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Eyre and Eton in Camden: Uncovering the Colonial Histories of Three North London Housing Estates

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This article analyses the colonial histories of three north London housing estates. A kilometre apart from each other and built under different social policy conditions, Hilgrove, Chalcots, and Alexandra Road Estates all share colonial histories. We trace the role of the slave-holding Eyre Estate in influencing the architecture of Hilgrove Estate; uncover how the Eyre Estate clashed with residents and the London Borough of Camden over Alexandra Road Estate; and consider Eton College's links to enslavement and its ownership of Chalcots Estate. We tell these histories with the aim of beginning a conversation around how to decolonise the way the city is

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known, linking the histories of the three estates with the colonialities of property and the welfare state. We do this to reflect on the implications a decolonial approach may have for new approaches to the history of public housing and the struggle for its future.

KEYWORDS council housing; architecture; decolonising the city; colonialism; enslavement; property ownership; social housing policy

To decolonise has become a rallying cry, urging us to decolonise our minds, our institutions, and our cities. The toppling of the statue of slave trader, Edward Colston, into Bristol docks by Black Lives Matter protesters in 2020 provoked widespread debate on how the legacies of enslavement and colonialism are remembered, obscured, memorialised, or overlooked. The desire to reckon with (or denounce) the present of colonial past has gained increasing prominence in public discourse, especially over for whom streets are named and the histories of particular buildings and institutions.[1] In this article, we look at colonial presence and the colonial present of three north London council estates.

By writing the estates' colonial histories, we aim, in line with Gurminder Bhambra, to develop 'our understanding of the shared histories that have configured our present'.[2] We use this to point to a need to chart the relationship between public housing, the welfare state, and colonialism. The intention of this is to open up conversations about how we begin to decolonise the way we know the city, linking this to contemporary struggles over housing. We do this by contributing to scholarship that recognises the welfare state's association with imperial wealth.[3] By following the money, we move beyond a balance sheet approach to the legacies of slavery and instead, in line with Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, recognise that things that appear far removed from slavery are actually intimately connected.[4] We begin the histories of the three estates before working-class struggles for decent housing and the post-war social contract. The three estates in this study are Hilgrove, Alexandra Road, and Chalcots in what is now the London Borough of Camden.

As part of the Open City project, we set out to consider everyday neighbourly practices, inclusivity, and connections to place on the three estates. We chose these estates because they were built by different types of local government under different policy conditions, their proximity, different architectures, and permissions granted to us by Camden Council. The three estates are along a one-kilometre stretch with Alexandra Road to the west and Chalcots to the east. Alexandra Road is perhaps best known with its iconic, award-winning architecture, and Chalcots has gained notoriety since 2017 for its polyethylene combustible cladding. Between the two estates sits the lesser-known Hilgrove Estate.

Each of the three estates has its own distinct history and architectural style and yet, all three estates are connected by what we found to be overlooked histories of colonial expansion, enslavement, and expropriation. The findings draw on archival research across five different local and national collections. We briefly

introduce council housing in London in the context of empire and the welfare state before turning to the histories of the three estates. We explore how the slave-holding Eyre family determined the architecture of Hilgrove Estate; how Eton College maximised its own profits on the Chalcots Estate; and how Camden Council clashed with the Eyre Estate over the right to build Alexandra Road. We use this to reflect on what a decolonial approach to the history of public housing might mean for the future of organising to decommodify housing.

Welfare and Empire

A decolonial approach re-centres how the phenomena of empire, colonialism, and racism shape the world[5] and calls on us to think about different ways of relating to and acting in the world.[6] The approach recognises that European modernity is defined by the processes of colonisation and the development of racial capitalism.[7] Gurminder Bhambra and John Holmwood argue that capitalist political economy is often separated from the colonialism with which it emerged. For them, the emergence of capitalism alongside chattel slavery determines the commodification of labour and the 'benchmark of commodified labour against which degrees of decommodification will be measured to establish types of welfare state is already itself a form of decommodification against which further decommodification is assessed in a way that erases the racial construction of labour'.[8] In this way, working-class struggles in Britain for the decommodification of labour—or, for that matter, land and housing—are inextricably linked to colonial extraction. This is because the industrial working class and property law are themselves a product of colonial expansion.[9] Capital accumulation because of colonialism is in turn central to the construction of the welfare state in Europe.[10] Elsewhere, Bhambra argues that Britain 'established domestic legitimacy and quiescence through imperial revenue; and imperial revenue included the taxes extracted from a colonised population'.[11] The relationship she stresses is the constitution of the imperial state through relations of extraction—or taxation—which in turn brought about the national project through relations of redistribution—or welfare.[12] She calls for more scholarship dedicated to understanding the colonial provenance of nineteenth-century welfare and argues that the post-Second World War construction of the welfare state relied on Britain running down its debts to India and Pakistan and subordinating the economies of its remaining colonies to national concerns.[13] Following Bhambra, there is a need to explore the material presence of colonial extraction in different expressions of the welfare state. In this case, we look at how colonisation has shaped three council estates in London. By re-centring the colonial in the histories of three estates, we hope to prompt further scholarship on the relationship between public housing and colonialism. We anticipate that others may uncover similar connections elsewhere and that this may contribute to ongoing debates about the future of the decommodification of housing.

