



# Door Locks, Wall Stickers, Fireplaces: Assemblage Theory and Home (Un)Making in Lewisham's Temporary Accommodation

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**Abstract:** This paper explores resident experiences of life in PLACE/Ladywell, a “pop-up” social housing scheme in London providing temporary accommodation for homeless families. Specifically, we consider barriers to, and assertions of, homemaking in this temporary setting through fixtures and fittings—a door lock, wall stickers, and a fireplace. The paper utilises assemblage thinking to understand homemaking within these time-limited and constrained circumstances. Despite their seeming banality, fixtures and fittings offer a material, politicised, and lively means of studying the attempted and thwarted production of home by residents living in PLACE/Ladywell. The absence of door locks reduces parents’ ability to maintain privacy and intimate relations; restrictions on hanging pictures and other decorative measures are circumvented by the use of wall stickers; and a defiant decorative fireplace establishes a sense of home in a temporary setting. Together, these objects constitute vital elements in negotiations between fixity and impermanence in temporary accommodation.

**Keywords:** precarity, homemaking, homelessness, materiality, assemblage, affect

## Introduction

Whatever you have in your rooms think first of the walls for they are that which makes your house and home, and if you do not make some sacrifices in their favour you will find your chambers have a kind of makeshift, lodging-house look about them ... (William Morris delivering a 1882 lecture about wallpaper and “The Lesser Arts of Life”)

In a cupboard, in a flat purpose-built as temporary accommodation, sits a large roll of Laura Ashley<sup>1</sup> wallpaper. The wallpaper, like its owner Gemma, is waiting;

waiting for a much wished-for “permanent” home. Here, though, there are rules against fixing anything to the walls, and, even if these were relaxed, it would be a waste of expensive wallpaper to decorate a flat granted to her for a maximum of two years. “It’s gonna sit there and it’s gonna wait until I get my permanent place”, Gemma told us, “and then I cannot wait to get it up ... it’s only been in the box for like the last four years, but it will be up”. In the meantime, stick-on wall decorations, what she calls “little touches”, serve as markers of a home that cannot be fully realised at PLACE/Ladywell, a much lauded social housing development where she and other homeless families live on an interim site in Lewisham, South East London.

The conception and development of PLACE/Ladywell, the UK’s first “pop-up village” is borne out of a now-chronic housing crisis characterised by limited genuinely affordable housing stock, increasing numbers of people living in the poorly regulated private rented sector, and skyrocketing levels of homelessness. At the same time as increasing precarity in the private rental sector, social housing stock has deeply diminished. While in 1970 there were 157,026 local authority housing completions across the UK, by 2004 this had dropped to just 140, and recent data for 2016 showed 3305 completions (Wilcox et al. 2018). One of the outcomes of this has been a rise in the number of families living in emergency bed and breakfast accommodation (Wilson and Barton 2019). In the face of a growing temporary accommodation emergency and a national government unwilling to invest in large-scale social housing construction, local authorities are pioneering creative ways of improving affordable and temporary housing provision. In the case of Lewisham Council, this has meant returning to, and modernising, post-World War II solutions of using prefabricated construction methods to build cheaply and at speed (Harris et al. 2019a, 2019b).

PLACE/Ladywell was designed by the world-renowned architecture firm Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners (RSH) and has been widely acclaimed by both City Hall and the media since its completion in 2016 (Gavron 2017; Kollewe 2016; Marrs 2017; New London Architecture 2017).<sup>2</sup> The development’s modular design is seen as proof of concept that non-traditional building methods and the flexible re-adaption of vacant space can alleviate the housing crisis. Currently, PLACE/Ladywell occupies the site of the former Ladywell Leisure Centre. The building is expected to move to another site—hence its “pop-up” moniker—when the land it currently occupies is developed for longer-term use.

The development consists of 24 two-bedroom flats—each with an open-plan kitchen/living room and private balcony—across three floors, with the ground floor units rented commercially. The first 23 (one flat remains a show-room) families to live in PLACE/Ladywell were selected according to several criteria, such as people deemed to have a strong need to be in Lewisham, and those not in rent arrears or seen to be making a sufficient effort to pay overdue rent. Rent paid by PLACE/Ladywell tenants varies according to their income, up to a maximum £265 per week according to one resident. It is planned that original residents will be housed there for a maximum of two years, after which there will be a second intake. This model relies on residents successfully bidding for permanent social housing within this two-year period (Harris et al. 2019a).

Drawing on research conducted across 2016–2017, we explore residents' experiences of living, temporarily, in PLACE/Ladywell and do so through fixtures and fittings<sup>3</sup>—a door lock, wall stickers, and a fireplace—which emerged in our interviews as central to participant stories of homemaking. Despite their seeming banality, fixtures and fittings, we argue, offer a material, politicised, and lively means of studying the attempted and thwarted production of home by residents living in PLACE/Ladywell. As Speer (2018:11) writes, “homelessness can be seen as the condition of having no fixed location and being continually forced to move between sites”. While the “pop-up” model of PLACE/Ladywell reproduces rather than addresses this condition, our research examined how residents nonetheless assert their right to dwell there through these fixtures and fittings.

We conducted interviews with seven residents in their flats. Key stakeholder interviews were also conducted with PLACE/Ladywell's architects, Lewisham Council and local MPs. Interviews focused on residents' prior housing biographies, journeys into homelessness, and their hopes and aspirations regarding future homes. All participants had young families with two or more children, and the majority were the (female) heads of single-parent households. All had become homeless as a consequence of eviction from the private rented sector: be that due to landlords raising rents or selling properties, or unexpected unemployment leaving them unable to pay the rent.

We spent time with residents in their flats, exploring their experiences of and opinions on PLACE/Ladywell as well as of the accommodation they had previously lived in. Given that PLACE/Ladywell is temporary accommodation, we were interested in whether, and if so how, it improved residents' lives while they waited to be housed permanently. We recruited participants, with prior permission from Lewisham Council, through door knocking and posting flyers at PLACE/Ladywell. For increased anonymity all names and identifying details have been changed.

A key conceptual mark of our paper is rooted in its use of assemblage thinking to understand homemaking under these time-limited and constrained circumstances. In the next section we outline how we advance work in geography on assemblage and how we foster dialogue with work on critical geographies of home and vital materialism. The research and analysis presented thereafter is divided into three sections, one for each fixture and fitting. The conclusion brings together our reflections on their status as vital elements in negotiations between fixity and impermanence in temporary accommodation.

## **Assemblage Thinking and Materialities of Home**

Objects and materials have long been understood as central in the construction of home and in processes of dwelling (McFarlane 2011; Miller 2008, 2010). Through the exploration of three examples—the door lock, wall stickers, and a fireplace—we consider these fixtures and fittings as lively elements of assemblages of homemaking and “unmaking” (Baxter and Brickell 2014; Brickell 2014), elements that can assist in both territorialising and deterritorialising spaces in order to enable or disable the production of home. Rather than decentring human agency and accountability, we show how they can exacerbate, but also contest,



**Figure 1:** Exterior of PLACE/Ladywell (photograph by Katherine Brickell, 2017) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

unequal power balances between human agents; here, homeless families living in PLACE/Ladywell, the architects that designed it, and Lewisham Council who commissioned and manage the property. As such, we consider homemaking as experienced in an environment where making a durable sense of home is unambiguously discouraged. Emphatically impermanent, both in terms of how long residents can stay and in how long the building itself will remain in situ, PLACE/Ladywell is not designed as a long-term home. It has been argued that disasters such as earthquakes “prompt explicit engagements with the city as a material and social assemblage” including “at the level of intimate experience” (Angell 2014:676), making “relations between people and their landscape” especially “self-conscious” and “active” (Dawdy 2006:720, quoted in Angell 2014:676). We argue that the same is true of the slow crisis of homelessness; a disaster situation in which there is heightened sensitivity to the capacities of materials and objects to afford or deny homemaking, as well as to the politicised distribution and governance of those materials by human actors.

We suggest that the door lock, wall stickers and fireplace were so significant to our participants because they are objects which require, and are mobilised, to generate fixity. Dwelling, for McFarlane (2011), is a process of assemblage; the territorialisation of objects and spaces into a relatively stable configuration that enables domestic life to take place. Assemblages require fixity to hold their elements together; the less fixed relations between elements are, the more precarious the assemblage and the more easily it can be deterritorialised; unmade. We show through these three examples that all relate to attempts to fix things in place, how they are part of both processes of territorialisation and deterritorialisation of PLACE/Ladywell as home, key elements in contestations over the right to dwell in temporary accommodation. They have, therefore, political potencies and

affordances that require academic study. In this regard, the paper advances assemblage thinking and its connection to scholarship on critical geographies and materialities of home in three main ways.

Firstly, the paper positions the domestic as a politicised and contested assemblage of persons and “things” that warrants greater attention in the uptake of assemblage thinking in geography. Geographers have long argued that the home and acts of homemaking are intrinsically political, affected and shaped by governance practices and rhetoric, and actively impacting wider politics (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Brickell 2012a, 2012b, 2020). In this paper we understand homemaking as the suturing of social relationships, identities, and materialities; a “pattern of regular doings, furnishings and appurtenances”, which fashion and reproduce the domestic (Douglas 1991:290). Through these doings, the home is understood as a key site which anchors senses of belonging and through which selfhood is constituted and performed (Jacobs and Smith 2008). Homemaking is also a process that “continues and consolidates itself with each event of significance that adds to the sense of home by overcoming the obstacles which might diminish it” (Dayaratne and Kellett 2008:66) As Pilkey (2014:1143) writes in his exploration of the homemaking practices of older gay men in London, “the accumulation and arrangement of objects at home are materialisations of our ongoing construction of subjectivity: these objects are physical realisations of personal meanings and interpersonal social relations”. They are also materially imbued practices of political significance. Fernández Arrigoitia (2014:188), for example, has explored how material components of home, namely lifts and stairs in a public housing block in Puerto Rico, have political significance, “with a history and role to play in producing certain experiences, sensations, ideas and therefore actions (or inactions) regarding public housing at a number of different intersecting scales”. In the context of public, emergency, and other forms of housing that have become disassociated with normative understandings of “home”, the materiality of housing becomes a component in the delegitimisation of residents’ rights to home. For the residents of the Puerto Rican block, the affective outcome of decaying lifts and stairwells was the reinforcement of a system of assemblage whereby social housing tenants, and working-class people more widely, are understood as less deserving of home, and thus their precarious housing conditions constructed as legitimate.

In this context, the paper argues that the denial of, or control over, homemaking objects and materials can undermine the construction and maintenance of identities and senses of self-worth for homeless families. If affective life is “always-already mediated; emergent from specific material arrangements” then we argue that affective experiences of precarity and stigma emerge from the constrained assemblages of homemaking at PLACE/Ladywell. Further, we argue that these constraints are politically motivated, amounting, here, to a denial of rights for those in emergency accommodation to make home that stems from, and plays into, a broader discouragement and stigmatisation of social housing tenancies in the contemporary political climate. As Speer (2018:200) concurs, “[i]deology and material practice are interdependent, and the material condition of homelessness is deeply imbricated with the condition of being ideologically disregarded by

society". For inhabitants of temporary accommodation then, the regulation of domestic life can (re)produce stigmatising representations of homeless families as inept and "revolting" (Nowicki et al. 2019; Tyler 2013). This has the additional potential to enact an ideologically driven denial of homemaking against families who have "failed" to secure housing in the private market, therefore valorising constraints to their expressions of home (Nowicki 2017; Speer 2017). Working to challenge "the common assumption that being homeless is the opposite of being domestic", Fraiman (2017:158) writes that homelessness is "less the absence of domesticity than a fragmented manifestation of it—domesticity in pieces, shattered under the pressure of homelessness". Much like her work which speaks to homemaking "hampered and partial but still being done", our paper looks to the impeded and obstructed assemblage of home undertaken by residents in PLACE/Ladywell. Working from the premise that assemblages are always, to varying degrees, precarious (DeLanda 2002), we consider how the assemblage of home is especially precarious in temporary accommodation. Homes made in PLACE/Ladywell are assemblages in disequilibrium, where attempts to fix elements together come up against the prevailing force of impermanence. As Lancione (2016:371) comments from his work on homelessness in Turin, Italy, there is a clear value in looking at the everyday assemblages of "life at the margins". Just as geographers have looked to "the different practices people employ to stay put" (Lees et al. 2018:349), our paper focuses on those used by residents to assert the right to fixity "in the meanwhile".

It should be noted that whilst the lack of fixity in domestic settings is not unique to formerly homeless people in temporary accommodation, the experiences recounted to us by PLACE/Ladywell residents are nonetheless indicative of how housing markets establish a "hierarchy of permanence" that determine who has the right to modify their domestic surroundings. For example, Soaita and McKee (2019) have recently documented how private renters in the UK experience the destabilising effects of impermanence, including restrictions on decorating practices and living with broken objects. The authors highlight the impact of this destabilisation of renters' ability to construct and secure a sense of home in inherently temporary settings. However, we argue that this lack of fixity is experienced all the more acutely by formerly homeless families, who alongside this experience of material impermanence are forced to live with compounding precarities and stigmatisation, which over time exacerbates their capacity to be affected by housing precarity and material elements of home (un)making.

Our second contribution to assemblage thinking, which builds links with critical geographies and materialities of home, is the argument that the fixtures and fittings of home and their assemblage have affective capacities which are activated and/or mobilised in situations of struggle and resistance and which require scholarly attention. Since the "material turn" in the social sciences (Whatmore 2006) academics have explored the "vitality" (Bennett 2004) and potential "disobedience" (Flood and Grindon 2014) of objects which are significant to political processes and events (Bennett 2010; Tolia-Kelly 2012). This includes recognition of the importance of objects and materials in the making, remaking, and unmaking of unequal urban environments (McFarlane 2011). For McFarlane (2011:650),

objects and materials are gathered in urban settings in order to enact “dwelling” as “a form of urban assembly”. An important element of the dwelling process is how material components of homemaking activate capacities of human subjects to be affected. Sometimes these generate affects of comfort and security linked to ideal versions of home or, conversely, as in our research, affects of discomfort and precarity. Following McFarlane (2011:653), we understand homemaking as an act of assemblage that “can be stabilised (territorialised or reterritorialised) or destabilised (deterritorialised)” through the ways that material elements of the assemblage interact with capacities to be affected in people.

Importantly, thinking about affective capacities as a key part of assemblages of homemaking in PLACE/Ladywell enables us to understand why elements of the fixtures and fittings in the properties activate feelings of trauma in our participants that stakeholders—namely Lewisham Council—struggle to anticipate. While affects are often talked about as collective conditions (Anderson 2016:4) this does not mean that capacities to affect and be affected are uniform. Affects are “collectively formed” (Anderson 2016:9), that is to say, formed through relations that extend beyond an individual subject, but different subjects develop different capacities to be affected depending on their position within those relations. In Deleuzian thought, affects are virtual; unactualised capacities of a system to affect and be affected by other systems (DeLanda 2002:71–72). Significantly, as virtual properties, affects are *historical*, not fixed or innate but produced through ongoing processes. In relation to PLACE/Ladywell’s residents, this helps us to understand how, via their traumatic housing biographies, they have developed capacities to be strongly affected by other elements of housing assemblages, in a way that those without such intense experiences of housing precarity have not.

Clearly, then, the materialities of home have political potency. Critics of Bennett’s vision of “thing power” have accused her political ecology of things of generating a “systemic blindness concerning the inequalities, asymmetries and hierarchies enacted in vital materializations” (Lemke 2018). Puar (2017:26) too has questioned the value “of investing in notions of vibrant matter without concomitant attention to the material conditions of the production of that matter”. We agree that attention to the vitality of objects can run the risk of a-politicising situations if it foregrounds the “contributions of nonhuman actors” (Bennett 2010:x) in ways that reduce the accountability of human actors. Avoiding this depoliticisation, we highlight how the vitality of objects can play into or be mobilised against contestations over homemaking between unequally positioned human agents, who, as outlined above, have different historically produced capacities to affect and be affected. In solidarity with emerging feminist critiques of assemblage uptake in geography, it is important that “assemblages that produce, mobilize, and maintain ... bodies’ differential symbolic-material status” are better foregrounded in geographical knowledge-making (Kinkaid 2019:4) and in the home specifically. In the paper, we consider how the attempts of residents to territorialise the flats in PLACE/Ladywell as a home are enacted through, and made difficult by, objects and materials that the building’s stakeholders provide them with or prohibit them from using.

Thirdly, we show how homemaking can reject and resist these inequalities through rule bending or breaking. As well as referring to how residents accommodate restrictions over their homemaking capacities, we explore homemaking as an intimate form of activism which defies the rationality of temporary housing providers that homeless domesticities are “out of place”. Anderson (2016:16) argues that, “even if a body’s ‘affective charge’ is constituted through the repetition of past contexts and actions, there is nevertheless always a ‘slight surprise’ to affective life. For a body’s affects are never fully determined, there is always an openness to them”. Therefore, while the past experiences of PLACE/Ladywell residents have produced a capacity to feel precarity intensely, this can also be channelled or transfigured into acts of defiance and protest that seek to generate and affirm new affective capacities, such as the capacity to feel at home. As Vasudevan (2015:332) has iterated in relation to occupation and protest camps, objects deemed “out of place”—be that the tent in a public square, or the homely fireplace in temporary accommodation—have the political potency to “come together to assemble alternative lifeworlds and articulate new forms of contentious politics”. This again speaks to Deleuze and Guattari’s (2003) assertion of territorialisation and deterritorialisation as politicised processes. For residents of PLACE/Ladywell to territorialise a temporarily allocated property by assembling a home, however precarious, within it, is a political act that resists, and asserts the contingency of, current material and ideological configurations of the UK’s housing economy, and within this, asserts the capacity (and legitimacy) of PLACE/Ladywell’s residents to feel at home.

### **The Bedroom Door Lock: Assembling Private Space in the Home**

As has been widely discussed, those requiring access to social housing are increasingly framed as “abject, deviant citizens, struggling financially as a consequence of their individual moral degeneracy, rather than through any failure on the part of the state” (Nowicki 2017:123; Tyler 2013). Social tenants are commonly portrayed as “scroungers”, greedily taking up public resources due to a lack of willingness to put in the work required to secure private housing. This is, of course, a discourse that conveniently forgets the conditions that make private tenancies or purchases impossible and/or undesirable, including the dire shortage of affordable private housing, falling wages (in real terms), rising underemployment and labour precarity, the prevalence of insecure, short-term contracts in the private rental market, and the pervasively poor standards of privately rented housing (Nowicki 2017).

The framing of social housing tenants as “under-performing” or failed citizens undergirds, we argue, their infantilisation by those who provide and govern social housing, and temporary housing in particular. It justifies a trade of welfare for autonomy, where those who are seen to have failed to provide for themselves, and therefore need to be “rescued” by the state, are deemed to have proven themselves to be inadequate (neoliberal) adults, thereby forfeiting the rights to the autonomy that others enjoy. In this section we explore the infantilisation of



residents in temporary accommodation and, specifically, how this infantilisation is enacted and mediated through objects, or the lack of them.

We specifically explore how the absence of a bedroom door lock in a flat in PLACE/Ladywell precludes the ability of one woman to maintain her personal life. While it is inarguably of an unusually high standard for temporary accommodation and allows residents far greater home-making capacities than found elsewhere, we show how regulations around seemingly minor and innocuous material dimensions of PLACE/Ladywell still enact a harmful denial of privacy and autonomy. This is especially so of materialities at boundary points which take on heightened significance in home unmakings (Burrell 2014). As Bodnar describes, the home comprises a “graduated privateness”, ranging from semi-public areas like porches and gardens, to areas like living rooms which guests are invited into, through to rooms such as bedrooms and bathrooms which offer privacy to individual members of households (Bodnar 2015). Assembling these internal borders and boundaries is an important element of homemaking, offering fixity to the rhythms and patterns of daily life as well as (potentially) to positionalities of residents within the home (e.g. in the hierarchies implied in who gets the master bedroom, or their own private bathroom). As we outlined earlier in the paper, whilst we do not claim that such barriers to fixity are unique to homeless families, we argue that the impacts are heightened through compounding experiences of stigmatisation and entrenched narratives of homeless people being undeserving of rights to privacy and autonomy within the home.

Before moving to PLACE/Ladywell Barbara had been moved around multiple temporary accommodations after being evicted from private rental housing. She has two young children, one of whom has learning difficulties. Barbara was relieved to have been housed in PLACE/Ladywell, and commented that it was much better quality, and much more spacious, than past accommodation. Prior temporary accommodation had been dirty, with crowded communal facilities, and only one bedroom she shared with her children. Almost all her things had had to be placed in storage, making it difficult to keep her children occupied in a small room with few possessions. In PLACE/Ladywell, she had been able to bring her belongings out of storage and, to a certain extent, unpack, radically improving her quality of life. Barbara however expressed disbelief and frustration that residents were granted tenancies for only a couple of years: “I don’t see the point [of moving us again], when you have people that are homeless, and children you’ve just given a lovely new place”. In Barbara’s interview there was a continuous sense that the property had the capacity to generate affects of security and joy but that those were undermined by the temporariness of its provision as well as by restrictions over her ability to make adaptations.

Certain features of the flat were proving problematic. Perhaps most significantly for Barbara, she had been told by the building manager, as had all the other residents, that she couldn’t drill any holes or make any, even very minor, changes to the doors or fittings - including not being allowed to put a lock on her bedroom door. After trying to explain her need for this to the housing manager, the sentiment was that “they’re not having it ... they’re really strict ... they say it is going to ruin the structure and everything”. She was told she would need to foot the

bill for removing the lock when she left, a cost which made her anxious. This one restriction had a significant impact on Barbara's personal life. Because one of her children has learning difficulties, they were liable to burst into Barbara's room at any time and so, without a lock on the door, it was impossible to guarantee the privacy needed to have romantic and/or sexual partners. This seemingly minor detail, a missing door lock, therefore prevented Barbara from developing relationships during her stay in PLACE/Ladywell. This restriction activated already heightened capacities to be affected by stigma in Barbara, formed across her past experiences of inadequate and constrictive housing. However, Barbara also felt unable to violate the rule, because of an equally heightened capacity to be affected by economic insecurity, which made her worry about the costs of infringing it. She explained further, "... and I've actually been getting some advice about whether I could get, like, a little bolt instead, but I don't want them to say, afterwards they'll say, 'oh you have a bill'".

The lack of a door lock prevented the territorialisation of the flat as a space that could enable privacy, thereby undermining Barbara's capacity for adult relationships. The financial penalty that territorialisation demanded was an anxiety too far. The undermining of Barbara's love life in this way resonates with Jeyasingham's discussion of how physical alterations to public toilets reduced opportunities for sex between men (Jeyasingham 2010). For Jeyasingham (2010:312), objects and materials in public toilets "come to be key parts of sexual encounters", providing, for example, hygienic environments, or "different degrees of seclusion" that organise "the erotic potential of indistinct and changing boundaries between public and private". In this account, objects and materials are "vibrant" in that their affective affordances can enable or disable capacities in human actors for sexual interactions to take place. In both these examples, the undermining of the sex lives of certain subjects is enacted not through explicit legislation but through activating particular affordances of objects and materials in order to generate assemblages that disable those capacities in human actors.

Restrictions on visitors are common in temporary accommodation. Weisman has explored how, in homeless shelters, "[f]ew visitors are permitted, and when they are there is no place to entertain them, be they a relative, friend or lover" suggesting "that homeless people do not need privacy, self-expression, friendship and sexual relations, or at least that these needs should not be taken seriously" (Weisman 1992:78). For Weisman, this lack of autonomy granted to homeless families explains why "housing for the homeless is referred to as a 'shelter', meaning a roof over your head, rather than a 'home', which implies autonomy and emotional as well as material support" (1992:78). Yet, although PLACE/Ladywell is framed, by Lewisham Council and RSH+P as a "home" for its residents, autonomy remains lacking. PLACE/Ladywell offers residents some autonomy over what they can do and who they can have in their flats. However, the refusal of a door lock for Barbara exposes how residents' autonomy remains curtailed even in this comparatively liberating setting. As such, its absence shows how rights to privacy and respect are being infringed through the devaluation and denigration of certain people, relationships, and living arrangements (Brown 2015).

Scholars studying other instances and forms of temporary accommodation, including homeless shelters and subsidised housing projects for the homeless in the USA (Choi and Snyder 2008; DeWard and Moe 2010; Speer 2017) and refugee reception centres in the Netherlands (Van der Horst 2004) have argued that restrictions over the autonomy of residents lead them to feel infantilised. Van der Horst argues that one of the key elements missed in relation to the meanings of home is autonomy as residents are stripped of many of the “taken for granted privileges of adult life” (2004:43). In reception centres and homeless shelters this is often enacted through processes including “checks of tidiness”, the allocation of vouchers and pocket money, or the provision of restricted options over food and drink which carry “the presumption that one is incapable of regulating one’s own affairs” (DeWard and Moe 2010:120). While no such rules are enforced in PLACE/Ladywell, the retraction of autonomy remains present, enacted through objects, or their absence, as in the case of Barbara’s missing door lock. The lack of a door lock means that, for Barbara, even though she has been housed in PLACE/Ladywell for up to two years, life remains on hold as she is unable to develop this aspect of her personal life. The simple refusal of a door lock means that her “taken for granted privileges of adult life” are compromised because she lives in temporary accommodation.

Barbara’s dilemma speaks to a wider issue exacerbated by the UK’s housing crisis, whereby the autonomy, or lack thereof, that adults possess relates directly to their tenure status. For a homeowner, putting a lock on a door is something that can be done without second thought, yet for social housing tenants, and indeed many renters, these kinds of taken for granted privileges are not always available. This creates a two-tier system within which a person’s ability to govern their personal life is determined by the kind of housing they have access to, which structures the materials and objects they are able to engage in assemblages of homemaking, and how they are able to do so. As Barbara’s experience shows, restrictions over materials and objects of homemaking are also restrictions over the capacities of residents, because removal of those objects is a removal of the affordances they provide to people. Inequality is therefore felt and lived in the everyday, as objects, or missing objects, such as the door lock, enact disenfranchisement and infantilisation, serving as reminders to residents of PLACE/Ladywell that they are subservient to those providing their housing.

## **Slippery Surfaces: Deterritorialising Senses of Home**

Social housing is no longer seen as an appropriate setting within which to make long term homes in the UK. As Nowicki (2017:135) has explored elsewhere, contemporary housing policy does not recognise that “a dwelling provided by welfare is as much a home as one that has been purchased by an individual on the free market”. In this section, we argue that this is reflected in both the design of temporary housing and in expectations over its upkeep. Specifically, we do so through an examination of walls.

As well as objects, the material substances and surfaces around us have an affective power, shaping how we feel in our surroundings. For example, Watson

(2019:960) has explored how, as part of an urban environment, water “generates passions, attachments and a sense of belonging” and can enrol “bodies in new connections, socialities, alliances and politics”. In specific relation to the Lidos in Hampstead Heath, London, she argues for the importance of water, as an “immersive” substance, in generating senses of belonging in the local area. Contrary to this, the surfaces surrounding residents in PLACE/Ladywell seemed designed to deny belonging and refute efforts at attachment.

Wall hangings and fixings are commonly understood as central to the production of home. Parrott has explored how in settings where residents *don't* want to feel at home, for example in psychiatric units, they tend to resist encouragement to put things on the walls in order to “assert that the institution is a temporary place” (Parrott 2005). Burrell (2014) reports too of how residents of a particular Leicester neighbourhood divest themselves of objects, “exiling” them into storage to enhance the feeling that they will leave for a better home at some point in the future. Conversely, many of the families we interviewed at PLACE/Ladywell would have liked to make changes to the walls of their accommodation in order to create a more adequate sense of home for themselves. Gemma interpreted the rules against wall fixtures and hangings as an attack on the ability of residents to make home in PLACE/Ladywell and suggested that the spacious store room built into each flat was intended as a place for them to put their possessions *instead* of having them around the house and on the walls as one normally would. She explained:

So we was told, nothing on the walls, like nothing ... I said to the property manager, so basically you want us to leave everything in the boxes, is that what that room's for, that little cupboard, you want everything stacked up in there? And basically they just said “Yeah”.

Gemma had indeed ended up using the store-room to keep things with which to decorate her imagined future home, including a roll of Laura Ashley wallpaper which she had bought to decorate her former, privately rented, home. Gemma was somewhat relieved that she hadn't gotten around to putting it up immediately, as a week after buying it her landlord evicted her to sell the property after 12 years of her living there. She explained what happened next:

I was like oh no, this couldn't have happened at a worse time, yeah and that was it really so I ended up being homeless, I didn't really understand the procedure, I went down [to the council office] and they said basically we can't do anything until the actual day you're out ... which for me was like ludicrous cause I was like what do I do then, what do I do with my contents of a three bedroom house and a garage? I don't understand.

Gemma went on to describe her tears on eviction day as she asked her local authority to be re-housed. For 18 months Gemma moved from one “disgusting” emergency accommodation to the next, and was told that her belongings could be kept in a warehouse they would provide. Concerned about the security of her belongings given how many years it had taken to “build up nice things” and describing herself as “very OCD” in their care, she was also vexed about its

perceived lack of cleanliness. This she said, “just threw me off the edge, so I said no, I’m not gonna do that”. Her dad luckily stepped in to pay the £400/month for her belongings to be put in a private storage facility which offered insurance.

Gemma has been reunited with her belongings at PLACE/Ladywell. She told us, however, how she’d love to be able to use her wallpaper to create a “feature wall” in the PLACE/Ladywell flat, “like, to make it more homely, but obviously we can’t”. Here, the ability to put up her wallpaper is, for Gemma, a marker of a permanent family home and her inability to do so in PLACE/Ladywell reiterates her awareness of its temporary allocation to her and her family. These strict regulations regarding decoration were enforced despite the fact that PLACE/Ladywell’s architect told us he had designed the walls of the flat to be easily “popped-off” and replaced in order to facilitate customisation. This highlights a conscience decision on the part of Lewisham Council to diminish residents’ ability to fix themselves, in this case literally, and imprint their identities on the walls of PLACE/Ladywell.

The prohibition of nails had led many residents in PLACE/Ladywell to turn to stick-on solutions. In compensatory attempts to make the walls of the flats homely, multiple families had decided to decorate using wall stickers given they couldn’t hang frames on the walls. Gemma had put up a wall sticker expressing her love for her family. Another resident, Scott, had also bought “those sticky picture things” as he went on to explain:

... well the thing is we’ve been told we’re not allowed to put any pictures up on the walls, we’re not allowed to make any holes, but we went out and got those sticky picture things ... we’ve done stuck up a couple of pictures and what not. So instead of having the walls as a completely blank canvas, you know like you want it to feel like home.

Scott’s family had spent the last five years moving from temporary accommodation to temporary accommodation across South London, including in hostels. He had been “passed from pillar to post really” and had endured multiple encounters of living in one-roomed accommodation which “which was full of rats” and another where “my daughter was sleeping and the mouse was right there next to her”.

The stickers in each flat expressed, although very differently, the ethos of the homes they were decorating to counter the “blank space” they were given but restricted from decorating as they wished. Scott’s sticker, placed in the kitchen, read “Today’s Menu Has Two Choices: TAKE IT or LEAVE IT”, which played into Scott’s humorous self-representation as a stressed dad to a young family. Gemma’s sticker read “My Kids & Me Forever” and was placed above some decorative flowers, embellishing the homely, comforting atmosphere she had tried to produce throughout the flat. Both however spoke to the clear desire to make home. Gemma, for example, had also creatively hung decorative accessories on existing fixtures that expressed love and evoked home for her (Figure 2).

The importance placed on decorative items like this by residents emphasises the significant role of affective capacities in strengthening ties between elements of assemblages. They strengthen emotional attachments between residents and the building they are making home in.



**Figure 2:** “Love makes a house a home” decorative accessory in Gemma’s flat (photograph by Katherine Brickell, 2017) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

The highly personalised wall stickers, in particular, provided a popular compromise for decorating the flats in PLACE/Ladywell because they could be peeled off the walls at the end of tenancies, ensuring residents wouldn’t incur fines. The peeling off of the stickers would be especially easy because the walls of PLACE/Ladywell are in fact designed to be wipe-clean and therefore not easily damaged or marked. This design feature is pragmatic and convenient for a building designed to be deconstructed and moved potentially multiple times and to house multiple rounds of tenants during its lifespan. However it also, we argue, exacerbates residents’ sense of being out of place in the building, not wanted there nor intended as its permanent residents. As Cresswell (1996:8) has argued, objects in public space work to create a “normative landscape” which designates “what is right, just, and appropriate” and PLACE/Ladywell’s wipe-clean walls suggest to residents they are not invited to make home there. One resident even described feeling almost like the walls were resisting her attempts to decorate, explaining her battle trying to hang up pictures with sticky hooks (rather than the banned nails) that she would put up repeatedly, only for them to fall down again. The slippery surfaces of PLACE/Ladywell left residents unable to literally attach things to the walls and therefore unable to fully attach, emotionally, to the flats as

home. Angell (2014), in her discussion of assemblages of home and housing in Istanbul's earthquake-prone urban environment, has shown how in places at risk of disaster there is heightened sensitivity to the capacities of materials and their potentials to unmake home, for example, to the possibility that "bad concrete" could cause a building to collapse. Similarly, PLACE/Ladywell residents demonstrate a heightened sensitivity to the materials of the building because of their housing precarity and are acutely affected by how those materials afford or deny their capacity to make home. Gemma's "Love makes a house a home" (Figure 2) decorative accessory cradled on her temperature monitor could also be removed without any trace, or damage to the walls, when she left.

Theorisations of assemblage highlight the metastability of any given configuration (Anderson and McFarlane 2011; DeLanda 2002). All assemblages are precarious, open to be deterritorialised (DeLanda 2002) but some assemblages are more stable than others. What determines the stability of an assemblage is the strength of the attractions and connections between components. In PLACE/Ladywell, assemblages of homemaking are especially precarious because of the weakness of the ties between components of the building and the objects residents have brought with them. The building itself, as a mobile, modular building, is designed *against* fixity; here we see how the materiality of the walls resist attempts by residents to fix possessions in place. Anderson and McFarlane (2011) have explored how assemblages can "claim" territory, holding "heterogeneous parts" together. However, here attempts to claim territory are thwarted by materials deployed in the building of PLACE/Ladywell. As Angell (2014) elaborates, sensitivity to materiality in such crisis contexts also exposes the "politics of responsibility" embedded in urban assemblages. When assemblages become or are precarious, questions are raised about the valuations explicit in how "good" and "bad" materials have been distributed, and the power imbalances enacted through who gets to make decisions regarding those materials and their distribution. In PLACE/Ladywell, the valuations and power balances are clear; residents have been allocated materials by stakeholders who have a vested interest in undermining their attempts at durable homemaking, given their plans to move both the tenants and the building in the near-term future.

As well as not affording the fixing of decorations in place, the wipe-clean walls at PLACE/Ladywell deterritorialised assemblages of homemaking through their affective force. The wipe-clean walls made some residents of PLACE/Ladywell anxious about being perceived as dirty. Tyler (2013) has shown how social groups deemed to be abject are framed as "revolting" in contemporary society. She details revulsion as an aesthetic and emotional reaction that naturalises what are in fact moral and social judgements and thus reinforces social hierarchies. She explores how certain stigmatised groups, such as asylum seekers, travellers and gypsies are figured as being unclean and, drawing on Douglas' (1966) definition of dirt as "matter out of place", thus deemed undeserving of inhabiting certain spaces. In PLACE/Ladywell, expectations over the cleaning of the properties, reiterated by the wipe-clean walls, made residents self-conscious of their stigmatised positionality as homeless people, also commonly represented as dirty. As Anderson has argued, representations have affective force (2016). In PLACE/Ladywell,

this was mediated via the wipe-clean walls and Gemma also experienced it through the materiality of other spaces she encountered in the process of becoming homeless, for example in the fact that the council thought it acceptable for her belongings to be stored in a dirty warehouse facility.

Many of the residents in PLACE/Ladywell expressed their anxieties regarding trying to keep the flats clean. Grace wondered “how other people are maintaining this white, in other people’s flats, I don’t know!” Scott said that on moving in he had “turned round and said to them, I’ve got three young kids, there’s no way white walls are staying white walls” but had then been relieved to find that the walls were wipe-clean, although he still worried that he wouldn’t be able to leave the place as it was when they moved in. Scott was convinced that the managers at PLACE/Ladywell were judging the standards of cleanliness that the residents could maintain and that it was “a test to see how clean you keep your house” which would impact on “where they place you” when allocating permanent housing. Scott had internalised a sense of shame about his own dirt, expressed, for example, in an embarrassment that the only route to the bins was via the front gate, meaning he had to take the rubbish out in public. He was also critical of others in the building who he deemed not to be upholding the required standards and would therefore be less favourably judged than himself and his family when permanent housing was allocated. He said:

My neighbour just down the stairs they’ve literally trashed their house, there’s a hole in the wall there, this door’s off, that door’s off, like ... I’m not saying my house is the greatest but I’ve got three young kids so it’s hard to keep a place tidy but literally as you walk in here to walking in down there looks like a crack house, here looks like a family home, you know what I mean?

If, for Tyler (2013), subjects internalise and reproduce stigmas attached to them then it is clear that Scott has internalised the sense that homeless families are judged for being dirty, not only using it to scrutinise his own flat but to judge his neighbours. While feeling like the requirement to keep white walls clean is a big ask of families with young children, he tries his best to comply with these rules, cleaning, as he describes “24/7” and using wall stickers rather than hangings to make the flat feel homely without breaking any rules.

Scott’s frantic cleaning aims to prevent any trace of himself and his family being left in the property in order to secure the best chance of them being housed in appropriate permanent accommodation. Trying to become “invisible” is a common theme in work on homelessness. Datta, in her work on homelessness and materiality, has described how the physical structure of a homeless shelter in Phoenix was designed to be “invisible” after it faced opposition from local people who felt it would threaten business (Datta 2005:541). Similarly, but on the scale of people rather than buildings, Williams (1996:107) has described how homeless women try to make their presence in temporary accommodation less felt so as to avoid being judged by staff. Williams writes that one woman “goes as far as to borrow laundry soap from her husband, who does not live at the shelter and from whom she separated due to his physical abuse, so that the staff will not think she has used too much of the shelter soap”.



Similarly to the accounts described above, the walls in PLACE/Ladywell encourage residents to be “invisible” in their own (temporary) homes, by leaving no trace of themselves. The wipe-clean walls signify to residents that they and the homes they wish to make are “revolting”, and that their presence must be minimised as much as possible. Or, to frame the situation through Douglas’ (1966) characterisation of dirt as matter out-of-place, residents are encouraged to feel that they and their homes are dirt, that they are undesirable, out of place subjects and that any trace of their presence left in the building will be penalised. Residents’ internalisation of the stigma surrounding them is reflected in their home-making practices, as in their attempts to make home using wall stickers or stick-on hangers they also comply with the rules in the flats and with the normative expectations that their presence should be minimally visible and ultimately erasable from the building. These attempts at invisibility are enacted by weakening relationships between people and places, ensuring that relations between them leave as little trace as possible. This necessarily weakens the assemblage itself, lessening the degree to which human and non-human elements are entrained.

### **The Fireplace: Activating Latent Capacities**

Temporary accommodation, following Tyler (2013:41), can be classed as a space of abjection, a “border zone” simultaneously inside and outside the “body politic proper”. Temporary housing is a liminal space, not, as we have argued, accepted as a space of homemaking, but framed as a waiting space for those currently outside of the neoliberal housing market (who it is hoped will be later placed or replaced into it) and therefore also understood as outside of (neoliberal) society. The last two sections have explored how the liminal status of temporary accommodations’ inhabitants is reiterated through furnishings, including how material features inhibit their autonomy and agency, preclude their ability to make home and reinforce stigmatising representations. In these instances, the affordances of objects and materials deterritorialise assemblages of homemaking, undermining efforts to produce a domestic environment. In this section, however, we move on to explore how a fireplace, erected by Gemma in her PLACE/Ladywell flat, enables her to defiantly assert the value of her home and herself, constituting a refusal to be relegated to the “meanwhile” space-time that PLACE/Ladywell, as a building, occupies. Here Gemma actualises the political potencies of objects to do so. As detailed previously, residents of PLACE/Ladywell had been forbidden from making any holes in the walls of the flats. As well as precluding hanging pictures, this also meant that no furnishings could be nailed to the walls. However, Gemma, while accommodating these rules to some extent (for example by not putting up her wallpaper) saw them as unreasonable and had decided, in defiance of the instructions, to screw a much loved fireplace into one of the walls of the living room (albeit with plans to use Polyfilla to later cover up the holes created).

Before visiting Gemma we had already heard about her fireplace in the media. It had gained much attention from journalists and architects who had visited her flat, partly through an appreciation of its aesthetics and partly, perhaps, in comedic appreciation of Gemma’s bold decorative move in a property that, designed



**Figure 3:** Gemma's fireplace at PLACE/Ladywell (photograph by Katherine Brickell, 2017) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

as emergency accommodation for homeless families, people weren't expected or encouraged to decorate. Gemma was pleased that people had been commenting on her fire place, boasting that "[e]verybody said it just makes the room ... the fire place does make the room, doesn't it, and I'm very proud".

Gemma had originally bought the fireplace for the house she had rented long-term before being made homeless. She had bought it cheap but worked hard to refurbish it, describing how she had "fitted the back myself ... made the hearth, the bottom half, rubbed it down, painted it, bought the mirror". Having the fireplace in PLACE/Ladywell was very important for Gemma in terms of continuity with her old home and she had felt sad about the idea of leaving it in the storage cupboard, along with the wallpaper, to wait for a future property. As she commented, the PLACE/Ladywell flat "was a blank space and in my previous house I had also lived in a blank space" that was not conducive to feeling "homely".

As DeWard and Moe (2010) have argued, being able "to construct and maintain a sense of self-worth" within the context of temporary accommodation "may be critical for survival", but comes under threat when women are required to live by rules that undermine their autonomy. They outline the struggles of women to assert their agency within such regulated environments, detailing how any

resistance to the regulations is often read as an act of insanity, on the assumption that only somebody mentally unsound would refuse to comply with what are seen as reasonable and basic rules. However, we argue that small acts of defiance, such as Gemma's insistence on putting her fireplace up in PLACE/Ladywell, are, as Deward and Moe suggest, important avowals of self-worth.

The last two sections explored how limitations on homemaking are linked to the stigma faced by certain demographics, who are seen as less deserving of homemaking opportunities. Here, Gemma refuses to be stigmatised. Rather than anxiously complying with the expectations of how the flats should be kept, she is defiantly proud of the alternations she has made. The fireplace is a way for Gemma to assert that she will not be made transient and that her home will be made within what space and time she has. The "thing power" (Bennett 2004) of the fireplace, its power in asserting Gemma's intentions to make home in the flat, is clear from the reactions it received from the media. Its potency lies in its ability to bring out capacities in the PLACE/Ladywell flats that were not meant to be activated. In Deleuzian accounts of assemblage, virtual properties refer to a system's real but un-activated capacities, capacities that can be made actual by bifurcations of that assemblage. As we have seen, the PLACE/Ladywell flats are emphatically positioned as temporary accommodation, their capacity to become durable homes systemically undermined through their materialities and the rules surrounding them. Yet Gemma's addition of the fireplace, defiantly nailed into the wall, activates and exposes the capacity that the flats *do* have to become home and in doing so demonstrates that refusals of that capacity are ideological. The media were fascinated by Gemma's fireplace precisely because it claimed a capacity for homemaking that had been disallowed and in doing so revealed the deliberate nature of that prohibition.

But if "disobedient objects" are most commonly ones that have been re-appropriated "and turned to a new purpose" (Flood and Grindon 2014:15), so that what is radical is, in part, the subversion of a things designated use, then, contrary to this, Gemma's fireplace is radical precisely because it is fulfilling its intended purpose—decorating and warming a home (her fireplace serving as an electric heater as well as decoration). Using a fireplace the way it should be used, to create home, is in this context a radical act, because, in appearing inappropriate, it exposes the restrictions enacted on PLACE/Ladywell residents. As Angell writes, following Bennett, things and objects become "political matter" when "recognized and discursively mobilized" within a system of meaning. The vibrancy of Gemma's fireplace unfolds within a system of meaning that it illuminates and contests (Angell 2014).

What is at stake here is the right to make home as an integral dimension of the right to agency over one's environment and forming the emotional and legal foundations from which to participate in civic life. For Rolnik (2014), former special housing rapporteur for the UN, "the right to adequate housing has to be understood as a gateway to other rights, it is a condition that has to be fulfilled in order to ensure the exercise of belonging in all its aspects". In this vein, Gemma's defiant homemaking can also be read as an assertion of her rights and value as a human being and of her "belonging" in London. While other residents, as

discussed in the section above, clean anxiously, conforming to expectations that they will leave no trace of themselves in the building, Gemma does not shy away from asserting that she belongs, albeit temporarily, in PLACE/Ladywell, by erecting a fireplace, an object strongly symbolic of a home that is fixed and stable. Indeed, scholars have explored how fireplaces have historically served as both aesthetic and emotional centrepieces of domestic space, including by providing a mantelpiece on which to display and arrange markers of “self ... home and family” (Hurdley 2006), such as the ornaments and pictures that Gemma has positioned above the fireplace. As Rolnik suggests, being able to feel at home seemed to underscore an ability to exercise other rights for Gemma who was vocal about her treatment after being made homeless, and had managed to be moved to PLACE/Ladywell following numerous discussions with her MP.

Tyler (2013:41) writes that “the politics of the abject is a counter-spatial politics, which attempts to reclaim the spaces and zones of abjection as radical sites of revolt”. As argued, temporary accommodation can be seen as an “internal border zone” where people live who are “excluded from the body of the state” because of their perceived failures at securing housing within a neoliberal housing economy, into which it is hoped they will subsequently enter. However, abjection, for Tyler, can also be a political positionality from which those excluded can reassert their rights to participate in society via a reclamation of space. She writes that the “the politics of the abject is a counter-spatial politics which attempts to reclaim the spaces and zones of abjection as radical sites of revolt” (Tyler 2013:41). Read through this assertion, Gemma’s fireplace can be seen as an act of transgressive place-making (Giorgi and Fasulo 2013) and as a radical reclamation of PLACE/Ladywell. Although designated a liminal space, within which residents should *wait* for a home that will supposedly reintegrate them into society, Gemma repurposes PLACE/Ladywell as a site of affirmation for her *current* and unprovisional status as a resident and citizen of London, refusing to be a “temporary person” just because she is in temporary housing.

## Conclusion

By bringing together thinking in assemblage theory and critical material geographies of home in this paper, we have examined how fixtures and fittings mediate the politics of homemaking and unmaking amongst families living in temporary accommodation. We have shown how stigmas related to the neoliberalisation of housing are reproduced through the material infrastructures of temporary social housing, as rules over the contents and upkeep of such properties reinforce the infantilisation of those not fulfilling expectations of private ownership or rental. In mobilising assemblage theory we have attended to how capacities to affect and be affected are “differentiated”, “emerging from and expressing specific relational configurations, whilst also becoming elements within those formations” (Anderson 2016:11). Specifically, we have shown how the unequal positioning of subjects within London’s housing system govern their capacities to be affected by non-human elements of homemaking assemblages, and in particular to experience stigma via material elements of homemaking. We have also considered how

everyday objects, such as a fireplace, can be deployed in acts of defiance to such stigmatising forces. Attending to their vitality, we have demonstrated how the affordances of objects can be activated to enable certain territorialisations and deterritorialisations of space, thereby enabling or disabling processes of home-making under challenging circumstances.

What is clear from the stories of families in PLACE/Ladywell is that a lack of control over the fixtures and fittings they need to make home does significant damage to people's sense of self. The stories in this paper expose how the precarity of being homeless is lived not just through the spatio-temporalities of moves and displacements from and between properties, but through the micro space-times of everyday life; of interactions with objects, or indeed, their absence. In exploring these items, a door lock, wall stickers, and fireplace, we have shown how inequalities within the neoliberal housing system are enacted through precarious assemblages of homemaking. Despite residents' attempts to fix assemblages of home into stable configurations, the senses of home they manage to create remain precarious. We have argued that this is due to a politicised, ideologically driven distribution and governance of materials that deprives people in temporary accommodation of their capacities to make home effectively. We have also demonstrated that political potencies of objects and materials can be activated to both entrench and resist such valuations; acting as vital elements of negotiations between fixity and impermanence in temporary accommodation.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Laura Ashley is a chain of shops which sells clothes and interior decorations that are characterised by Romantic English designs often with a nostalgic feel to them.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.rsh-p.com/projects/place-ladywell/> for further detail about the development and a video on how it was manufactured. The video also includes a tour of inside one flat before residents moved in.

<sup>3</sup> There are no set definitions for what constitutes a fixture or a fitting, but generally a fixture is understood to be any item that is bolted to the floor or walls, and a fitting to be any item that is free standing or hung by a nail or hook.

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