



# Securing the city, making the city: Property guardianship and dispersed policing in urban space

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## **Abstract**

This article addresses the phenomenon of contemporary property guardianship, a type of building security by live-in occupants, who pay below-market rents, as a growing method of dispersed policing. While the centrality of property security is often foregrounded, both in existing literature on the topic and by property guardian operators, this research charts the increasing use of property guardians as operationalised agents in the surveillance and regulation of urban space. Within this, it looks at property security through an understanding of the building as a spillover site, the security for which has ramifications for wider urban space. Through analysis of how property guardians provide security within a wider remit than typically understood, it underscores guardianship's relationship to broader security regimes. In light of its findings, it readdresses the role guardianship plays within the context of urban regeneration and gentrification. Through focusing on guardianship in London, with reference to other U.K. cities, it examines closely at borough-level local authorities use of guardians to further understand the position of guardianship-as-policing within regeneration. As such, it engages with the ways that property guardianship, as with other modes of policing, is concomitant with efforts to reorganise and remake cities. This research builds on previous scholarship within the topic of guardianship, while drawing on work from fields such as urban studies, policing studies and abolitionist thought, as well as reportage, promotional material, and both local and national policy. Through use of interviews and questionnaires, this article centres the experiences of guardians, and their relationship to their duties. It attempts to understand the subjectivities produced and actively sought by such dispersed methods of policing activity, which are undoubtedly reliant partly on the precarity of those enacting them.

## **Keywords**

Property guardianship, security, anti-social behaviour, policing, subjectivity

## **Introduction**

The languages of security and safety dominate discourses around both property and urban space. Security is both a key concern in public imagination, and a guiding force in urban planning and design, policy, and policing strategy. As abolitionist scholar and poet Jackie Wang notes, ‘the spatial politics of safety organises the urban landscape’ (2012: 153). To this end, scholarship has often noted the relationship between security and urban regeneration (Smith, 1996; Fussey *et al.*, 2012; Mirenu, 2020), a process engaged inextricably with the reorganization of urban landscapes. Ananya Roy recently drew this out explicitly, and compellingly, in her work on gender-property logics and abolition, in which she formulates the murder of Breonna Taylor’s killing by police as ‘collateral for the transmutation of property’ (2021). In the UK, a report from the Institute of Race Relations highlighted a ‘dangerous symbiosis’ between regeneration-based housing policy and new forms of policing (Perera, 2019: 5).

This article examines the phenomenon of property guardianship, one of the most popular means of security for vacant buildings (Inside Housing, 2020), and its uses in the redevelopment of urban space. Following Mark Neocleous’s treatment of policing as ‘an *activity* and *process* rather than an institution or organisation’ (2021: 22), I view guardianship as one such policing activity dispersed through urban space. Property guardians fulfil the specific role, as one operator phrases it, of ‘protect[ing] and defend[ing] the property’ (VPS Guardians Ltd, 2020). Yet despite operators’ orientation towards property security, my research reveals it is becoming common for guardians to be asked to report anti-social behaviour and other crime locally, either as a recommendation or a contractual obligation. In this article I aim to reposition property guardianship as part of a growing sphere of dispersed forms of policing aimed at the regulation of urban space. Alongside its role in a more general move towards dispersed policing, I will also highlight the specific role guardianship *as* policing plays in urban regeneration, through local authorities use of guardianship.

While most existing scholarship on the topic has primarily been concerned with the precarity of licensees (Ferreri, Dawson, & Vasudevan, 2016; Hunter & Meers, 2018; Ferreri, 2018; Ferreri & Dawson, 2018; Ferreri & Vasudevan, 2019; Meers, 2019; Meers & Hunter, 2019), their security role has been addressed. Mara Ferreri and Gloria Dawson argue that the security provided through these schemes is ‘predicated on the guardians’ own insecurity’ (2018: 427). This is undeniable; local authorities and other property owners benefit from cheap security measures in part due to the widespread insecurity endemic in the housing market. Guardianship necessitates frequent and unexpected moving, invasive inspections, restrictive regulations, and 28 days’ notice to quit. Security, while addressed, often forms a secondary concern. More widely, work on squatting tends to view guardianship in relation largely to security against squatting, or guardianship as an assimilationist strategy against squatters (Manjikian, 2013). Little attention has been paid to the increasing tendency for these security duties to extend beyond the building itself, into the surrounding area, and its implications for wider urban policing.

## **Property guardianship in London**

Property guardianship first arose in the Netherlands in the early 1990s, against a backdrop of increasingly harsh legislation against squatting. This model of security for vacant property then spread to other European countries, such as the UK, Belgium and France during the 2000s (Ferrerri, 2018). This article focuses on guardianship within the U.K., predominantly in London, where it is most widespread (Ferrerri, 2018). To underpin this geographical focus, I will briefly summarise the context in which property guardianship emerged and operates in the UK.