Housing London

The emergence and development of public housing in London is often presented as a triumph of working-class struggle. Indeed, the existence of public housing in London is intimately tied with the politics of class and class struggle.[14] The relationship between working-class action and public housing is well documented elsewhere.[15] Our aim is not to put forward an alternative theoretical perspective as to why public housing developed in London. Instead, we consider what forms of ownership and extraction the movement for public housing in London struggled against. We consequently begin the histories of the three estates in this study before these moments of triumph. Rather than start at the point of decommodification, we look at what colonial legacies mean for the compromise between labour and capital. For Saull, working-class struggle for the welfare state and, consequently, public housing was also part of wider anti-imperialist and anti-racist organising.[16] Robbie Shilliam inflects this with the argument that irrespective of wider anti-imperialist organising, compromise between labour and capital in Britain in the twentieth century led to the emergence of a eugenicist welfare state predicated on a racialised distinction between 'deserving and undeserving stock'.[17] In this way, while the movement to bring land into public ownership and build homes for the people can be seen as part of a wider anti-imperialist struggle, the extent to which resulting welfare and housing policy succeeded in its aims is nonetheless predicated on racialisation. This is in line with Bhambra and Holmwood's argument that measures of decommodification can erase the racial construction of labour.[18] In the histories of Hilgrove, Chalcots, and Alexandra Road, we consider the relationship between public housing and colonialism, considering their connections to questions of deservingness, and potential implications for the future of how we know the city.

Hilgrove, the first of the three estates in this study, was built by the London County Council (LCC). Chalcots, the second, began construction in collaboration with Hampstead Borough Council, and Alexandra Road was built by the London Borough of Camden. Works for the three estates were completed in 1959, 1968, and 1979, respectively. The LCC was created in 1898 and was replaced by the Greater London Council (GLC) in 1965. Camden Council was created following the Local Government Reform Act in 1965, which merged three former boroughs: Hampstead, St Pancras, and Holborn. Chalcots passed from Hampstead Borough Council to Camden Council in 1965. Hilgrove was owned and managed by the LCC until 1965, and then by the GLC until its abolition in 1986 when it was transferred to Camden Council. Camden Council continues to own and manage Hilgrove. Alexandra Road was built by Camden Council and remains under the council's ownership and management. The chief architect for Camden between 1965 and 1973, Sydney Cook, is famous for building distinctive modernist housing across the borough.[19] Less well known, however, are the histories of Camden's LCC estates and how private interests have shaped public housing in the borough. The three estates we explore reflect these histories and show how the history of some of London's housing estates begin thousands of miles away from London and sometimes centuries before the creation of the LCC (Figure 1).

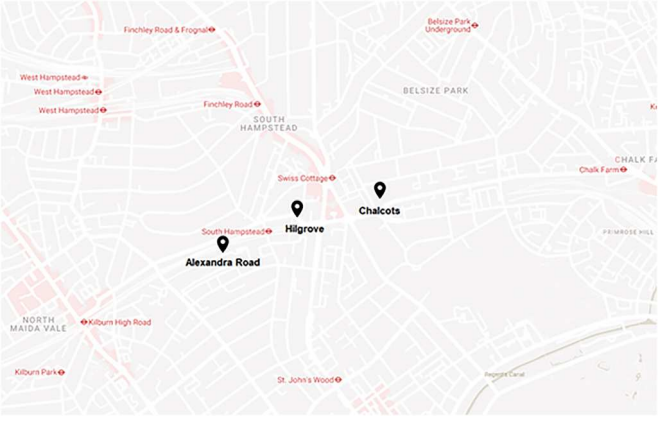

FIGURE 1 North Camden map.

Methods

Our time in the archives did not begin with decolonial ambitions. Instead, we began with a desire to place fieldwork for our wider project on the three estates into historical context. We wanted to consider what the histories of the three estates might reveal about the dynamics of race, migration, and living with diversity in the present. We began our archival research in the collections held by Camden Local Studies and the London Metropolitan Archives (now The London Archives). Our initial surprise at the colonial connections of Hilgrove and Alexandra Road and findings on the relationship between Chalcots and Eton College led to further archival research at City of Westminster Archives Centre, the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) collections, and the Eton College Collections. We present our findings following James Vernon, for whom it is important to take a 'mole's eye view' anchored in place to understand the social formations that imperialism creates and shapes.[20] While we chose the estates for the different policy conditions they were built under and their distinct architectural forms, we believe that future research may reveal that the colonial connections of the three estates are not atypical. As part of the Open City project (see: https://opencitywarwick.co.uk/), we also conducted ethnographic and art-based research on the inclusivity of place and the network of relationships between material and immaterial layers on the three estates.[21] Artistic outputs that were informed by our archival findings can viewed until 2029 at the following web address https://estateanatomies.uk/. We present the histories of each of the three estates in the order in which they were built.

Hilgrove Estate and the Eyre Estate

The history of the Hilgrove Estate begins with the Eyre Estate. In 1733, Henry Samuel Eyre bought the 500-acre St John's Wood Estate.[22] The Estate spanned from what is now Lord's Cricket Ground to just north of the tracks of the West

Coast Mainline, with Finchley Road as the eastern border and Maida Vale as the western border. The Eyre family bought the estate with proceeds from the enslavement of people in Antigua where they owned extensive sugar plantations. The family continued to enslave people until the abolition of slavery and claimed compensation for fifty-six enslaved people in 1836.[23]

