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I. **Introduction**

A discourse of 'place' is increasingly being mobilised, and finding a receptive audience, among UK housing practitioners (McKee, 2015; Wainwright and Marandet, 2018). In 2018, for example, the National Housing Federation (NHF) – an industry body representing housing associations across England which together provide homes for over 6 million people – formed the Great Places Commission (GPC) to examine 'how housing associations, working with national and local government and other partners, can create thriving and successful places' (GPC, 2019:5). Its final report urged multiple policy and practice changes aimed at integrating housing into place-specific policy frameworks (such as Local Industrial Strategies) and institutions (such as Local Enterprise Partnerships), as well as developing new sector-wide approaches to partnerships, local procurement, sales of housing stock, and asset-based community development. Such proposals reaffirm that housing associations (HAs) are increasingly expected to serve as place-based anchors in communities (McKee, 2015) – an expectation which seems set to continue as the UK housing sector endeavours to negotiate a new post-pandemic state of affairs (Gurney, 2021). Yet, extant literature shows that the notion of 'place' is a contested one (Warnaby and Medway, 2013) which, despite its seductive appeal among practitioners, is often deployed in managerial contexts with the purpose of promoting unacknowledged political agendas and associated interests (Lucarelli, 2018; Lloveras et al, 2021). Consequently, we posit that the translation of 'place' into HAs' managerial practice should not be treated as self-evident, and warrants a critical scrutiny that is overdue. In other words, how should we understand the assertion of HAs as place management actors? And what have been the consequences?

This paper investigates these important questions in the context of an empirical case: a HA which recently adopted a 'place' strategy and restructured to create new employee positions explicitly oriented toward 'place.' This case emerged as part of an ethnography on a housing estate in a UK city, where we examined how residents organise communal spaces in negotiation with other actors, particularly the landlord – the HA in question. During fieldwork, we learned about the HA's ongoing internal restructuring and the implementation of its first 'place' strategy. So, in addition to ethnographic research and interviews with residents, we also interviewed managers at various levels of the HA to explore its place management practices in conjunction with those of residents. What we found led us to conceptualise a more holistic understanding of place management, one which not only includes the more 'traditional' practices of managing places, but also involves a wide array of practices encompassing economic, political, social, and ecological considerations. Together, these revealed the potential for what we term 'ecological place management,' which we develop in terms of its implications for theory and practice.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we contextualise the emergence of UK HAs, which may be less familiar to the readers of this journal. We then offer a sympathetic critique of existing place management literature (e.g. Yanchula, 2008; Ntounis, 2018), with a particular focus on existing ways housing is understood therein. While UK HAs increasingly exhibit characteristics associated with place management actors (e.g. town centre management organisations and business improvement districts), we reflexively question *how* HAs' uptake of place notions is unfolding. To interrogate this further, we introduce our research site – both the housing estate and HA which manages it – and our methodology for gathering and analysing data. This leads to the presentation of our findings, where we demonstrate the socio-ecological, socio-political, and political-economic dynamics involved as the HA, residents, and other actors participate in what could be regarded as place management practices. In our discussion, we highlight several

implications of our findings, drawing on interdisciplinary research to account for the multiple forces involved in processes of ecological place management. Importantly, we urge greater attention to the ecologies of *both* managing and organising places. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of this ecological frame for both theories and practices of place management more generally. Thus, in the context of UK housing, our paper contributes to understanding the complex ways that place management and organisation are ecologically underpinned (Heikkurinen et al, 2021), calling for place managers to embrace ecological thinking capable of confronting future challenges.

II.   The emergence of housing associations

In the UK, HAs emerged as a mechanism to provide housing to those whose needs were unable to be met by the state (typically local authorities) or the private housing market, co-existing alongside both as part of the 'third sector' (Malpass, 2000; Pawson and Mullins, 2010). Beginning in the 1980's, the widespread model of 'council housing' (wherein local authorities owned and managed most of the publicly available housing stock) was subjected to financial constraints as local authorities became increasingly pressured to reduce their balance sheets, driven by central government's neoliberal ideology (Meek, 2014). However, in contrast to local authorities, HAs had the ability to access financial markets and thereby fund the building and maintenance of housing stock – while, importantly, still operating in a not-for-profit manner and serving a legally obligated social purpose (Manzi and Morrison, 2017). As a result, a series of housing asset transfers from local councils expanded the HA sector considerably, developing into a national policy (Malpass and Mullins, 2010) that has continued in recent years (Marsh, 2018). As Manzi and Morrison, (2017) note, this was a self-reinforcing process: HAs were praised as more financially prudent managers of housing than local authorities (while still fulfilling a social purpose), leading to more

pressure from central government for housing stock transfers from councils to HAs, which in turn enabled HAs to expand their asset base and remain financially viable. Nevertheless, the challenge of balancing competing financial and social demands has become an increasing dilemma in recent years. Changes to both government policy (McKee et al, 2017; Manzi and Morrison, 2017) and the housing market mean that HAs are having to cope with greater portfolio risks (Manzi and Morrison, 2017), financialisation (Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Jacobs and Manzi, 2020), and the continued influence of neoliberalism (Christophers, 2018).

Today, HAs' substantial role as owners, managers, and providers of housing has meant that their social role has expanded concomitantly, a process both constituted through their historical development and circumscribed by law. Their not-for-profit status means that any surplus generated is reinvested in the organisation's activities, including in efforts to deliver socially beneficial outcomes. And, while explicitly *not* government-run, HAs maintain close ties to local authorities – often by local councillors allocated a set number of seats on boards (Marsh, 2018) – although their governance practices are inevitably more 'messy' in specific contexts (McKee, 2010). Moreover, legal obligations shape HAs' commitments to: (1) deliver public benefit while achieving 'value for money' (Marsh, 2018; see also the Public Service (Social Value) Act, 2012); (2) introduce fixed-term tenancies that brings security of tenure into question and, as scholars have described, undermines residents' 'ontological security' (e.g. Madden and Marcuse, 2016); and (3) accommodate the longstanding 'Right to Buy' programme, which since 1980 has allowed residents to purchase their 'council house' at a discount (Fitzpatrick and Watts, 2017). The latter has meant that HAs are characterised by a mixed tenure of social housing renters, owner-occupiers, and private renters (i.e. typically renting from the owners of once publicly-owned homes).

