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# Neither Shoreditch nor Manhattan: post-politics, 'soft austerity urbanism' and real abstraction in Glasgow North

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*Speirs Locks is being re-constructed as a new cultural quarter in Glasgow North, with urban boosters envisioning the unlikely, rundown and de-populated light industrial estate as a key site in the city's ongoing cultural regeneration strategy. Yet this creative place-making initiative, I argue, masks a post-political conjuncture based on urban speculation, displacement and the foreclosure of dissent. Post-politics at Speirs Locks is characterised by what I term 'soft austerity urbanism': seemingly progressive, instrumental small-scale urban catalyst initiatives that in reality complement rather than counter punitive hard austerity urbanism. Relating such processes of soft austerity urbanism to a wider context of state-led gentrification, this study contributes to post-political debates in several ways. Firstly, it questions demands for participation as a proper politics when it has become practically compulsory in contemporary biopolitical capitalism. Secondly, it demonstrates how an extreme economy of austerity urbanism remains the hard underside of post-political, soft austerity urbanism approaches. Thirdly, it illustrates how these approaches relate to wider processes of 'real abstraction' – which is no mere flattery of the mind, but instead is rooted in actually existing processes of commodity exchange. Such abstraction, epitomised in the financialisation and privatisation of land and housing, buttresses the same ongoing property dynamics that were so integral to the global financial crisis and ensuing austerity policies in the first place. If we aim to generate a proper politics that creates a genuine rupture with the destructive play of capital in the built environment, the secret of real abstraction must be critically addressed.*

**Key words:** Glasgow, post-politics, soft austerity urbanism, real abstraction, creativity fix, new urban frontier

## Introduction

somewhere between stocks & shares  
and the 'commonsensical' editorial  
pity the poor arts page  
thinking itself alone. (Leonard 1995, 5)

Leonard's poem intimates how the perceived autonomy of the arts is more subject to the dictates of commodity exchange and (neoliberal) common sense thinking than many imagine. Developing this premise, I examine the emergent Speirs Locks 'cultural quarter' in Glasgow North within a relational nexus of urban development, instrumental cultural policy and social housing erasure. I

argue that the context of austerity following the global financial crash of 2007/08 has been reframed at Speirs Locks as an opening for allegedly progressive forms of low-key urban development through discourses of what I term 'soft austerity urbanism'. But these discourses, I contend, are characteristically post-political in two ways. First, they involve participatory and collaborative forms of action that deny *dissensus* (or disagreement). Second, they pursue soft forms of austerity urbanism that ultimately augment the same property dynamics that were so integral to the global financial crisis and ensuing austerity policies in the first place.

The post-political thesis has been criticised for undermining or neglecting processes of agency and resistance and for presenting post-politics as a reified

*condition* rather than contested process (McCarthy 2013; Chatterton *et al.* 2013; Larner 2014). Yet such critical accounts tend to disavow the violence of ‘real abstraction’, a notion of abstraction that is not exclusive to thought but instead arises from commodity exchange and the value-form as a ‘second nature’ that achieves practical truth in modern capitalist society (Sohn-Rothel 1978; Toscano 2008; Loftus 2015). In doing so, they risk reifying what Adorno termed ‘pseudo-activity’: ‘the attempt to preserve enclaves of immediacy in the midst of a thoroughly mediated and obdurate society’ (2001, 201). Indeed, the invocation of ‘participation’ is now practically compulsory in instrumentalised artist-led gentrification strategies (Gray 2009; Bishop 2012); user-generated communicative capitalism (Dean 2014); localism and social inclusion discourse (Bridge *et al.* 2012; Bishop 2012); and austerity processes of devolved governance, downloaded responsibility and externalised risk (Böhm *et al.* 2010; Peck 2012). In such a context, DIY, voluntarist and participatory practices, such as those promoted at Speirs Locks, coincide with neoliberal austerity measures and the persistence of real abstraction in ways that require close critical scrutiny.

