

The Economic Politics of Anti-Displacement Struggle: Connecting Diverse and Community Economies Research with Critical Urban Studies on the Carpenters Estate, London

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Abstract: This article explores the economic politics of anti-displacement struggle, bringing into conversation critical urban studies and diverse and community economies research. It draws on my research and collaboration with a community planning group which emerged from residents' and businesses' struggle against displacement on the Carpenters Estate in Newham, London in 2012/13. My analysis makes visible the ways in which anti-displacement struggle both animates and limits the production of new economic subjectivities, language, and possibilities for collective action. Ideas and tools from diverse and community economies research—lightly held and adapted for specific struggles and contexts—can help to support and strengthen these messy and fragile economic politics. The article advances diverse and community economies research on antagonism and the diversity of capitalism and contributes to re-orienting critical urban research towards the production of economic alternatives.

Keywords: community economies, diverse economies, displacement, urban economic development, participatory action research

Introduction

This article explores the new economic possibilities and propositions which emerged from the struggle against displacement on the Carpenters Estate in the early 2010s. Carpenters lies immediately adjacent to the site of the London 2012 Olympic Games in Stratford, East London, and was listed for demolition by the London Borough of Newham in 2008. In 2011, University College London (UCL) selected it as the site for a new campus. The threat of displacement posed by UCL's plans mobilised local residents, businesses, and other organisations to develop their own community plan. After UCL withdrew following wide-ranging opposition, in September 2013 the group launched its community plan (London Tenants Federation 2013) and later became a Neighbourhood Forum.

This article focuses on the relatively short, intense process of producing the local economy proposals for the community plan which I directly supported from

November 2012 to October 2013 as part of my PhD research at UCL. This involved supporting local firms to participate, gathering together local knowledge into a new narrative about the economy, and collaborating to develop an alternative vision and proposals for economic development. The intense threat posed by UCL's plan created a highly pressurised situation for engaged research, and it was only through later critical reflection that I arrived at this article's insights and contributions.

The article begins with an introduction to 20 years of struggle against displacement on the Carpenters Estate, situating the community planning process triggered by UCL's proposal for a new campus in the context of prior and subsequent developments which continue to evolve at the time of writing. I then review critical research on urban displacement, highlighting a growing interest in commercial displacement (González 2018; González and Dawson 2015; Taylor 2020) and alternatives (Lees 2022; Slater 2009). I also introduce Gibson-Graham's (2006a, 2006b) work to re-frame the economy as diverse, opening up new economic subjectivities and new possibilities for collective action, and explore the growing interest in antagonism within diverse and community economies (DCE) research (Gabriel and Sarmiento 2020; Huron 2015, 2018; Miller 2015; North et al. 2020). The next section adapts DCE participatory action research methods (Cameron and Gibson 2005a; Gibson-Graham 2005) to open up space to explore and advance the economic possibilities of anti-displacement struggle, pushing at the boundaries of what might have otherwise occurred. My subsequent analysis explores the ways in which the threat of displacement mobilised, shaped, and limited new economic subjectivities, language, and possibilities for collective action. In conclusion, I draw together the article's contributions to both DCE and urban studies, highlighting the potential and need for DCE research to resource and extend the fragile economic possibilities of anti-displacement struggle.

Throughout, I use Gibson-Graham's "open stance" to acknowledge and account for the messiness, limits, and vulnerability of these possibilities, without denying their potential (Gibson-Graham 2008; Gibson-Graham and Dombrski 2020; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010). I also take up suggestions that urban researchers remain alert and attentive to openings, contestation, and differentiation in analysing policy and politics (Anderson 2020; Kern and McLean 2018; Parnell and Robinson 2012). These resources inspire lightly held critical analysis which can find meaning, power, and potential in highly constrained and precarious struggles, holding back from pre-emptive closure in order to remain open to future developments.

The Struggle Against Displacement on the Carpenters Estate

The Carpenters Estate—located immediately next to the site of the London 2012 Olympic Games—includes 703 homes across three 22-storey towers, three-storey apartment buildings, and terraces (London Tenants Federation et al. 2014), several commercial buildings, two community centres, a primary school, and the Building Crafts College. The London Borough of Newham began exploring

options for addressing problems with the quality and standard of homes on the estate in 2000, announcing in 2004 plans to demolish one of the tower blocks and re-house residents elsewhere (Sendra and Fitzpatrick 2020). Several years later, in 2011, UCL announced a plan to develop a new campus on the site to support its growth in the context of declining government funding. UCL's proposal was supported by Newham, which claimed it would facilitate the borough's economic transformation from wholesale, distribution, construction, manufacturing, and transport to high-value jobs in emerging sectors.

UCL's proposal reflects the increasing the neoliberalisation of universities, in particular the growing influence of extractive real estate interests and logics (Bose 2015). These processes are not uncontested, however, and struggles against neoliberalism within universities are often linked with wider movements (Kelley 2017). UCL's plans were vigorously opposed by Carpenters residents and many students and staff who challenged the loss of social housing, displacement of a settled community, and neglect of residents' concerns and wishes. One group of residents, CARP! (Carpenters Against Regeneration Plans), initiated their own community plan for the future of their estate, supported by the London-wide community planning network, Just Space, and the London Tenants Federation (LTF) as part of their broader anti-gentrification project with scholar-activists Loretta Lees and Mara Ferreri (Lees and Ferreri 2016; London Tenants Federation et al. 2014). Several UCL students and staff opposed to the university's plans also offered support, facilitated via Just Space's long-standing relationship with UCL. These nascent relationships of university–community solidarity re-imagined and re-worked relationships beyond the real estate logics animating UCL's proposal but did not evolve into a more substantial or longer-term coalition (see, for example, Kelley 2017).