Further developments have only added to this complex situation. For example, while still providers

of mixed tenure social housing, HAs are increasingly building new homes and diversifying their

offer to include market rate, rent-to-buy, and a range of other housing products (e.g. Marsh, 2018),

in part responding to the need to remain financially solvent, while also helping the government

deliver its targets for homebuilding (Meek, 2014). New UK policy developments such as

'devolution' (McKee et al, 2017) and 'levelling up' (Heath, 2022) are also changing the UK housing

landscape, relying on the mobilization of HAs (and other third sector organisations) to combat

austerity and become 'lead agents of local, *place-based solutions* in tackling the problems facing

low-income neighbourhoods' (McKee, 2015:1077, our emphasis). Finally, the sector must also

respond to emergent crises, such as working toward decarbonisation due to the climate

emergency (NHF, 2021) and addressing the multiple social inequalities exacerbated by the Covid-

19 pandemic (Gurney, 2021). Consequently, HAs must grapple with these multiple challenges as

they manifest in specific places (e.g. Wainwright and Marandet, 2018). However, the nature of

HAs' *placedness* and how this shift toward place as a pillar through which to implement

improvements in local areas connects with debates about implementing place management

practice have been hitherto underexplored.

III.   The interface of place management and housing: What role for housing associations?

Place management has been conceptualized as the combination of several practices, including

place marketing, place maintenance, and placemaking (Parker, 2008), that are premised on

partnership-working with other place stakeholders (Yanchula, 2008). As Ntounis (2018) notes,

place management is increasingly focussed on restructuring at the local level toward place-based

outcomes. In this context, some scholars have explored the context of housing as a site where

place management processes occur (see for example, Mowery and Novak, 2016; Read and Sanderford, 2017). Others shift attention to a more specific emphasis on placemaking efforts in housing (e.g. Benkő et al, 2018), analysing the ways housing constitutes a site where places are *made,* rather than a priori *managed* – a conceptual move that aligns with geographers' enlivening of place imaginaries (e.g. Cresswell, 2015).

The housing research reviewed previously offers valuable insights into place management, but it is also important to critically interrogate the extent to which housing is amenable to place management practices in the first place. At its most basic level, housing is a structure comprising a shelter or building wherein some form of dwelling occurs, making it a widely accepted human right (OHCHR, 2009). However, housing is also a multi-actor, multi-scalar *process* involving public/private efforts to ensure that citizens can access and live in suitable homes – to varying degrees of success (Madden and Marcuse, 2016). Considered in this light, housing phenomena become inseparable from broader changes pertaining to the interplay between neoliberal capitalism and urbanisation (Harvey, 2005). Recent years have seen profound changes whereby aspects of urban life, including housing, are increasingly subjected to the deregulation and globalization characteristic of neoliberal capitalism (Madden and Marcuse, 2016). Relatedly, and similar to other kinds of public land, housing has undergone a privatization process that has led to an increasing role for finance (Christophers, 2018). This nexus between liberalisation and financialisation has enabled an explosion of housing development, while also facilitating access to loans for housing construction and refurbishment by a range of entities. One group playing an increasingly important role in these processes within the UK context are HAs (Meek, 2014).

Initially, it would appear that HAs are archetypal place management entities. Recognised as key partners for place-based collaborations (GPC, 2019), HAs operate at the interface of the public, private, and voluntary sectors which Yanchula (2008) argues together manage places. Moreover,

place management's aims of improving places and benefiting those who use them (Gower, 2008) align with the social mission of HAs and their obligations to their users (i.e. residents). However, there are also differences. Particularly significant is HAs' locus of activity: whereas place management has previously found fertile territory in the retail spaces of town/city centres, HAs are concerned with different *kinds* of places – notably, neighbourhoods. Indeed, housing is intimately connected to the rhythms of everyday life (Moran, 2004), the local neighbourhood, wider urban (as well as rural) contexts, and other multi-scalar spatial arrangements (Heslop et al, 2020). Additionally, and in contrast with town centre management initiatives, HAs are not (only) managing the spaces between individual units. They typically own the totality of a spatial area (i.e. the homes and the spaces between/beneath them) making HAs' interest and involvement in the places under their jurisdiction arguably far greater than other place management actors. Finally, to the extent they can be categorised as users, residents of HAs' homes are also *not* solely interested in using places in ways that are (necessarily) foreseeable by HAs. Instead, as we have seen, housing is concomitant with everyday life (Moran, 2004), which complicates HAs' efforts to manage such places.

Based on this, our central research question is: *how* are HAs becoming place management actors in the context of UK housing? By aiming to answer this question, we build from recognition that the movement of place management practices across boundaries and into housing contexts should not go unexamined (Ntounis, 2018). We do not accept *a priori* the correspondence/equivalence between housing and other prevailing contexts for place management inquiry – particularly retail, commercial, and town centres (Parker, 2008). Rather, our paper *denaturalises* (Fournier and Grey, 2000) the unreflexive translation of place management thinking from other domains, and into housing. To investigate this further, we next describe our methodology for empirically researching place management practices in one HA and a housing estate it manages.