As in many cities, London's housing is increasingly marked by instability and precarity for its inhabitants due to multiple factors. The stark dilution of publicly owned housing has been facilitated by the state following the introduction of Right to Buy under the 1980 Housing Act, allowing council tenants to purchase the properties they lived in. Successive neoliberal governments have not only accelerated the privatisation of housing stock through the expansion and incentivisation of Right to Buy. They have also stimulated its financialisation, through normalising and encouraging public-private partnerships and capital speculation within the housing market, particularly following the 2008 global financial crisis. These factors, alongside population growth, have seen the number of households in the private rented sector (PRS) rise dramatically in recent years. With those in the London PRS increasingly experiencing ease heightened vulnerability to eviction, poor conditions, and on average spending 40% of income on rent (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2020), it's easy to see how guardianship became popularised as a mode of living that, while accompanied by heightened insecurity, presented opportunities for lower living costs.

Considering that at least 45% of properties secured by guardians in London were publicly owned immediately prior (Hunter & Meers, 2017), we might understand guardianships contemporary manifestation in the capital within the 'wider logics of urban dispossession and displacement' (Ferrerri, Dawson, & Vasudevan, 2019: 255). Of 33 local authorities in London, 24 protected at least one property by guardianship in 2016 (Berry, *et. al*, 2018). Guardianship has multiple benefits for local authorities. Within a summary of 'good practice', the London Assembly Housing Committee suggests the use of guardians to 'supplement borough staff' (Johnson, *et al.*, 2015: 40). Licence fees paid by guardians generate revenue: Camden Council alone receives an estimated income of £250,000 from licence fees (Berry, *et. al*, 2018). More importantly, it facilitates and makes visible the generation of income through the selling of land. Establishing this is critical to understanding the use of guardians as security agents within urban space.

Another item of contextual importance is the criminalisation of residential property squatting in 2012 in Britain. This ban, whilst revealing the state's preoccupation with the sanctity of property and its efforts to protect its continual commodification (Vasudevan, 2017: 7), also helps us understand property guardianship's growth in popularity as a choice of dwelling - the practice is often framed by guardians as a legalised version of squatting. Guardians inhabit certain 'lifestyle' markers associated with squatting, such as communal dwelling in atypical building typology or the need to adapt a 'DIY' and mobile sensibility

(Ferreiri & Dawson, 2018). Thus, while guardians might have little notice to vacate, operators are quick to secure new placements, and critically this notice to vacate is not dealt by bailiffs or police. Even though guardians themselves are often ambivalent, or wholly negative, in their attitude towards their role, this framing also goes far in attracting would-be guardians. One YouTube comment below a guardian's effusive video reads, 'You get to be a squatter without beign [sic] a squatter :D Perfect' (Blue, 2020), evocative of Hugo Priemus's assertion that 'yesterday's squatter is today's anti-squatter' (2011: 3). In this sense guardianship relies upon the *conversion* of would-be squatters into security *against* squatters, a conversion that becomes facilitated by such criminalisation. Therefore, we might move towards understanding guardianship's relationship to squatting as one of a parasitic, yet ambivalent, symbiosis.

This focus on London was also guided by my own interest in and connection to the city. I was born in the East London borough of Newham, and I lived there until two years ago, not too far from one operator largest concentration of guardians. My time here was shaped immeasurably by my mother's position as a homeowner for most of my life (who incidentally first lived in London as a squatter in her childhood). I watched the area change dramatically over my lifetime, so was unsurprised at its recent identification as one of London's most gentrified boroughs (Almeida, 2021). While largely shielded from the effects of this by my privilege, I was drawn to understanding guardians' role within this process. As an anti-gentrification activist in North London, where I now live, I wondered whether guardians were in use in developments I saw around me, or whether they would be in planned ones advertised on hoardings around condemned council estates.

The focus here on property guardianship precludes direct relevance beyond a handful of European states. However, the broader concerns regarding new forms of security and policing have an international pertinence. Policing scholars have long theorised that policing on a global scale has shifted to 'multilateralised' (Bayley & Shearing, 2001) and 'pluralised' (Jones & Newburn, 2006) forms. In many respects, guardianship can be read as a facet of this, mirroring developments in other modes of policing. Just as data-driven predictive policing heralds efficiency through forecasting places likely to be sites of crime (Sandhu & Fussey, 2021), guardianship similarly provides efficient means of surveillance and facilitates police work in perceived crime hot-spots. In this respect, it forms part of an apparatus I have termed elsewhere as the 'pre-emptive time' of carcerality (Carceral Time Working Group, 2021). Building from this, I hope to strengthen understanding of *how* these policing activities act in service of urban policies that seek to remake spatial landscapes in the interests of market forces.

In the following section I provide an overview of my methodology. I then move to more in-depth discussion firstly on property security, which repositions the security work enacted with relation to the building as of direct relevance to broader security regimes within the urban landscape. Secondly, I address security obligations regarding the local area, with a particular focus on anti-social behaviour, and local authority owned properties and consider the role of guardians within this. Finally, I conduct an in-depth examination of 'socially responsible' guardianship provider Dot Dot Dot.