The threat of displacement motivated the community plan to develop at high speed. From the end of 2012, workshops and events took place every month or two for around a year. At workshops, six to ten residents and two or three local businesses and other organisations discussed and developed proposals across various themes. Workshops were informed by wider door-knocking, exhibitions, and consultations, culminating in two large community events to launch the community plan and determine next steps.

In May 2013, UCL withdrew its proposal. UCL and Newham announced that they had been unable to agree commercial terms, and UCL students and CARP! claimed victory for their campaigns. Later that year, UCL announced that it would instead take up a site within the former Olympic Park—from which 284 businesses, two Gypsy and Traveller sites, and a large housing cooperative had already been cleared (Davis and Bernstock 2023)—as part of a broader arts, culture, and higher education cluster. This evolved to become “UCL East”, UCL's new campus on the “East Bank” of the Olympic Park. UCL East opened in Autumn 2022, largely unopposed although questions concerning the university's relationship with local communities continue to attract critical attention.

The community planning group continued to advance their own plans after UCL's withdrawal. An exhibition and consultation on a draft plan took place in summer 2013 before the final plan launched in September, including sections on housing and environment, social and community facilities, green and play space,

transport and access, local economy, and community ownership/neighbourhood planning. The group then focused on establishing a statutory Neighbourhood Forum to turn the Carpenters Community Plan into a statutory Neighbourhood Plan that would form part of the formal local planning framework under the 2011 Localism Act. This already lengthy and demanding process was made more so by the need to mediate a pre-existing conflict between two groups of residents, a product of the intense pressures of facing displacement. This conflict had not hindered the community planning process particularly but came to a head when both groups decided to start work on a neighbourhood plan as only one could be designated. In parallel, residents and firms attempted to influence the London Legacy Development Corporation's (LLDC's)¹ new local plan, which included the Carpenters Estate as a major development site.

The Greater Carpenters Neighbourhood Forum achieved formal designation in 2015 and a statutory consultation on its draft 2Neighbourhood Plan followed in 2019. In 2020, the Forum lapsed before its proposed Plan was adopted and Newham tasked its housing company, Populo, to develop a new masterplan for the estate, approved by a (contested) residents' ballot in 2021. The scheme remains contested at the time of writing, with remaining residents concerned about delays, costs, and failure to complete repairs, and businesses unsure as to whether and how they will be included.

Exploring Anti-Displacement Struggle through Diverse and Community Economies Research

Having introduced contestations over the Carpenters Estate, in this section I bring DCE research into conversation with research on urban displacement struggles. DCE research is not the most obvious starting point for thinking about anti-displacement struggles, which generally attract the attention of gentrification, urban social movement, and other critical urban researchers. The latter body of scholarship focuses mainly on struggles for decent, secure, and affordable housing in the context of increasingly extractive financialised urban development (Penny and Beswick 2018; Robinson and Attuyer 2020). Gentrification researchers are becoming more interested in anti-gentrification struggles and alternatives, with a focus again on housing (Lees 2022; Slater 2009). Housing has also been a focus of urban social movement research, alongside other sites of collective consumption such as public space, community facilities, and social infrastructure (Horton and Penny 2023; Leitner et al. 2007). Previous research on the Carpenters Estate also reflects this housing focus (Watt 2013); while Sendra and Fitzpatrick's (2020) account acknowledges the involvement of local businesses, it does not explore this process or its impacts. Where critical urban scholars have engaged with businesses, the focus has been on the role of elite and powerful business and financial interests in securing neoliberal, capitalist, and financialised urbanisation (North et al. 2001; Peck 1995; Wood 2004).

A greater diversity of firms is receiving attention through a growing strand of research on commercial gentrification and displacement (Davis and Bernstock 2023; Ferm and Jones 2016; González and Waley 2013; Zukin et al. 2009),

however, which I review elsewhere (Taylor 2020). This work highlights the invisibility and vulnerability of industrial firms (Davis and Bernstock 2023; Raco and Tunney 2010) and market traders and small retailers serving the everyday needs of working-class, migrant, and racially-minoritised communities (Rankin and McLean 2014; Román-Velazquez 2014), in urban development processes. There is also a growing body of academic research on the efforts of threatened traders and firms to challenge commercial displacement (González 2018; González and Dawson 2015; Raco and Tunney 2010; Román-Velazquez 2014; Taylor 2020). London's intensifying workspace crisis and proliferating workspace struggles (Taylor 2020) have made it a particular focus of research.