IV.   Research site and methodology

Introducing the research site

Our research focuses on one HA (which we pseudonymise as 'CityHousing') that owns and/or manages thousands of homes across a UK city. Specifically, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork on one housing estate within CityHousing's purview, which contains around 250 flats (i.e. apartments). This estate includes a significant amount of shared spaces where (some of) everyday life on the estate occurs, including: streets, play areas, and large shared gardens; communal halls and entryways; virtual and physical residents' groups, etc. CityHousing is legally responsible for both the housing stock and land it sits upon, resulting in ongoing negotiations between CityHousing, residents, the local City Council, and others about the best way(s) to manage and organise these areas.

The housing estate and CityHousing serve as an exemplary case for inquiring into recent efforts to implement place management processes in housing, as well as the potential tensions and limitations therein. This is particularly so because CityHousing was implementing its first 'place' strategy during fieldwork. We therefore critically scrutinise this and other developments, including the role of residents therein, to explore the multiple factors influencing – and influenced by – these nascent place management practices. While we focussed in particular on the housing estate, our research also examined CityHousing's broader efforts to reorient toward place, and thus hold relevance for other places, HAs, and housing contexts. Finally, to protect the anonymity of all participants, the HA and our interviewees – both employees of CityHousing and residents of the estate – have been anonymised.

Methodological approach and data analysis

Over the course of 13 months, we undertook an extensive ethnography on the housing estate in question, while also regularly interacting with employees of CityHousing. To gather data, we entered the field as participant observers: of deliberations at meetings of different residents' groups; through joining informal gatherings (e.g. gardening days, monthly give-and-take stall); and by volunteering at events on the estate (e.g. communal meals). Our participant observation also exposed us to CityHousing employees: we attended three two-hour meetings between residents and employees; shadowed employees' scheduled site visits to the estate; and engaged in informal conversations with employees at the CityHousing offices. Furthermore, we employed several other methods: fieldnotes were recorded during and after immersion in the field; photographs were taken; and archival, policy, and legal documents were gathered. We also conducted 16 ethnographic interviews with residents, as well as five semi-structured interviews with employees of CityHousing and one with a local councillor, which were subsequently transcribed. The latter were loosely structured around an interest in how 'place' was understood, and being integrated, into existing practices by the HA. Together, these data enabled an analytical focus on how CityHousing is working to manage places while also accounting for the processes of negotiation with other actors – especially (but, as we shall see, not only) residents.

In our analysis, we inductively coded our data with an interest in identifying the ways CityHousing's management processes are connected with its nascent focus on place. These were condensed into sets of practices, which were further grouped into sub-thematic categories tied to place management (Ntounis, 2018; see *Table 1*). At the same time, we remained attuned to the fact that housing is a relatively new empirical context for place management practices; indeed, we were finding that much of our data did not neatly fit within the identified categories of place management. More importantly, our ethnography had revealed a more complex situation than

these sub-themes were capturing. As a result, we continued coding our data in an effort to provide

a clearer understanding of how place is being managed on the housing estate. What emerged

were a wider array of practices, which were again condensed into sub-thematic categories, then

themes (see *Table 1*), which accentuate the complexity of place management *vis a vis* housing

by drawing out the ecological, social, political, and economic dimensions therein. We validated

this widened scope through reference to relevant housing (e.g. McKee, 2015; Madden and

Marcuse, 2016) and place management (Benkő et al, 2018; Beza and Hernández-Garcia, 2018)

literatures.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

As is clear from *Table 1*, while we anticipated our findings would focus on the 'typical' actors

expected to manage places (i.e. managers) in a top-down fashion, our analysis provided evidence

of an increasingly complex assemblage of practices being deployed by a constellation of actors,

including CityHousing employees, residents, government, and others, as well as multiple wider

ecological, social, political, and economic processes informing the management and organisation

of place. While we were tempted to treat these dimensions as distinct, such an effort would

mistake conceptual ease for analytical rigour. Instead, we found these different dynamics to be

unfolding together: boundaries are continually (re)articulated between them, rendering the

categories themselves fluid and hybrid (Sheller and Urry, 2003). We have therefore hyphenated

the socio-ecological, socio-political, and political-economic themes emerging from the analysis of

our case. These themes are presented next, after which we discuss the implications of our

findings for place management.

V.   Findings: Dynamics of place management in a housing association

In this section, we first provide an account of how CityHousing is strategically shifting toward place management practices, before developing the other themes we identified in our analysis that nuance and complicate this rendering. Each sub-section title uses an interview excerpt to evoke its thematic underpinning, which is subsequently described.

'A bit of a restructure': A place strategy and emerging place management practices

During our fieldwork, CityHousing was in the midst of implementing its first 'place' strategy, which formalised a commitment to providing place-based services. When we spoke with CityHousing employees both informally and in interviews, they repeatedly attributed this shift toward place as a 'steer from the top' of the organisational hierarchy. As 'Daniel,' a senior executive, explains:

> *My view was there was an opportunity in the areas we work with to take a different role...So our, kind of, vision was to offer a service which was about investing both in people and place, as well as managing their homes and letting them and repairing them, and bringin' them up to full standard. And also concentrating on a high quality design of those particular places sensitive to what that neighbourhood requires.*

This aim of not only managing homes, but also seeking to design and invest in places, reflects Daniel's intention of embedding place-based thinking at CityHousing, which echoes the housing strategy articulated by the City Council and, in turn, reflects CityHousing's close political ties. However, as an HA, CityHousing must nonetheless contend with the fact of their substantial interest in housing assets: in other words, they own and/or manage private spaces. This contrasts with prevailing place management approaches, which often rely on the formation of new organisations (e.g. Business Improvement Districts) *external* to their membership and stakeholders. To the extent that a place focus is *internalised* into HAs, their simultaneous private

asset ownership constitutes an added complexity that they must face in striving to implement place management.