By the early nineteenth century, the Eyre Estate (which still exists today in reduced scale) dominated St John's Wood. The motivation for the development of St John's Wood was driven by falling profits from the enslavement of people in Antigua.[24] It was an explicit attempt to safeguard the Eyre family fortune against the rapid momentum gained by the anti-slavery abolitionist movement and to ensure their continued financial security by developing their London land.[25] The Eyre Estate produced a masterplan for the development of St John's Wood in 1794 and work began in 1804, creating a cityscape of low-density villas and avenues.[26] A cornerstone of the Eyre Estate's development was the Alpha Cottages, which were one of the first consciously built suburbs for the upwardly mobile middle classes, one of the earliest examples of semi-detached housing in Britain, and set the tone and visual language of the garden suburb.[27] The Alpha Cottages were a mix of semi-detached and detached houses in large gardens that sought to 'straddle the worlds of town and country as well as labourer and aristocrat'.[28] Mireille Galinou argues that the Alpha Cottages were the very first Garden Suburb and inspired the Garden City movement almost a century later.[29]

The Garden City first conceived of by Ebenezer Howard sought a marriage of town and country. Low-density housing set in wide park space with separate, clearly delineated areas for industry were intended to create 'ideal communities' by design.[30] Other design features connect the Alpha Cottages to the Garden City movement. The cottages had pitched roofs, ironwork balconies, and balustrades that were later mirrored in both Welwyn Garden City and on Hilgrove itself. The Garden City movement was a response to slum housing in Britain's industrial cities and was intended to bring about 'healthy living and industry of a size that makes possible a full measure of social life but not larger'.[31] Although the Garden City movement was influenced by thinkers such as Pierre Proudhon and William Morris, Richard Clevenger and David Andrews argue that the Garden City in practice was a means to regulate the bodies and lives of the urban working class by improving the 'stock of the nation'.[32] Citing Howard, Clevenger and Andrews argue that the Garden City movement used a rationally planned rural setting to 'civilise working class habits and cultivate a healthy, moral, and orderly work-force for the British empire' in direct response to imperial fragility and weak working-class bodies in the aftermath of the Boer Wars.[33] The safeguarding of wealth and privilege is also a part of the history of the Garden City that prioritised investment over philanthropy[34] with the aim of securing profits for commercial capital investors by generating high rent revenues.[35] The Garden City movement aimed to regenerate the British body politic by repackaging the country houses emulated by the middle classes[36] for the lower orders. This regeneration, however, was only available to those who were deemed deserving of it. This is because a 5% philanthropy model was adopted at Welwyn. This model guaranteed investors a 5% return on their

investments, which meant that working-class housing was confined to particular parts of Welwyn Garden City out of financial necessity.[37]

The Garden City returned to St John's Wood after the Second World War. This return marks Hilgrove's direct connections to the Garden City Movement. The area around Swiss Cottage suffered extensive bomb damage.[38] In 1946, the LCC approached the Eyre Estate to buy land for housing on the east and west sides of Finchley Road.[39] Not wanting to change the middle-class character of the local area, or undermine the value of their land, the Eyre Estate refused the development of public housing on the site.[40] Following extensive negotiations, the Eyre Estate granted land to the LCC on two conditions. The first was that 25% of the land be used to house higher-income groups. The second was that the Eyre Estate would choose their own architect for the development, eschewing the LCC's own architects' department, which at the time was the largest in the world.[41] The Eyre Estate chose Louis de Soissons and his practice De Soissons, Peacock, Hodges, and Robertson. De Soissons is perhaps best known for his role as Chief Architect and Master Planner for Welwyn Garden City.[42]

Welwyn, which as described above served the most 'deserving' workers,[43] has much in common with Hilgrove. De Soissons's designs for both Welwyn and Hilgrove reflect the style of the Alpha Cottages. The top left image of Figure 2 shows the elevations for the Alpha Cottages with their pitched roofs and iron balcony details. To the right is De Soissons's now listed Knightsfield flats in Welwyn Garden City built in 1956 and below are De Soissons's elevations for the Dobson Close flats on Hilgrove, also built in 1956.[44] Both De Soissons's buildings bear a great resemblance to the 'first' garden city. Both can be seen to appeal to the genteel town and country sensibilities of the upwardly mobile Georgian middle classes. Beyond these similarities in style, both Hilgrove and Welwyn were laid out in similar ways. Housing in Welwyn is predominantly comprised of semi-detached houses grouped in cul-de-sacs with large front gardens opening onto roads with wide grass verges, mature trees, and contiguous allotments.[45] Likewise, plans for Hilgrove grouped buildings around cul-de-sacs (Dobson Close and Dorman Way) with mature trees and access to private and communal gardens and allotments for ground-floor flats, terraced houses, and maisonettes.[46] Emulating the 5% philanthropy model, the higher-income flats stipulated by the Eyre Estate are separated from Hilgrove by the six-lane Finchley Road. Boydell Court, which was intended to be a part of the LCC's Hilgrove Estate and let to higher-income groups, was leased to a private company, Odderino's Rest and Hotel Company, as soon as works were completed.[47] Odderino's made improvements to Boydell Court's heating provision and tenants' facilities and a penthouse storey was later added to the blocks.[48] The external appearance of the blocks is almost identical to those on the west side of Finchley Road, but the average two-bedroom flat in Boydell Court is around 40% larger than its neighbour six lanes to the west. In 2023, a four-bedroom flat in Boydell Court cost £9,900 pcm to rent and a four-bedroom flat on the Hilgrove cost £2,145 pcm to rent privately.[49] Living wage in London in 2023 is £1,691.41 pcm after tax and National Insurance contributions.[50]

There are clear continuities between the appearance of the Eyre Estate's Alpha Cottages, Welwyn Garden City, and Hilgrove Estate. Beyond sharing an architect,