This article contributes to research on anti-displacement struggles, adapting DCE ideas and tools to explore their potential to generate new possibilities and propositions for economic development. New approaches to local, urban, and regional economic development that can support lives and livelihoods within environmental limits are urgently needed as climate, social, health, and financial crises intensify and multiply. In the UK, four decades of policy efforts to address growing regional inequalities and improve economic and social outcomes in deindustrialised and marginalised “left behind” places have failed. At the same time, in seemingly “successful” cities such as London, poverty, inequality, and displacement have intensified, particularly impacting working-class, migrant, and racially-minoritised communities. In this context, the focus of critical academic research on economic development is shifting towards exploring and advancing alternative approaches (Donald and Gray 2019; MacKinnon et al. 2022; Robinson 2016).

DCE ideas and tools are well-suited to this task. Although there has been little engagement with DCE research within urban studies so far, early contributions confirm its resonance with broader moves to strengthen feminist and postcolonial critical urban theory and praxis and focus on alternatives (Anderson 2020; Derickson 2015; Kern and McLean 2018; Longhurst et al. 2016). DCE research stretches back to the 1990s and Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson's critical engagement with how “capitalocentric” ways of thinking about the economy make it harder to think and act beyond capitalism, drawing on an understanding of language as performative (playing a role in bringing into being the world it describes). In capitalocentric economic discourse, the economy as a whole is labelled “capitalist”, rendering all other forms of economic activity invisible or marginal. Gibson-Graham (2006a:85, xiii) re-theorise the economy as a “postmodern pregnant space” of diversity in which “what is often seen as the *economy*, that is formal markets, wage labor, and capitalist enterprise, is merely one set of cells in a complex field of economic relations that sustain livelihoods”. This theorisation has inspired a plethora of “diverse economies” research focused on representing and mapping economic diversity, understood as a performative political act which, by making economic diversity more visible, helps to bring it into being (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020). Exploring the diversity of capitalism itself, its ambiguities and potential for transformation—including via the more-than-capitalist interests and practices of capitalist enterprises—also challenges hegemonic ideas of monolithic capitalism and makes space for alternatives (Gibson-Graham et al. 2019; North 2016, 2020; North and Nurse 2014).

Gibson-Graham's language of economic diversity opens up new economic subjectivities or, to put it more simply, different ways of relating to the economy (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 2006b). It resignifies us all as economic actors whose diverse activities collectively make up the economy, through our paid and unpaid work, formally and informally organised/regulated labour, gifts, barter, and market transactions. From this perspective, the economy is not something "out there", separate from social and political life, but is made collectively by us all, open to being re-made in multiple ways. Gibson-Graham's (2006b:87–88) politics of the subject "resignif[ies] economy as a site of decision, of ethical praxis ... [and] all economic practices as inherently social and always connected".

Gibson-Graham and their collaborators develop propositions and tools for enacting ethical decision-making about the economy in a *community economy* (Gibson-Graham 2006b; Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). A distinct strand of "community economies" research has developed, focusing on economic forms and practices animated by a shared sense of interdependence and produced through ethical negotiation, e.g. cooperative, social, and solidarity economy initiatives (Community Economies Collective 2019; Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020).

Gibson-Graham's new economic language and subjectivities open up new possibilities for collective action, informed by an understanding of knowledge as performative. In this view, research plays an active role in bringing into being the world it describes, opening up wide-ranging possibilities for "hybrid research collectives" involving academics and others (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 2008; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010). Here, I am particularly interested in what Cameron and Gibson (2005a:315) call "participatory action research in a poststructuralist vein", which I explore in the next section.

DCE research is animated by the idea of economy as political and recognises that building community economies often demands and depends on political struggle (Gibson-Graham 2006a; St. Martin et al. 2015). Yet, as Gabriel and Sarmiento (2020:282) suggest, in turning away from capitalocentric theorising, DCE research has often left "[t]he power struggles at the heart of entity known as 'the economy' ... not only unaltered but also oddly unattended" (see also Miller 2015; North et al. 2020; Roelvink 2016). As North et al. (2020:333) put it, DCE has underplayed the "conflictual dynamic" between capitalist space enclosure and defensive initiatives against commodification and marketisation.

Recognising DCE's blind spots, Miller (2015, 2019) encourages researchers to engage with antagonistic struggles (see also Gabriel and Sarmiento 2020; North et al. 2020). Drawing on his engagement with struggles over development in Maine in the United States, Miller (2019:232–233) writes that, "these ideas will matter only to the extent that they enter into new relations with others—ideas, bodies, forces—that take them up as experimental propositions, give them new life, and transform them through collective learning and struggle". Engaging with antagonistic struggles is important because, as Huron (2018:64) explains, "studying how commons have arisen—or been created, or been seized—in the past, can help us to learn how we can continue to seize, or create, and expand commons today" (see also Roelvink 2016).

While several DCE researchers have acknowledged the roots of community economy initiatives in antagonistic struggle (Kruzynski 2020; McLean 2021; Thompson 2020), the relationship between the two has been most thoroughly explored by Huron (2015, 2018; see also Vieta and Heras 2022). Huron foregrounds the struggle to seize, maintain, and expand the urban commons in her research on housing cooperatives in Washington, DC, showing how tenants and residents built the relationships and confidence they needed to make housing commons through contesting evictions. Struggle can not only mobilise but also constrain new economic possibilities, however. Huron's question—"When there's no longer a clear outside enemy, how does struggle continue?" (in Huron and Gray 2019:161–162)—is highly pertinent to the Carpenters struggle. This article contributes to this growing interest in "antagonistic economies" (North et al. 2020) within DCE research, expanding discussions beyond housing to include struggles against commercial displacement.