Negotiating – though never fully solving – this private asset/public place paradox requires ongoing work. For example, managers at CityHousing explained how the strategic orientation toward place required some organisational restructuring. 'Sean' describes the creation of new place-based 'area manager' positions:

> *Previously, they had a variety of functions and roles. This year we've done a bit of restructure and we've took some of that role away from the…*[area managers]*…and put it in other parts of the team.*

It is perhaps inevitable that, to ameliorate the challenge of fitting 'place' into its wider managerial remit, CityHousing adapts and adjusts the roles and constituent elements of its organisational structure. This has meant reassigning some of the area managers' '*functions and roles*' to other – typically more junior – employees, presumably so they can dedicate more of their time toward place. At the same time, this strategic reorientation is evident in other strategic documents that contain a set of interconnected organisational commitments to 'place' – although whether such documents are (non)performative vis a vis institutional action is not self-evident (Ahmed, 2006). Regardless, the integration of 'place' into CityHousing's structure and strategic documents demonstrate its shift in scope and focus to more widely encompass the places where housing stock is located.

Moreover, CityHousing is committed to being involved in a series of partnerships for the benefit of the places concerned, a fundamental place management practice (e.g. Yanchula, 2008). In fact, our examination of local policy documents revealed that CityHousing is explicitly identified as a *lead* partner in particular places: through such governmental strategies and frameworks, they implicated in urban regeneration of the city in question. But CityHousing's partnership-working goes further. During fieldwork, we observed how CityHousing works with retailers and private

companies to direct job training and work opportunities toward local residents (a service not limited to rent-paying tenants), and similarly coordinates with charities to help people access services.

Taken together, CityHousing's activities bear strong resemblance to place management practices in more established arenas (e.g. Millington and Ntounis, 2017; Ntounis, 2018). Nevertheless, the context of housing is not without adaptations; in our analysis, we began to critically explore what other dimensions influence CityHousing's place management practice. Among these, particularly notable was frequent focus on environmental considerations – both at CityHousing and on the housing estate in question.

'They've gotta accept that then things will just shift, won't they?': Socio-ecological processes

At CityHousing, questions of the natural environment tend to involve interventions in green spaces. Across its housing properties, some residents care for gardens and other green areas, but often this is not the case. Referring to the housing estate where we conducted fieldwork, Sean explains that it:

> *...is quite specific in that there's certain part of that estate residents look after. Sometimes they can't for various reasons. But some of our other green areas are much bigger and people can't manage them, so we need to think about how we break them up. But we need the community to take...ownership because otherwise it's easy for us just to come along and cut them, that's a very simple way of us managing spaces. But it's not effective, is it?*

While CityHousing hopes for residents and '*the community*' to '*take ownership*' of green space, this must be reciprocated by a desire from residents, who we found to have motivations altogether different from a vague notion of '*ownership.*' We were not entirely surprised that the estate of focus in our fieldwork is framed as a '*quite specific*' and successful case of looking after the

environment. After all, a recurrent problem we heard from residents was the need to take actions despite, conflicting with, or resisting CityHousing's efforts.

Emblematic of the conflictual tensions regarding environmental care on the estate is residents' opposition to the use of herbicides, particularly in several long-standing organic permaculture gardens which are maintained by estate residents and where food is annually produced (and eaten). We observed how navigating this conflict over herbicides requires sustained resident action. Due to residents' opposition, CityHousing's interventions in green spaces are typically limited to weed trimming – which itself can inadvertently kill wildflowers, propagated bulbs, budding plants, and countless other flora. To address this, some gardeners have drawn maps showing which areas should and should not be cut back by CityHousing gardening staff, although these have been only partially effective. A more common practice is to demarcate permaculture areas containing plants that should not be trimmed using sticks or logs (*Figure 1*). These efforts block a weed trimmer's cutting cord and, it is hoped, signal for the user that plants beyond the boundary are to be left alone. Further such material interventions abound: for example, we observed and participated in converting grass to plant beds, fruit bush pruning, tree planting, hand-weeding permaculture gardens, and bucket-watering plants during summer drought. Together, these constitute important placemaking practices for residents.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Nonetheless, maps, territorial markers, and other material practices also require communication. In this respect, a fairly productive dialogue exists between CityHousing and the Tenants' Association on the estate. These regular meetings allow for ongoing negotiations about how green spaces (as well as other material concerns) will be managed by CityHousing or self-

organised by residents. Residents' discussions with CityHousing are premised on a view of their

home as not only an intimate and personal space, but also woven together with everyday life,

place-based connectedness, and ecological systems. Indeed, in contrast to CityHousing,

residents see the natural environment as part of the place itself: plants exist together with – but

also alongside – humans. For example, 'Sarah,' a long-time resident and community activist, uses

the beautifully evocative notion of '*interfering with the weeds*' to explain her gardening philosophy.

And 'Tim', another resident and gardener, describes his practice as follows:

> *I go through phases where, you go through phases of goin', 'I like the anarchy,'*
> *because I just like to see what happens when things are left to their own devices.*
> *I like to – and it is like, actually what happens when this gets left to its own devices.*
> *Now, it gets really messy and horrible. So I'm now happy with that. I'm happy that*
> *that bit, left to its own devices, just gets a bit messy.*

Clearly, Tim makes no effort to impose complete control on the gardens: they get 'messy' on their

own, and this is to his preference. In such cases, residents recognise that green spaces on the

estate emerge *through* human-plant interferences *with each other*, thereby acknowledging the

independent existence of these ecological actors.