FIGURE 2 Top left: Alpha Cottages; top right: Knightsfield flats, Welwyn Garden City; bottom: Dobson Close, Hilgrove Estate. Images courtesy of De Soissons and Partners, The London Archives, and Westminster City Council.

both Hilgrove and Welwyn project a particular vision of desirable, aspirational, and appropriate form of community. The Garden City Movement sought to develop the stock of the empire.[51] The particular form of family life promoted by Welwyn and Hilgrove can also be read in line with the 1942 Beveridge report's focus on improving the stock of the nation through state intervention into the form and structure of family life.[52] In this way, although the LCC was successful in securing a concession from the Eyre Estate to build Hilgrove, the compromise reached with the landowner determined the architecture and archetype of ideal community on the estate. The colonial histories of landownership on the estate consequently shape contemporary life on the estate. Although Hilgrove may be in public hands, a more expansive look at its history reveals that decommodification on the estate has not erased the racial construction of labour. Built ten years after Hilgrove, we now look east across Finchley Road to Chalcots Estate.

Chalcots Estate and Eton College

Eton College is one of the best-known and most prestigious British public schools.[53] Founded in 1440, Eton is widely seen as synonymous with Britain's ruling classes. The college holds extensive property across Britain and, along with other public

schools, the crown, the Church of England, and the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge universities, has had considerable influence on English property law. Eton, for example, played a defining in role in acts of parliament such as the University and Colleges Estates Acts of 1858, 1898, and 1925, which relate to the extent to which public schools and universities can develop their land holdings, extract lease fees from their tenants, and the length of leases they can grant. As Sol Gamsu finds, Eton holds investments worth £350.1 m with a further £86.4 m in property.[54] In addition, Gamsu and Jason Arday find that Eton received major donations from slaveholders. They argue that Eton has extensive material ties to the slave trade through two major sources: the income of its students and donations to the school from its alumni. They find that plantation owners frequently educated their sons at Eton and that capital accumulation from enslaved labour is central to maintenance of elite educational institutions like Eton.[55] The UCL Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery shows that Eton alumni or their agents claimed compensation for 28,883 enslaved people between 1834 and 1845.[56] These alumni in turn invested their profits from enslaved labour back into their school and across the metropole.

The land that Chalcots Estate is built on is part of Eton's historic Chalcots Estate. The Chalcots Estate was gifted to Eton by King Henry VI in 1449. The school has owned and leased property on the estate ever since. The Chalcots Estate stretches from Finchley Road to the east to Chalk Farm to the west with borders at Regent's Park and Belsize Lane. Eton realised the land's potential for building in 1796 when college surveyors advised 'a considerable part of this estate is suitable for building'.[57] By the time John Nash's Regent's Park was nearing completion in 1824, the college decided to begin speculatively building villas for sale to the upwardly mobile middle classes. Before Eton began development, it sought an act of parliament that would grant the college the right to let property on ninety-nine-year leases, which was granted in 1826.[58] Prior to this, universities and colleges could only lease land for up to twenty years and houses for twenty-one years at a time. By the 1840s, Eton had developed extensive stucco detached and semi-detached houses with 'rustic Italian' and 'restrained Grecian detailing', including a small triangle of homes that would accommodate fewer servants for the 'younger and less affluent reaches of the professional classes'.[59] These properties remain in the Eton Conservation Area. The college continued to build large townhouses on the Chalcots Estate until the 1860s, granting ninety-nine-year leases.

By the end of the Second World War, the area had suffered extensive bomb damage, about a third of the properties in the centre of the estate had been requisitioned by the state as part of the war effort, and many of the smaller houses had been subdivided into flats or rented as single rooms. As the Fellows and Provost of the college complained, 'the flats are an abomination; the tenants are not at all respectable and 95% are foreign'.[60] When the ninety-nine-year leases for properties built in the mid-nineteenth century were ending, Eton undertook to redevelop the estate. Prior to undertaking redevelopment, however, the college entered lengthy litigation against the state over whether it would be able to extract premiums from its leases.[61] Eton ultimately won its court case,

arguing that because it was not under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education but the Ministry of Agriculture, it could extract premiums from its leases even as a charitable body. In 1963, Eton put a tender out for development and received bids from Wates developers; the British Commercial Property Investment Trust with Max Payne as architect; Laing developers with De Soissons as architects; Wimpey with Stone, Toms and Partners as architects; and London Merchant Securities with Lennon and Partners as architects.[62] Eton chose London Merchant Securities with Dennis Lennon and Partners as architects because they were the most cost effective and would yield the greatest return in ground rents and lease fees. Lennon was inspired by Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin and designed low-rise houses set in gardens for sale and four tower blocks of flats for sale. The modernist, white-rendered low-rise houses were intended to offer 'luxuriously equipped houses' and 'a new conception in neighbourhood development, comprising individual architect designed town houses in a garden setting' that were 'well served by private schools'.[63] In keeping with Corbusier's Plan Voisin, the four towers of the Chalcots redevelopment were intended to offer four flats on each of the twenty-three storeys marketed to young professionals and couples with luxurious houses around the towers for elite families (Figure 3).

As the redevelopment of the estate would lead to large-scale evictions of tenants in the pre-existing subdivided Victorian villas and terraces, the Fellows and Provost of the college noted as early as 1963 that 'it might prove to be beneficial for political reasons to be prepared to include a proportion of economical housing units so as to indicate an effort to deal with all reasonable classes of occupiers'.[64] Unsurprisingly, Hampstead Borough Council requested to lease some of the housing developed by Eton to house those made homeless by the redevelopment. Of the thirty acres undergoing redevelopment, Hampstead Borough Council requested to lease five. Following extensive negotiation, Eton agreed to lease the four tower blocks (or three acres) to Hampstead Borough Council. This resulted in a 10% loss in projected profits from the development and provoked one Fellow to ask, 'have the college got any moral obligation in the matter?'[65] Once given over to public housing, the towers were re-designed, their overall footprint was reduced, and the number of flats per floor was increased from four to seven.[66] Following the Local Government Reform Act in 1965, the new Camden Council tried to oppose the redevelopment all together. This was in part because of the number of people who would be displaced by the development and in part because Camden did not want cede control over public housing to private developers.[67] However, Camden ultimately agreed to honour its predecessor's agreement and the four towers were built and named for villages near Eton College.[68] Not all Chalcots residents were able to be rehoused and return to their neighbourhood upon completion of the towers. Today, one of the three-bedroom low-rise town houses costs £6,604 pcm to rent.[69] In contrast, there is rarely property for rent privately on the four towers, with almost none on the market since combustible polyethylene cladding was removed in 2017.

The flammable cladding on Chalcots Estate was installed in 2006 to improve the appearance of the towers. It took three and a half years to install.[70] The only company to bid for the cladding contract was the Partners for Improvement

FIGURE 3 High-rise and low-rise housing on the Chalcots Estate.

Consortium who reduced the price from £119 million to £66 million by using combustible cladding.[71] A major investor in Arconic, the company who provided the cladding, is Trinity College, Cambridge, a direct beneficiary of the legislative changes in property law that Eton helped bring about.[72] The cladding was installed under a Private Finance Initiative (PFI).[73] A week after the Grenfell Fire, every Chalcots resident was evacuated while the cladding was removed.[74] Camden Council had to use its cash reserves to pay for the cost of evacuating all residents. In 2019, Partners for Improvement went into liquidation, making reimbursement almost impossible.[75] The recladding was supposed to be completed in 2021. Today, in 2024, over six years since residents were first evacuated, the works to re-clad the blocks and install new windows have not yet been completed.[76]

The existence of the four towers of Chalcots are a result of a concession by Eton to Hampstead Borough Council. This concession was driven first by Eton's fear of the consequences of 'the socialists'[77] gaining electoral power and second because of Hampstead Borough Council's opposition to the homelessness that the redevelopment would cause. What is significant is that this concession did not result in Eton selling or giving the land the towers are built on into public ownership but instead entering a relationship with Camden Council who pay the college a token annual ground rent of £2.[78] In this way, Eton preserves its ownership over this otherwise valuable piece of land.

In the story of Chalcots the tensions, trade-offs, and compromises reached between Eton College and Hampstead and later, Camden, reveal a struggle over the decommodification of land. For Eton, the redevelopment of Chalcots was driven by the effort to safeguard wealth accumulated over 600 years for centuries to come. Although the estates of public schools continue to own large swathes of land in London, we were surprised by Eton's direct involvement on Chalcots. The connections between British public schools and empire are widely acknowledged. Less known, however, is the role these institutions play in determining—through the built environment of public housing—the everyday life of Londoners. We argue that acknowledging these histories point to more complex relationships of ownership and extraction. While the connection between Eton and Arconic, who provided the cladding that could have led to deaths of Chalcots' residents, is indirect, the institutions who invested in them are nonetheless imbricated with one another.[79] Trinity College, like Eton, benefited directly from colonialism and enslavement and Eton played a leading role in legislation that would safeguard Trinity's investments.[80] Taking this perspective on the history of Chalcots prompts the question of what public housing where freeholds are not held by institutions that continue to benefit from expropriated wealth might look like. We now head west back over Finchley Road to Alexandra Road, the last of the three estates in our study and a form of coloniality that differs from Hilgrove and Chalcots.

Alexandra Road Estate and the Eyre Estate

Like Hilgrove, Alexandra Road was built on land previously owned by the Eyre Estate. Like Eton, the Eyre Estate wanted to redevelop parts of its estate for housing following the Second World War. As with Hilgrove and Chalcots, the area on what was to become the Alexandra Road Estate was heavily bombed, and large parts of it had been marked for clearance as a result.[81] To develop its valuable land, in 1964 the Eyre Estate entered discussion with South Bank Properties to build seven tower blocks and 128 luxury houses for sale on the current Alexandra Road site and beyond—with the proposed site extending to the terraced homes to the south of the current site and bounded by the border with the Harrow School Estate to the west.[82] As at Chalcots, the redevelopment would have led to the residents of the subdivided villas and terraces developed by the Eyre Estate in the nineteenth century being made homeless. The Eyre Estate consequently faced significant public protest and residents who feared homelessness organised petitions, protests, and conducted extensive research into their neighbours' preferences for the redevelopment of the area.[83] Unlike at Chalcots, prior to the Eyre Estate's redevelopment being approved by Hampstead Borough Council, Camden Council was formed. At the same time, the introduction of the 1965 Rent Act meant that private developers would be legally obligated to rehouse people made homeless by new developments. The significant loss of profit that this would entail for the Eyre Estate combined with resident pressure for the newly formed Camden Council to 'buy the existing

houses and modernise them', arguing for the municipalisation of street properties, led to the Eyre Estate withdrawing their plans.[84] This was followed by Camden submitting a Compulsory Purchase Order for the northernmost and most marginal part of the proposed redevelopment area and ultimately taking ownership of the land that was to become Alexandra Road in 1967.[85]

The land that Camden purchased for the Alexandra Road Estate is long and narrow, with the West Coast Mainline railway as a hard northern border to the site (Figure 4). The southern border of the site is the Ainsworth Estate, which was built by the LCC and transferred to Camden by the GLC in 1970.[86] The chief architect for Camden, Sydney Cook, appointed Neave Brown as architect for Alexandra Road, based on his previous developments in Camden—namely, Winscombe Terrace for a housing cooperative and Fleet Road Estate for Camden Council.[87] Against the increased preference for high rise living chosen for many council housing developments, Brown advocated for street-based living, designing high density housing with street facing front doors for all. Residents who had organised against the Eyre Estate redevelopment submitted several requests to the council for the design of the new Alexandra Road estate. These included: pedestrianisation, open park space, places for children to play, and places for older people to sit in the sun. This also included clear opposition to high rise living.[88] The architectural history of Alexandra Road and Brown's designs have been well documented elsewhere.[89] Of core relevance to us are two features. First, that Brown designed the estate to incorporate a pub, light industry, special school, play centre, youth club, community centre, and public park, thus heeding residents' demands. Second, that both the park and the estate itself explicitly set out to emulate John Nash's grand regency terraces. The curving façade of Alexandra Road was intended to look like the crown estate's Park Crescent, thus emulating the architectural model set by those re-investing profits from colonial extraction in the metropole. Indeed, as the surveyor for the Eyre Estate commented in 1829, Park Crescent would never have been completed had it not been for the financial support of the East India Company's gunpowder contractor, John Farquhar.[90] Similarly, Janet Jack, who designed Alexandra Road's public park, borrowed Nash's design principles for the Regent's Park by creating a series of distinct spaces for distinct purposes, demarcating play areas for older and younger children as well as quiet spaces for older adults.[91] In this way, Brown and Jack's vision for Alexandra Road re-appropriated Regency grandeur for the working class. This can be seen as a symbolic claim over the built form and aesthetics that represent colonial extraction. This having been said, the symbolic claim over Nash's Park Crescent and Regent's Park marks a continuity in architectural form stemming from colonial endeavour. This raises significant questions as to who deserves and has the right to access Regency grandeur and what histories those architectures owe their existence to.

Following the success of the Conservative Party in the 1968 local election, Brown's design for Alexandra Road was pared back and buildings to the east of the site were passed to private developers and a housing association. The ambitious and bespoke design for Alexandra Road combined with its more unconventional concrete build also coincided with major economic downturn.