Adapting DCE Participatory Action Research Methods for Anti-Displacement Struggle

Having brought DCE ideas into conversation with research on urban displacement struggles, in this section I explore how DCE participatory action research (PAR) methods can be used to open up space to explore the economic possibilities of anti-displacement struggle, pushing at the boundaries of what might have otherwise occurred. While DCE PAR methods (Cameron and Gibson 2005a; Gibson-Graham 2005) have not previously been used to nurture the economic possibilities emerging from anti-displacement struggle, they are well-suited to the task. In DCE PAR projects, researchers use participatory mapping and cataloguing techniques in workshops with local people in marginalised and disinvested areas to generate alternative representations of the local economy (new economic language), documenting the diverse skills, experiences, and activities of the community. They create spaces in which community members can playfully explore and experiment with new identities as economic subjects (new economic subjectivities) in relation to these alternative representations, beginning "to imagine the various ways in which they might act on their abilities and ideas" (Cameron and Gibson 2005b:281). And they support community members to pursue ideas for community enterprises, opening up new possibilities for local economic development.

Like PAR more generally, DCE PAR has been criticised for being "top-down", embroiling local communities in researcher-led projects based more on researchers' theories than participants' needs, desires, and interests (Harney et al. 2016). Such criticisms are particularly pertinent to precarious and poorly resourced groups which often experience research as extractive (Benson and Nagar 2006; Kitchin and Hubbard 1999; Taylor 2014). Ensuring research benefits community collaborators means holding DCE ideas and tools "lightly" so as to make space for community-based approaches and priorities, as Waitoa and Domroski (2020:508) emphasise in their research on Māori political activity in New Zealand.

Critical reflection on the tensions and conflicts between research and activism is fundamental to arriving at an embedded action research approach that can resource and support anti-displacement struggle *and* advance DCE research. Critical reflection is not often discussed within DCE research (though see Lyons 2014) but is fundamental to scholar-activism as practised within critical geography (Fuller 1999; Routledge 1996). In DCE research, an emphasis on performativity affords all research an active role in bringing into being the world it describes, making all researchers already activists. From this perspective, academics can be part of collective agency “without needing to change hats or stray outside the walls of the academy” (Gibson-Graham 2006a). However, this understanding risks collapsing important differences that may exist within collectives. Critical reflection can help to acknowledge and address issues of power and positionality and be productive of new possibilities (Routledge 1996; Taylor 2014). Uncomfortable feelings of dislocation and fracture are generated as multiple, sometimes conflicting identities, and institutions interfere with and disrupt each other (Routledge 1996). In negotiating these displacements and disruptions, scholar-activists may arrive at a “third space” from which to write, speak, and do, where critical thought is embedded in solidarity with the struggles of communities and activists and oriented towards action (Routledge 1996:399; see also Fuller 1999; Lyons 2014; Taylor 2014).

Tensions and conflicts between research and activism were particularly powerful in the case of the Carpenters Estate. As a student in the university whose plans threatened to displace my collaborators, my hopeful ideas about the potential for research to support community economy initiatives were profoundly challenged (Taylor 2014; see also Derickson and Routledge 2015). Regularly confronted with residents’ and businesses’ distress and anger at their exclusion and expulsion, I felt extremely uncomfortable about deriving personal benefit from the institution causing this harm. I also found it difficult to work in such a highly pressurised context. Of course, the immediate demands and needs of the struggle meant that it would not have been possible—or ethical—to design and deliver a research project *a priori* from the university at this time. Additionally, although my help and support on local economy was very welcome, I had limited influence over the wider community planning process facilitated by Just Space/LTF. I found it particularly difficult when the subsequent focus on developing a neighbourhood forum directed attentions away from putting ideas and projects emerging from the community plan into more immediate action, including in the area of local economy in which I was, of course, very invested. I regularly worried that my work would “fit” neither the academic requirements of a PhD nor the contours of DCE and critical urban research. Reflecting in a research diary was crucial to my ability to work in this context, as were spaces of mutual support and collective discussion.

The pressures and demands of anti-displacement struggle left limited space for theoretical and methodological framing at the time, however. My research and engagement was inspired and motivated by DCE research from the start but it was only through subsequent critical reflection in the process of writing up my thesis that I was able to articulate more precisely how DCE ideas and tools could be adapted to explore and expand the economic possibilities of anti-displacement

struggle. With more distance, I could see that my work had significantly strengthened residents' and businesses' capacity to contest displacement and develop economic alternatives in the face of intense threat and minimal resources. I came to understand and accept the limits of what it had been possible to do as reflective of the demands of antagonistic struggle, necessitating strategies which constrain DCE research and, indeed, economic possibilities.