## **Methodological approach and considerations**

This research has been guided by the experiences of property guardians, collected using questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Without this my central thesis regarding the increasing use of guardians as dispersed policing would not have taken shape. However, this has not been my primary or sole research method. Instead, this forms part of a mixed methods approach.

The fourteen questionnaire respondents had been guardians with six different providers, and the five interviewed with four different providers. This sample included present and former guardians, whose guardianships spanned between 2007 and 2021. This was in order to chart changes in typical duties and preclude the possibility of my sample reflecting only the circumstances during the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting restrictions. Though most participants were guardians in London, three were guardians in two other English cities.

An important consideration was that guardians were often explicitly forbidden in their contract from talking about their situation, and many felt anxious about sharing their experiences (Berry, et al., 2018). This was a key factor in my decision to remove identifiable information and use pseudonyms. I chose not to obscure names of guardianship companies, however, as these contextualise the specific models and practices of different operators. Locations were also not altered because there is a specific relevance, for example, in a guardian's presence in Toxteth, Liverpool, a site of historic over-policing and political contestation. In all instances, these elements have been kept as general as possible to avoid actual identification.

This barrier of participant reticence and anxiety made a questionnaire a useful 'entry-point' in finding interviewees and reaching those who wished to remain anonymous. Having circulated the questionnaire myself, this was passed on to groups and individuals I would not have been able to contact directly. This allowed me to build a higher level of trust with participants, as many were 'connected' to me through friends of friends or acquaintances, a paradigm noted in other studies on guardianships (Ferreri & Dawson, 2018). By chance, I found some participants while outside my now-former place of work, a university in Central London, after I was approached for a lighter. This, although not reliant on connections, was not dissimilar. I presume I was approached, in part, because I was 'like' them: a young woman, dressed similarly, in contrast to the construction workers smoking nearby.

There are known issues with relying on snowballing to find research participants, such as bias due to spread among like-minded individuals, and potentially unrepresentative outcomes of volunteer sampling (Jupp, 2011). While my sample represented a range in profession, length of guardianship, provider, and building typology, the majority were in their 20s-40s, middle class, and white. Most indicative of these limitations was the fact that despite the suggestion that guardianship schemes have increasingly recruited high numbers of low-income migrant workers (Property Guardian Research Group, 2015; Bayfield, 2019), this was not reflected in my sample. This drawback, however, is not a novel one. Other research using qualitative methods has similarly been unable to reach migrant guardians (Clemoes, 2014),

or in instances where this has been possible, still produces samples that largely self-identify as middle class (Ferreri & Dawson, 2018). Going forward, more targeted effort to reach a greater diversity of respondents would be a prudent avenue for further research, especially in light of the findings of this article.

## **Part 1. Securing property**

While the provision of property security is not the central focus of this article, it is important to address it here for two reasons.

Firstly, securing the building they are dwelling in is the most typical requirement of property guardians. In the words of the companies themselves, it is ‘protection through occupation.’ It is, of course, the explicit reason for their existence; the protection of the property from squatting, vandalism, congregation, or other forms of criminalised activity. As one property guardian reported, in response to reported problems, the founder of their operator Dot Dot Dot allegedly said that ‘the bottom line is we’re a property security company, we’re not a residential agency’ (Clemoes, 2014: 42). As such, any work considering guardianship within the context of growing security measures in urban space would be impoverished without any discussion of its role in property security.

Secondly, it is important to frame the building itself as a spillover site, from which security is enacted not just within but also extending outwards. I understand the building as not an isolated site of security within the urban landscape, but a porous one. Protective security measures tied to it are innately tied to their immediate surroundings, and often further afield. We see this in the influence of defensible space theory (Newman, 1972), in which architecture is said to be of key use in limiting criminal activity. Via popularisation in Britain through Alice Coleman’s *Utopia on Trial* (1985), initiatives such as police security standard ‘Secured By Design’ have seen deprived neighbourhoods become characterised by ‘fortress levels of security’ (Minton & Aked, 2003: 7). We might also frame the understanding of property as a spillover site for policing activity as an inverse of appeals to the broken windows theory. This posits that visible signs of disorder proliferate into the surrounding area thereby encouraging and multiplying crime, a framework that has been aptly described as achieving an ‘urban strategy’ of displacement (Camp & Heatherton, 2016). Given that operators’ websites lay claim to guardianship as something that ‘helps combat ‘broken window theory’” (Property Guardians, 2021), this logic of how security might extend outwards is one actively in play.

To separate property or building security, then, as a distinct concern to dispersed policing measures would be to overlook their shared genealogy. As Neocleous’s work on police power draws out, there is a historic ideological connection between the very concepts of security and property in liberalism, in which security came to mean the liberty of private property (2021).

