Social media and housing activism in post-crisis Dublin: Geographies of digital/material contention

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Declaration

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Summary

This thesis focuses on housing contention in Dublin since the global financial crisis. The thesis explores housing struggles in this period (2007 to 2021) as digital/material contention, influenced by Mohamed Zayani’s (2015) reading of ‘digital contention’ as the ‘gradual emergence of a contentious mediated culture’ which is embedded in the everyday experiences of users as a way of struggling together in a sustained and effortful manner that can vary and evolve over time. The thesis connects Zayani’s framing of contention with digital geographies literature, and particularly its nuanced conceptual reading of space as simultaneously digital/material and always-already-mediated (Leszczynski, 2015). This connection is used to conduct an empirically-grounded socio-technical investigation of the relation between contention and the digital’s ambivalent role within this in contemporary housing struggles.

The thesis investigates how activists have used digital technologies, and particularly social media, to contest housing in post-crash Dublin. Social media are one facet of the wider ubiquity of digital tools, technologies, and logics in contemporary lives and societies, and a growing digital geographies literature has highlighted the intensifying relationship whereby geographies are produced through, by, and of the digital (Ash et al., 2018). This thesis uses housing activism in post-financial crisis Dublin as a case study to contribute new insights on the ways in which contention now unfolds as simultaneously digital/material, and the ambivalent potentialities and pitfalls that this creates for contemporary activism in a broader context of de/repoliticisation (Swyngedouw, 2018) under communicative capitalism (Dean, 2005). Rather than offering a utopic or dystopic framing, the thesis proceeds from the actually existing context of post-crash housing activism in Dublin to assess how and why digital technologies are used by those seeking individual, collective, and societal change (Kitchin and Fraser, 2020). The thesis focuses on the role that housing activist community groups have played in politicising housing in post-crash Dublin through a set of evolving digital/material tactics, forms, and forces. Specifically, this evolution involved three temporary political occupation campaigns which the thesis unpicks in detail (Bolt Hostel, Apollo House/Home Sweet Home, and Take
Back The City), and an overarching shift ‘from mobilising to organising’ through the launch and expansion of a Community Action Tenants Union (CATU Ireland).

Using an inductive case study approach, the research employs three principal methods of data collection – digital ethnography, participant observation/observant participation, and semi-structured interviews – to investigate Dublin’s post-crash housing activism. The thesis’ framing of contention as digital/material draws from data collection as three layered or diffractive ‘cuts’ (see Uprichard and Dawney, 2019). This involved a) digital ethnographic observation of how housing activist groups used social media (and particularly Facebook), b) participant observant/observant participation during a temporary political occupation campaign (Take Back The City, summer 2018), and c) semi-structured interviews with key participants in post-crash housing struggles in Dublin. This methodological approach shaped my understanding of how occupations have played a key role in post-crash housing activism in Dublin, which is recognised by existing scholarship (e.g. Di Feliciantonio and O’Callaghan, 2020), and unfold simultaneously digitally/materially, which is typically ignored or underexplored in existing scholarship. The lived experience of the Take Back The City campaign informed my approach to interpreting housing contention as digital/material, with temporary political occupations functioning as a high-profile amalgam of digital/material tactics that I could see from digital ethnography had been recurringly and iteratively deployed by housing activist groups throughout the post-crash period. I undertook targeted digital ethnographic data collection to document the recursive relationship between occupation and social media, in which social media were used to publicise, organise, and mediate temporary political occupations, and housing activism more broadly, and occupations as digital/material events were key forces driving the evolution of post-crash housing struggles. This social media data was used as a discussion aid in semi-structured interviews, where interviewees were asked to reflect on previous and current housing activism and social media usage within this activism.

Empirically, the project extends existing research by moving ‘beyond the geotag’ (Crampton et al., 2013) and offering a reading of Irish post-crash
housing activism as digital/material, a point that is often either ignored or taken for granted in existing accounts (e.g. Hearne et al., 2018). Methodologically, the project deploys a transferable and innovative combination of mixed methods to understand the complex digital/material geographies of contention, with a particular emphasis on housing financialisation and activism as digital/material (cf. Nic Lochlainn, 2021a). Conceptually, the thesis outlines the digital/material practices through which contemporary contention is publicised, organised, and mediated, and attunes to the ambivalent possibilities and limitations of the digital in struggles for impactful change.
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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Impetus for research: Digital/material contention – speeding up and falling apart

Is this just the way life is now? Should it be like this? Does it matter at all? (Kitchin and Fraser, 2020, p. 2)

In October 2018, a group of activists ‘occupied’ the lobby of Airbnb’s European headquarters in Dublin’s docklands (Figure 1). Airbnb’s presence in Dublin is controversial. The company’s choice of headquarter location symbolises the city’s position within globalised and financialised networks of tax avoidance. Its presence also highlights the profound contradictions of on-going housing and homelessness crises in a city branded as a tourist destination of international significance.

Figure 1 - Take Back the City occupy Airbnb headquarters – image collected through digital ethnography of Take Back the City Facebook page, posted publicly on 13th October 2018. Note faces are blurred here by author.

The occupation lasted less than two hours but briefly trended on Irish Twitter and was covered by national media (e.g. Molloy 2018). I did not attend the occupation of the Airbnb lobby, although I had been conducting participant
observation and digital ethnography researching Take Back the City – Dublin, the housing activist coalition involved in organising the event. Mostly my absence was because I had spent the preceding weeks at what had felt like an endless succession of housing activist meetings, demonstrations, and protests. I was invited via Facebook to a ‘flash action’ assembling at a specific bridge on Saturday morning the week before the event. However, I was tired, I was in the final weeks of writing a particularly long and onerous funding application, and I succumbed to what had become something of a voyeuristic habit during my research – I watched some of the event through the campaign’s Facebook livestream while working at my desk. I left a Firefox tab open on the livestream for maybe ten minutes, and occasionally switched from Microsoft Word to view the choppy unfolding of the action, which consisted of about a dozen housing activists standing in the lobby of the Airbnb building with a banner decrying the company’s involvement in ongoing housing/homelessness crises. Competing with the background noise of a funky beat, there was some chanting and short speeches decrying Airbnb, their alleged tax avoidance, and their contribution to a wider housing crisis in Dublin. The spectacle proceeded to the bemusement of onlookers who had presumably been in to view the building as part of a wider ‘open house’ architectural event taking place in the city that weekend. Other livestream viewers were commenting yellow thumbs up emojis and ‘well done’. Eventually, I closed the tab because it felt disappointing, ghoulish, and a bit surreal to be watching an event I had not made time to attend in person.

The Airbnb occupation was undertaken as part of Take Back The City – Dublin, a wider housing activist campaign, and illustrates two key points of the thesis and its focus. Firstly, Take Back The City’s occupation of Airbnb’s headquarters illustrates how contemporary contention unfolds not as either digital and/or material but as experiments with, in, and through the simultaneously digital/material context of modern life (see Leszczynski, 2015). This reflects the ways in which digital technologies reshape, accelerate, and fragment our everyday lives both on individual and collective scales (Kitchin and Fraser, 2020), and in turn impacts and is impacted by the entanglement of the digital and the urban in contemporary settings. Activist practices unfold relationally within this, shaped by and shaping our
digital/material world. The thesis engages with housing activist community groups and their usages of digital technologies and social media (particularly Facebook) to publicise, organise, and mediate post-crash housing struggles in Dublin. Secondly, interpreting housing struggles as digital/material contention influences how I frame the possibilities, limitations, and evolution of post-crash housing activism. Here, the thesis’ focus on digital/material contention is a conscious positioning within existing vocabulary on digital technologies and contestation. Academic discussion of these topics has been characterised by a proliferation of poorly distinguished terms which are often used synonymously but mean different things to their users. ‘Digital activism’ and ‘online protest’ are the keywords of choice for academic writers, but distinctions between them (with regards scope, intention, or pejorative nature) can be broad and ambiguous (Yang, 2016; Kaun and Uldam, 2018 discuss this in their introduction to a recent special issue on the ‘digital activism’). One of the major features of terms used to discuss the internet and protest is that they usually focus on how the Internet and/or digital technologies are used to conduct protest through specific, protest-focused activities (Vegh, 2013). One of the points that this thesis elucidates, however, is that activism unfolds through a digital/material ecosystem characterised by the everyday, embodied, and often mundane experiences of so-called ‘digital activists’, who operate as individuals and collectives.

‘Digital contention’ is a term introduced by Mohamed Zayani (2015) to account for this everyday dimension of ‘online protest’, connoting an emphasis on how socio-technological digital communication practices and processes are embedded in everyday life and lead to the ‘gradual emergence of a contentious mediated culture’ (Zayani, 2015, p. 12). For Zayani, ‘digital contention’ is:

‘An amalgam of social interactions, citizen forms of engagement, cultural practices, ordinary activities, and mundane pursuits that insect with and are embedded in media experiences, anchored in participatory networks, and intertwined with processes of communication… Contention invokes a set of practices, interactions, engagement, articulations, contestations, and rejections that are not necessarily politically framed but they are political in other ways’ (ibid, pp. 12-13).
The thesis uses ‘contention’ to express the ways that digital technologies and protest are embedded in the everyday experiences of users, as in Zayani’s meaning. However, I also use the term ‘contention’ to capture a sense of being in contention as a way of struggling together, and something which is sustained (but varied) over time, effortful, and collective. Accordingly, the thesis focuses on housing activist community groups, whose actions and emphasis on temporary political occupations have been highlighted as arguably the cutting edge or vanguard of post-crash housing struggles in Dublin (e.g. Di Feliciantonio and O’Callaghan, 2020; Hearne et al., 2018; Lima, 2021b). These community groups tend to be organised around particular spatial but subjectively defined catchments areas (e.g. ‘Dublin Central Housing Action’) and have been central to housing’s contestation in post-crash Dublin. While their usage of social media has tended to be remarked upon in passing in existing research, the thesis frames housing activist community groups as distinctly digital/material in their practices and argues that these groups are distinct from forms of short-term action or expressions of disapproval, objection, or opposition (which I refer to as incidents or campaigns of protest). Community groups engage in contention by challenging issues collectively. While this can be explicitly oppositional, contention is typically understood as an on-going and collective endeavour, which may be more implicit in its resistance, and unfolds as part of and through the everyday, social, and mundane experiences and pursuits that Zayani discusses. In contrast to Zayani’s focus on ‘digital contention’, which replicates a tendency to distinguish between ‘digital’ activism and activism, I approach contention as simultaneously digital/material, rather than drawing a clear-cut division between the two.

Over the past decade or so, a series of digital accelerations and turns have reshaped the strategies, tactics, and practices of contemporary activism. Critical attention has characterised these practices as simultaneously a) situated in physical, especially urban, settings and b) digitally networked. Kitchin and Fraser (2020, p. 10) characterise acceleration as a key axis for describing and critiquing our increasingly digital lives, noting how ‘digital life seems to compress and fragment our time’. For Kitchin and Fraser, extraction is the other key axis for making sense of the problems that digital
life creates, and they note that ‘individual users – you, us – are in the centre of things with serious pressures bearing down from two directions’ (ibid, p. 11). This description, of being at the centre of larger dynamics, and the sense of speed and pressure evoked, is useful for understanding the contemporary critical moment as simultaneously foreclosed and in play, a characterisation which recurs in accounts of contemporary forms of contention. The decade since the global financial crisis of 2007/08, and particularly late 2010/early 2011 as a period of heightened global activism, has been shaped by this sense of accelerations, as well as an interplay between contingent contention of power and hegemonic foreclosure. The digital and the urban operate as both settings and stakes of a) acceleration, accumulation, and extraction, and b) resistance and alternatives to these processes.

The thesis uses the empirical case study of housing struggles in post-crash Dublin to investigate the geographies of digital/material contention. Here, I focus on housing activist community groups as a particularly important part of the broader ecosystem of housing’s politicisation, which operate alongside and manoeuvre between political parties, trade unions, local government, and ‘third sector’ organisations who are all also interested in housing. The thesis has two main aims. First, the thesis investigates how digital technologies in general and social media in particular have been used in grounded activist struggles. Guided by an inductive approach, I outline how housing activist community groups have used Facebook, Google Forms, and an assortment of other types of digital tools and platforms as part of their attempts to politicise and contest housing. As outlined in chapter three, here I focus on piecing together the longer-term trajectory of housing activism as on-going and collective parts of an evolving struggle, rather than episodic or individualistic protests about housing. Secondly and relatedly, the thesis aims to use qualitative and quantitative data to document and analyse how activists’ uses of social media have changed in the decade since the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008. This meant adopting a reflexive and emergent digital/material approach to attune to how groups contesting housing were using digital technologies and social media, and whether, how, and why this had changed over time. As discussed in chapter three, this emergent approach highlighted the central role of temporary political occupations of vacant
buildings and the recurrence of this tactic in three main campaigns, which were the Bolt Hostel, Apollo House/Home Sweet Home, and Take Back The City-Dublin. To accomplish these two related aims, the thesis had three main objectives, which shape its central research questions. These were to:

i) analyse contention as simultaneously digital/material using digital ethnography of and participant observation with housing activist community groups in Dublin;

ii) explain how digital/material contention is produced and changes over time through digital ethnography of housing activist groups’ social media accounts (with a particular focus on Facebook, and recognition of the evolving role of Twitter and Instagram) and semi-structured interviews with key members of housing activist community groups;

iii) assess the overall impacts of digital/material contention on the forms (e.g. political party, trade union, tenant union) and subject positions (comrade, worker, member) which structure contemporary housing activism in Dublin.

1.2 Theoretical framework
The thesis’ conceptualisation of contention as digital/material draws from existing work on the digital, the political, and housing struggles in post-crash cities. A growing body of interdisciplinary work has focused on interpreting the digital and the permeation of everyday life by digital tools and technologies (Kitchin and Fraser, 2020). Geography’s ‘digital turn’ offers new ways to understand the temporal and spatial impacts of the digital as ‘pervasively’ and ‘ubiquitously embedded’ technologies which ‘enact progressively routine orderings of quotidian rhythms, interactions, opportunities, spatial configurations, and flows’ (Ash et al., 2018, p. 26). Digital geographies approaches offer a nuanced conceptual reading of space as simultaneously digital/material and always-already-mediated (Leszczynski, 2015). Geographers have contributed to inter- and trans-disciplinary understandings of activism and social movements more broadly by arguing for a sensitivity to place, space, scale, and networks in contestation (e.g. Leitner et al., 2008; Miller, 2013), with recent work on ‘fast activism’ (Lauermann and Vogelpohl, 2019) using campaigns against mega-events to illustrate ‘an emerging mode of urban opposition’ which aims to resist and change ‘local receptions of fast and mobile urban policy’. Digital geographies work on activism, which I discuss in detail in chapter two, has used social
media data to ‘map’ protest (e.g. Shelton, 2017) and drawn from/contribute to critical media research on feminist activist (e.g. McLean et al., 2019).

While digital geography approaches offer nuanced understandings of space, embodiment, and digital activism, existing literature struggles to account for the ambivalent and changing roles digital technologies play in the broader context of communicative capitalism, in which neoliberalism fuses and is perpetuated by digital technologies and participative democracy as an ideal (Dean, 2005). Dean’s work offers an overarching framework for the links between technology and governmentality that digital geographies scholarship has highlighted, or what Dammann et al. (2022) describe as an emergent ‘new digital governmentality’. For Dean, this fusion of neoliberalism, democracy, and the digital creates a gap between activist practices, shaped by the permeation of digital technologies and logics, and their foreclosure under communicative capitalism, in which digital technologies are used to commodify attention (Crogan and Kinsley, 2012) and technocratic logics subsume activism within broader processes of depoliticisation (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2015). Importantly, Dean tends to focus on the limitations that digital technologies impose on what can be broadly understood as ‘left-wing’ politics (e.g. Dean, 2009, 2016). However, these limitations also apply but are differently experienced by ‘right-wing’ political and popular mobilisations, who have also drawn upon the digital’s ambivalent political possibilities to wage ‘online culture wars’ (Nagle, 2017), organise a conservative spatial politics (Trapenberg Frick, 2013, 2016), and promote a transnational ‘heteroactivist’ agenda (Nash, Catherine J. et al., 2021; Nash, Catherine Jean and Browne, 2020). Here, communicative capitalism as a political economic context can be usefully situated within the broader framework of Left political philosophy dealing with post-politics/post-democracy, which explains how meaningful or transformative change is foreclosed by the fusion of capitalism and democracy as ideals (e.g. Žižek, 2008). Political urban geographers have used theories of political subjectivation, the post-political, and its post-democratic implications, to outline a more processual reading of depoliticisation in contemporary cities and the recurrent repoliticisation or return of the political as socio-spatial rupture (Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017; O’Callaghan, 2019). Within this
literature, Foucault’s (1982) work on the subject and subjectivation, or subjectivisation, is an entry point for understanding the process of how the subject can observe, analyse, and interpret themselves, a form of power in immediate and everyday life. Political subjectivation attunes to the relations of power between self and others, within and through which a collective can come to recognise itself as an emerging subject or way of being together, with political potentialities (Di Feliciantonio, 2016; Rutland, 2013).

Rather than a fixed sense of ‘the post-political’ as an era or ‘the return of the political’ as a narrow and reductive act (see Beveridge and Koch, 2017), the thesis uses Swyngedouw’s (2018) processual reading of de/repoliticisation to contextualise the ambivalent potentiality of digital/material contention in post-crash cities. The digital plays a complex role in the interstice between digital geographies and wider literature on political theory and activism, and the ambivalent but pervasive character of digital technologies, tools, and logics means the digital is central to how de- and re-politicisation unfold. On the one hand, digital technologies and logics are a key tool used in technocratic governance to foreclose politicisation (Slater, 2021; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2015) and the broader political economic framing of neoliberal urbanism and urban financialisation (Aalbers, 2016a; Fields, 2019). On the other hand, activism, like many other components of contemporary life, is now practiced and experienced digitally/materially. Media, critical communication, and Science-and-Technology studies attune to the affordances and limitations that activists encounter on/through digital platforms (e.g. Fotopoulou, 2016; Treré, 2018), but tend to struggle to account for space, place, and the simultaneously digital/material dimensions of community. In contrast, urban geography accounts of contemporary activism highlight the complex spatialities that this entails, but have a tendency to emphasise the emplaced nature of urban ‘struggle communities’ (e.g. Arampatzi, 2017a) in ways that either take for granted or ignore the digital’s key role in urban activism. Simultaneously, Left political theory tends to treat activists’ uses of digital technologies as necessarily leading to foreclosure within the circular drives of communicative capitalism (Dean, 2009) or poor substitutes for the in-person and face-to-face organising of traditional left forms of communist party
(Dean, 2016, 2019) and trade union (McAlevey, 2020). The thesis problematizes this tendency for theorists (and activists) to ignore or dismiss the constitutive role of digital technologies and logics in contemporary contention. This does not mean advocating for a techno-utopic assessment. Instead, the thesis argues that activist practices in contemporary contexts are best understood as simultaneously digital/material, shaped by the everyday nature of digital tools and activists’ agentic engagements and experiments with them. The desire to return to older organising forms of party and union, with an emphasis on the supposedly ‘unmediated’ interpersonal relations that these forms allow for, is a form of utopic thinking that cedes the digital’s ambivalent potential and is, moreover, impractical given the permeation of digital tools, technologies, and logics in everyday life.

1.3 Introduction to the case study
My conceptual argument, that contention is digital/material, is constructed through an empirical analysis of housing activism in post-crisis Dublin, with a specific focus on housing activist community groups and their digital/material tactics. Here, the term ‘post-crisis’ is used to situate the research in the decade since the GFC, a key temporal landmark of contemporary life. The GFC as a crisis, and subsequent unfolding crises of banking, sovereign debt, and housing, are themselves ongoing facets of longer-term trajectories of capitalism, but are often discursively produced and mobilised as specific moments producing opportunities for intervention, management, and (potentially) solution (e.g. Heslop and Ormerod, 2020 on the English ‘housing crisis’). Throughout the thesis, the term ‘post-crisis’ is used to identify how the temporal moment of the GFC, which was constructed and understood as a ‘crisis’, and its highlighting of the crisis-prone tendencies of capitalism (Harvey, 2010) served as a moment of rupture in which transformative change seemed possible. Bourdieu discusses this relationship between crisis and possibilities for contention or change in terms of the suspension of doxa or ‘that which is beyond question’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 169), but it is important to note that crises are also opportunities for forces of power to further, deepen, and entrench their own positions/policies (Streeck, 2011). This entrenchment and extension of neoliberalism in the post-financial
crisis period, which Peck et al. (2013) refer to as ‘neoliberalism redux’, is variegated, geographically uneven, and subject almost everywhere to contention.

My framing of this thesis as an investigation using post-crisis is intended to highlight how digital contention has played out within and shaped by resistance and power in contemporary societies in two senses. Firstly, as a moment in which the doxa of neoliberal capitalism was seemingly subject to an at least temporary and/or partial suspension for some and ‘the possibility of radical change has been firmly placed on the historical agenda’ (Douzinas, 2013, p. 9), the post-crisis period was marked by the convergence of the permeation of everyday life by digital technologies and an upsurge in heterogeneous place-based contention. In this sense, the onset and widespread agreement on the construction of the GFC as a global financial crisis is significant in terms of presenting some puncturing or contingency within neoliberal capitalist hegemony. Secondly and relatedly, just as this discursive construction of crisis was deployed in explaining and justifying the retrenchment of austerity measures in America and much of Europe, the crisis presented an opportunity for counter-claims or readings of what, in retrospect, had ‘gone wrong’ and what ‘ought to be done’ about it. O’Callaghan and McGuirk (2020) draw on Roitman’s (2014) work to tease out the uses of crisis as ‘a self-referential placeholder in the chain of events’, in which systemic failures are characterised or claimed as a ‘crisis’ instance, through which the explanatory before and diagnostic after is actively constructed. O’Callaghan and McGuirk (2020) explore this understanding of crisis as critical and analytical tool in terms of housing financialisation and market transformations through state policies in Ireland and Australia. I draw on their emphasis on crisis as a heuristic to instead read the unfolding of processes of both de- and repoliticisation, in which the ‘crisis-claims’ of the dominant constellations of power (e.g. state, supranational governance agents, financial institutions’) can be contrasted with the ‘crisis-claims’ of contentious actors and movements, who construct these claims in an attempt to leverage transformative change.

I use housing, one of the major struggles of the post-crisis period, to assess the digital’s ambivalent possibilities and situate the conceptual
framings of communicative capitalism and de/repoliticisation in a specific empirical context. The onset of the GFC was closely connected to housing financialisation, and state efforts to ‘resolve’ the GFC tended to focus on restoring liquidity to property markets. The outcome of these dynamics has been a severe and on-going global housing crisis, in which the financialisation of housing and urban land has become increasingly intensive and extensive (Aalbers, 2016a; Rolnik, 2019). The thesis focuses on housing for three main reasons. Firstly, housing’s centrality to financial capitalism and social reproduction makes it an important site of struggle in contemporary contexts, and urban housing struggles have sought to organise and politicise housing as a simultaneously global and local issue that materially resonates with tenants (e.g. García-Lamarca, 2017a). However, the diversity of housing experiences, complexity and abstraction of housing financialisation (Fields, 2017), and prevalence of technocratic housing policy ‘solutions’ (Slater, 2021) raise challenges for activist organisers which resonate with broader discussion of contention and foreclosure in contemporary contexts. Secondly, digital technologies, approaches, and platforms are a key but under-explored factor in how housing activists actively and collectively respond to these challenges (though, see Akers et al., 2019; McElroy, 2022; McElroy and Vergerio, 2022; Teresa, 2016). The digital is more typically discussed as a factor in how urban space is commodified (Porter et al., 2019; Shaw, 2018) and tenants are subject to digitally-mediated rent extraction under financial capitalism (Fields, 2019). As a result, scholarship on post-crash housing activism has tended to cede the digital, itself a site of struggle, to the financialising processes and actors reshaping post-crash cities (which Fields in Porter et al., 2019 cautions against). This ignores the empirical realities of how contemporary struggles unfold digitally/materially and epistemologically replicates the taken-for-granted character or activist/scholarly aversion toward the digital, and the thesis therefore challenges these problematic aspects of existing work.

Finally, the interplay between housing as a site of digital/material contestation and foreclosure makes housing a useful lens to view the ambivalent possibilities that the digital creates for activism in post-crash cities more generally. A rich and emergent literature has highlighted the
significant, if somewhat delayed (see Layte and Landy, 2018), post-crash mobilisations around water charges (e.g. Power et al., 2016) and then housing (Hearne et al., 2018) in post-crash Ireland. However, this literature has tended to allude to or take for granted the use of digital technologies and social media in post-crash struggles around water and housing, without considering in detail what these tools are used for. Focusing on housing and its digital/material contention in Dublin, a post-crash city par excellence, accordingly makes a significant step in adding new empirical insight that speaks to the wider digital/material possibilities, limitations, and issues with which contemporary activism and Left political theory grapple. This contribution to broader literature is generated through close engagement with housing activist community groups in Dublin. Housing activist groups play a particularly important role in the wider digital/material ecosystem of blogs, forums, newspaper comment sections, and social media platforms in Ireland. This ecosystem has offered a space for academic and public processing of the political, economic, social, and cultural upheaval in the decade since the GFC (see Davies, 2013; Kitchin et al., 2013). The thesis focuses on housing activist groups as a key force within this digital/material ecosystem, and analyses how housing activist group use digital technologies, and particularly social media, to politicise and contest housing.

1.4 Path through thesis

The thesis is divided into three sections. Section one, consisting of two chapters, provides the theoretical and methodological context for the work. Chapter two gives an overview of literature on digital and critical urban geographies, communicative capitalism, and Left political theory, the three main bodies of theory the project draws from. The chapter sets out the conceptual tools that are used to assess housing activists digital/material contention, which are framed through a focus on practices of publicising, organising, and mediating. Chapter three presents the project research methodology, clarifying the three main forms of data collection used to diffract and assemble the geographies of digital/material contention that are the focus of the thesis. In this chapter, a set of emergent research questions
are connected to the practical framings of publicising, organising, and mediating introduced in chapter two.

Section two provides the urban political economy and digital ethnographic context around which the main empirical framings hinge. Chapter four draws from Hearne et al.’s (2018) formulation of the relational articulation of housing crisis and activism, which is re-interpreted with an emphasis on housing activism as digital/material. Drawing from secondary data and literature, the chapter traces the major developments in housing and housing struggles throughout the post-crisis period, which I position as running from the end of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ through to the ‘crisis ordinary’ of housing from 2016 onwards. Chapter five uses digital ethnographic and interview data to sketch out the digital/material labour that has produced post-crash housing activism, with a particular focus on the role and evolution of temporary political occupations as a characteristic activist tactic.

Section three moves from these contextual overviews and presents the empirical findings of the project, explaining and analysing how and why housing activists use digital/material tactics to publicise, organise, and mediate contention. Chapter six puts housing activist community groups’ publicising practices in dialogue with Jodi Dean’s (2005) work on communicative capitalism to consider the publics produced by/through activists’ digital/material contention. I use temporary political occupations to argue that housing activists use digital/material tactics to appropriate and make public the privatised and commodifying ‘spaces’ of social media and the post-crash city, but highlight how this ‘making public’ is subject to limitations shaped by its digital/material production and the tensions this created for housing activist groups seeking to mobilise ‘the public’. Drawing from these limitations and activists’ reflections on them, chapter seven uses organising to explain how digital/material contention is produced, and changes, over time. The chapter draws on digital ethnographic and interview data to assess the organisational forms and forces that produced post-crash digital/material contention and outlines the shift from mobilising to organising that housing activist groups have attempted to effect as a learning from temporary political occupations. Chapters eight and nine assess this shift and the digital/material mediating practices that have been central to it,
with the former considering the mediation of subjects and subjectivation processes, and the latter focusing on the mediation of space. Finally, chapter ten, the concluding chapter, synthesises the main findings of the thesis and develops a discussion of how post-crash Dublin’s housing activism should be read as digital/material contention, with implications for digital and urban geographies approaches to power and its contestation in contemporary contexts.
Chapter 2 – Digital/material subjects in contention: Protest in the digital age

2.1 Digital geographies, geographies of the digital

A growing body of interdisciplinary work has focused on interpreting the digital and the permeation of everyday life by digital tools and technologies (Kitchin and Fraser, 2020). Geography has provided much of the language for how we think, talk, and write about digital technologies, from initial ‘cyberspace’ tropes (e.g. Batty, 1993) to more recent work on ‘code/space’ (Dodge and Kitchin, 2004; Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). Simultaneously, geography is impacted by the broader context of on-going socio-technical changes. The increasing incursion of digital technologies into almost every facet of academic life has been discussed within the discipline as part of a broader ‘digital turn’ (Ash et al., 2018). Attempts to conceptualise what the geographies of the digital actually are have considered spatial conceptualisation of the digital in general, as well as more applied interpretations of the spatialities of specific digital technologies and their implications. Overall, geography’s ‘digital turn’ has produced an emergent literature at the intersection of human geography, media, and science-technology-studies (STS) that offers new ways to understand the temporal and spatial impacts of the digital as ‘pervasively’ and ‘ubiquitously embedded’ technologies which impact socio-spatial ‘rhythms, interactions, opportunities, spatial configurations, and flows’ (Ash et al., 2018, p. 26).

The convergence of location as quantifiable x-y phenomenon/commodity, and digital technology developments built from this premise, has strongly influenced work on the geographies of the digital (Leszczynski and Wilson, 2013; Kitchin, Lauriault, et al., 2017; see also Thatcher, 2017, on the related commodification of location). The main point of broad consensus within this literature is that the digital and the material are entwined, which influences how spaces and places are defined and experienced, the social production of space, and the spatial production of society, which in turn impact ‘the geographies of the digital’ (Sutko and de Souza e Silva, 2011; Chesher, 2012; Graham, 2013; Kitchin, Lauriault, et al., 2017). While most scholars now eschew ‘problematic binaries’ of virtual or
real, on or offline, digital or material, there is no universal consensus on how best to conceptualise the geographies of the digital. Ontological and epistemological plurality within this broader discussion is warranted, and it is unlikely that a one-size-fits-all conceptualisation will somehow be achieved. The thesis aims to contribute to this pluralistic literature by analysing contemporary contention and its digital/material geographies. In doing so, the thesis seeks to bridge human geography and sociological/political media/communications studies research. The former struggle to unpack how contention in an increasingly digital age uses digital technologies in ways that add further situated and generalised relationality to relational space. The latter tend to struggle to connect ‘Tweets’ and ‘the streets’ without reducing, prioritising, and/or failing to grasp the interplay between one or the other. Because there is a lack of consensus on what geographies of the digital are, or how we can understand and frame that which is both digital and material (increasingly, almost everything), we lack a vocabulary that fully grasps how protest in the ‘digital age’ unfolds. This gap stunts the extent to which social sciences approaches can contextualise protest within overarching processes of de/repoliticisation under communicative capitalism – we lack a broader conceptual understanding, within in which empirical and situated cases of ‘digital protest’ could be grounded. Here, I argue that there is much to be gained by approaching contemporary contention as digital/material, an approach that builds from emerging ‘spatial media’ literature, and particularly Agnieszka Leszczynski’s work on spatial media/tion.

Leszczynski (2015) positions ‘mediation’ as a useful epistemological approach for digital geographies research because spatiality consists of material socio-spatio-technical relations, and is as such ‘always-already’ mediated. Accordingly, spatiality does not exist as a separate ontological object. Instead, Leszczynski argues, spatiality emerges relationally through the ways in which society, space, place, and technologies interact, and interpretation should not minimise or privilege one or other of these component parts. Leszczynski’s spatial media/tion thesis suggests that processual and ontogenetic (i.e. constantly being brought into being) understandings of the geographies of the digital are more appropriate than
hybrid digital/physical metaphors. Crucially, spatial media/tion builds on Kitchin and Dodge’s work on code/space and the ways in which spatialities and software are mutually constituted (Kitchin, 2011; Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). Relationships between code, the production of space, and socio-spatial interactions are contingent, relational, and context-dependent, but unfold in ways which are inherently mediated in one form or another. This provides an important context for understanding how human and nonhuman actors, bodies, technologies, and spatialities co-constitute geographies and contemporary life (see Kinsley, 2013). Federica Timeto’s (2015, p. 1) conceptualisation of diffractive technospaces as the ‘sociotechnical environments in which humans and machines relate and intersect’ is also useful here. Timeto highlights the dynamism and contingency of spatial media/tion and the extent to which technospaces emerge through performative entanglements inextricable from their mediations. This emphasis on performativity over representation as a means of reading the sociotechnical requires what Harding (2004), in the context of standpoint epistemology, refers to as ‘strong objectivity’, a responsible and on-going reflexive awareness of relationality, one’s positionality, and their implications for processes of knowledge and world-making. The methodological implications of this approach with regards the situated nature of knowledges (Haraway, 1988), ‘the performativity of methodologies’ (Hughes and Lury, 2013, p. 787), and the active mediation and construction of what can be known are unpacked in chapter three.

Thinking of geographies of digital contention in connection with broader geographies of the digital inflects this project, which approaches the research as the geographies of simultaneously digital/material contention. Accordingly, I draw on work by Kitchin and Dodge and Leszczynski and proceed with a relational, processual, and ontogenetic approach to geographies of the digital and, by extension, digital contention. A key point arising from this understanding is that space, society, and technology are complexly (but potentially revolutionarily) connected – our experiences of the world are mutually constituted by people, technology, and space in ways that in turn change the social, the spatial, and the technological. Put differently, the digital/material comings-together of space, people, and
technology (and the contingencies and power relations that exist within and between these) are complex, offering both setting and stage for contemporary activism in ways that overspill (to borrow from Light et al., 2018) their settings or uses within dominant power structures.

Work on the geographies of the digital and spatial media in part responds to the increasing prevalence of ‘new spatial and locative technologies’, which ‘include a suite of applications that are explicitly spatial wherein location and mapping are core to their modus operandi’ (Kitchin, Lauriault, et al., 2017, p. 1). Digital geographers (Kitchin and Lauriault, 2018; Swanlund and Schuurman, 2019; e.g. Thatcher, 2017) have unpicked the production and consumption of location and ‘locatability’ as a key characteristic of the ‘spatial media’ that have captured academic, government, and industry interest. For critical digital geographers, research is often in an uneasy alignment with the means and methods of ongoing big data-ification, and the aggregation and corrosion of privacy that locative technologies are sometimes underpinned by and contribute to. Rather than specifically dealing with locatable spatial media, the thesis’ focuses on housing activism in post-crash Dublin highlights the more subjective ways in which peoples’ lives take place within and across digital/material spaces. In the thesis, these connections typically take the form of subjective and poorly-defined references to, or descriptors of, material places that are publicised, organised, and/or mediated using digital technologies/platforms. This reflects how people construct their lives in relation to subjective understandings of space and spatialities, which in turn impact their understandings of themselves and their relations to others. Echoing broader criticism of the trend toward big data/computation methods in the social sciences (boyd and Crawford, 2012; Kitchin, 2014; Leszczynski and Crampton, 2016; Olmedilla et al., 2016), this thesis aims to contextualise how activists have used digital technologies to contest housing in post-crash Dublin as an example of contemporary digital/material contention, rather than attempting to extract or process ‘big’ social media data about housing or activism.

The positioning of the research within digital geography extends the two main digital geographies approaches to activism, which can be described as ‘spatial media’ approaches and an emergent literature on feminist
activism’s digital geographies (and feminist digital geographies). The first approach tends, to varying extents, to ‘leverage’ the potential of ‘spatial media’ and then ‘move beyond the geo-tag’ in mapping social media data (Crampton et al., 2013; Shelton, 2017). This approach tends to focus on US-based activist examples and discusses how specific protest events and the social movements they are attributed to are created and shared through social media (Karduni and Sauda, 2020; Sauda et al., 2022; Tremayne, 2014). Spatial media approaches most typically use geo-location, sentiment, and network analysis on large Twitter datasets harvested using specific protest hashtags (e.g. ‘#Ferguson’) to ‘map’ and ‘visualise’ protest (e.g. van Haperen et al., 2018) in ways which are draw from and highlight location as technological and discursive construct and commodity (Thatcher, 2017). Consequently, while ‘protest’ as oppositional action is seen as being ‘mappable’ through x-y digital co-ordinates and #event, more detailed and situated accounts of how activists use digital technologies (e.g. Hensby, 2017; Uitermark, 2017) often do not capture the specifics of digital/material geographies in longer-term and more consciously collective contention, which is arguably more fruitful grounds for subjectivation processes. The second approach, while often using sensitive techno-/data-analysis, typically flips the research focus from ‘spatial media’ to the gendered, classed, raced, and sexualised bodies that produce them. Elwood and Leszczynski’s (2018) review of ‘feminist digital geographies’ have highlighted the rich and diverse emergent literature of critical feminist digital geographies research. Feminist geographers, as noted by Elwood and Leszczynski (ibid, p. 630), draw from the same critical GIS ‘roots’ of ‘feminist critiques of representation, of vision, of Science, of objectivity’, and ‘have used these foundations to theorize digital practices as social praxes; to document the contingency of digital representation; to remake understandings of digital and technical ‘expertise’; to identify and contest the exclusions of digital spaces; and, to transform digitally-mediated modes of knowledge production by unsettling masculinist epistemologies’. Feminist digital geography approaches draw from existing critical feminist media research (Baer, 2016; Fotopoulou, 2016) and usefully emphasise the embodied and gendered character of feminist activists’ uses of digital technologies (especially McLean et al., 2016, 2019). This emphasis on
embodiment and reading for/from difference chimes with an emergent literature on black and queer digital geographies and critical data studies (e.g. Elwood, 2020; Russell, 2020), with gender and sexualities research being an early focus for work at the intersection of geography and the socio-technic spatialities of digital technologies (e.g. Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Cockayne and Richardson, 2017; Nash, Catherine J. and Gorman-Murray, 2019).

The thesis picks a path between spatial media and critical feminist approaches by deploying a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, which I detail in the next chapter. Social media data on housing activism are ