Resisting renovictions:
Tenants organizing against housing companies' renewal practices in Sweden

Dominika V. Polanska
Södertörn University; Uppsala University; and the Institute for Housing and Urban Research

Åse Richard
Institute for Housing and Urban Research at Uppsala University

Dominika V. Polanska is an associate professor of sociology interested in urban social movements, extra-parliamentary activism, squatting, tenants' mobilizations, informal organization, and non-traditional forms of civic engagement. She is affiliated with Södertörn University, and Uppsala University and the Institute for Housing and Urban Research. More information: www.dominikavpolanska.se

Åse Richard is PhD student in Human Geography at the Institute for Housing and Urban Research at Uppsala University. Her research is based in intersectional methodology, and concerns gender perspectives on displacement, resistance and housing development in Sweden.
Contact:
dominika.polanska@ibf.uu.se
ase.richard@ibf.uu.se

Abstract

While governing practices, as articulated in policies and other documents intended to shape tenants' behavior, have been given considerable attention in research, less attention has been given to the self-regulation of tenants in practice or how these governance practices are challenged and resisted from below. The ambition of our work is to study governing practices deployed by housing companies in two Swedish cities to achieve tenants' compliance with extensive housing renewal plans, and to conceptualize this means of exerting power as practices through which tenants are governed, silenced and surveilled, and their collective interests divided. Building on several years of ethnographic work among communities of tenants experiencing extensive renovation of their homes and, in particular, qualitative interviews and focus-group interviews with tenants, this study analyzes how governing practices are exercised by housing companies and contested by tenants. Our contribution is twofold: First, we propose the broadening of the notion of *repertoires of contention* alongside collectively organized contention to include covert and individual forms of resistance. We understand these forms as mutually shaping, and distinguish between eight forms of resistance repertoires common among tenants facing renovictions (indirect evictions caused by extensive housing renewal and skyrocketing rents) in Sweden: building local identities, mixing formal and informal forms of organization, delaying the process, detournement, politics of disengagement, demanding accountability through visibility, reversing knowledge hierarchies, and reversed shaming. Second, we aim to add to the still understudied field of tenants' mobilizations in the Swedish context.

Keywords

Displacement, renovictions, resistance, tenants' mobilization, Sweden

<u>Introduction: Tenants as active subjects</u>

As subjects of housing governance in advanced liberal democracies, tenants have been the focus of previous research that argues that tenants' responsibility, participation and empowerment are central concepts for understanding the underlying discourse of strategies and techniques deployed by housing managers, landlords and housing policy makers (Flint, 2002, 2004; Gurney, 1999). Researchers have paid particular attention to governing practices, as articulated in policies and other documents intended to shape tenants' behavior (Bradley, 2008; Flint, 2004; McKee, 2009). Less attention has been given to how these governing strategies are performed in practice, and how they are challenged and resisted in a neighborhood by the tenants (McKee, 2011). In times of neoliberal policies and widespread individualization and responsibilization in housing, it is important to understand how governing is performed and resisted, not least for those exposed to these practices.

The ambition of this paper is to study how tenants in the cities of Stockholm and Uppsala have resisted the governing practices deployed by housing companies in Sweden to achieve their compliance with extensive renovation plans. Our work is founded on several years of ethnographic work among communities of tenants who have experienced extensive renovation of their homes, including individual and focus-group interviews with tenants who are facing, undergoing or have already experienced renovations. The long-term character of our engagement is important and is inspired by critical urban research on displacement, which argues that fine-grained but important power relations tend to run under the radar of academia, as researchers generally arrive too late and do not stay long enough, and thus miss out on the complexity and scope of such processes (Atkinson, 2015; Slater, 2006).

We conceptualize resistance as individual and collective actions of defiance, carried out as everyday routines or in explicit and organized ways, as oppositional practices and actions with tenants as active subjects. When homes are subjected to pressure or threats, resistance emerges. In housing, this tends to be embedded in the everyday, and plays out on a local scale (Listerborn, et al., 2020). Following bell hooks (1991), we stress the importance of understanding the *sites* of resistance, framed by the concept of homeplace as a site of safety, grounding and dignity.[1] Thus, we include covert forms of resistance that might not be carried out in an explicit manner, but rather by individuals, and not necessarily as an organized *repertoire of contention* (Scott, 1985; Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014). Our conceptualization therefore broadens the notion of repertoires of contention, defined by Charles Tilly as a 'whole set of means [a group] has for making claims of different types on different individuals' (Tilly, 1986, p. 2, see also McAdam, Tilly & Tarrow, 2001), to include recurrent, informal and individual forms of resistance and claim-making that are less visible to researchers (cf. Lilja et al., 2017). Our purpose is not to assess whether such repertoires are strong or weak in terms of making an impression on popular memory or an impact on policies (Tilly, 2006), but to categorize these repertoires. We thus go beyond the limitations

---

[1] We regard claims for *dignity* as universal and expressed in the context of housing and renoviction in Sweden, where dignity is conceptualized as equality, housing standards, neighborhood security, continuous maintenance and the right to stay put (Listerborn et al., 2020).

of social movement researchers who tend to focus on the most visible mobilizations, which we see as the tip of the iceberg.

By focusing on the current renewal of rental housing in Sweden, and on tenants' perceptions of housing companies' practices, conceptualized as *governing practices*, we focus on how power operates in a situation where extensive renewal of rental apartments requires the approval of affected tenants. The tenants interviewed for this study faced on average a 50 to 60 percent increase in rent, and the identified practices performed by the housing companies were extensive and aggressive. Previous research on Swedish *renoviction* practices has pointed to such practices resulting in indirect evictions caused by extensive housing renewal and skyrocketing rents (Baeten et al., 2017; Polanska et al., 2019; Polanska & Richard, 2019).

The Swedish context is of particular interest, as decades of deregulation of the welfare state, including a marketization of the housing sector, has laid the ground for large-scale renovictions in the country (Baeten et al., 2017; Listerborn et al., 2020). Researchers describe the current character of the housing sector as hybrid and 'monstrous', as residual regulation and neoliberal policy have created a situation hard to handle politically. Christophers argues that 'as currently configured, the Swedish housing system serves as a decisive mechanism for the creation, reproduction and intensification of socio-economic inequalities' (2013, p. 888). Along with the shrinking stock of public housing, and the widening socioeconomic division between homeowners and renters (Baeten & Listerborn, 2015; Grundström & Molina, 2016; Hedin et al., 2012), this monstrous character of the housing system opens up increasing numbers of renovictions, which have particular implications for social filtering in a context characterized by housing inequality (Listerborn, 2018).