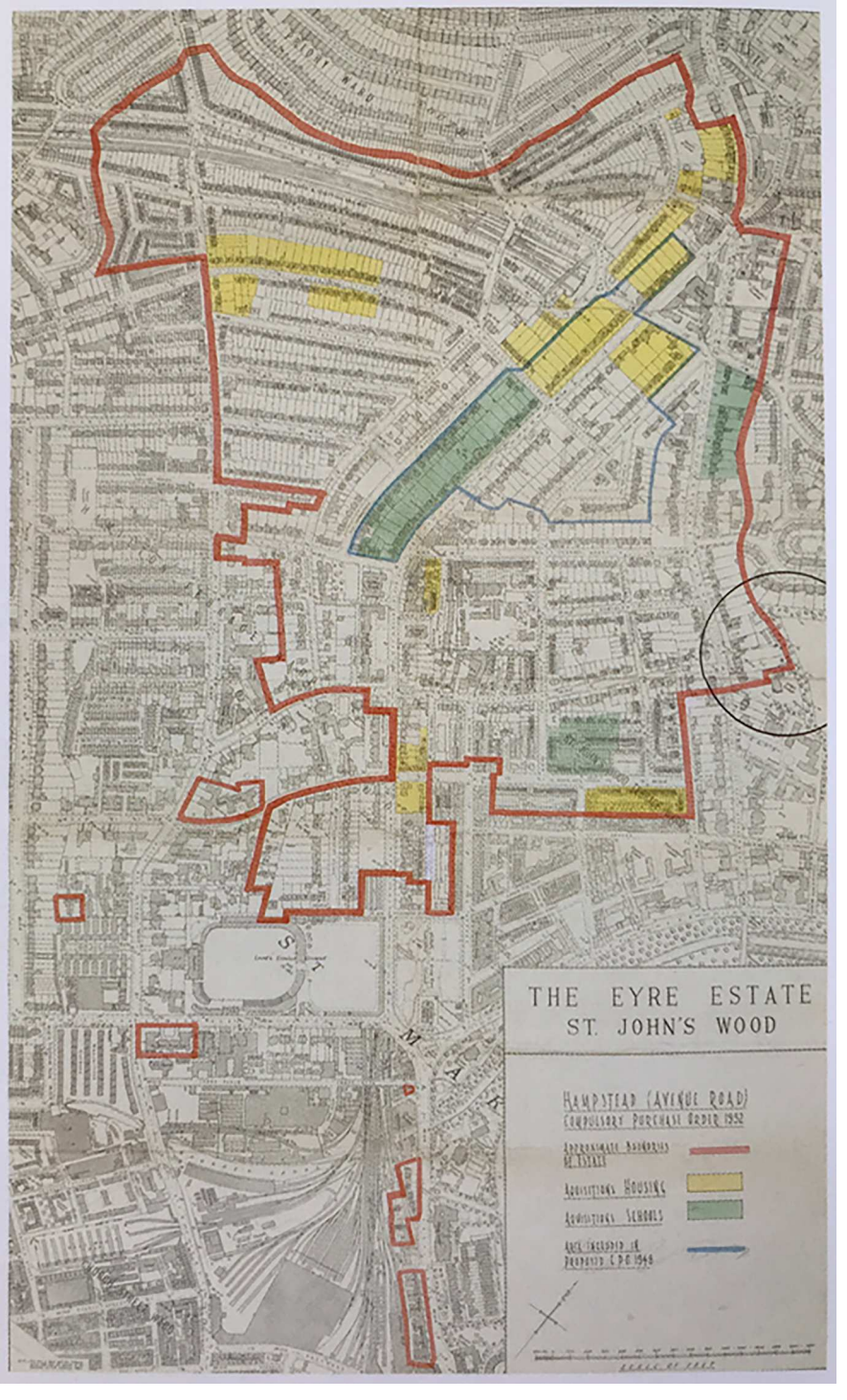

FIGURE 4 Map of the Eyre Estate, 1952. Courtesy of Westminster City Council.

Spiralling costs and rising inflation following the 1973 oil price shock meant that the development was met with increasing resistance. This culminated in the then Labour leader of Camden's housing committee, Ken Livingstone, calling for an inquiry into the development of Alexandra Road. The enquiry lasted three years between 1975 and 1978 and marked a continuing tension between those who wanted to modernise derelict homes and Camden's existing housing stock for council housing tenants, and those who hoped to build ambitious new estates.[92] By the time the estate was completed in 1979, it was mired in controversy, with complaints aired by some of its earliest residents.[93] Despite this, Alexandra Road, which received Grade II* listing in 1993, is now widely seen as a pinnacle of council housing architecture in Britain and has often been described as an exemplar of ambitious, humane modernism (Figure 5).[94]

Alexandra Road, Hilgrove, and Chalcots reveal colonial continuities, both in their histories of land ownership and in their architectural form. Alexandra Road's history also reveals tensions over the desirability of certain types of home, the power of resident action, and who is seen as deserving of what architectural forms. All three estates point to particular conceptions of class and deservingness and all three reveal colonial histories of extraction that both predated and, in the case of Chalcots, precluded their decommodification.

The histories of the three estates all show how land ownership has been a fundamental determinant of not only the estates' architectures but also the struggle over the right to build them. This raises the question of what colonial legacies mean for how we understand the contemporary struggles for the right to housing. In other words, the three estates prompt a need to follow the thread that links land ownership and the coloniality of property in the city, to the struggle for public housing, and the current housing crisis. The following section consequently looks at what the histories of land ownership and dispossession might mean for the future of public housing.

Who Owns London?

Colonial modes of appropriation have shaped the development and form of the three estates in this study. Likewise, genealogies of working-class resistance, organising, and autonomy have helped bring about cherished aspects of the welfare state including estates like Hilgrove, Chalcots, and Alexandra Road.[95] By recognising that class and race are mutually constituted we aim, in line with Berg and Hudson, to bring decolonial approaches into dialogue with the more widely adopted historiographical approaches to public housing. The historiographies of public housing in London often begin with moments when the scale is in the favour of labour, starting with points of triumph like the creation of the LCC or the 1965 Rent Act. Indeed, the clear fear of 'the socialists' expressed by the fellows of Eton College in their committee meeting is evidence of this.[96] While we do not dispute this dialectical tension, we argue that a history of public housing that begins with who owns the land on which our homes are built and why can enable us to better understand how de-commodification of housing can

