of pre-emptive, everyday displacement, ejecting themselves from the dampness of their dwelling. Shame and embarrassment grow dominant, compounded by media imagery, drip-fed to all.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 21.

We hear now from MILENA, seated in her Haringey flat:

MILENA

Everything was just worse because you were just here all the time, and you internalised everything. And then it seems much worse when you're constantly in the same place all the time. And so yeah, if I'm out - like now, I try and go out as much as possible. I'm always trying to just stay out.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 22.

NARRATOR

It's not just through news coverage that dampness takes centre stage. Mould - the opportunistic agent that thrives in dampness - is light averse: perhaps it is more at home in the pixelated, low-resolution world of social media than the camera flash of a news crew.

⁶ Thomas Keenan, 'Mobilising Shame,' *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (2004), 446.

AUTOMATOR
CHANGE TO SLIDE 23.

NARRATOR

In these fora, individual figures get narrativised hagiographically, becoming a means through which housing providers can be seen to be acting. Singular cases may be patched up and mended, but systemic issues linger on once the flurry of cameras dies down; so too does the work.

AUTOMATOR
CHANGE TO SLIDE 24.

NARRATOR

And with the circulation, this continual feedback loop continually reanimated is the ideological and discursive battery on the very existence of social housing at all.

AUTOMATOR
CHANGE TO SLIDE 25.

We enter the oral evidentiary proceedings of the House of Commons, as overlayed voices vie to jostle each other:

NICK MURPHY

- stigmatisation was very much being driven by the media and to a certain extent by housing policies—⁷

PROFESSOR COLE

-is long-standing stigmatisation. Social housing—⁸

PAT TURNBULL

-spread through the mass media—⁹

SUZANNA MUNA

-driving down standards in social housing, but that is part of the narrative that is put out that helps excuse it—¹⁰

⁷ Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, 2022, *Oral evidence: The regulation of social housing* (HC 2022-03 874), February 7. Available at: <https://parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/0f0511b0-15c8-40ec-a006-2daba3f7cd6b>.

⁸ Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, 2022, *Oral evidence: The regulation of social housing* (HC 2022-03 874), January 17. Available at: <https://parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/e8e9d8d7-f13b-4598-88fd-b2cc43d9945d>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

PAT TURNBULL

-deliberate policy to reduce the amount of social rented housing and replace it-¹¹

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 26.

NARRATOR

The existence of what these images depict is known and has been known by those with the power and capital to act for some time now. A new photograph or video rarely tells us anything more.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 27.

NARRATOR

And yet still, these voyeuristic viewpoints persist, dangling the promise of change of respite. Meanwhile, they feed the long process of dispossession through multiple channels at multiple frequencies. They actively curtail radical potentials, actively limit our horizons.

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 28.

NARRATOR

As Sontag writes, 'to take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are in the status quo remaining unchanged, to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing - including when that interest is another person's pain or misfortune'.¹²

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 29.

NARRATOR

Surviving Scholar opens by saying these are conditions that shame 21st-century Britain, but what is left in the wake of this shame?

AUTOMATOR

CHANGE TO SLIDE 30.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1978), 12.

NARRATOR

I do not advocate for dusting dampness away, but a move towards housing justice must work to move away from this revelatory frame, away from pure exposure.

There is a pause, then a voice. Our constant hum fades away - by the end, its absence makes her sound crisp and sharp, at last:

PRIYA

I don't know if I have anything to add besides like: bro, if damp is such a minor issue, yeah, as they try and make it out - telling us like, 'Oh, it's not that big a deal. Just do blah, blah, blah' - Then you sort it. If it's such a minor issue, come to my house and sort it, bro!



IMAGE 4: PHOTOGRAPH OF SLIDE 30. ALIKE TO SLIDE 1, A PETRI DISH IS SUPERIMPOSED WITH A MAP OF LONDON PLOTTING DAMP MEDIA COVERAGE, WHERE DATA HOT SPOTS COME TO RESEMBLE MOULD COLONIES. WE END WHERE WE BEGAN, BUT THESE SLIDES ARE NOT IDENTICAL, WITH IDIOSYNCRATIC MOULDY SHADOWS STRETCHING ACROSS THE FRAME.