In what follows, I situate developments at Speirs Locks within a broader context of de-industrialisation, de-population and property redevelopment in Glasgow North. I then provide an overview of the post-political thesis, paying particular attention to Rancière’s ambivalent axiomatic of equality and briefly addressing his lacunae on the mediating role of the economy/state nexus through the concept of real abstraction. I then explain what I mean by ‘soft austerity urbanism’ and how it has enabled the construction of an exclusive, fabricated new ‘community’ of arts professionals at Speirs Locks. Finally, I show how the long-term resident population has been excluded from the ‘regeneration’ of Speirs Locks and the surrounding area through the violence of ‘real abstraction’, exemplified in the erasure of social housing at nearby Sighthill.

Methodologically, this work emerges from sustained research on neoliberal urbanism and its contestation in Glasgow (Gray 2009; Gray and Mooney 2011; Gray and Porter 2015), as well as participatory action research in Glasgow North through *The Burgh Angel*, a community activist group in the neighbouring Maryhill district. I draw on a plethora of policy documents related to urban planning, housing, sustainability and the creative economy, alongside extensive surveys of secondary sources in cognate literature, focusing on outputs from key agents involved with the planning, community engagement and design processes, all of which evoke the discourse of ‘soft austerity urbanism’ contested here.

## Speirs Locks in context

The Speirs Locks cultural quarter is part of the wider Glasgow Canal Regeneration Project (GCRP) at the Forth and Clyde canal terminus just north of the city centre. This public-private partnership, comprising Glasgow City Council (GCC), Scottish Canals, ISIS Waterside Regeneration and Igloo Regeneration (GCRP 2008), augments a multi-scalar planning conjuncture that views Speirs Locks as a catalyst or ‘gateway’ for the Glasgow North growth corridor, one of six key regeneration areas outlined in Glasgow’s City Plan (GCC 2009). It has been designated a key site in the development of Glasgow’s creative economy and is one of eleven exemplar Scottish Sustainable Communities Initiative (SSCI) sites in Scotland, based on the principles of New Urbanism (GCRP 2008). The site was once a centre of industrial activity whose decline and severance from the city centre was hastened in the 1960s by the navigational closure of the canal for the construction of the M8 motorway. It is crucial to note the uniquely unprepossessing properties of the site, which is markedly distinct from the dense, mixed, residential ‘authentic urban places’ that Zukin (2010) has identified as typical targets for culture-led gentrification. It is neither Shoreditch nor Manhattan, but rather a somewhat banal, non-residential, 14-hectare light commercial/industrial estate.

Since the late 2000s, GCC and GCRP have encouraged and subsidised arts organisations to tenant the area: Scottish Opera, the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS), Glasgow Academy of Musical Theatre Arts (GAMTA), The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) and The Glue Factory, an arts venue with studios. This recent importation attests to the constructed nature of ‘community’ in the area problematising casual discourses of community ‘participation’. 7N Architects were selected to design the Speirs Locks master plan and, since 2009, have developed the ‘Growing the Place’ and ‘Cultural Wayfinding’ strategies, which aim to reconnect Speirs Locks to cultural institutions in the north of the city centre through low-budget catalyst initiatives. Completed GCRP projects include: the £6.3 million reconnection and refurbishment of the canal basin at Speirs Locks; the £3.5 million Garscube Landscape Link, which connects the city centre and the canal via the M8 motorway underpass; and the renovation of a former distillery into a new ‘creative factory’ named The Whisky Bond.

It is vital to locate the ‘cultural quarter’ within a wider context of urban decline and re-development. Glasgow North, along with the River Clyde and the city’s East End, was integral to Glasgow’s reputation as the ‘Second City of Empire’, containing world-leading iron foundries and chemical and locomotive works. Yet

these were mostly redundant by the 1960s, leaving behind enormous areas of vacant and derelict land representing a potentially vast ‘new urban frontier’ for land and property speculation (cf. Smith 1996; Gray and Mooney 2011) at Dundashill (27 acres), Cowlairs Park (30 acres) and Sighthill (123 acres). According to Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics, 91.1 per cent of people in the Canal ward and 87.4 per cent in the Springburn ward lived within 0–500 metres of a derelict site in 2014. Moreover, in 2012, Possilpark and Keppochill to the north of Speirs Locks were the second and third most deprived data zones in Scotland, according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.

Demolition of social housing and its replacement by predominantly private and intermediate housing is central to the Glasgow North growth corridor and to Glasgow’s housing policy overall (GCC 2009). The connection between this strategy – driven by the planned transformation of use value into exchange value – and creative city policies at Speirs Locks has been under-examined until now. This silence is symptomatic of a more general disavowal of poverty that is all too common in creative city and affirmative low-budget austerity discourses (Peck 2005; Wilson and Keil 2008; Hilbrand and Richter 2015), but evading this wider context, I argue, amounts to an inadmissible apologia for post-politics and the violence of real abstraction (Loftus 2015).

## Post-politics and the ‘distribution of the insensible’

The ‘post-political’ designation typically refers to the ‘techniques of consensual persuasion’ operative under a neoliberal consensus model that work to foreclose the political, prevent the politicisation of particulars, and limit what is and what is not the subject of debate (Paddison 2010, 24). Depoliticisation is the ‘basic aim’ of post-politics, along with the unconditional demand that things should remain as they are (Žižek 1999, 188). As noted previously, this thesis has been criticised for downplaying agency and resistance, serving as a *fait accompli* for neoliberalism while producing a diagnostic framework that is potentially ‘analytically flat, totalizing, and inadequate’ (McCarthy 2013, 19).

Such critique provides an important corrective to pessimistic social analyses, yet pointing to quite different instances of political activism and declaring tautologically that this represents actually existing proper politics might merely reinforce ‘pseudo-activity’ as ‘an end in itself’ (Adorno 1991, 200). The pertinent question, I argue here, is whether this politics offers ‘the prescription of a possibility of rupture with what

exists’ (Badiou 2005, 24). Overplaying small-scale political interventions, however necessary they might be to the prefiguration of a generalised politics of radical contention, can tend to underestimate and disavow constraining objective conditions and the routine failure of social movements to politicise particular concerns as systemic concerns. As Žižek observes:

What post-politics tends to prevent is precisely this metaphoric universalisation of particular demands: post-politics mobilizes the vast apparatus of experts, social workers, and so on, to reduce the overall demand (complaint) of a particular group to just this demand, with its particular content. (1999, 204)

Developing this argument, I focus on Rancière, stressing the progressive potential in his work, but questioning his presupposition of equality in light of his disavowal of real abstraction. For Rancière (2006) post-politics is characterised by the foreclosure of antagonistic and agonistic common life by the administration of ‘the police’. The police is the name he gives to the diffuse organisational systems that establish a ‘distribution of the sensible’ based on two primary processes: (1) governing based on a division of the population into parts, groups, social positions and functions, separating those who take part from those who are excluded; (2) participation characterised by the absence of a ‘void’ or ‘part with no part’. By this he means that the *dispositif* of the police creates order based on the principle of *saturation* (comprising paradoxically division and inclusion) where a ‘lack’ or ‘supplement’ is not recognised.

For Rancière (2001) proper politics lies in an irruption of the ‘void’: when those in the demos ‘beyond count’ take the liberty of speaking, and ‘the part with no part’ *part-takes*, calling into question the police division of common and private, visible and invisible, audible and inaudible. For Rancière, indeed, democracy is *defined* by *dissensus* and the refutation of a society’s given assumptions: ‘not a quarrel over which solutions to apply to a situation but a dispute over the situation itself’ (2004, 6). This presupposition of equality is vital for disrupting those ideologies that aim to keep everyone in their place. But for Iles and Roberts, Rancière’s tendency to declare economics off-limits may be ‘simply another way of keeping everybody in their place’ (2012, 92). As Bishop argues, equal participation is by no means ‘synonymous with collectivism’ nor is it ‘inherently opposed to capitalism’ (2012, 4). Thus, rather than attending solely to social forms, she contends, we need to focus on what participation *produces* – and, I would argue, what it negates.

Badiou (2005) likewise wonders what *consequences* arise from Rancière's axiomatic of equality, while noting how the problems of collective organisation and state mediation are absent from Rancière's account. Rancière, Badiou contends, pits 'phantom masses against an unnamed state' when he should really pit political militants 'against the "democratic" hegemony of the Parliamentary state' (2005, 121–2). For Dean (2014), the problem is not so much about de-democratisation but rather the acceptance of capitalism by the Left, with Rancière's account showing the shortcomings of an oppositional politics de-coupled from a critique of political economy. Brown likewise argues that Rancière 'does not think the distribution of the insensible, the moment of valorisation, and thus he misses entirely the dimension of political economy in his thinking of politics' (2014, np).

Brown's détourned notion of the *distribution of the insensible* usefully calls attention to the persistence of 'real abstraction' in the social nexus: the abstract equivalence of economic exchange (Sohn-Rothel 1978). Challenging charges of economic reductionism, which themselves have become a form of inverse reductionism, Toscano observes that the 'secret' of real abstraction is that it is not exclusive to the mind as is often supposed; instead it proceeds from real material processes under specifically capitalist conditions:

[T]o put it bluntly, *abstraction precedes thought*. More precisely, it is the social activity of abstraction, in its form as commodity exchange, that plays the pivotal role in the analysis of real abstraction. (2008, 281)

For Sohn-Rothel (1978), real abstraction forms a social synthesis established by exchange; a 'second nature' premised on the separation of exchange from use and private property based on division and partition. It is the persistence, indeed the deepening imbrication, of this 'thoroughly mediated and obdurate society' (Adorno 1991, 201) that calls into question both Rancière's axiomatic of equality, and participatory discourses at Speirs Locks and elsewhere.

### Soft austerity urbanism: a 'creativity fix' for hard times?

The global recession is causing widespread suffering and hardship but, in some respects, it may turn out be a good thing for the future development of our towns and cities. (Anderson 2010, 18)

Following the global financial crisis, Glasgow, as elsewhere, has been subject to 'austerity urbanism'

(Peck 2012; Tonkiss 2013; Mayer 2013). Peck's (2012) influential study of the 'extreme economy' in the USA outlines three primary indications of austerity urbanism: destructive creativity, deficit politics and devolved risk, with 'scalar dumping' (devolved governance, downloaded responsibility and externalised austerity) both the result of neoliberal reform and the condition for its escalation. His diagnostic is depressingly familiar, and potentially debilitating for agency-oriented approaches (Hilbrandt and Richter 2015). Yet it remains to be reckoned with. Thus, here I want to examine the entanglement of austerity urbanism with seemingly progressive forms of 'soft austerity urbanism' at Speirs Locks.

In common with many old industrial cities, Glasgow has suffered from problems of de-industrialisation, socio-spatial fragmentation, land contamination and vacant and derelict space (Gray and Porter 2015). In this context, a discourse of soft austerity urbanism – sharing many similarities with Peck's (2009) notion of the 'creativity fix' – has been adopted as an urban panacea at Speirs Locks. Indeed, the leitmotif of austerity is central to 7N Architects and their place-making manifesto, 'Growing the Place in Hard Times' (Anderson 2010), and to Architecture and Design Scotland (A+DS), as summarised in 'Re-thinking Place: Creativity in Austerity' (Lawlor 2011). They frame austerity as an *opportunity* for progressive urban design and a rupture in business-as-usual urban development. As Anderson observes, preceding the global financial crisis, lower value land uses were squeezed out by speculative development, but with tighter financial constraints post-crisis, different urban uses could potentially return:

The seemingly endless supply of credit that fuelled speculative development and large mortgages [...] will be tightly reigned in for the foreseeable future. This will cause significant shifts in the demand profile and the kind of developments that can be created to meet it [...]. In the midst of the widespread doom and gloom, the Speirs Locks project may be an indicator of a recalibration of the rules of the development game. (2010, 20)

The Growing the Place strategy thus aims to initiate a series of limited public realm and arts based initiatives to catalyse regeneration. Anderson cites standard creative city exemplars – Camden Market, Hoxton and Greenwich Village – whose once diverse fabric of uses, activities and people in central urban locations inspired the holistic approach to urban design that Jane Jacobs affirmed in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, but which are now seen as exemplars of gentrification. In revealing language, Anderson, the managing partner



and lead designer of 7N Architects, discusses how the Growing the Place approach aims to replicate the gentrification of such 'edgy' central districts through 'colonisation' by 'bohemian menageries of people' (2010, 19). Notably, the words 'colonisation', 'colonise' and 'colonised' are carelessly repeated by Anderson, artlessly conveying the not-so-hidden strategy behind the Growing the Place strategy.

Soft austerity urbanism at Speirs Locks thus parallels the 'artist-led property strategy' that has been central to Glasgow's highly uneven urban regeneration model (Gray 2009; Tretter 2009), and a ubiquitous urban policy response to inter-city competition worldwide. As Peck observes, fiscally undemanding creativity scripts represent a 'low-cost, market-friendly urban placebo' (2005, 760) in times of austerity and urban malaise. Indeed, the model of soft austerity urbanism at Speirs Locks mimics this 'creativity fix' (Peck 2009), without compromising in any way the dictates of hard austerity urbanism based on polarised labour and housing markets, property and land speculation and retrenched public services. Even Richard Florida, the creative class 'guru', acknowledges that there is a 'strong correlation between inequality and creativity: the more creative a region is, the more inequality you will find there' (2004, 55). Like the 'sustainability fix' – which allows for the accommodation of environmental concerns within and alongside growth-based urban entrepreneurialism (While *et al.* 2004) – the creativity fix is eminently post-political. Such fixes are particularly potent in old industrial cities, where both symbolic and material gains are rendered tangible for embattled local governance in times of austerity. These include:

drawing down public funding, finding appropriate languages and policies for reconciling potential conflicts between growth and quality of life, and seeing in positive urban environmentalism [or creativity] opportunities for revalorising urban space or mitigating further devaluations. (2004, 565)

For all the talk of creativity, sustainability and use value, Anderson ultimately stresses that 'increasing land values' (exchange values) are an 'intrinsic' part of the Growing the Place Strategy, as they are 'ultimately what will fund it all and pay for the front-loaded catalyst public-realm initiatives' (2010, 20). Soft austerity urbanism then refers to instrumental modes of policy, planning, design and collaboration that operate within the constraints of the given; a given that is drastically reduced in progressive scope through the context of austerity. In this way, soft austerity urbanism is eminently post-political.

## Soft austerity urbanism in practice

If participation appears threatened in other spheres, its privileging in art might be compensatory – a pale, part-time substitute. (Foster 2006, 194)

The Growing the Place strategy is allegedly premised on the 'natural momentum' of artist settlement 'from the ground up' (Anderson 2010, 19). Yet what is distinctive about Speirs Locks is how far removed it is from the 'authentic' holistic model of urbanity that 7N Architects claim as inspiration. The reality, easily gleaned from Anderson's (2010) frequent use of the 'colonisation' metaphor, is that the 'existing community' is a recently imported phalanx of arts professionals supported by considerable state subsidy. The suggestion that the Growing the Place strategy has 'come from within rather than being imposed' (Anderson 2010, 20) masks the instrumental creation of a fictitious 'community' that helps legitimise development and planning objectives in the area via *selective* processes of community consultation and participation.

This approach was all too evident at a 'Growing the People' workshop, supported by the SSCI and led by David Barrie working with A+DS and the Scottish Centre for Regeneration at the Glue Factory in 2010. Following SSCI's mission to engage the local community, the workshop recommended building on the community needs of Speirs Locks 'existing cultural tenants' (Lawlor 2011) – a highly selective notion of 'community' given that these tenants had only very recently arrived. In fact, the workshop was primarily comprised of real-estate developers, urban designers, business people and representatives from the creative industries and government (Barrie 2010a; Lawlor 2011). The lack of representation from welfare, community or tenants' groups in the wider area is apparent in an online video of proceedings.<sup>1</sup>

The cultural venue chosen for the workshop is also instructive: while urban planners are often extraordinarily unreflexive about how the built environment creates symbolic barriers to genuine participation, poor and marginalised people read the hierarchical distribution of people, places and functions immediately. With this distribution of the sensible in place, a consensual post-politics has emerged that predictably emphasises the creative economy, property development and 'sustainable development' driven by new 'entrepreneurial networks' (Barrie 2010a; Lawlor 2011), with the self-evident contradictions between property development, entrepreneurship and 'sustainable development' (While *et al.* 2004) mystified by discourses of creativity and soft austerity urbanism.

In part GCRP's 'community' approach, however tokenistic, has been necessitated by the global financial crisis; in part by the need to manage the dissensus evident in previous rounds of regeneration. In 2006, there was a successful campaign by the Speirs Wharf Residents' Committee and Cedar Tenants Association to block a private, 16-storey 'skyscraper for yuppies' at Speirs Locks (*The Burgh Angel* 2006, 2). Nick Durie, a community activist with *The Burgh Angel*, stressed the importance of the campaign in a context of social housing erasure at nearby Hamiltonhill and Sighthill, while surmising that GCRP's decision to shelve the plans was likely a strategic attempt to avoid a public inquiry and unwanted scrutiny of future plans (Durie 2008). Notably, from 2006 onwards, references to community consultation were fore-grounded in all GCRP plans, but members of the Glasgow Residents Network, including *The Burgh Angel*, dismissed the consultation process as 'a public relations exercise' that failed to acknowledge the 'degree of scepticism in relation to the canal regeneration, especially among community members'.<sup>2</sup>

Such scepticism rightly revolves around concerns that the canal area will be privatised and gentrified despite post-political public relations exercises. Indeed, David Barrie & Associates' 'venture urbanism' place-making strategy ultimately asks:

Can the landowner realise more value from their investment? Can the formation of new businesses generate increased values? Can this approach offer the real estate developer opportunities to capture value not just from the site but also from land beyond its boundary? (Barrie 2010b, 11)

For A+DS, such private-partner-led entrepreneurial strategies are simply part of the 'new pragmatism' required to effect 'real sustainable change' in times of austerity (Lawlor 2011). This new pragmatism has long been evident in Glasgow's neoliberal land and housing policy, the negative results of which can be seen in a related urban development project in the Glasgow North growth corridor at Sighthill.

### **Transforming Communities Glasgow? 'Real abstraction' in practice**

Contesting notions of abstraction as a detached disembodied style of 'Olympian' thinking tending towards generalisation and over-simplification, McCormack (2012) argues that it should not be opposed to situated and embodied experience. Indeed, the practical truth of real abstraction is evident in the blizzard of abstract abbreviations (MBS, CDOs, CDs, SIVs, etc.) connected to the contemporary financialised economy that have

generated a 'violent irruption' into the home: the primary site of social reproduction and everyday life, where the tension between use and exchange value is rendered explicit (Bhandar and Toscano 2015, 8). If we are 'ruled by abstractions', this is nowhere more evident than in the housing market, which is central to contemporary political economy (Aalbers and Christophers 2014).

'Increasing land values' are 'intrinsic' to soft austerity urbanism at Speirs Locks (Anderson 2010, 20), and the privatisation of social housing in surrounding areas is tellingly obfuscated by a discourse of community participation and ownership through the Transforming Communities: Glasgow (TCG) programme. Alongside the Speirs Locks master plan, the programme is pivotal to the Glasgow North growth corridor (GCC 2009). Led by GCC, Glasgow Housing Association (GHA) and the Scottish Government – key partners at Speirs Locks – the programme covers eight different areas of the city focusing on large-scale demolition of GHA social housing stock, and regeneration through 'mixed communities' and 'diversity of tenure' – which in practice in Glasgow, as elsewhere, has meant 'gentrification by stealth' (Bridge *et al.* 2012).

The shift in the programme from social to private tenure is profound, with 11 000 GHA social rented properties being demolished and replaced by 6500 homes for private sale and mid-market rent and just 600 new social rented homes: an alarming overall reduction of 10 400 social rented homes in Glasgow. Sighthill itself was constructed between 1963 and 1969 with ten 20-storey slab blocks and several lower blocks providing around 2500 council homes for over 7500 people. The Sighthill TCG project, the largest housing regeneration project in the UK outside London, will complete a highly contested programme of phased demolition begun in 2008, resulting in 650 homes for private sale and mid-market tenure and only 141 homes for social rent: a long-term reduction of public/social housing of staggering proportions. While GCC and GHA have routinely stated that all local tenants will be re-housed in the area, this is patently illusory based on these figures.

This process has not been without contention. There has been ongoing dissensus led by Sighthill Save our Homes (SSoH), a local tenants' group, and members of the Community Council. SSoH was a vocal part of the ultimately unsuccessful campaign against the 'stock transfer' of all public housing in Glasgow to GHA in 2003, the largest transfer in the UK (Mooney and Poole 2005). Stock transfer was sold to tenants on the basis of community 'participation', 'ownership' or 'empowerment', but has been more akin to incorporation, regulation and responsabilisation (McKee and Cooper 2008). Following transfer, and ensuing dissatisfaction with GHA's consultation process over full demolition plans in

2005, SSoH conducted an independent survey of Sighthill's remaining tenants: 76 per cent wanted to remain in Sighthill, 84 per cent wanted immediate investment in the blocks and 51 per cent had no confidence in GHA (Kirkintilloch Herald 2005).

These viewpoints represent a rupture in the distribution of the sensible – the constructed consensus that 'regeneration' through privatisation processes is both inevitable and desirable – making visible and heard what was previously invisible and unheard. After vigorous campaigning, five blocks were retained with five demolished in 2008 and 2009. The five remaining blocks were then re-scheduled for demolition against tenants' wishes, with two blocks retained after further campaigning. These two blocks are currently being demolished, despite an assurance by GHA that they had a long-term future. Thus the secretary of the local Community Council has accused the TCG partners of 'an appalling betrayal' of tenants in Sighthill.<sup>3</sup> Sighthill and Speirs Locks are inextricably linked by the same planning and development partners, yet this narrative of displacement, privatisation and tenant betrayal is entirely absent from the post-political boosterism of soft austerity urbanism advocates.

Taking a wider view, as represented in the City Plan and the Local Development Strategy (LDS), both Speirs Locks and Sighthill are seen as gateways to 'unlock the development potential' of Glasgow North,<sup>4</sup> including vast derelict and vacant areas like Dundashill and Cowlares Park, which are subject to stalled private development plans. Like the old industrial East End of the city, which has been subject to land and property speculation through the 2014 Commonwealth Games and Clyde Gateway regeneration project (Gray and Mooney 2011; Gray and Porter 2015), Glasgow North is envisioned from above as a vast 'new urban frontier' potentially ripe for profitable speculative investment. This is real abstraction operative in the built environment: 'not in mind, but in fact' (Sohn-Rothel 1978, 25).

## Conclusion

I have argued that discourses of soft austerity urbanism at Speirs Locks 'cultural quarter' mask and legitimise the violence of hard austerity urbanism in Glasgow North. The vision for Speirs Locks is quintessentially post-political in that it pursues supposedly progressive forms of post-crisis austerity urbanism while valorising the same land and property speculation that was so integral to the global financial crisis in the first place. The case study here illustrates how soft austerity urbanism creates a new distribution of the sensible that is 'participatory' in only highly circumscribed forms, and how it converges with a wider programme of urban land and property speculation

– a *distribution of the insensible* – which is both *de-facto* and *de-jure* exclusionary. As Colomb (2012) stresses, the possibilities for creativity, participation and progressive politics on temporary or low-budget urban spaces remains ultimately constrained by private property relations and the permission of landowners.

It is vital to challenge over-determined treatments of creative city policies and austerity urbanism that preclude critical dialectical practices (Tonkiss 2013; Hilbrand and Richter 2015), yet a now commonplace, and often misplaced, critique of economic determinism risks becoming a form of inverse reductionism that disavows the real abstractions of capital relations (McCormack 2012; Loftus 2015). In spatial terms, the 'open secret of real abstraction' (Toscano 2008) is tangible in the dominance of exchange value over use value, land speculation, spiralling housing costs, the erasure of public and social housing, and the tyranny of housing debt. It is also disclosed in situated, embodied struggles over social housing in places like Sighthill. Countering 'creative class mania', Wilson and Keil (2008) argue that the 'real creative class' are those who struggle under the dull compulsions of urban poverty. Attending to and supporting such dissensual struggles, with close critical attention to the local policy and planning approaches that they contest, is essential if we are not simply to reproduce a post-political apologia for the never-ending play of capital in the built environment.

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## Notes

- 1 <https://vimeo.com/15656958> Accessed 31 July 2016.
- 2 <http://glasgowresidents.files.wordpress.com/2007/03/notesonforthandclydelds.pdf> Accessed 31 July 2016.
- 3 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-19517338> Accessed 31 July 2016.
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