This notion of spillover can also be read more literally. Guardians reportedly often find themselves engaging in security activity surrounding the property in order to secure the

building itself. Oliver, a guardian with Global Guardians in 2016-17, informed me that while it was not part of their written contract, they were told on multiple occasions that their duties involved patrols and physically stopping anyone trying to squat or congregate. On one occasion, this resulted in a man attempting to run them over, after Oliver had found him urinating on what they termed their 'house' (a storage facility in East London). Oliver relayed that they and their fellow guardians felt uncomfortable being asked to take such an active role without training. Paul, who lived for over nine years as a property guardian in Toxteth, Liverpool, also engaged in patrolling activities, particularly during the 2011 riots where they 'got into the habit of it.'

In both instances, the dimension of patrolling is of significance. Critically, this marks an expansive territoriality, signalling a spatialised dimension of security that extends beyond the legal remits of the property. In Paul's account, this is amplified by the context of the 2011 riots in England. These started in Tottenham, London, after Mark Duggan, a Black man, was murdered by police, and then spread to other parts of London and the U.K. Paul's location in Toxteth is also not incidental. Often reported as the starting point of the 2011 riots in Liverpool (Shennan, 2016), Toxteth had also been the site of riots in July 1981, following rising tension between the Merseyside police force and the Black community. The security that guardianship provides is then not just amorphous in its spread outside the legal parameters of the property's bounds, but it is also moulded through its contextual responsiveness to 'crime,' and state policing priorities.

Through their 'protection through occupation,' guardians also play a role in securing the *value* of the property. This is not solely enacted through ensuring the maintenance of the property's condition, but through guarding against squatting and criminal activity that risk devaluing the asset, as well as facilitating the displacement of social housing tenants. Agnieszka, a musician, had been a property guardian in Erno Goldfinger's Balfour Tower in 2016, part of a council estate in East London, and told me she felt uncomfortable having been part of the process of what she saw to be gentrification. She remarked, 'our role was to 'protect' the building and keep it in good condition whilst the housing developers got their act together with plans, so essentially we were on the side of the developers.' After residents were decanted (temporarily moved from the property) for refurbishment in 2011, it was announced in 2015 that they would not be returning: no homes would be retained as social housing within the estate. Artists were recruited as guardians through Bow Arts Trust, while others, such as Agnieszka, were supplied by Dot Dot Dot.

The case of Balfour Tower is striking perhaps due to its architectural significance, though it is far from an atypical example. As Lagoutte and Jeraj have argued, guardians ease the transfer of assets from public to private hands, through allowing the property owner to sit on their asset, with little expenditure or action required (2017). While guardianship's relationship to redevelopment is explored in further detail in the following section, which focuses on newer uses of guardians within the surrounding area, we here see how this protection of value similarly 'spills over' into a broader urban context, facilitating further profit generation from surrounding land.

As demonstrated, while property security is not the central focus of this article, its importance cannot be overlooked. When considering guardianship as a means of protecting against threats to property, I turn to David Correia and Tyler Wall, who argue that the enforcement of property relations ‘is how capitalism defends what it considers just. To speak of enforcement is to speak of police. Property is thus a form of police violence’ (2018: 48). Property guardianship could be seen as a new method of enforcement of property relations over other rights, a new means of enabling and legitimising an expanded realm of police violence.

## **Part 2. Anti-social behaviour and the surrounding area**

The security duties of property guardians do not just expand beyond the property with a slow creep. Instead, guardians are explicitly expected to enact security and surveillance in the surrounding neighbourhood as part of their ‘role.’ Where the security provided by guardians explicitly extends into the surrounding area, this manifests invariably as an increase in exposure to direct harm faced by poor and racially minoritised residents, through expanding and legitimising policing powers. As outlined in this section, overrepresentation of this as a duty amongst those in council estates reveals a relationship between the policing of subjects within them and the processes of urban redevelopment.

Among participants, many detailed that their security duties included reporting any anti-social behaviour, and other forms of crime, in the surrounding area. This seemed to most commonly be asked of the guardians I spoke to who were in residential buildings and amongst those who had been guardians in recent years. Generally, these residential buildings were owned by local authorities; in such cases, they were invariably (ex) social housing in the process of being decanted prior to demolition, redevelopment, or refurbishment. So common is this usage of guardians that a London Assembly Housing Committee report on challenges associated with estate regeneration promotes guardianship to reduce security bills through ‘detering [...] anti-social and criminal behaviour, by creating regular local footfall, eyes and ears’ (Johnson, *et al.*, 2015: 31).

Rather than enacting security against external threats to the building, guardians are also asked to effectively ‘police’ the areas they are placed in. This is something many of the guardians I spoke to expressed explicitly. Maria, a guardian in the borough of Tower Hamlets, East London told me: ‘I felt uncomfortable reporting anti-social behaviour because I didn’t feel like part of the community, so it felt like I was given authority to police people for no reason.’ Andrew, who also found that reporting anti-social behaviour in the area was part of his duties when he became a guardian, revealed that as a believer in police abolition, this ‘never sat right’ with him. This discomfort was underscored by his position as a white, middle-class artist on a majority Black and South Asian council estate in Newham. The racialised element here is not atypical or incidental; in the U.K., 48% of all Black households and 33% of Bangladeshi households live in social-rented housing, in comparison to 16% of white households (Barton, 2017).



The link between guardianship and anti-social behaviour is not new. Guardians have historically been asked to take an active role in preventing anti-social behaviour from occurring in the property or on its grounds. As Stuart Woolgar of Global Guardians Management wrote in the *Telegraph*, vacant buildings ‘attract’ anti-social behaviour (2020). Lowe Guardians (2021) and DEX Property Management (2019b) also make this claim on their websites. However, it seems to be more commonly and frequently foregrounded.

‘Anti-social behaviour’ is, and always has been, a nebulous term. As Bannister *et al.* note, definitions of anti-social behaviour ‘propose that any behaviour that violates an individual’s well-being and falls outwith prevailing standards of behaviour’ can be classed as antisociality (2006: 928). In their guardian handbook, Dot Dot Dot draw on the Met Police’s (2016) list of activities that would be classed as anti-social behaviour. These include begging, drinking in public spaces, noise, and ‘inconsiderate behaviour.’ The looseness here leaves the discretion with the guardian, encouraging them to inform the police if they have *any* concern. Dot Dot Dot further classifies anti-social behaviour as any action that leaves ‘you or others feeling alarmed, harassed or distressed.’ This emphasis here on the personal feelings of the spectator is significant. While operators suggest this duty makes the local community safe, I resist safety as a neutral category. Returning to words that begin this article, ‘the spatial politics of safety organises the urban landscape;’ bodies arousing ‘feelings of fear, disgust, rage, guilt, or even discomfort must be made disposable [...] in order to secure a sense of security for whites’ (Wang, 2012: 153).

Historically, appeals to anti-social behaviour, a key focus of New Labour, have facilitated a kind of preemptive policing. Philip Whitehead and Paul Crawshaw (2012) note, for example, that the Police and Justice Act 2006 meant that parents who had not committed a crime could receive a parenting order for a child who had not either, if the child was believed to be *likely* to engage in anti-social behaviour. While reflecting a rhetorical move towards a focus on incivility in the 1990s and 2000s, the corresponding policing powers were unevenly distributed, falling along classed and racialised lines (Mills & Ford, 2018). Further to this, the relationship between housing and anti-social behaviour cannot be understated. Following the 2011 riots, prime minister David Cameron announced in Parliament ‘part of solving the problem is saying to people in social housing: if you misbehave, you can be thrown out of your house.’ With the 2014 Anti-Social Behaviour Act, this became a reality. Councils and housing associations were now given grounds for absolute possession of secure tenancies, enabling the eviction of tenants found guilty of anti-social behaviour.

I return here to the fact that duties around anti-social behaviour seem to be most frequently asked of guardians in residential buildings, commonly council estates undergoing a process of ‘decanting’ local residents. For instance, in both Maria and Andrew’s testimonies, mentioned above, their location is significant. Borough level analysis revealed between 2003 and 2020, Tower Hamlets saw a net loss in council homes of 260, and Newham of 294 (Berry, 2021). I posit this relationship to redevelopment as not just a simple facilitation, but as related to the increasingly prevalent role guardians have in ‘policing’ the local area. Intimately wrapped up in this process is the intersection between economic regeneration and social regulation (Helms, Atkinson, & MacLeod, 2007). In their work on

the Olympic regeneration in East London, Pete Fussey *et al.* note how regeneration and security are ‘yoked together’ (2012: 261). Expanding this, they argue using Mary Douglas’s theory of purity and danger (1996) that security within the context of regeneration is fundamental to strategies of ‘cleansing’ and ‘purifying’ as urban management. Fussey *et al.* are not alone in applying Douglas’s theory to regeneration; Ben Campkin argues similarly that it can help us understand tenant displacement and the ‘symbolic and physical ‘sanitization’ process’ of neoliberal urban development (2013: 51).

As established, the desire to reorganise urban spaces as a chief public concern of regeneration is widespread, exemplified by Haringey Council’s aim to socially recompose Tottenham in North London to attract ‘more affluent residents’ (Felgate, 2018), or Newham Council’s priority of getting ‘better off residents to stay’ (Falk, 2010). This recomposition is achieved through displacement, in which a ‘cleansing’ process of the urban landscape is facilitated through security means. Considering this, the use of guardians in estates to police and report antisocial behaviour takes on a more insidious character. Keeping in mind the 2014 Anti-Social Behaviour Act, we might imagine exactly *how* these powers could come to be used, as means of displacement within a context of dispossession. What emerges too, is the creation of a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which through using higher concentrations of agents to ‘spot’ acts of criminality a higher number of incidents are reported. The very area becomes marked for its high levels of crime; invariably, this justifies further overpolicing. With existing residents either forced to leave or encouraged to voluntarily under these constructed ‘localised hostile environments’ (Perera, 2019: 23), land and property is freed up for speculation. The cycle continues.

Guardianship enables and exacerbates policing of working class and racially minoritised groups, who are already disproportionately overpoliced, allowing this to be done more efficiently, and round the clock. Therefore, while the use of guardianship in regeneration schemes exacerbates the crisis of affordable housing, it also exacerbates a crisis of policing as a means of place-making. I find compelling Ingrid Burrington’s (2018) assertion that ‘policing and urban planning have a lot in common,’ in their shared ability to enact violence, shared fetishisation of maps and data, and shared ambition to redesign and transform urban space in the name of making it more ‘liveable’ and safer. If safety is a preserve of whiteness – or, as Hannah Black (2017) argues, if whiteness is the ‘dream that safety is real’ – then security should be seen as a mobilisation of resources to protect this. Turning again to Wang’s articulation of the desire to remove contaminant Black and brown bodies from white urban space, I argue that it is these bodies that are a key ‘threat’ that guardianship deliberately ‘secures’ urban space against.

### **Part 3. Precarity, the guardian, and guardianship's ideal subject**

As discussed so far, property guardians perform numerous security and policing functions, extending beyond the property they dwell in. In the previous sections I have outlined how these duties inform and support legitimate state policing, while mirroring state policing patterns in the over-policing of specific subjects and areas. What is left to address is

the subject of the guardian themselves within this. What is their position within these duties, how do they relate to them, and relate themselves to them? There is no single or straightforward answer here. Guardians have individual circumstances, motivations, and experiences regarding participation in guardianship schemes. The varied circumstances within which they operate, such as geographic location, operator and building typology, all have impacts which cannot be extricated from questions of subjectivity and relationality.

It is important to first distinguish the role of the guardian from broader moves towards responsabilisation. Guardianship is distinct from the social expectation that anyone should participate in reporting criminal activity and cannot wholly be explained by growing 'incentivisation' to take personal responsibility in ensuring security (Rose & Lentzos, 2017: 31). Guardians are not purely self-governing. They are asked to enact security measures as part of their *role*, a condition of their continual accommodation. Moreover, rather than just a version of John Flint's 'responsible tenant' (2004), in which legally enforced contractual duties work with, and are reshaped and reinterpreted by moral concerns, guardians differ in a significant respect. They are not tenants. Flint presents a self-regulating tenant, one expected to also ensure desirable conduct in *their* wider community as 'duty-owing members' of it (2004: 893), through what others have observed as the 'creation of a social contract' (Manjikian, 2013: 81), where housing is no longer an entitlement, but a privilege. Conversely, guardians are brought in, frequently for short periods, in order to enact this specific role. In fact, they are often viewed as harmful by, and existing in opposition to, other *could-be* community members (England, 2014).

In addressing the subject of the guardian, I focus on two common threads: the precarity and ambiguity of licences, and the continual construction of the ideal guardian.

### **Returning to precarity, raising ambiguity**

I have left precarity largely unaddressed in this article so far. Partly, this is because of the wealth of existing research in this area. Yet, while I take issue with the definitive link drawn by Ferreri and Dawson (2018) between guardians' insecure position and the security that they provide, it's useful to revisit this in relation to how it informs the 'role' of the guardian.

Guardians are, in essence, legally bound to enact security and policing duties. For example, a Dot Dot Dot contract from 2020 notes that any breach of rules and regulations – including security duties discussed earlier - can result in termination of the licence. An undated contract from LOWE, another guardianship company, revealed a similar stipulation. With licences deliberately designed for ease of termination relative to the PRS, many guardians live with anxiety about being left without a home for not fulfilling the requirements placed upon them. It's this tension, this precarity, upon which guardianship as a means of security and dispersed policing rests – it becomes enforceable through this form of capitalist abuse. In turn, their actions and the performance of these duties are continually monitored and inspected to ensure compliance with contractual obligations, through using 'head guardians' with duties to report on those they live with, and frequent unannounced

inspections. By contrast, PRS tenants must be given at least 24 hours' notice before someone enters the property.

Yet despite guardians inhabiting precarious dwellings, they are often far from what many would consider the forefront of those facing housing insecurity. As Anne Allison argues, precarity marks the 'loss of something that only certain countries, at certain historical periods, and certain workers ever had in the first place' (2013: 7). One of my interviewees noted that the rigid financial checks required made her unsure whether those who 'need the cheap accommodation the most' could access such schemes. Some schemes require an income over £16,000, a good credit history, and a criminal records check (VPS Guardians Ltd, 2020; DEX Property Management, 2019a). By many accounts, most guardians are university-educated, self-identify as middle class, and work in the creative and third sectors (Ferrerri, Dawson, & Vasudevan, 2016). As Hunter and Meers underscore, guardianship is not positioned as 'a form of accommodation for those who are unable to live elsewhere, but instead as a choice for those who can' (2019: 226).

This is where ambiguity becomes a provocative angle. Within migration studies, some have highlighted the relationship between ambiguity and precarity (Ilcan, Rygiel, & Baban, 2018; Nassar and Stel, 2019; Stel, 2021), and how the former can produce the latter. A similar reproduction is evident within property guardianship. Despite contractual obligations, those I spoke to left feeling uncertain about what *would* result in the termination of their licence. Despite many reporting that they often felt closely monitored themselves, they also felt unsure *how* operators and property owners would know if they weren't enacting their duties. Legal cases have also highlighted the ambiguous position guardians occupy as not-tenants, not-employees (Meers, 2019).

This sense of uncertainty and ambiguity ensures a level of compliance that is, in part, predicated on an insecure position. Of those I spoke to, there was a high level of reported compliance to these duties, regardless of how conflicted they felt by them. One guardian remarked she often found herself informing the police regarding issues that she felt 'could have been solved in the community.' There seemed also to be a recognition that their security duties were one of the most important, if not the most important, part of their role. A few guardians revealed to me they broke other rules of their licence, such as having guests over or lighting candles, with no repercussions, while generally remaining more compliant with rules related to security. This level of compliance amongst those I spoke to seems to be representative of wider trends; reviews of guardianship companies by property owners often highlight the successes of using this model. For instance, Tower Hamlets Council, who use Blue Door Guardians, reported that property guardians were more effective at preventing anti-social behaviour than traditional methods, such as CCTV, security guards, and increased police work (Berry, et al., 2018).

It is not, then, that guardians themselves specifically target working class or racially minoritised individuals and communities. It is that they are, invariably, placed in buildings in a deliberate attempt to prevent criminalised behaviours. And, once they are in this setting, their precarious and ambiguous legal position, alongside measures of self and internal monitoring, are factors used to create a culture of compliance.

### Guardianship and its ideal subject

Property guardianship rests on an image of the ‘ideal’ guardian. A guardian is *flexible*, is *adventurous*, is *resilient*, inhabiting a particular neoliberal discourse, in which adaptability to precarity is both normalised and valorised (Ferreri & Dawson, 2018). But the rhetoric surrounding the ideal guardian is growing. A guardian is *responsible* and *responsive*. A guardian is *social* and *socially conscious*. Guardianship provider Dot Dot Dot makes an emblematic case study in this respect. Throughout my research, Dot Dot Dot was the most consistently likely to ask guardians to extend their security function into the local area and were the first to have added this as a contractual obligation. As such, their operations are of particular significance to this research, especially given their popularity with local authorities.

Founded in 2011 by Katharine Hibbert, an ex-squatter, Dot Dot Dot provides ‘socially responsible property guardianship’ (Dot Dot Dot Property Ltd, 2021). As part of this, Dot Dot Dot exclusively accepts applicants who volunteer for at least 16 hours per month. Through this, Dot Dot Dot attracts those who want more flexibility to volunteer, while also appealing to property-owners with corporate social responsibility targets.

London squatters point out the irony in guardians no longer just paying ‘rent’ to perform ‘work’ duties, but volunteering too (Squatters SLAP, 2016). On LinkedIn, Hibbert proclaims that in the company’s first 10 years, its guardians’ labour would have been worth £4.3 million, the equivalent to one person working full time for 200 years. The growing trend towards volunteering often sugar-coats neglect, delegating state functions to individuals and their communities. This is particularly pertinent given the popularity of the volunteering model with local authorities utilising guardianship companies. Thus, in addition to the financial benefits local authorities often reap from guardianship, they benefit from the labour volunteers invest in areas they have often withdrawn from due to austerity measures.

More significantly, this emphasis on volunteering obscures Dot Dot Dot’s part in the provision of security and dispersed policing. Amongst the guardians I spoke to, many who had been with Dot Dot Dot felt that the volunteering aspect mitigated other aspects of the scheme that they found problematic. Guardians who otherwise were concerned by their duties, or their role in redevelopment more broadly, often felt that they were ‘contributing something,’ or ‘doing something good.’ In this respect, Dot Dot Dot has also managed to avoid much of the criticism often levelled at its competitors. For instance, Howard (2014), a guardian with Dot Dot Dot in 2014, wrote in the *Guardian* that she would not consider being a guardian with a ‘commercial’ company, but would happily live with Dot Dot Dot again. It’s this idea of ‘doing something good,’ and good civic behaviour, that then occupies an oppositional relationship to anti-social, and criminalised, behaviour. Guardians then become a contrasting figure, the do-gooder, who through the construction of this ideal figure, are ever more incentivised to act against undesirable behaviours.

While Dot Dot Dot is presented as being more than ‘just’ a security solution their guardians offer a greater amount of security provision. As mentioned, Dot Dot Dot was the first provider, and in my research findings and analysis, the most likely, to extend guardians’ security remit beyond the property and into the wider area. This focus on volunteering also

critically informs the security it provides. Croydon Council reasoned that the emphasis on volunteering gives peace of mind that the guardians will be actually looking after the building (Berry, et al., 2018). As Dot Dot Dot (2019a) states, ‘good people make great guardians, conscientiously reporting anti-social behaviour and safety issues.’ The implication here is that ‘good people’, represented by the volunteer, are more successful at fulfilling their security and policing duties.

Other industry operators, such as Global Guardians, are beginning to introduce a further emphasis on volunteering as a key criterion for potential guardians. The valorisation of Dot Dot Dot reveals this model to no longer be a singular operator’s unique selling point, but a growing trend in the guardianship industry. The growing emphasis on socially conscious guardianship is reflective of a growth in the security duties of guardians. These two facets cannot be decoupled. Better people make better guardians, better guardians make better security.

## **Conclusion**

Through a close study of public reports and promotional material, and first-hand accounts from present and former guardians, this article has highlighted that the primary significance of property guardianship is as a dispersed policing activity in urban spaces.

The security enacted by property guardians relates both to the building itself, and increasingly, to the surrounding area. In both instances, this serves the interest of a neoliberal property regime, through a twinned facilitation of the financialisation of property, and the management of subjects classed as risky, dangerous, criminal, contaminant. These two facets are two contingent sides of the same coin. As members of the London group Architects for Social Housing argue, ‘there is - in actuality rather than in the ideology of our society - a class war being waged through housing, and so far it is all going to plan’ (Elmer & Denning, 2016: 275). Though they were speaking more broadly of the mechanisms of redevelopment, I hope that this article’s reassessment of guardianship reveals how guardianship can be viewed as a part of how this war is being waged, as well as how this war is racialised as well as classed.

This move towards dispersed, embodied forms of security is something we should be vigilant against. My concern here is not that security duties are increasingly carried out by those without sufficient training, and that professional security guards or police would be more appropriate discharges of these duties. Just as Alex Vitale warns that many police reform proposals ‘reinforce a false sense of police legitimacy and expand the reach of the police into communities and private lives’ (2018: 222), I warn that guardianship does the same.

Guardianship has troubling implications for forms of resistance on a broader scale, especially as it pertains to housing and increasingly criminalised modes of living. Its trajectory demonstrates a pacification and commodification of a radical form of living – the squat. More than this, property guardianship weaponises the commodification of the squat’s aesthetics, against its radical predecessor. It reveals how forms of resistance can become co-opted, not only as commodities, but in ways that serve both state and private interests.

As guardianship grows, as COVID-19 brings with it a wave of new urban vacancy throughout cities, and as state and private policing powers are expanded on a global scale, this topic should not be dismissed as a niche concern. Guardianship not only relies on precarity, as a means of delivering compliance, but embeds more widespread forms of precarity and vulnerability. These come in various forms and are not novel to guardianship alone. They come through the protection of buildings while they await processes of redevelopment, privatisation, demolition, and speculation. They come also through increasing the exposure of Black, brown, and poor people to violence at the hands of the police.

I would like here to turn to the words of one of the guardians I spoke to. Andrew, a guardian in Newham, told me: ‘the biggest threat I ever really felt wasn’t from our neighbours who were going through it in their homes, it was from aggressive policing. Why would I add to that?’ His question, of ‘why would I add to that?’ was something I turned over in my mind. I thought about it in the specifics of his situation; I thought about it more broadly in relation to other guardians I had spoken to; I thought about it in relation to my own relationships to the spaces we talked about.

Maybe then, a more pertinent question here is why do *we*? When I started this research, I was a university library worker, working in an increasingly precarious Higher Education landscape. My duties, too, extended beyond library activities to enforcing security measures. From Prevent<sup>1</sup> to ID cards, I too was wrapped up in enabling and ensuring the overpolicing and bordering of certain subjects, in manners that serve both the state, and the private property of the university (in particular, the university as a landlord, as a real estate investor). To a similar end, Roy reminds us that a struggle against the university as a policed-property order is one that ‘entails challenging the very ontology of our universities’ (2021). I am not naive to the fact that my life outside of the academy too is entwined with similar modes of policing, some more evident than others. To extend Roy’s line of thought, perhaps the struggle against a policed-property order will often, or even always, involve an ontological challenge.

My primary concern in addressing property guardianship has been in its expansion or enablement of policing powers that seek to remake our urban landscape through displacement, financialisation, and other modes of racial capitalist violence. But I end with a consideration of my own role within similar expansions, and an open call to address the growing centrality of security provision and embedded forms of policing as a condition of continued living, of continued employment. In *Anti-Security*, Neocleous and George Rigatos pin down this danger of security. The more we talk about it, ‘the more we become alienated from one another and the more we become complicit in the exercise of police power’ (2011). Maybe the final question is not in what ways are ‘they’ (in whatever form ‘they’ appear) security, or even am ‘I’ security, but *how* are *we* all security?

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<sup>1</sup> Prevent forms part of the U.K.’s counter-terrorism strategy. Here I refer to the prevent duty of those working in education and health to report those deemed at risk of radicalisation, introduced in the 2015 Counter-Terrorism and Security Act.

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