Gradually, we began to identify how the active role afforded to plants is extended elsewhere as a

way to justify a range of resistive actions. Frustrated by a general perception that CityHousing

inadequately consults with residents, Sarah suggests that *'they won't bloody properly engage with*

people...so they've gotta accept that then things will just shift, won't they?' She proceeds to

describe how several residents fixed a broken door on the estate after CityHousing had failed to

act. While residents' impetus to act is present, Sarah's question recognises that '*things*' (and not

merely plants) on the estate are also actors that '*will just shift.*' This also highlights the ways that

the estate is a place that exists through social-and-ecological connections with elsewhere: the

broken/fixed door emerges from sawn trees, forged metals, and petroleum-based paints – which

each rely on further agential forces (lumberjacks, saws, forests, extractive industries, industrial

processing etc.). Other actors similarly enable residents' placemaking, including ties between the

estate and a local gardening centre which, during fieldwork, regularly supplied plants and gardening equipment to residents. But these relations can also be antagonistic, such as residents' view that the arrival of students at the nearby University brings crime because they make easy targets for thieves, or the disruption caused by multiple carbon-intensive, high-rise apartment buildings being built across the road from the estate.

Finally, socio-ecological relations influencing the estate also extend to infrastructures of modern life. When a severe plumbing issue occurred in a resident's flat, CityHousing sent out a team several times, then eventually hired a subcontractor to address the overflowing water in the resident's kitchen. However, the problem remained unresolved for an extended period of time, in no small part because the utility company did not have maps of the water mains readily available. We were astonished to learn that the same uncertainty also exists for the natural gas pipes connected to flats. Both were attributed by the CityHousing contractors to being a consequence of the estate's construction in the 1940's. Here, an individual resident's water or gas use is tied to the history of the estate and its construction, as well as the hydraulic and energy infrastructures of Manchester. But these activities are, ultimately, ecologically underpinned: they involve the transformation of nature in the creation of domestic spaces (plumbing, gas, rubbish waste removal), as well as gardens (gardening tools, purchased seeds, consumed fruit) (Kaika, 2004).

Thus, what appears as a hitherto successful case of organising place-based activities becomes complicated when peering beneath the surface of those activities and examining their connections to elsewhere. This set of socio-ecological dynamics is central to CityHousing's efforts at managing place, as well as residents' practices of placemaking. But, in addition to this we also came to understand how these are also tied to social and political dynamics unfolding on the estate, at CityHousing, and more widely.

'It's definitely reactive work': Socio-political dynamics and tensions

Our analysis identified multiple social and political dimensions to CityHousing's activities and interactions with residents (in conjunction with other place-based actors). Residents interested in improving the estate deem moving beyond a narrow concern with one's home to be a prerequisite for meaningful place-based social relationships. Reflecting on this in an interview, Sarah, describes her recognition that:

> *...unless you've actually got people in functioning communities, and with a voice, then there's… there's no point, really. I dunno, that's just, that's what I keep coming back to. And that's the basic thing that needs energy put into helping it work.*

The very existence of communities, then, is premised on a *need* for organising and participating in a range of relatively effective (i.e. '*functioning'*) activities. Our fieldwork uncovered a veritable multitude of such activities, including: organising/attending meetings of the Tenants' Association or other residents' groups; gardening in the large communal green areas; engaging in countless email, text message, and social media exchanges; attending communal meals; donating clothes and unwanted items to the monthly give-and-take stall; and so on. However, what became clear is that the opportunities for engaging are circumscribed by residents' desire to participate. Sarah picks up on this fact, continuing:

> *...some of the people are here because they really want to be here, and then lots of other people are here because they've got nowhere else to go and they're at the bottom of the pile and it's a real mixture of, kind of, intentional community and totally unintentional non-community.*

There is also a (dis)inclination toward involvement based on how and why residents became part of the different communities on the estate. In fact, these multiple communities and their political (non)intentionality are connected – although without strict overlap – to the particular mix of tenancies on the estate, including: social housing tenants, renters of privately-owned flats, residents who own as a result of Right to Buy, and also a housing co-operative. These differing kinds of tenure tend to have corresponding lengths of residence and thus more/less opportunities

to develop ties, deepen connections, and engage with others. Indeed, during fieldwork we came to appreciate the multiple communities and tenancies coming together to generate overlapping and diverging relations.

While the potential of the place relies on residents' intentionality and tenure, a contrasting view is presented by CityHousing employees. During interviews, managers regularly utilised the notion of 'community' as a singular phenomenon. For example, as 'Elliot' explains:

> *I feel like the business* [CityHousing] *recognizes so many facets of a community and things that can help the community to thrive. I feel like we as a business want to be a part of it all.*

Similar statements abound, from 'Liam' emphasising that the sub-contracted companies CityHousing employs must '*give back to the local community,*' to Sean explaining that CityHousing's place approach means '*we go out and do stuff in the community.*' Implicit in such statements is a homogenising view – note Elliot's shift between articles, from 'a' to 'the' community – overlooking the fact that *communities* are multiple in urban life (Blokland, 2017). Leaving such nuance unacknowledged in favour of claims about a singular, definable entity generates attendant differences in how the spatiality of community is conceived: namely, it allows CityHousing employees to construct community as a spatially segregated group amenable to managing. This disregard for difference ignores the political potential of both communities (Blokland, 2017) and space (Massey, 2005).

A similar tendency is evident with regards to the uneasy fit of 'place' with the daily activities of CityHousing employees. In an informal conversation discussing their move toward a place-based approach, several managers shared the view that '*it's definitely reactive work'* before describing typical instances when they must respond to issues raised by residents, rather than pre-empt them. In the same conversation, Liam shares a joke amongst colleagues: problems inevitably seem to arise toward the end of a working week, which has given rise to the adage around the

office that '*it always happens on a Friday.*' There is a potential contradiction here between CityHousing's activities and those of residents: housing and residents' activities are interwoven with everyday life (Moran, 2004), which does not fit with the regular office hours of CityHousing's employees. As with notions of community, tensions exist between a discourse of managing places and the socio-political character of actual practices in places. This has a depoliticising effect, which can be explored further by examining the question of scale.