Baeten and colleagues write that the landlords have come to 'deploy a variety of "soft" tactics to minimize disagreement and to force tenants to comply with far-reaching renovations and (sometimes skyrocketing but always significant) rent increases' (2017, p. 17). Polanska and Richard (2019) call such governing practices *violations*, as tenants perceive and describe them as causing unwanted mental and physical stress and regulating their individual behaviors towards a particular scheme. However, people do not always act as expected. These governing practices are contested by Swedish tenants in acts which are of great importance to research, acts that should be understood as emerging within the context of a changing economic and political framework following decades of deregulation in the housing sector.

The study material consists of over 100 semi-structured interviews, conducted between 2018 and 2020, with tenants living in public and private rental housing in six neighborhoods in Stockholm and three in Uppsala. The interviews focus on tenant experiences of housing renewal, (non-)dialogues with housing companies, collective mobilization and contestation, and their individual experiences of resistance to renovation plans. It also includes seven focus-group interviews with tenants, structured to discuss the governing practices of housing companies and resistance to extensive renovations carried out in 2018. The interviews have been transcribed and thematically coded, and extracts covering information from and encounters with the housing company have been used in the analysis, along with individual and collective reactions and resistance to the renewal plans. The interview material is

enriched with experiences from several years of ethnographic work (still ongoing) and action research among communities of tenants resisting extensive housing renewal in both cities.

Renoviction is a drawn-out process, affecting the social and spatial conditions in a neighborhood over a long period of time (Marcuse, 1985). Related research on gentrification and displacement (see Atkinson, 2015; Davidson, 2009; Lees, 2000; Slater, 2006; 2009) emphasizes the risk of an academic 'gentrification of gentrification', thus missing important aspects of how deeply renoviction hurts the social and temporal conditions on the individual and neighborhood scale (Fullilove, 2005; Pull & Richard, 2019). To challenge such methodological hurdles, and to fulfil our aim of creating collective knowledge rooted in practice that establishes social spaces for fighting inequality, such an activist approach has been central. Co-production with affected tenants and housing activists has enabled the development of a research design relevant for practice, as well as the development of theory. Such co-production is helix-shaped, rather than unidirectional. It requires handling the dialectics of theoretical and 'silent', practically and locally embedded knowledge in complex situations. Mutual trust is an important component. In this project, trust has gone beyond the traditional requirements of confidentiality, letters of consent and careful handling of personal data, as our research methodology depends on the tenants' willingness to take part and their trust that the academic production will benefit their interests. Such sensitivities require that the researcher actively engages in topics that relate to the practical challenges facing tenants; remains open to changes in project structure and focus; has a long-term perspective; stays aware of local contexts; and feeds back analysis and research results in multiple ways appropriate to each situation. Such commitments are time-consuming and require a respect for tacit knowledge, but are crucial for the building of trust. In our engagement with housing justice in general, and the concurrent Swedish renoviction processes in particular, our role as academics is thus manifold: functional, instrumental and consultant in character. Drawing upon Freire (2000), our research approach is based on transformative methodologies, crafted to raise awareness and to actively counteract injustice in the housing sector. An example of our activist methodologies approach is the production and widespread use of a handbook based on first-hand experiences of renoviction in Sweden–'Renovicted! The landlords' power-games, and how you take that fight', published in 2019 (Polanska et al., 2019)–which has since been used by tenants fighting renoviction in their neighborhoods, as well as by the media, study-groups and awareness-raising campaigns. The handbook was a collective endeavor, produced in close cooperation with affected tenants and with multiple purposes: to bridge experiences of renoviction between neighborhoods; to build collective understanding of the unjust power relations inherent in renoviction; to make visible tenants' resistance; and to question the notion of displacement subjects as passive victims. In this paper our aim is to advance the knowledge produced in the handbook, firstly by conceptualizing the governing practices deployed by housing companies so that they can be compared with governing practices in other contexts (and thus counteracted), and secondly, and most importantly, to identify forms of resistance that can serve as inspiring examples for future struggles against renovictions.

In the following section, we introduce the reader to the Swedish context of housing renewal in the rental sector, then move to the paper's main focus on the techniques used by housing companies to achieve tenants' compliance with extensive housing renewal plans, and the ways in which these are resisted by tenants. We further study how tenants interpret these techniques through the concepts of *governing practices*, *resistance* and *repertoires of contention*. Our contribution is twofold: First, we propose the broadening of the notion of *repertoires of contention* to include covert and individual forms of resistance alongside collectively organized contention, understanding that these are mutually shaping. Second, by analyzing the rich empirical data underpinning this work, we add to the still understudied field of how tenants are currently mobilizing in the Swedish context of renoviction processes. Our contribution is therefore both theoretical and empirical.

Displacement by profit-driven renovation

In 2011 it was calculated that 700,000 dwellings built in the 1960s and 1970s were awaiting renovation and renewal, following state regulations on energy efficiency (Industrifakta, 2011). Today, about 155,000 apartments are still awaiting such renewal (Trä och Möbelföretagen, 2019). As observed by affected tenants and researchers, housing companies carry out unnecessarily extensive measures throughout the process to maximize profit (Baeten & Listerborn, 2015; Baeten et al., 2017; Polanska & Richard, 2019). Consequently, in neighborhoods of large and middle-sized Swedish cities, rents have skyrocketed, and the displacement of tenants is at stake (Bergenstråle & Palmstierna, 2016; Boverket, 2014; Mangold 2016). Reports show that neglected maintenance alongside state demands for energy efficiency make renovation and technical modernization urgent, primarily in low-income areas where elderly people (most often women), single-parent households, families with children and other low-income groups are threatened with displacement (Boverket, 2014). It is also apparent from these reports that displaced households tend to move to areas with even lower incomes and worse school results.

The Swedish Tenancy Act distinguishes between maintenance and standard-enhancing measures. Maintenance is the responsibility of the housing company, to be covered by the rents already paid, while standard-enhancing measures allow for rent increases. Currently, there are no juridical limits on the rent increases allowed for standard-enhancing renovation. Instead, tenants are assumed to have protection from arbitrary and steep rent increases through a system of negotiated rents in which the tenants are most often represented by the Swedish Tenants' Union (the largest civil society organization in the county, with more than half a million members). The recent wave of renovictions has shown that this negotiation-based system does not protect tenants from being displaced from their homes. Following the introduction of the Public Housing Companies Act (Lag, 2010, p. 879), a requirement to act in a 'business-like' manner has been interpreted differently by public housing companies (Salonen, 2015). The act also meant that rent levels in private multi-family rental housing were no longer aligned with rent levels in publicly owned housing. From 2011 onwards, the level of rents in the private housing stock (often higher as a consequence of more extensive housing renewal) were also taken into account. Calculations show that a standard-enhancing

renovation in 2016 increased rents on average by 37 percent, with significant differences between cities and housing companies, and much higher levels in the larger cities (TV4, 2016). In the capital city, Stockholm, rent increases of up to 60 or 70 percent have not been unusual in recent years, given the housing shortage and tough competition for rented housing (Hem och Hyra, 2016).

This trend of extensive housing renewal followed by steep rent increases has been most evident in Stockholm in recent years, compared to smaller cities in Sweden. One could argue that the city of Stockholm has been a playground for privatization and renewal projects that have displaced low-income households to the peripheries of the city and beyond. The amount of public housing in the city has shrunk to an all-time low of 17 percent, following conversions of public housing under 'right to buy' programs and through sales of public stock to private housing companies over the last two decades (Andersson & Magnusson Turner, 2014; Hedin et al., 2012). The privatization of housing has been painfully apparent in the suburbs of the city over the last decade. These are the same areas where the need for renovation has become urgent, partly because of neglected maintenance. These are also the neighborhoods where most low-income households live, in rental apartments that are either awaiting renovation or have recently undergone renewal. Tenants interviewed for this study all lived in rental housing, whether private or public, in Stockholm neighborhoods constructed between the 1950s and 1970s.

Situated within commuter distance of Stockholm, the municipality of Uppsala is the fourth-largest city in Sweden. Just 70 kilometers north of the Swedish capital, Uppsala is part of Stockholm's metropolitan growth region, and consequently its housing market is of high interest to national as well as international construction companies and investors. For the past ten years, the large-scale renewal of the multifamily housing stock carried out has sent rent increases skyrocketing up to 70 percent (Pettersson, 2016). Most of these neighborhoods were built in the 1960s and 1970s, and years of neglected maintenance and the subsequent need for structural renovation have paved the way for public and private companies alike to carry out large-scale rent-raising renewals and displace low-income citizens from their homes. Despite its comparatively small percentage of rental multifamily housing—18 percent compared to a national average of 30 percent (SCB, 2019)—these processes of construction and renewal are currently reshaping social relations in Uppsala. The largest public housing company is still the owner of a majority (70 percent) of the rental multifamily dwellings, despite the entry of large private and pension-fund housing companies. Residents in public as well as privately owned housing have protested against the large-scale renewal of their homes.

Governing practices in housing renewal

Previous research shows the brutal nature of current displacement processes taking place in Sweden (Baeten & Listerborn, 2015; Baeten et al., 2017; Gustafsson et al., 2019; Listerborn, 2018; Polanska & Richard, 2018, 2019; Pull, 2020; Pull & Richard, 2019). Baeten and colleagues categorize the violence of displacement exerted by landlords as 'objective

violence', arguing that it operates anonymously, systemically and invisibly through the very way society is organized, as opposed to physical, or 'subjective', violence (2017, p. 11). The authors argue that Sweden's social order, in which landlords hold a much more powerful position than tenants, is reproduced in discourse and interactions and results in a hegemonic view of the powerless tenants as having themselves to blame. If we view neoliberalism as a governmental rationality, the means of governing specific objects, in our case tenants, are of particular interest to uncover. In other words, if tenants are the objects of governing power, the means and rationalities by which they are governed are interesting to study.

Our previous research focuses on methods and techniques deployed by landlords in Sweden to show their widespread and systematic use, especially in situations where steep rent increases are at stake (Polanska & Richard, 2018, 2019; Polanska et al., 2019). Our studies identify six main techniques used by housing companies during renovation to silence and control tenants: *making invisible, harassment, inaccessibility, guilt, belittling* and *rule by division*. Additionally, we introduce 12 subcategories of techniques used against tenants. These are: *time pressure or availability requirements, 'not/nice guys', threats, sanctions, presence pressure, construction work harassment, special treatment of certain groups, neglected maintenance, a 'no' as standard response, hostage-taking, lack of information,* and *false information*. Our previous studies focus on how housing companies and their representatives silence, punish unwanted behavior, and divide collective interests among tenants. In this paper we aim to conceptualize this way of exerting power as practices through which tenants are governed. We argue that the conformity of individual and collective behavior, in this case of tenants during renoviction processes in Sweden, is currently controlled through the following *governing practices* of:

1) Silencing,
2) Surveilling,
3) Dividing collective demands.

These governing practices are aimed at tenants, and at their potential resistance. If collective voices are silenced or made invisible, behaviors surveilled, and collective interests weakened, the powerful position of landlords vis-à-vis tenants is strengthened and remains unchallenged.

The governing practices of *silencing* are played out as a variety of techniques that include belittling, making invisible, and the projection of guilt. These practices strengthen dominant themes in the debate, such as technical and economic arguments for the renewal of houses, and vague expressions in favor of tenants' wellbeing. The use of technical arguments suppresses other relevant perspectives, such as social and temporal aspects of home and homemaking (Paton, 2016; Pull & Richard, 2019). The landlord often relies on proclaiming 'expert knowledge', mobilizing scientific reasons for housing renewal. One of our interviewees told us that the tenants were unable to take part in the assessment prior to the renovation as a decision had already been reached:

But it seemed that it was already set to be accepted and that we could carry out our own assessment if we wanted, but it would be the same outcome. And 'It will be shitty for

you and for everyone else if you do', I thought they emphasized strongly. 'You cannot do anything about this' (5).