Importantly, adapting DCE for anti-displacement struggle requires a primary focus on building and organising new economic subjectivities. In previous DCE PAR, first, participants develop new representations of the local economy from which new economic subjectivities can then emerge. In this case, however, although UCL's proposal provided strong motivation for firms to participate in community planning, their engagement depended on additional support: most business owners worked long hours and had no previous history of local activism. The first element of my anti-displacement DCE praxis was therefore the "everyday organising work" of mobilising and building alliances between threatened firms, residents, and other organisations, echoing Derickson and Routledge's (2015:1) "ethical practice of *resourcing*". This was slow and iterative work, made up of hundreds of everyday activities, including visiting local firms, inviting them to meetings, updating them on events and progress, and seeking views and input from those who couldn't attend meetings. I also organised the first two meetings of a new Carpenters business forum but did not pursue this as motivations waned following UCL's withdrawal, attentions shifted towards establishing a neighbourhood forum, and my availability reduced as I wrote my PhD.

The second element of my anti-displacement DCE praxis involved working with threatened residents, firms, and other organisations to build a new understanding of the local economy. The group's initial motivation for local economic mapping was to produce a "Business Directory" in order to invite local businesses and organisations to participate in the community plan. I was able to expand upon this by interviewing 12 local firms and organisations and speaking informally with many others, through which a new narrative of the strengths and specialisms of the local economy emerged. This representation became an important tool for challenging Newham's and UCL's neglect of the local economy and provided a starting point for the group's local economic development proposals. However, the intense pressures of anti-displacement struggle, as well as the limits of my influence over the broader community planning process and the time and resources available to me as a PhD student, meant that it was not possible to extend this economic reframing further via diverse economies representative tools.

The third element of my anti-displacement DCE praxis was supporting collective action. While in DCE PAR the focus has often been on specific local economy projects, anti-displacement struggle necessitated action across multiple arenas including community planning, meetings with planning officials, planning consultations, and neighbourhood planning. Various ideas for local economy projects emerged from the community planning process, such as childcare and healthy eating skill-shares, but no resources were available at the time to support them. They therefore fell by the wayside as the threat of displacement diminished and attentions turned to setting up a Neighbourhood Forum.

Overall, between November 2012 and October 2013, my anti-displacement DCE research at the Carpenters Estate produced 12 interviews with local firms and other organisations and a large archive of documents, notes, and research diary entries from around seven community planning meetings, exhibitions, and events as well as regular visits to local firms and organisations.

The Economic Politics of Anti-Displacement Struggle on the Carpenters Estate

In this section, I explore how the threat of displacement shaped and constrained the economic possibilities which emerged from the struggle over the Carpenters Estate, supported by the adapted PAR approach described above. I use Gibson-Graham's focus on economic subjectivities, language, and possibilities for collective action to structure my analysis, reversing the first two elements, as explained in the previous section. These new economic possibilities were significantly strengthened through my embedded action-oriented research but remained messy, strategic, and vulnerable, reflecting the pressures and demands of anti-displacement struggle in London, a "global city" with a hyper-financialised real estate market (Penny and Beswick 2018), as well the limits of PhD research. Future DCE-inspired anti-displacement research might provide greater support and resourcing to counteract the constraints and imperatives of encountering and resisting displacement.

New Economic Subjectivities: Emerging Solidarities of Anti-Displacement Struggle

Prior to the UCL proposal, Carpenters businesses had not joined residents' anti-displacement struggles. Things changed with the UCL proposal, which posed a much more specific and immediate threat. At the first community planning workshop, residents agreed that existing businesses should also have the right to remain in the local area. The threat of displacement also mobilised several small independent businesses in and around the estate to participate in the community planning process initiated by residents. Testimonies from one of the directors of a longstanding family-owned construction firm, P.A. Finlay, and the proprietor of Universal Automobile Engineers at an early meeting established common ground and solidarity between Carpenters residents and businesses. The director of P.A. Finlay explained how the firm had nearly been destroyed by its eviction from the Marshgate Lane industrial area—one of an estimated 200 businesses displaced for the Olympics (Raco and Tunney 2010). The directors decided to leave the firm's new site in Beckton and move to the smaller sites retained on the Carpenters Estate in order to rebuild. The proprietor of Universal Automobile Engineers explained that he had experienced heavy losses as trade reduced with the removal of industry and road closures for the Olympics, as well as the depopulation of the estate. These testimonies demonstrated to residents that businesses shared their feelings of fear, uncertainty, and anger at being ignored and displaced by UCL's plans, as well as previous negative experiences of regeneration

initiatives. Eight local businesses attended community planning meetings and events with several others taking part in different ways, such as offering space, collecting consultation forms, and contributing exhibition materials.

Through these encounters and activities, residents and businesses began to realise and affirm their common experiences of redevelopment and displacement. From this common ground, new economic subjectivities animated by solidarity began to emerge. These emerging solidarity subjectivities extended beyond residents and firms' shared desire to resist displacement to imagine a future local economy in which their interests and concerns were more closely entangled. Local residents wanted to see local firms involved in refurbishing the estate, training and employing local people, for example; this policy was particularly strongly supported by the locally-rooted multi-generational family construction firm, P.A. Finlay, which made regular donations to local youth and community groups, offered apprenticeships, and was frustrated by inaccessible local procurement processes. Sharing the experience of displacement generated opportunities to strengthen and expand these local roots and commitments, orienting businesses' more-than-capitalist interests and practices towards the production of benefit for local residents.

At various points, local firms signalled that their interests might not ultimately align with those of residents, however. The director of P.A. Finlay said, "I suppose I'm just being honest about my intentions ... they're not completely altruistic ... we are businesspeople, you know". In another example, the proprietor of a third-generation family-owned metal fabrication firm, Stratford Wire Works, explained that he would not be fighting to remain because he wanted to extract some value from his business while he had the chance in order to spend more time with his family and do something different with the rest of his life.

This was a strategic and partial alliance, therefore, animated by a shared imperative to resist displacement. Being primarily motivated by resistance rendered the alliance vulnerable; as the immediate threat of UCL's proposal faded, firms' participation in and commitment to community planning waned. When my organising support ended, firms did not continue to organise and represent themselves collectively via their own business forum and eventually stopped playing an active role in the Neighbourhood Forum, reducing opportunities to deepen and extend anti-displacement solidarities. This outcome underlines the importance of everyday organising work to anti-displacement DCE praxis, providing the foundation for threatened firms and residents to develop new economic subjectivities, language, and possibilities.

New Economic Language: Challenging the Erasure of Valued Local Economic Activities

UCL's proposal mobilised residents and firms to produce their own narrative—or, language, to follow Gibson-Graham—about the local economy, which had been entirely ignored by the university and Newham. This new economic language emerged from residents' desire for local businesses to have the right to remain in the area. Their commitment prompted residents to find out more about local businesses, to invite them to meetings. This process of discovery began with a

“walkabout” of the estate in December 2012, during which residents shared their everyday knowledge of the area, and developed further as more firms and organisations began to participate. 40 low-cost artists’ studios were discovered within two run-down and empty-looking old industrial buildings on one edge of the estate, and it emerged that the Carpenters and Dockland Centre rented low-cost office space to start-ups and social enterprises.

As previously-hidden economic assets and strengths became increasingly apparent, I gathered together information gleaned through walkabouts, meetings, conversations, and interviews into new representations of the local economy to discuss with the community planning group. The Business Directory I developed populated the empty space of the local economy in Newham and UCL’s plans with 31 identified local businesses and other organisations—mapped at Figure 1—including at least 13 businesses actively trading within the Carpenters area which provided jobs for at least 220 people. The Business Directory was organised by three clusters of economic activity—which I described in detail in a narrative text—specifically start-ups and social enterprises; construction, refurbishment, and artistic activities; and provision of goods and services to people living and working in the area.

The Business Directory and narrative text can be understood as performative tools, bringing the Carpenters economy into being as a space of presence rather than absence. They provoked pleasant surprise from people who had lived or worked in the area for many years, strengthening desires to retain existing economic assets and strengths. As performative tools, they also made existing businesses visible as potential agents of local economic development, bringing into being possible alternative future development pathways.

This new economic language was powerfully put to work to resist the threat of displacement posed by UCL’s plans. UCL had justified and promoted its proposed new campus by emphasising the socioeconomic benefits it would supposedly deliver for local communities, in particular jobs, but had not taken into account the businesses already present. Previously hidden and ignored firms and specialisms were revealed to UCL, Newham, and the LLDC through written submissions to formal planning consultations and public examinations, as well as meetings. On one occasion, the director of construction firm P.A. Finlay took a planning officer on a tour of local businesses. Such encounters brought policy makers face-to-face with local business owners at their premises, confirming their wish to remain in and contribute to the area. Through these efforts, the Carpenters Community Plan group began to position existing firms and residents as key agents and beneficiaries of local economic development.

New economic language was therefore embedded in and oriented towards the demands and imperatives of anti-displacement struggle. It did not distinguish between different ways of organising economic activity, as in Gibson-Graham’s language of the diverse economy. The vast majority of the enterprises catalogued were small firms operating within the capitalist sphere, often with more-than-capitalist interests and practices animated by a commitment to the local area and to serving local people, including several multi-generation family firms (see also North 2016). Had more time and resources been available, it could have been productive to pursue a deeper reframing of the local economy using diverse



Figure 1: Map of Carpenters Estate showing the location of businesses and other organisations included in the Carpenters Business Directory. Source: author's observations, map and design by Miles Irving, UCL Department of Geography (used here with permission), photographs 1 and 5 by Julian Cheyne (used here with permission), and all other photographs by the author.

economies images and tools. A deeper reframing might have enabled residents, firms, and other local organisations to build stronger economic solidarity subjectivities and pursue other possible arenas of collective economic action.

New Possibilities for Collective Action: Economic Development as "Healthy Growth"

For residents and firms, UCL's plan offered a discontinuous and disturbing vision of economic growth reliant on their displacement. Residents were consulted only

about re-housing options, not the wider vision for area, while businesses were ignored entirely. Residents and firms countered their erasure by expressing solidarity for one another to remain in the area and to contribute to and benefit from its future development. The core local economy policy was to reverse the depopulation of the estate, in light of its negative impact on local businesses. Other proposals aimed to reverse some of the negative impacts of the Olympics, e.g. road closures. These proposals challenged the idea of local economic decline as natural or inevitable by making visible the negative impact of previous regeneration efforts—policy choices which could be reversed.

Through community planning, residents and firms were able to develop new proposals for economic development entwined with their needs, values, and aims. Residents and firms wanted to see improved links between local education and training providers (e.g. Building Crafts College; the University of East London) and local jobs, including via apprenticeships, work placements, and up-skilling for local residents. Dialogue between residents and start-up firms in the Carpenters and Dockland Centre generated proposals for new low-cost workspace for skilled trades, manufacturing, and for young people to try out new business ideas.

From these proposals, a new vision emerged of economic development as “healthy growth”: growing and developing what was already present in the local area, involving and benefiting existing local residents and firms. This vision positioned local businesses as the primary agents of a form of economic development that would become more closely connected with local residents over time, yielding greater potential for mutual benefit. This vision was strongly shaped by anti-displacement struggle; it did not seek to reduce capitalist activities or develop community economies, but rather to ensure existing firms and residents could remain in the area and to grow and develop there. Proposals to increase and thicken the connections between firms and residents would drive existing firms to become increasingly more-than-capitalist through their growing local entanglements, embedded in and oriented towards the needs of local people. More jobs for local people was a central concern for residents, but they were not particularly motivated to set up cooperative or solidarity economy projects. At one point, the group discussed ideas for putting their proposals into action, e.g. childcare and healthy eating skill-shares, but these ideas were not progressed after UCL withdrew and focus shifted towards establishing a Neighbourhood Forum. Better-resourced anti-displacement DCE research might support threatened residents and firms to put such ideas into practice.

Although around ten local businesses participated in the Neighbourhood Forum, engagement dwindled over time due to the length and complexity of the process as explained earlier. Nonetheless, the draft Neighbourhood Plan, published for consultation in 2019, developed several local economy policies from the community plan such as a Neighbourhood Education Partnership, Carpenters Centre for Learning Support, low-cost workspace, and support for social enterprise (Greater Carpenters Neighbourhood Forum 2019).

In parallel, some residents and firms attempted to influence the LLDC’s local plan, which included the Carpenters Estate as a major development site. Amendments were proposed in line with the Carpenters Community Plan and debated

during statutory public hearings. Although no changes were secured, the consultation and public hearings offered Carpenters residents, firms, and other organisations opportunities to make links with the wider LLDC area, including in Hackney Wick and Fish Island where parallel efforts were underway to protect low-cost workspace and industrial firms. In total, around 13 firms and organisations challenged the plan's bias against industry, making the case for stronger protections from commercial displacement and re-framing local industry as an asset for "healthy growth", taking inspiration from the Carpenters Community Plan.²

Ten years on, businesses continue to face the threat of displacement and the Carpenters' vision and proposals for "healthy growth" have not been taken up. When I visited in November 2022, the seven artists and businesses I spoke to all wanted to remain in Carpenters, and the vast majority had little if any information about whether this might be possible. At the time of writing, Populo's masterplan³ states that industrial firms will not be included in any new development but be relocated elsewhere in Newham, with a commercial strategy determining which other existing firms may be able to remain. These emerging outcomes are indicative of a wider policy failure to retain and support industry in London, as well as other marginalised small businesses, as its housing and workspace crises intensify (Davis and Bernstock 2023; Ferm and Jones 2016; Taylor 2020). Glimmers of hope exist, however, in the continued strength of the local economy and businesses' desire to remain and resume collective discussions. Past experience confirms that further business organising will require support and resourcing.

As I write, the ten-year anniversary of the London 2012 Olympics has prompted politicians, policy makers, and academics to take a critical longer view of the claims of urban regeneration to benefit existing communities. There is by now overwhelming evidence that the regeneration efforts associated with the Olympics produced significant residential and commercial displacement with limited direct benefits for existing communities (Bernstock et al. 2022). The lack of monitoring of displacement and other impacts on existing communities has been a major failure, obscuring the role of gentrification in pushing up measures of socio-economic performance across the Olympic boroughs (Bernstock et al. 2022; Davis and Bernstock 2023). In this context, the Carpenters' proposition for "healthy growth"—economic development without displacement—has particular currency, coming from a community on the doorstep of the Olympics. More broadly, the Carpenters Community Plan has continued relevance to other urban struggles and movements contesting commercial displacement in London and beyond. This article provides one route for it to continue to circulate alongside the Just Space (2015) handbook on contesting commercial displacement (see also Taylor 2020).

Conclusion

Contributing to the growing interest in antagonism in DCE research (Gabriel and Sarmiento 2020; Huron 2018; Miller 2015; North et al. 2020), this article has revealed the consequential yet nuanced impact of anti-displacement struggle—of

encountering and resisting plans which would destroy valued homes, businesses, and communities—on the production of new economic subjectivities, language, and possibilities for collective action. While the messiness, limits, and vulnerability of the economic politics of anti-displacement struggle may be off-putting to some, this article confirms their relevance to several ongoing areas of DCE research.

Firstly, anti-displacement struggle is a potentially productive site from which to explore the potential for capitalist firms to play a role in advancing economic alternatives. In the Carpenters case, anti-displacement struggle produced solidarity and common ground between threatened residents and capitalist firms—in particular, locally-rooted multi-generational family firms—through which they began to re-imagine the local economy, its future, and their own relation to it. This case contributes to DCE research on the diversity of capitalism, providing further evidence for the potential for capitalist firms to have more-than-capitalist interests and practices (Gibson et al. 2019; Gibson-Graham et al. 2019; North 2016; North and Nurse 2014; Taylor 2020). It demonstrates how shared experiences of threat and struggle can mobilise existing more-than-capitalist possibilities towards alternative economic development pathways, in this case a vision for the healthy growth of a locally rooted and entangled economy.

Anti-displacement struggle is also a relevant starting point for advancing DCE research and activism at neighbourhood, local, or metropolitan level. DCE research has been challenged for its focus on specific place-based community economy initiatives which, it is often suggested, lack the scale and power needed for global transformation (Gibson-Graham 2006a; Jonas 2013; Kelly 2005). Gibson-Graham have challenged this binary framing of the local as the global's marginal and powerless "other", drawing on the scalar politics of feminism through the transformation of women and the places they inhabit, everywhere (Gibson-Graham 2002, 2006a). Notwithstanding the generative potential of this perspective, this article confirms there is much to be gained from advancing DCE research from a variety of starting points. Anti-displacement struggles offer specific opportunities to develop and advance plans and initiatives to support the flourishing of community economies at local, city, or metropolitan level, including in highly pressurised and financialised urban economies. Developing such propositions through close engagement and collaboration with urban movements and struggles may help to strengthen and secure them (see also Miller 2015, 2019; Thompson et al. 2022).

Of course, the objectives and imperatives of anti-displacement struggle also constrain and limit possibilities for proliferating community economies. Importantly, in this case, the threat of displacement produced a strategic and partial alliance between firms and residents, significantly weakened once the immediate threat retreated. Opportunities to deepen and develop emerging economic subjectivities became more limited thereafter, and ideas for nascent community economy initiatives were not progressed. The fragility and vulnerability of the economic politics of anti-displacement struggle highlights their particular need for support and resourcing in order to develop and flourish.

This article demonstrates the potential for DCE ideas and tools to provide such resourcing and support. It underlines the importance of critical reflection in

shaping research collaborations which respond to the immediate needs and demands of anti-displacement struggle, holding DCE ideas and tools lightly to resource and support emerging economic possibilities. Firstly, DCE researchers can support the everyday organising work needed to forge and sustain broad alliances and solidarities through anti-displacement struggle, including with uncertain or unlikely actors. They can also use DCE ideas and tools to collaborate on local economy surveys and mapping, supporting emerging alliances to develop their understanding of the local economy beyond the most urgent priorities of struggle. Finally, they can provide resources and support to put ideas for community economies into practice despite the demands and pressures of anti-displacement struggle. By supporting anti-displacement struggles, DCE researchers can build solidarity with, learn from, and centre precarious and minoritised communities, contributing to broader efforts to develop DCE research from and for diverse contexts and communities (Ferreira 2022; Hossein 2019; Vieta and Heras 2022; Waitoa and Dombroski 2020).

This article has also confirmed the relevance and usefulness of DCE research to critical urban studies. DCE ideas and tools can help researchers to move beyond the critical analysis of commercial gentrification and displacement and explore and advance alternatives (Lees 2022; Slater 2009). Importantly, DCE research can help to expand engagement with urban economies beyond the elite and powerful business and financial interests that have tended to attract the most critical attention (North et al. 2001; Peck 1995; Wood 2004). Re-conceptualising the economy as diverse brings a wide range of other economic actors into view, with the potential to become new economic subjects and to advance new economic possibilities. The case of the Carpenters illustrates how DCE ideas and tools can be adapted to support and strengthen new and emerging propositions and possibilities for economic development. In this way, researchers can challenge the extractive real estate logics that increasingly shape universities' relationships with surrounding communities.

This article therefore answers calls within critical urban research, as well as local and regional economic development studies, for greater focus on developing and advancing alternatives (Donald and Gray 2019; MacKinnon et al. 2022; Robinson 2016). The open stance, optimism, and collective action that animate DCE research offer welcome correctives to long-standing traditions of critical urban research focused on hegemonic financialised, neoliberal, and capitalist urban development (see also Anderson 2020; Kern and McLean 2018; Parnell and Robinson 2012). More specifically, DCE ideas and tools offer inspiration and insight as to how urban economies might not only be imagined otherwise, but also remade otherwise.

There is considerable potential for further productive dialogue between DCE research and critical urban studies (Anderson 2020). Cities and "the urban" offer specific opportunities for political debate and contestation; they are more than just the location or container for struggle and alternatives (Huron 2015; Taylor 2020). Interest in cities and urban research is growing within the Community Economies Research Network (CERN), including via workshops at CERN's "Liviana" conferences which I co-organised with other network members.⁴ I hope this

article makes a contribution to these ongoing conversations, opening up new avenues for academic research to play a role in bringing into being urban economies that can support the majority of urban lives and livelihoods.

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Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

Endnotes

¹ The LLDC became the planning authority for the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park and immediately surrounding neighbourhoods in 2012.

² It is not possible to discuss the potential and limits of the broader mobilisation around the LLDC local plan within the confines of this article.

³ Populo secured planning permission for its masterplan in 2022, following a two-year resident engagement programme and ballot. The masterplan includes retention of some terraced housing, refurbishment of one tower block, demolition of all other existing buildings, new residential and commercial space, and new premises for the Building Crafts College and Carpenters and Dockland Centre.

⁴ Co-organisers included Benedikt Schmid, Ottavia Cima, Christian Anderson, Peter North, and Thomas Smith.

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