

# Focus E15 Campaign

*Social Housing not Social Cleansing!*



## Housing is a mental health issue: Root Shock and the London housing crisis

🕒 May 18, 2016    📁 eviction resistance, evictions, housing crisis, Newham council, social cleansing    📌 Joe Hoover, root shock

*At our last campaign meeting Joe Hoover from City University talked about human rights and housing, drawing on work of activist groups such as ONE DC in Washington DC, and other groups in Chicago. He provided us with shocking figures of US homelessness, displacement, decanting, racism and then talked about the resistance and inspiration given by movements in Brazil, South Africa and tactics used. The discussion included making links to what is going on in London and Newham in particular and Joe spoke of Rootshock and the human/psychological suffering imposed by being torn from one's roots.*

*Read Joe's guest blogpost below, where he explains more about this concept of Root Shock.*

This week is Mental Health Awareness Week in the UK. In Newham Council, and other councils across the UK, there will be a week of events to highlight the importance of mental health. There is, however, a troubling absence on their calendar of events. Newham Council is not talking about housing as a mental health issue. In fact, Newham Council, like councils across London, is undermining the mental health of the individuals and communities they are tasked with serving.

Mental health difficulties can make it hard for individuals to find and keep a secure home, but the types of homes and communities we build also have a profound effect on our mental well being. In London our public officials and government bodies too often fail to meet the housing needs of the most vulnerable, but to make matters worse they are making more and more Londoners vulnerable to displacement. While planners and developers speak of "regeneration" or "renewal", the communities that are losing their homes know this process as displacement, as social cleansing. When we destroy buildings and rebuild urban centres in the interest of investors over residents, we harm communities and individuals. Displacement is a collective psychological trauma.

Dr Mindy Fullilove has developed the idea of root shock (<http://www.rootshock.org>) to describe the 'traumatic stress reaction to the loss of some or all of one's emotional ecosystem.' What she describes is the loss of our sense of place in the world, the loss of our community, when we are forced out of

homes by war, disaster or urban “renewal”. When we are forced from our community, and when communities themselves are destroyed, our attachment to our home is severed. We lose the bond between person and beloved space. As our attachments are severed we are also taken away from our familiar environment, which is a psychological and social injury. When we lose our familiarity with our environment we lose the detailed cognitive knowledge we have of places, people and ourselves. Finally, as we are taken from the places and people we know well, our sense of identity suffers. The cumulative effect of this loss is what Dr Fullilove calls root shock, and its consequences are far reaching for communities and individuals that have been uprooted.

The trauma of root shock increases an individual’s vulnerability to violence, substance abuse, physical illness and mental illness. As has been documented in *The Spirit Level* (<https://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/resources/the-spirit-level>), we know that inequality is bad for our health, but when we add the loss of homes the harm of poverty and inequality is made worse. When communities lose their emotional ecosystems and place in the world, it exposes individuals to violence and economic hardship when they are moved to deprived areas, and to isolation as they are separated from friends, families and networks of care.

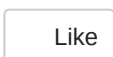
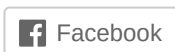
If we do not recognise the trauma of displacement we cannot address the harm done by removing people from their homes. We have to stop seeing the destruction of communities as a business investment and recognise it as an injury, committed against individuals. Recognising housing as a mental health issue means focusing on preventing this trauma. Dr Fullilove talks about the need for prevention as a strategy of resistance: primary prevention should seek to protect homes and communities from destruction; secondary prevention should seek to limit the devastation to communities already under threat; and tertiary prevention should seek to rebuild communities damaged by displacement.

Thinking of housing as a central element of our emotional ecosystem reveals that our public officials and institutions are failing us. We must demand that Newham Council, and councils across London, serve the needs of the people and build healthy communities.

By Joe Hoover.

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