In this case the housing company used technical as well as legal arguments (by referring to a decision of the Rent Tribunal) to back their calculations regarding the extent of the renovation and its costs. Tenants faced a rent increase of over 60 percent, and were not given access to the calculations supporting this increase. Most importantly, tenants were not allowed to voice their own expertise gained from living in these homes, nor were they allowed to examine underlying technical or economic reports.

The outcome of the governing practice of *surveillance* is to control and foster desirable behaviors among tenants through soft and hard techniques, such as implicit threats, presence in the building making tenants feel surveilled, or direct harassment, handing out fines or installing surveillance cameras in communal parts of the building. Tenants told stories of being blacklisted if they did not comply with the decisions of the housing company, threats of eviction, suspension from the housing queue managed by the company, high bills when moving out of the apartment, the removal of the possibility of a discount in the rent increase, threats their case would be taken to the Rent Tribunal in the event of lack of cooperation, and harassment during renovation, when the company shut off water and heating during the Christmas holidays. One of the tenants told us about the information that was sent out by the housing company, including threats of fines and eviction:

> This is the worst I've been through, but there are certainly worse cases. Because they push people down and they are also threatening. Sending threatening letters: 'If you do not let in our', what are their names? 'workers, craftsmen'... We all let them in, but they still send threatening letters, in advance. 'If you do not let them in you will be fined SEK 10,000. And if that does not happen, you will have to leave'. And when we tried to call these guys who wrote those letters, you could never got hold of them, never /... / or it was busy all the time (17).

Tenants told us the housing companies made direct and indirect written and oral threats if they questioned or did not cooperate or comply with the companies' instructions. Tenants also told us about their landlords' unwarranted presence in the residential area and their building, which created a strong sense of being surveilled. Such presence was often noticeable, for example, when employed staff regularly visited the facility for no obvious reasons, which the tenants felt was to 'keep order'. Additionally, the housing companies had a high turnover in employed staff, thus intensifying the tenants' experience of insecurity. The interviewees also related that representatives of the company called unannounced at the door, and hung around in the communal areas of the building (stairwell, laundry room, elevator and so on) without warning or explicit reasons to visit. The companies left traces of their presence, for instance by tearing down information put up by tenants, handing out fines for 'violations', or personally supervising new installations/repairs/renovation.

The most common governing practice exerted was that of *dividing collective demands*. Such practice splits the interests of tenants not just by offering individual deals and solutions, avoiding meeting the tenants collectively, keeping meetings small-scale and restricting the

information flow, but also by spreading rumors, inciting neighbors against each other, offering different agreements to tenants with different rental contracts, banning meetings on the company premises, and specifically targeting critical tenants. One tenant described how the company used their knowledge of the powerlessness of tenants from immigrant backgrounds to silence critical voices by offering rent reductions.

Individual agreements were common, and tenants testified that the use of benefits or special agreements prevented their neighbors from organizing, while those who chose to criticize the housing company in more organized forms were labeled 'troublemakers'. Sometimes, when conflicts or dissatisfaction rose to the surface, the communal meeting space in the building that the tenants used for parties and social activities was put at stake: 'So, it feels like the slightest mistake we might make, if we somehow upset them too much, then they will respond: "We are taking back this space"' (21).

Tenants offered resources by the housing company were in turn expected to keep things calm. The technique of time pressure was central to this governing practice of division, giving tenants a limited period of reflection for important decisions or arranging meetings at short notice. Time pressure was reported to create great stress and to hamper well-thought-out and informed decisions. It also meant that tenants did not have time to talk to each other and answer in a united way. On a more structural level, the tenant collective is divided through increases in the number of time-restricted contracts in a neighborhood prior to a renewal. Tenants living on these contracts have no say at all regarding the renovation, and the landlord has the right to cancel the contract, usually with only one-month's notice.

Resistance among tenants

Despite such practices that weaken the position of tenants facing housing renewal, affected tenants have taken collective action throughout the country (Gustafsson et al., 2019; Listerborn et al., 2020; Polanska & Richard, 2018; Pull & Richard, 2018). In our previous research (2018, 2019), we discussed individual as well as collective forms of resistance, and the formation of political subjectivities among tenants in Sweden facing renovations. This research demonstrated the playful, solidary and political character of tenants' collective action, as well as the more hidden nature of individual resistance. Given the widespread governing techniques deployed by landlords, we find it interesting to deepen the understanding of how this highly uneven power relation is challenged by tenants in practice. Moreover, the obstacles to collective organizing identified above will also be discussed in our conclusions, to show how governance practices are challenged and resisted by tenants from below.

Founded in the theoretical framework and our empirical material, we identify eight *forms of resistance* among the tenants. These forms are understood in a broad sense in our work. They take place on scales seldom included in the notion of collective claim-making and resistance, encompassing micro-level and low-scale, sometimes covert and implicit, everyday ways of making claims and contesting individually and collectively. Such forms of resistance might be less visible, but have a recurrent character, are reproduced by tenants at the various

sites and consist of accumulated experiences that are developed and shared between individuals and groups. The eight forms of resistance we identify are:

1) Building local identities: telling your own story;
2) Shifting shapes – mixing the formal and the informal;
3) Delaying the process;
4) Detournement – using humor and playfulness;
5) Politics of disengagement – actively not engaging in the topic;
6) Demanding accountability through visibility;
7) Reversing knowledge hierarchies/orders;
8) Reversed shaming – image attacks.

As described above, most neighborhoods subjected to renoviction in Sweden today are stigmatized and, in some cases, racialized. In the context of a debate on rental multifamily housing renewal, focused as it is primarily on economics and technical issues, one strategy frequently employed by tenants is to resist by *building (strong) local identities* and telling their own story. For example, in Uppsala, tenants worked together on a visual exhibition, demanding that 'their homes' should be the center of discussion not 'the building', thus challenging the dominant and static view of spatial form and the built environment. Such a claim, emphasizing the importance of social space, was also picked up by local protests in other cities under the banner of 'Our homes, their building', as tenants joined forces in demonstrations and videos to claim their right as the current residents to stay put in their homes. Representations of such a position are the focus of several music videos, wall newspapers and local Facebook groups created by tenants in various neighborhoods in order to build local identity. When, for example, a housing company in Uppsala claimed that the kitchens were old, worn out and not desirable to 'modern tenants', women in the neighborhood posted pictures of their kitchens on Facebook, claiming both their functionality and high emotional value. In one neighborhood in Stockholm, long-lasting resistance was built on a local identity which asserted that the residents were well-informed, active and unique, and part of an organized local movement:

> The people here are somehow, the [neighborhood] people are unique, they raise their voices, this with the [grassroots movement for urban justice], you know, there were many well-known organizations here that were created by that movement (H2019: 4).

By describing the local community as active, and thus rejecting the dominant narrative of stigmatized neighborhoods inhabited by passive residents, tenants claimed their own stories of the area and their homes. To create a network built on local identity has been crucial in fighting renovictions in the cases we have studied, as well as in neighborhoods in other Swedish cities. The main characteristic of this strategy is to tell the stories of tenants in their own words, through specifically chosen outlets: blogs, Facebook groups, letters to the editor in newspapers, pictures, songs and music videos, or artwork.

The Swedish Tenants' Union is the largest civil society organization in Sweden. However, for the past ten years, tenants in neighborhoods facing renoviction have had to set up local and independent networks and organizations to claim their right to stay put. Relations with the Tenants' Union are somewhat complicated, as this large and well-established organization has the right to negotiate rents, a long tradition of being the only organization to represent the interests of tenants in Sweden, and a professionalized and bureaucratic structure that makes it slow to react to a situation in which renoviction has become a reality in Sweden. Local organizations, most often marginalized and scarce in resources, find it difficult to get access to key resources such as meeting places and legal expertise, while still protecting their independence. Nevertheless, cooperation with this established organization has sometimes become crucial in the amplification of local struggles. One of the interviewees told us about the frankness of the local tenants' union when tenants were facing extensive renewal:

> As experts, we can offer the expert knowledge we have, but what you want to achieve we cannot achieve; only you are able to achieve it.' So, they basically said things that you really want to hear a trade union say. 'We support you, we are not in control, you do what you want to do and we support you (2).

The strategic way in which tenants *shifted the shape of their organization*, from formal and institutionalized to informal, was developed in the neighborhoods of Stockholm and Uppsala to navigate the bureaucratic nature of the Tenants' Union in innovative and highly tactical ways. Tenants who chose to be active members of the Union in some cases also organized locally through independent networks. Formal and informal organization among tenants took place in parallel, sometimes in close cooperation, and at other times independently, which strengthened their claims on behalf of the tenants facing renovation. This shape-

A demonstration against renoviction of an area in Stockholm, 2015. Poster saying: "Luxury renovation= cleansing of tenants". **Photograph: Dominika V. Polanska.**

shifting strategy responded to both the established and formal nature of an NGO and the more informal activist networks working on behalf of local tenants.

Another common strategy reproduced in the neighborhoods of Stockholm and Uppsala was *delaying the process*, thus giving the tenants more time for knowledge acquisition, dissemination, and mobilization. By delaying the process, neighbors could be recruited, pressure could be put on the housing company, the media could be contacted and public opinion could be built around the issue. The legal/bureaucratic procedure of particular institutions involved in the process could be used strategically to the advantage of the tenants, and in the end, rent increases would be limited through the negotiations with the housing company that occurred in the meantime. This form of resistance was used strategically in a neighborhood in Stockholm and described in the following way by one of the tenants:

> The only thing that can be done if you live in private rental housing is to delay and postpone the whole process. That's what the seven of us did in our building. You do not sign any approval. Once the landlord pulls you before the Rent Tribunal, ask for as much deferral as possible. Then, of course, you lose the case in the Tribunal. Then you take as much time as possible to appeal to the Highest Court. Then you ask for the longest deferral there as well. We were lucky that our court cases were postponed throughout the summer of 2016. All this resulted in the whole process taking over a year (May 2015 to September 2016). In the end, [the housing company] got tired of not being allowed to start plumbing work and 'renovation' and the seven of us (subsequently six) went to a meeting and we got rid of the renovation of the kitchens and those of us who already had fairly new bathrooms also got rid of that renovation (H2020: 1).

The above citation shows that the tenants strategically used delaying to their advantage. A knowledge of legal procedures was crucial to maximize the delay. In this case the outcomes were rather positive for the tenants involved: their rent increases were limited and so was the extent of the renovation of their homes.

Yet another form of resistance identified is the *detournement*. A technique developed by the Situationists, it means 'overturning' or 'derailment', or the strategic use of humor and

playfulness to turn around meanings (Eagles, 2018). Humor and satire have been shown to strengthen the local identity, challenge hegemonic power, and reveal top-down governing techniques employed by the landlords to carry through plans that go against the will of the tenants. When confronted with humor and satire, housing companies have reacted either by filing police reports or by blaming tenants collectively. In previous work (Polanska & Richard, 2018) we have called this kind of action *humoristic resistance* – emphasizing the duality of humor and its contribution to the strengthening of the collective identity by using ridicule. Ridicule fulfilled a function through which the power asymmetry was somewhat and temporarily rebalanced, and the opponent – the housing company – belittled. Playful posters ridiculing the housing company's name and logo as well as their renovation plans were posted anonymously in public places and later disseminated through social media, drawing laughter from tenants and contributing to the creation of solidarity in neighborhoods. These expressions overturned meaning through creatively formulated messages, pictures and artwork. One example renamed the housing company Rikshem (national homes) as Riskhem (risk homes), Rikssvin (national pigs) or Rikas hem (rich men's homes). By using creative and humorous ways of interpreting the situation, the authority of the housing company in dictating the rules of renewal was undermined and the absurdity of the situation visualized. In Uppsala (2012) as well as in Stockholm (2016), the residents built towers of moving boxes in front of the local housing company's office in the morning to make access to the office difficult for company employees. In Stockholm, this 'installation' was photographed and spread through social media, encouraging the housing company to move from the area. Another common action was to print stickers with different messages and post these in areas facing renewal. In the case of Högdalen and Hagsätra, two neighborhoods in southern Stockholm, these stickers stated that the owner/housing company should be evicted. They stated: 'Evict XX, before XX evicts you' – an absurd claim that was widespread in these two areas in 2015 and 2016. This use of ridicule allowed the imagining of an alternative or reversed order of power.

Previously we have written about the *politics of disengagement* among tenants facing extensive renewal, referring to tenants' active choice not to engage in the topic of housing renewal (Polanska & Richard, 2018). This is resistance by refusal, a passive form of resistance described by Prior and Barnes as 'a form of subversion that involves an outright refusal by users to become engaged in attempts to address needs, problems and dilemmas; it may even mean a refusal to accept that particular needs, problems and dilemmas exist at all in the way they are defined in policy' (Prior & Barnes, 2011, p. 270). In the situation of extensive renovation, this could be expressed by tenants refusing and actively avoiding getting involved in the topic of renewal, by refusing to read information or open the door, by avoiding talking to the housing company, attending meetings or preparing for a move. Frederick (2017) has called this kind of strategy *disengagement politics*. We have conceptualized it as not necessarily collectively organized or explicitly intentional, but collectively expressed among tenants as a form of everyday resistance that is oppositional in practice. One of our interviewees told us about their feelings when the renewal plans forced the tenants to move from the apartments during renovation work:

I want to stay here, I do not want to hustle. When you are my age, you should be allowed to stay, damn, right? I want, I will not move, I will not move a bit. They can do what the hell they want, they will need to throw me out then (32).

For this tenant, the active choice of not preparing for the move was an expression of this kind of disengagement politics. It is a response that often occurs among tenants facing extensive renewal, forcing them into decisions they are not comfortable with. Quite often, this kind of everyday resistance is turned into a more collectively organized form of claim-making/repertoire.

Another recurrent way of claim-making, performed by tenants in neighborhoods of Stockholm and Uppsala, was to *demand accountability through visibility*. The aim here is to improve the leverage of tenants vis-à-vis the housing company by strategically using the visibility of the issue to put pressure on the housing company and hold it accountable for the consequences of housing renewal (which could be social, ecological or technical). One such example is when tenants under threat of renoviction taped bright yellow papers in their windows bearing the text 'We want to stay put', which emphasized the social consequences of displacement. Other neighborhoods picked up this method, making the slight but important change: 'Everyone should be allowed to stay put'. Such acts made visible the ongoing processes of renoviction, made claims to act in solidarity with neighbors and held the housing company accountable for possible displacement in the area. As a collective act performed by individuals from their homes, this resistance did not stem from any officially known 'project' or 'campaign', but was still disseminated, picked up and used by neighborhoods in several Swedish cities. Such visibility attracted the media, and this yellow representation of ongoing renovictions made it on to the first page of local as well as national media several times, thus promoting a view of the renovations as hitting homes where people live, not just an investment in buildings in need of renovation.

Figure 3

Posters from a demonstration in Uppsala, 2018.
Photograph: Åse Richard

The use of the media to put pressure on the housing companies is a common action used to make visible the claims of tenants. Another such strategy is to collect signatures and hand them over to the company in official circumstances. Yet another relatively common strategy is to organize a public demonstration. One of our interviewees told us how the pressure of media reports impacted the housing company:

> And my wife wrote in *Aftonbladet* [a national newspaper] and *Mitt I* [a local newspaper] and TV was here and interviewed us. We did not meet the housing company, but instead TV interviewed them. It was XX who answered those questions and he then said that 'Yes it needed to be renovated' and it was certainly needed. But maybe you did not have to do so much and [could avoid] the following rent increase, and then he said, 'It is not decided, you have to negotiate with the Tenants' Union and so' /… / Then Swedish Television also had an 'expert' who was interviewed in the same vein and he said, 'They are doing such major renovations so that they can raise the rent', instead of thinking about what is needed (18).

In this case, pressure created by the media, the questions addressed by the journalists to the housing company, and local organization outside the Tenants' Union resulted in an alternative model of housing renewal to that initially proposed, introducing optional renewal levels, and thus different costs/rent increases. 'Going visible' has proven a way ahead, as housing companies and corporations are most often vulnerable to bad publicity. On several occasions, tenants used Facebook to question renovation plans, thus forcing companies to act on calls for maintenance or demands for a less extensive renovation.

Reversing knowledge hierarchies is yet another form of resistance we would like to highlight in and beyond the two cities we have studied. Ways in which tenants have reversed knowledge hierarchies include gathering expertise and seeking answers independently, demanding expert opinions to contest the dominant discourses formulated by the housing companies that tend to emphasize technical solutions and economic efficiency in favor of extensive renewal. There are cases where tenants working in, for example, construction or engineering have demanded investigations and reports regarding the companies' call for extensive and costly upgrading, providing their own critique. A tenant described how her neighbors suggested alternative solutions, but the result was just silence from the housing company:

> We have people here in the neighborhood who know plumbing, electricity and construction. Experts. One of the tenants even proposed a model, he built a three-dimensional model of how we could do things. But they [the housing company] were silent. Or, they sent a higher boss (A).
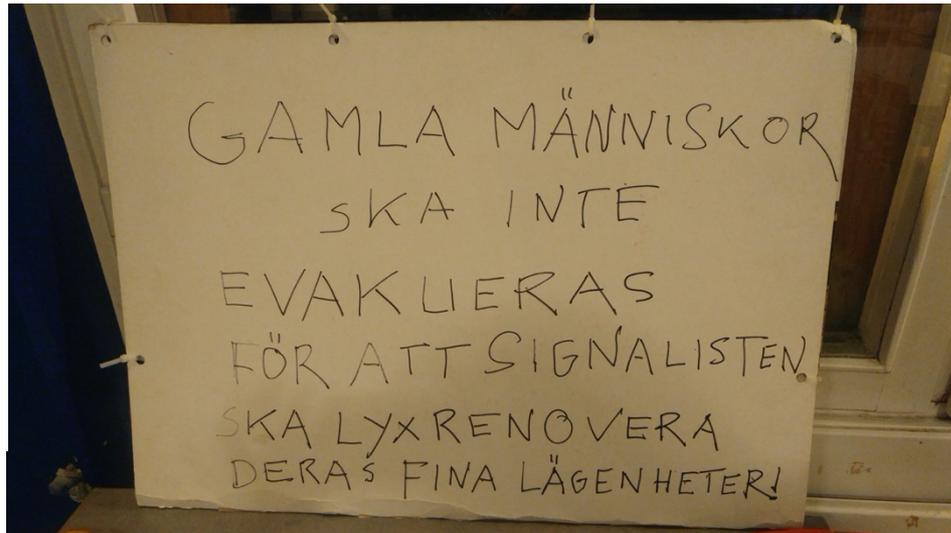
The above citation sheds light on the housing company's position of power in renewal situations, and shows how tenants' suggestions can be ignored, irrespective of their content or the depth of engagement. Yet we have also observed how some companies have changed their plans as a result of the contestations of tenants who used expertise to claim their rights.

The last form of resistance identified in our study is the *use of shaming* and image attacks on the housing company, a part of the repertoire closely connected to the strategies of

visibility and reversing knowledge hierarchies described above. Tenants witness what we in previous work have called the projection of guilt (Polanska et al., 2019). The act of shaming reverses guilt and calls on the morals and morality of the housing company to act accountably and consider the wellbeing of the present tenants. We have observed that tenants perceive public housing companies as 'easier' targets of shaming than private companies, as they are expected to act for the public good. On the other hand, some small private companies have proven to be 'immune' to shaming performed by tenants, and thus remained unaffected by such attempts.

Conclusions: Resisting renovictions

The objective of this study has been to examine how governing practices are used by housing companies, and how these are contested by tenants in situations of extensive housing renewal in two Swedish cities. We have identified three *governing practices* exercised by public and private housing companies in contemporary housing renewal projects in Sweden that silence tenants, surveil their behavior, and divide collective demands. Our contribution has been to show how power operates in situations of housing renewal and, above all, how tenants perceive it. The perspective of tenants is neglected in discussions of housing renewal, and by demonstrating the way that tenants are exposed to governing practices during renoviction processes, we hope to contribute to strengthening the ways in which resistance among tenants can be built.

Tenants are resisting extensive housing renewal that is perceived as threatening the safety of their homes and neighborhoods. In our study we have identified eight *forms of resistance* among tenants facing renovation and possible displacement in two Swedish cities. These reflect both *individual* and *collective* forms of claim-making: building local identities, mixing formal and informal forms of organizing, delaying the process, detournement, politics of disengagement, demanding accountability through visibility, reversing knowledge hierarchies, and reversed shaming. These strategies can be viewed as responses to the governing practices, thus aiming to unify tenants who face renovation, reversing the

asymmetrical power relation between tenants and landlords. These strategies are not fixed. They have been used and developed over a period, sometimes invented by the tenants' mobilizations we studied, but most often copied from previous struggles. In cases where tenants have achieved beneficial outcomes, ranging from slowing down the process to directing the housing company to carry out more cautious and affordable housing renewal projects, these strategies have become disseminated and used to resist renovictions. At the same time, the resistance of renovictions in Sweden over the last decade has unfolded in a fragmented way and primarily on a local scale, despite some recent attempts at scaling up. The persistence of tenants' mobilizations and resistance has been the key to achieving some of these 'successes' and has also contributed to cooperation, spreading the word, and the building of coalitions between tenants' groups.

The examination of resistance among tenants in this study has two purposes. The first is to broaden existing theoretical tools to understand the forms of contention we have observed among tenants. The second is to identify strategies used by tenants to resist renovictions, forming a repertoire of contention that can be learned from and inspire future struggles.

Swedish tenants facing extensive renovations have encountered difficulties on discursive, institutional, neighborhood, and individual levels. The Swedish legal system is individualized, the marketization of housing is advancing in the country, and residential segregation based on income and ethnicity is growing. There is an acute shortage of affordable housing in Sweden. With the ideology of homeownership widespread, tenants' collective identity is atomized, with the consequence that its formation faces severe difficulties. There is thus a need to examine how power operates, how it is resisted, and what can be done.

The formation of subjectivity and collective forms of organization also face obstacles created to shatter them in the tenancy forms offered by housing companies (short-term or conditional contracts), in the shrinking number of meeting spaces left by the privatization and commercialization of public spaces, in the housing companies' changing strategies and adaptations to counter resistance, in the often difficult economic conditions of tenants that need to be dealt with first (due to the ongoing precarization of the labor market, discrimination, and withdrawal of social and welfare services), and not least in the trust in the Tenants' Union – a highly institutionalized and professionalized organization whose activity is centered primarily on providing services to members and negotiating rents.

Despite the atomizing character of this neoliberal housing context, tenants organize and do so strategically and with awareness of housing companies' shifting shapes and interests. By building strong local communities and tactically using resources and shifting forms of collective action in the intersection of institutionalized/non-institutionalized, formal/informal and NGOs/networks, tenants have succeeded in putting pressure on their housing companies and contributed to highlighting the issue of renovictions in the media and popular opinion. Tenants also use a common repertoire of delaying, ridicule, expert knowledge, accountability, morality, or visibility to demand their rights and create leverage on behalf of the tenants' collective.

Acknowledgements

References

Andersson, R. & Magnusson Turner, L. (2014) Segregation, gentrification, and residualisation: from public housing to market-driven housing allocation in inner city Stockholm, *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 14(1), pp. 3–29.

Atkinson, R. (2015) Losing one's place. Narratives of neighbourhood change, market injustice and symbolic displacement, *Housing, Theory and Society* 32 (4), pp. 373–388.

Baeten, G. & Listerborn, C. (2015) Renewing urban renewal in Landskrona, Sweden: pursuing displacement through housing policies, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 97(3), pp. 249–261.

Baeten, G., S. Westin, E. Pull & I. Molina (2017). Pressure and violence. Housing renovation and displacement in Sweden, *Environment and Planning* A 49 (3), pp. 631–651.

bell hooks (1991) Theory as Liberatory Practice, 4 Yale J.L. & Feminism. Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlf/vol4/iss1/2

Bergenstråle, S. & Palmstierna (2016) *Var tredje kan tvingas flytta – En rapport om effekterna av hyreshöjningar i samband med standardhöjande åtgärder i Göteborg* (Göteborg: Hyresgästföreningen).

Boverket (2014) *Flyttmönster till följd av omfattande renoveringar*, ISBN:978-91-7563-183-7.

Bradley, Q. (2008) Capturing the Castle: Tenant Governance in Social Housing Companies, *Housing Studies*, 23(6), pp. 879–897.

Christophers, B. (2013) A monstrous hybrid: the political economy of housing in early twenty-first century Sweden, *New Political Economy*, 18(6), pp. 885–911.

Davidson, M. (2009) Displacement, space and dwelling. Placing gentrification debate, *Ethics, Place and Environment* 12(2), pp. 219–234.

Hedin, K., Clark, E., Lundholm, E. & Malmberg, G. (2012) Neoliberalization of Housing in Sweden: Gentrification, Filtering, and Social Polarization, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 102(2), pp. 443–463.

Eagles, J. (2018) The Situationists, Marcuse and the "Great Refusal" of the "Hopeless Cases": The Socially Marginalized, Rebellion and Revolution, *International Critical Thought*, 8(1), pp. 79–104.

Flint, J. (2002) Social Housing Agencies and the Governance of Anti-social Behaviour, *Housing Studies*, 17(4), pp. 619–637.

Flint, J. (2004) The responsible tenant: housing governance and the politics of behavior, *Housing Studies*, 19(6), pp. 893–909.

Frederick, A. (2017) Visibility, respectability, and disengagement. The everyday resistance of mothers with disabilities, *Social Science & Medicine* 181, pp. 131–138.

Freire, P. (2000) *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New York: Continuum).

Fullilove, M. T. (2005) *Root Shock: How tearing up city neighborhoods hurts America, and what we can do about it* (New York: New Village Press).

Grundström, K. & Molina, I. (2016) From Folkhem to lifestyle housing in Sweden: segregation and urban form, 1930s–2010s, *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 16(3), pp. 316–336.

Gurney, C (1999) Pride and prejudice: discourses of normalisation in private and public accounts of home ownership, *Housing Studies*, 14(2), pp. 163–183.

Gustafsson, J., Hellström, E., Richard, Å. & Springfeldt, S. (2019) The right to stay put: resistance and organizing in the wake of changing housing policies in Sweden, *Radical Housing Journal,* 1(2), pp. 191–200.

Hedin, K.; Clark, E. Lundholm, E. & Malmberg, G. (2012) Neoliberalization of housing in Sweden: gentrification, filtering and social polarization, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 102(2), pp. 443–463.

Industrifakta (2011) *Behov och prioriteringar i rekordårens flerbostadshus. En intervjubaserad lägesanalys av åtgärdsbehov och väntad utveckling 2011–2015.* Byggnadsmarknadsrapport 2011(1).

Johansson, A. & Vinthagen, S. (2016) Dimensions of everyday resistance. An analytical framework, *Critical Sociology* 42 (3), pp. 417–435.

Lilja M., Baaz, M., Schulz, M. & Vinthagen, S. (2017) How resistance encourages resistance. Theorizing the nexus between power, 'organised resistance' and 'everyday resistance', *Journal of Political Power* 10 (1), pp. 40–54.

Listerborn, C. (2018) *Bostadsojämlikhet* (Falun: Premiss förlag).

Listerborn, C, Molina, I. & Richard, Å. (2020) Claiming the right to dignity: New organizations for housing justice in neoliberal Sweden. *Radical Housing Journal* 2(1), pp. 119–137.

Lees, L. (2000) A reappraisal of gentrification. Towards a 'geography of gentrification', *Progress in Human Geography* 24(3), pp. 389–408.

Mangold, M. (2016) *Challenges of renovating the Gothenburg multi-family building stock – an analysis of comprehensive building-specific information, including energy performance, ownership and affordability* (Göteborg: Chalmers University of Technology).

Marcuse P. (1985) To control gentrification. Anti-displacement zoning and planning for stable residential districts, *Review of Law and Social Change* 13 (4), pp. 931–945.

McAdam, D., Tarrow, S. & Tilly, C. (2001) *Dynamics of contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

McKee, K. (2009) Post-Foucauldian governmentality: What does it offer critical social policy analysis? *Critical Social Policy*, 29 (3), pp. 465–486.

McKee, K. (2011) Skeptical, Disorderly and Paradoxical Subjects: Problematizing the "Will to Empower" in Social Housing Governance, *Housing, Theory and Society*, 28 (1), pp. 1–18.

Paton, K. (2016) *Gentrification. A working-class perspective* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate).

Pettersson, C. (2016) Renovering – så mycket höjs hyran, *Hem & Hyra*, December 5. Available at: https://www.hemhyra.se/tips-rad/renovering-sa-mycket-hojs-hyran/ (Accessed 21 November 2020).

Polanska, D. V. & Å. Richard (2018) Bortträngning pågår. Renovering som kulturellt trauma, *Sociologisk forskning*, 55 (2–3), pp. 381–405.

Polanska, D. V. & Å. Richard (2019) Narratives of a fractured trust in the Swedish model: Tenants' emotions of renovation, *Culture Unbound* 11(1), pp. 141–164.

Polanska, D.V., Degerhammar, S. L. & Richard, Å. (2019) *Renovräkt! Hyresvärdars makt(spel) och hur du tar striden* (Stockholm: Verbal Förlag).

Prior, D. & M. Barnes (2011) Subverting Social Policy on the Front Line: Agencies of Resistance in the Delivery of Services. *Social Policy & Administration*, 45 (3), pp. 264–279.

Pull, E. (2020) *The original sin – On displacement through renoviction in Sweden.* Doctoral dissertation, Roskilde University.

Pull, E. & Å. Richard (2019) Domicide: displacement and dispossessions in Uppsala, Sweden. *Social and Cultural Geography.* DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2019.1601245.

Salonen, T. (red.) (2015) *Nyttan med allmännyttan* (Stockholm: Liber).

Scott J.C. (1985) *Weapons of the weak* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).

Slater T. (2006) The eviction of critical perspectives from gentrification research, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30 (4), pp. 737–757.

Slater T. (2009) Missing Marcuse. On gentrification and displacement, *City 13*(2–3), pp. 293-331.

Tilly, C. (1986) *The Contentious French* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

Tilly, C. (2006) *Regimes and Repertoires* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Trä och Möbelföretagen (2019) Renoveringsbehov i Miljonprogrammet. Available at: https://www.tmf.se/siteassets/statistik/statistiska-publikationer/renoveringsbehov-i-miljonprogrammet/renoveringsbehov-i-miljonprogrammet---20192.pdf (Accessed 21 November 2020).

TV4 (2016). *Nya chockhyror oroar.* Available at: https://www.tv4.se/klipp/va/3282854/nya-chockhyror-oroar (Accessed 21 November 2020).