

## **UNCERTAINTY UNDER THE ARCHES: NETWORK RAIL'S COMMERCIAL PROPERTY SELL-OFF AND THE CRISIS OF AFFORDABLE WORKSPACE IN LONDON**

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### **NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY (max 3,000 characters)**

In September 2018, Network Rail agreed to sell 200 railway arches as a single commercial portfolio to investment groups Telereal Trillium and Blackstone Property Partners for £1.45bn. The sale represents the latest in a long line of public asset sell-offs in the UK through which rents are shifted from the public to the private realm. While the details of the sale are still being negotiated, there are grave concerns about the future of thousands of archway enterprises across the country. The potential impacts are particularly acute in East London, where small businesses have revitalised the local rail infrastructure while contending with rent increases of up to 300%. However, the sale also represents a rare opportunity for organisation among businesses that share a common landlord. Local businesses organised through the East End Trades Guild have responded by developing an Affordable Workspace Manifesto, culminating in a campaign for London Working Rent. This campaign raises critical questions about the capacities for collective organisation among diverse small businesses, and the possibilities for applying principles derived from the movements of employees and residential tenants - such as Living Wage and Living Rent - to the commercial rental sector.

This project proposes a collaboration between the East End Trades Guild (EETG), the New Economic Foundation (NEF) and the School of Geography at QMUL in order to generate much-needed evidence on the impacts of the National Rail sell-off in East London and the possibilities for collective organisation and intervention. This research will advance theoretical understandings of socio-economic value and, specifically, inform emerging policy debates on affordable workspaces in the context of the transfer of rents from the public to the private sphere. In this regard, the research will contribute to emerging scholarship on the connections between social entrepreneurship and public life, bringing together research programmes on livelihoods and diverse economies (Monteith & Giesbert 2017; Monteith & Camfield forthcoming) and urban sociality and collective culture (Koch 2016; Koch & Latham 2012; 2013). Furthermore, by addressing questions about the possibilities for collective action and organisation, the project will build upon the School of Geography's reputation for conducting research on local issues in East London in ways that direct national campaigns, such as the Living Wage campaign (Wills 2008; Wills and Linneker 2014).

### **PROJECT DESCRIPTION (Max 6,000 characters)**

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*1. What are the social, economic and cultural contributions of the archway enterprises in East London, and how do these contributions challenge dominant theories of value?*

Debates on the future of the arches hinge on different conceptions of value. Network Rail and the UK government justified the portfolio sell-off through national imperatives of economic value and fiscal responsibility, namely that it will reduce public debt and provide funding for much-needed transportation improvements. Conversely, EETG campaigns to-date have focused primarily on localised notions of social value, emphasising the contribution of the archway enterprises to local livelihoods and traditional

industries. Absent in both accounts is a more systematic consideration of value that enfolds the economic and the social, and which recognises the multidimensional impacts of the archway enterprises on public life in East London. This project proposes to audit the myriad services and opportunities that individual businesses provide, but to also investigate the relationships, collectivises and exchanges that exist *between* these businesses, and their contribution to broader systems of employment, care and resilience. These relationships and exchanges are critical to the generation of alternative theories of value which can help to advance debates on how best to protect affordable workspace in London in the context of ongoing processes of regeneration and displacement (cf. Hall 2014; King et al. 2018).

*2. What are the prospects for collective organising among the diverse enterprises operating under the arches, and for nurturing solidarity among small and medium businesses in East London more broadly?*

A remarkable feature of the arches is that they are home to a wide array of independent businesses, local chains and international franchises that include mechanics, auto parts suppliers, minicab drivers, baristas and craft-beer makers. The EETG represents a critical attempt to mobilise forms of solidarity among diverse small businesses in the midst of a broader shift from waged labour towards entrepreneurship, gig work and precarious self-employment (Srnicek 2016; Standing 2011). An extensive literature considers modes of solidarity and collective action among employed and self-employed workers amid these changing conditions of labour in London (Alberti 2016; Graham and Woodcock 2018). Likewise, there is a growing attention to collective organisation among private housing tenants; for example, through renters unions, community unionism and community land trusts (Watt 2016; Watt and Minton 2016; Wills 2001; 2009). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the challenge of collective organisation among business owners who are simultaneously employers, workers and tenants. This research will provide a timely investigation into the effectiveness of unionisation practices among small independent businesses in the face of displacement. Specifically, it will generate critical evidence on the successes and limitations of the trades guild as a medium through which small business owners are able to share information and resist unaffordable rent increases by private landlords.

*3. What forms of collective action and intervention would improve the affordability of commercial workspaces in East London, and how might these be scaled up to the national level?*

EETG and NEF are currently developing a range of initiatives designed to increase the stock of affordable workspaces in East London and strengthen the position of small enterprises in their negotiations with private landlords, drawing upon techniques derived from the movements of employees and residential tenants. These initiatives include a small business land trust, a digital platform that enables tenants to share information on rent agreements (Rent Check), an Affordable Workspace Manifesto, and a London Working Rent campaign. Research is urgently required in order to assess the viability of these initiatives and the potential barriers to uptake and upscaling as they are rolled out in East London. For example, how should London Working Rent be calculated, and at what geographical scales? This research will also inform practical discussions about the possibility, feasibility and desirability of different forms of policy response.

## **Methodology**

The project will deploy a mixed methodology, applying three key approaches in the two London boroughs with the largest number of archway enterprises (Hackney and Tower Hamlets):

- Auditing existing information on archway enterprises (including business type and size, profitability, lease arrangements, formal and informal services provided, and customer and employee demographics) together with colleagues from EETG. An enterprise survey will be conducted to fill any gaps.
- Mapping social and economic exchanges within and between the archway enterprises, and businesses and households in the surrounding areas of Hackney and Tower Hamlets (cf. King et al. 2018).

- A participatory ethnography of the London Living Rent campaign, including observation of EETG meetings and semi-structured interviews with business owners, EETG members, officials from local government, National Rail and Blackstone Property.

### **Timescales**

Year 1: PhD commences with background review of academic literature, policy reports and relevant journalism. Observation at EETG meetings, governmental hearings and other activity related to the transfer of ownership. PhD Progression in months 6-9 and interim report #1 for EETG.

Year 2: Primarily devoted to fieldwork; interim report #2 to EETG and organising conference at QMUL for start of year 3. (see below).

Year 3: Completion of data analysis; write and revise chapters for thesis; provide final report for EETG; draft one article for submission to academic journal; one commentary for The Conversation/the Guardian/Times, etc; submit thesis.

*Supervisions fortnightly in year one; monthly thereafter;*

### **Plans for dissemination and knowledge exchange**

-Twice-yearly meetings with key EETG staff and members, the production of two interim and one final report for EETG.

-Work with QMUL City Centre to organize one-day workshop on *Affordable Workspace in London*

-Work with QMUL Geography School Liaisons Officer to develop learning and fieldwork materials for the 'Changing Places' theme of the new Geography A-Level

-Serve as a mentor for the new QMUL/EEGT Q-Consult project on Transparency and Information Sharing

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