As CityHousing integrates place into its strategic approach, it has had to reassess the scale of its activities: directing its activities toward places – rather than solely housing stock – means confronting the question of what constitutes a place. The urban housing which CityHousing manages is situated in the dense bricolage of neighbourhoods, communities, retail, infrastructure, green spaces, and more comprising urban life, making any delineation of 'place' a complicated process. It was this milieu, and how the housing estate of focus in this paper and HA themselves are embedded within such complexity, that interested us during our research. In practice, the diversity of place is reconciled with the many properties under CityHousing's management in a way that is not entirely detached from places themselves. For example, the wider neighbourhood where the estate is situated has a strong place identity, a fact recognised by Sean in an interview. Still, CityHousing internally compartmentalises that neighbourhood into two 'place areas,' indicating a need to manage their private assets. This is particularly clear when, reflecting on the 250 flats comprising the estate, Sean calculates that '*most of our places have about 1000 properties that we own, so at the best [the estate] is probably a quarter of one, one place.*' Such a demarcation of a place, and its fractional division based on number of properties, requires overlaying a rigid, rational template over the rich tapestry of place.

Another employee explained how CityHousing is aiming to align its 'place boundaries' so that they fit with the City Council's wards (i.e. sub-city districts), which is anticipated to facilitate

communication, collaboration, and access to ward-specific data. The adherence to prevailing political institutions once again relies on a rationalistic practice of hanging discrete boundaries onto place. This obscures recognition of the aforementioned complexity of communities and places, their functioning, or the political intentionalities therein; and it ignores the entanglement of places *with each other*. This, in turn, is connected to, and partly driven by, the particular political-economic context of CityHousing's efforts to manage places.

'There isn't much point bein' a charity if you're broke': Political-economic considerations

Our analysis also revealed the salient influence of the UK's neoliberal political economy on CityHousing's efforts to manage place. As previously stated, HAs can access credit to invest in their public housing stock in ways that local authorities cannot – a policy change aimed at removing assets from government ownership and shifting them to the private sector (Christophers, 2018). Of course, accessing credit has also meant that HAs' ability to deliver a service (i.e. housing) must generate revenue to repay financial loans within their existing not-for-profit, charitable governance framework. This was poignantly evident at CityHousing. Daniel, the senior executive, recurrently focussed on the significance of financial considerations for CityHousing, describing, for example, how 'a *housing association like us is an asset-based organisation with a stock of a value, which has guaranteed revenue streams through rent, and against that you could borrow from the private sector, which the local authority couldn't do.*' Here, notions of 'value' and 'revenue' seep into the description of CityHousing's activities. Indicative of the broader financialisation of housing (Madden and Marcuse, 2016), CityHousing cross-subsidises some of its housing estates through newer, higher quality, attractively-designed developments.

While tapping into shifting capital flows is important for CityHousing, its trajectory with relation to place is also concerned with making a contribution to the locales in which it operates in the form of 'social value.' As mentioned previously, CityHousing and other HAs are *obliged* to deliver 'social value' under the Social Value Act (2012). This materialises in another important guiding document we were repeatedly urged to examine as evidence of their place-based approach: CityHousing's 'social investment' strategy. As an indicator CityHousing uses to track its social investment performance, 'social value' typically involves requiring contractors and other organisations they work with to purchase local materials and/or employ local people. The legislation giving rise to this activity (i.e. Social Value Act 2012), is centred on valuing – in practice, measuring – socially beneficial activities. This has a dual impact of both metricising social impacts into quantifiable criteria and measuring the replacement of governmental obligations toward society with those of the private sector, together revealing the deeper ideological commitment to neoliberalism (Christophers, 2018). Such a policy necessarily influences CityHousing's social investment strategy whilst having broader impacts on the services available to local residents, which become counted, tracked, and reported as training classes attended, job placements secured, hours of advice freely given, and so on.

The consequences of a neoliberal political economy extend elsewhere. We encountered multiple instances where CityHousing supports cultural projects, including through help-in-kind, such as free mentoring. However, we found that most of its assistance is financially-oriented: upskilling residents for the job market, helping residents with applications for national and local grant funding schemes, undertaking its own grant-making, and running community events. On the estate we examined, several projects have received substantial financial investment from national grant-funding bodies, the local authority, and CityHousing. Sean articulates this point forcefully:

> *To be brutally honest with you, we have pumped a lot of money into that area, into that estate. They've got things that nobody else has ever got, the intranet for example. Nobody else in our areas have got any of that, and there's been a lot of*

hard work tryin' to develop and move that forward, but it all cost a lot of money to put in, and to do. We've done it to try and make the estate more engaged and better.

Here, the effort to help the estate maintain its intranet and internet service (particularly the substantial cost of the project), is seen as emblematic of CityHousing's support for the estate. But it also relies upon conflating increased financial investment with more engagement, improvement, and, ultimately, greater delivery of social value.

CityHousing's efforts to quantify its activities are reflective of the national context wherein private charities are expected to fulfill roles previously delivered by government – another pillar of the neoliberal project. Yet, interviewees were careful to distinguish CityHousing from local government. After recounting in an interview some of the ways it ensures its own financial resilience, Daniel contrasts CityHousing with government:

What we're not about is being the local state. It's about enabling people to take a bit more control with our help, but not about a subsidy. It's about a helping hand but not continually -- and we always have to do things which makes us some money as well.

The organisation must navigate its charitable aim of supporting people and places, a legislative demand for social value, and a financial necessity for profitability – within this neoliberal milieu. The result is a sort of ambivalence and confusion about organisational identity. In interviews, employees oscillated between describing the organisation as a charity with the aforementioned social value obligation, and arguing it has to think and act like a business. Daniel states that, '*while we may be a charity, there isn't much point bein' a charity if you're broke, cuz you can't do anything.*' CityHousing is thus complicit in the political effort of substituting local government with private services *because* it understandably seeks to continue to exist as an organisation in this context. In these ways, neoliberalism's reshaping of government's role in the economy can be located amongst CityHousing's place management practices as it participates in a political economy which is reordering and reorganising the world.

VI.   Discussion: Toward ecological place management

Our findings demonstrate that CityHousing's increasing aspirations to 'manage' places are occurring along with multiple socio-ecological, socio-political, and political-economic considerations, which raises the question of the relationship between these hybrid dynamics and CityHousing's place management practices. In this regard, a paramount implication of our research is support for a more holistic understanding of place management in housing: in addition to CityHousing's organisational restructuring toward a place-based focus, its working in place-specific partnerships, and managerial strategies oriented toward 'place,' an expansive set of other activities are involved. Ecological considerations regarding green spaces or plumbing issues must be socially negotiated; political questions about 'community' or 'place' boundaries exist in tension with the social relations constituting them; and late capitalism is entangled with the prevailing neoliberal political ideology. In these contexts, CityHousing must also contend with resident activities and activism – as well the agential role of other non-human actors, from waste collection to water's domestication and their multiple underpinning material infrastructures. These complex realities that CityHousing, and other HAs, must grapple with in their uptake of 'place' reflect the convoluted state of contemporary housing (Kaika, 2004; Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Fitzpatrick and Watts, 2017).

Yet, while the evidence indicates there is a need to extend our conceptualisation of place management, there are significant challenges associated with accommodating this complexity in practice. Consider how inattention to the socio-ecological aspects highlighted above leaves CityHousing poorly positioned to deal with their outcomes, from unawareness of the water and

gas infrastructure plans to the increasingly catastrophic consequences of environmental changes wrought by urbanisation (Beza and Hernández-Garcia, 2018). Similarly, places are organised in/through multiple socio-political rhythms (Nash, 2020), so any demand on managers to address *place* issues, while nonetheless remaining responsible for housing, may force them into a reactive mode that exhibits an out-of-sync arrhythmia with places (Lefebvre, 2004). Finally, the paradoxical commitment to deliver services more broadly for places – rather than simply for residents – within the constrained operating space afforded by public sector austerity demonstrates the unrelenting pressure of neoliberal political economy on CityHousing and other HAs (e.g. McKee, 2015), which exists for place managers more broadly (Millington and Ntounis, 2017). However, neoliberalism is a *specific configuration*, rather than a totalizing force. The shift toward place-based approaches and broader concerns for public welfare (from providing employment support or community grants to Covid-19 assistance or decarbonisation) demonstrates that the changing nature of public-private distinctions not only includes neoliberal logics but also extends beyond them (Sheller and Urry, 2003). In other words, the uptake of place by HAs is inevitably influenced by neoliberalism, *and also* by the socio-political reconfiguration of HAs' relationship toward public space and socio-ecological processes underpinning urban life.

An important consequence of the above is that the hybrid dynamics of place management identified in our analysis are not ontologically equivalent. Their relations rest upon recognition that the political and economic dimensions of places are part of – and influence – broader social relations, which are all in turn ultimately reliant upon ecological systems and metabolic flows of matter-energy (Swyngedouw and Kaika, 2014). This imbues (place) management in such contexts with an obligation and normative aim of 'meeting the needs of earthbound actors' (Heikkurinen et al, 2021:32), a constraint which cascades down to the social, political, and economic dimensions. In this way, place management practice can be understood as an ethical

endeavor that, while intersecting with political-economic and socio-political processes, exists within the boundaries of social and ultimately ecological systems.

Therefore, we propose an *ecological* frame for capturing these complexities and challenges of extending place management to housing. Lucarelli's (2018; 2019) development of an 'ecological approach' to place branding is instructive, particularly his call for 'analyses to move beyond neoliberalism, seen here as a "mere" contemporary series of events, by recognising place [management] as inextricably linked to modernity' (Lucarelli, 2018:15). This makes space for socio-political and socio-ecological dynamics in contemporary society transpiring *alongside*, *amongst*, and *aside from* the particular neoliberal political-economic configuration. In other words, an ecological understanding of place management in housing incorporates multiple urban governance processes to assess the variegated and novel ways that places, politics, and urban actors are entangled together, situating HAs' management of places within/between/at the center of these wider dynamics. At the same time, ecological place management warrants wariness of reductionist understandings of places which, our findings suggest, tend to privilege managing *at the expense of place*, obviating the tensions intrinsic to places in favour of a productivist mode of management. Instead, an ecological lens captures the need for *moderation* and acknowledges that, ultimately, social relations bear an ecological cost and therefore must be managed with care (Heikkurinen et al, 2021). This aligns with a view of place as relational, open, and interconnected (e.g. Massey, 2005), paving the way for integration of socio-ecological, socio-political, and political-economic *multiplicity* into organisations' place management approaches (Ntounis, 2018). One important means for accomplishing this is through a shift in thinking toward organising, a point we return to subsequently.