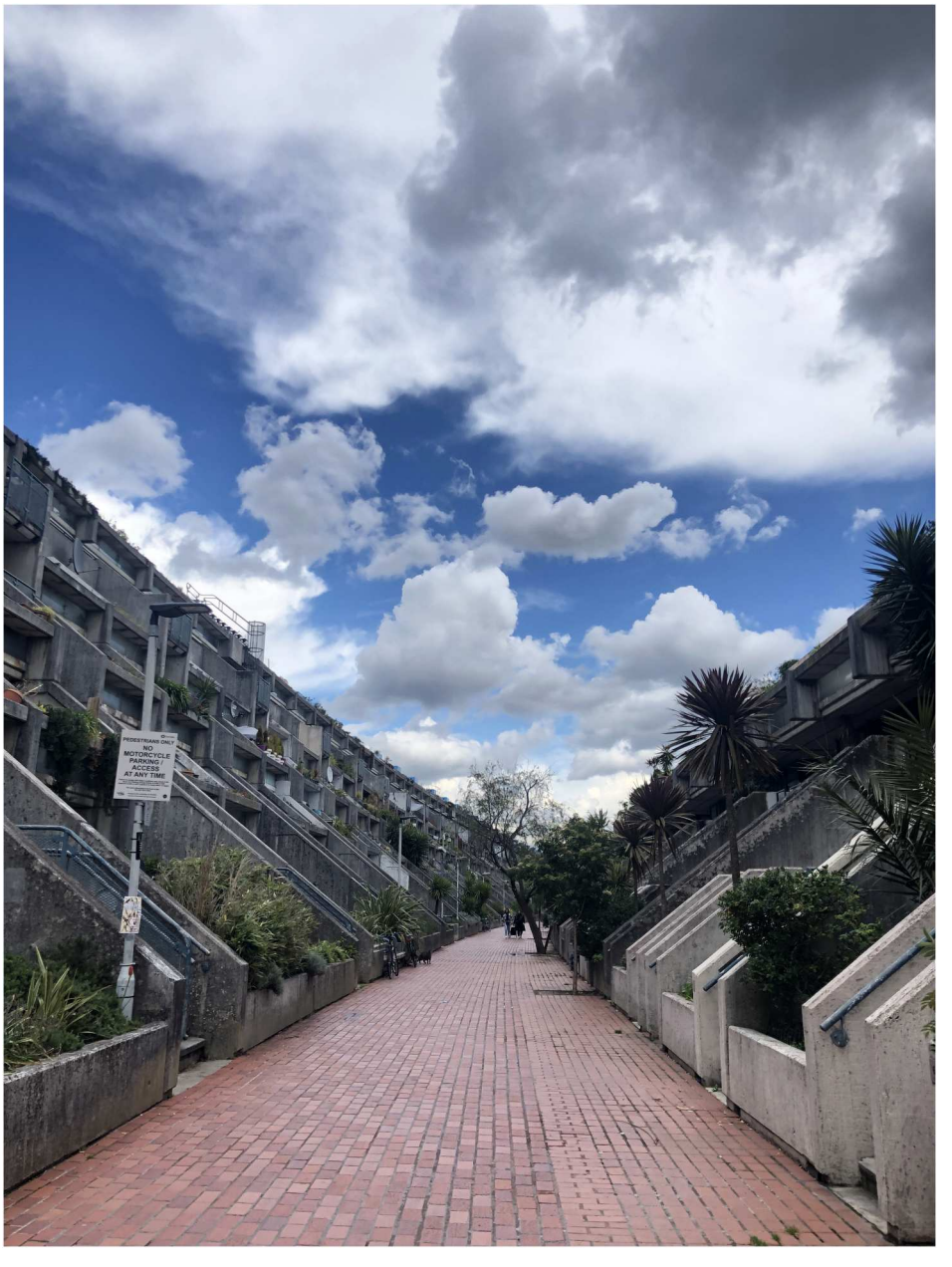

FIGURE 5 Rowley Way, Alexandra Road Estate.

take place in the future. As the housing crisis puts safe, secure, and affordable homes beyond the reach of ever-growing numbers of Londoners, decolonising how we know the city by understanding what the histories of landownership mean for the right to housing can have the potential to inform future activisms. How might, for example, the future of Chalcots look, if Eton were taxed to fund

the housing on the land that they own? Or what ideals of community might emerge from bottom-up or resident led architectures? Such questions might be informed by further study of the coloniality of housing. Building on this study, for example, Susannah Cramer-Greenbaum has begun to map historic and contemporary patterns of land ownership in London using archival and land registry data. In our own co-productive work with residents from the three estates, imagined architectures included everything from goats on the estates' green spaces, to flying cars, and communal swimming pools. Findings from this study may also have implications for campaigns for reparations and link the push for reparations to the future of housing in the city.

For Bhambra and Holmwood, colonial power is central to the construction of the welfare state in Europe.[97] By recognising this centrality, and the mutual construction of race and class, it is possible to begin to build towards future organisation for social justice. This is echoed by Shilliam, who makes clear that his argument that the welfare state is a eugenicist project is not an argument against public goods, but rather an argument for the struggle for public goods as a part of an anti-eugenicist welfare state.[98] In this way, a decolonial approach to public housing and future studies that may reveal similar histories to the ones presented here could have the potential begin to reframe debates about deservingness, placing them instead in a wider conversation about the racialisation of categories of deservingness. By re-telling the stories of these three estates, we have highlighted colonialism's presence in seemingly quotidian spaces, beyond statues and monuments. By arguing that race and the modern law of property share conceptual logics because the legal form of 'property ownership and the modern racial subject are articulated and realised in conjunction with one another', it is possible to see that future debates over public housing should also be considered within a decolonial frame if we are to look beyond a past heyday and towards a future where housing is a right and not a commodity.[99]

Conclusion

In this article, we have used the histories of three north London public housing estates to re-centre the colonial presence and present in the city's housing. In line with Bhambra and Holmwood, we began with the premise that colonialism and the welfare state are deeply imbricated. Our study of the three estates did not seek to uncover colonial histories, but we anticipate that the stories we have traced here are not atypical. We looked at the history of three estates in the London Borough of Camden: Hilgrove, Chalcots, and Alexandra Road. Each of the three estates were built by a different form of local government under different social policy conditions. On Hilgrove, we found that the slave-holding Eyre Estate owned the land on which Hilgrove Estate was built. The Eyre Estate's resistance to council housing being built on its land determined the architecture of the Hilgrove Estate. The architect chosen by the Eyre family projected a particular form of community for an ideal type of deserving working-class resident. On Chalcots, we found that the land the estate was built on is owned by Eton College. We looked at how institutions like Eton benefited

from colonialism and enslavement and looked at the legal and financial relationships between institutions like Eton and companies responsible for the installation of combustible cladding on Chalcots Estate. On Alexandra Road, we considered how Brown transformed marginal land bought from the Eyre Estate by building a concrete edifice that replicated in concrete and, in doing so, reclaimed for the working classes the aesthetic of homes built by the Great Estates for the wealthiest Londoners. Overall, we argue that by uncovering the colonial histories of land ownership in London, we can better understand the struggle for public housing and build towards the future decommodification of land. By decolonising the way we know the city, it may be possible to build towards decolonising the city itself. For us, this would mean changing how and by whom London is owned by making the case for the public ownership of land and housing.

Disclosure Statement

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