How, then, can our conceptualisation of ecological place management apply to practice? What can place managers do to adopt this extended approach to managing places? In HAs, ecological

place management foregrounds the importance, even urgency, of improving the socio-ecological conditions of places. In practical terms, this includes retrofitting existing homes to minimise their carbon footprint, such as through investing in home insulation, installing the most ecologically robust heating and water infrastructure, and adopting measures that encourage residents to reduce material use in line with planetary boundaries (Steffen et al, 2015). Equally, however, HAs should realise the social benefits of ecological engagement by improving access to green spaces, deepening communities' capacity to determine the future of shared spaces, and encouraging participation in local civic life. The political and economic contexts within which these occur have, in the past, tended to subordinate ecological concerns to priorities of the neoliberal state (e.g. McKee, 2015) and/or the capitalist-growth regime (Vandeventer et al, 2019). If HAs want to contribute to maintaining a habitable planet, this cannot continue. Instead, ecological place managers must privilege social and ecological concerns, rather than a reliance on delivering growth and profitability, while also crafting politically actionable narratives about the positive consequences of managing places in an ecologically sound way. The explicit creation of roles with an ecological remit, such as 'ecological place manager' positions, is one way to begin this process, but ultimately ecological considerations must be woven into the very institutional fabric of HAs (as well as local authorities and other place actors). A strategic reorientation toward ecological place management will prove useful in this regard, which should include imbedding ecological thinking and practice in areas such as strategy formulation, employee training, and subcontractor agreements.

Thus, our ecological place management framing refocuses inquiry on both '...the major key (i.e. discourse, institutions) and minor key (i.e. practices, everyday life) of politics' that together assemble in places (Lucarelli, 2018:16). To this end, we find promise in the potential for notions of 'organising' to contribute toward enlivening the imaginaries of ecological place management by recognising that 'managing' is only one mode of organising (e.g. Parker et al, 2014). Seen this

way, the multivarious nature of *place organising* involves a wide range of practices which generate (temporary) place-based orderings and stabilisations of complex socio-ecological relations, which are the foundations upon which socio-political and political-economic systems rely. Organising not only accounts for the heterogeneous factors coming together in places, but more forcefully it also calls for a radically contingent view of the best way to organise (or manage) places. This raises questions that ecological place managers must grapple with, such as: how should places (whether in the context of housing, town centres, or elsewhere), understood as ecologically underpinned, be accounted for in management practice? Within the context of the climate emergency and socio-ecological crises, whose interests should be prioritised? And should the processes of organising everyday life be subject to managerial impulses? We do not presume to provide readymade answers to these questions, but rather encourage their contemplation, discussion, and integration into a form of place management capable of helping organise places and transforming them for a socio-ecologically just and sustainable future.

VII.   Conclusions: From ecological place management to organising tomorrow's places

This paper has examined the recent incorporation of 'place' within UK HAs by focusing on the emergence of a place-based approach at CityHousing and one housing estate they manage. We have scrutinized the hybrid varieties of practices characterising what might be called the *ecologies* of place management. In doing so, a key aim of our paper has been to clarify the multiple interconnected processes involved as housing practitioners look to implement place management: socio-ecological processes in action, combined with socio-political tensions that must be navigated and a particular neoliberal political economy. Our proposal to conceptualise this as ecological place management contributes to existing debates which acknowledge the multiplicity of place itself (Lucarelli, 2018; Ntounis, 2018), while also encouraging housing

practitioners to enliven their thinking about the richness, multiplicity, and scalar complexities of the places with which their management practices are increasingly entangled.

A key implication of our work is that, as place management practices travel to new arenas such as housing, we need to pay attention to the particular kind(s) of practices occurring in specific contexts. To this end, an ecological understanding of place management can better grasp its spatially specific nuances in the case of HAs and other housing practitioners. Equally, however, other place management processes are not static; we call for renewed attention to the ecologies of place management amongst existing place management actors, including town centre managers, business improvement districts, placemaking organisations, and others. Consequently, our paper denaturalises and gives renewed impetus to interrogating the politics of place management.

While our ethnography did not encounter ecological place management fully realised, we have contributed an empirical case that demonstrates the potential for greater enrollment of ecological thinking in CityHousing, HAs, and place management more generally. Equally, we found that an ecological approach makes room for the richness of everyday life that unfolds in places. The fact is that places are always organising and being organised; managers' temptation to exert control over these stabilisations of socio-ecological life should not be treated as a given, nor should it be the aim of place management. Instead, ecological place management contributes to understanding the multiplicity of ways in which reality is performed through mundane, everyday practices, calling upon anyone seeking to serve and improve places to act as catalysts for organising more socially and ecologically sustainable futures, whether in housing, at the neighbourhood scale (e.g. Beza and Hernández-Garcia, 2018), in town and city centres, and elsewhere. We therefore urge further research on 'place organising' as a concept with potential

to unsettle place management scholarship and further develop our understanding of the ecologies of places.

To conclude, we hope that our paper has started to map new trajectories for theorising, studying, and practicing place management in more ecologically-minded ways. More ambitiously, our hope is that ecological thinking might elevate the tone and pitch of place management debates to match the urgency of responding to contemporary interconnected crises as they manifest in places (Lloveras et al, 2021). Such a change would reorient place management toward both tackling current ecological, social, and political challenges, and better anticipating future emergent ones. Here, place managers and place management scholars have a capacity, perhaps even an obligation, to act. This paper makes clear that adopting an ecological approach to place management can equip us for the hard tasks ahead of addressing the confounding challenges society faces and better organising tomorrow's places.

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Theme	Sub-thematic condensed codes	Indicative practices
Place management practices	Administrative bureaucracy Changing roles/restructuring Management strategies Partnerships	CityHousing's 'place' and 'social investment' strategies Housing partnerships, third sector Restructuring toward place Consultations/negotiations with residents
Socio-ecological processes	Bottom-up activities, activism Comparatives: relational and broader contexts Changing uses of space	Caring for green spaces Gardening, growing food, environmental activism Waste, water, food, and energy use
Socio-political dynamics	Power-laden communication Relations with residents Community Culture, attitudes	Community engagement Everyday life inclusion, and participation Changing policy and political contexts
Political-economic context	Financial focus (money, jobs, capital) Government policies, politics Relations with government	Financialisation and financial viability Quantifying social value Business profitability

Table 1: Themes, sub-thematic condensed codes, and indicative practices

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Figure 1: Sticks as a boundary marker demarcating permaculture gardens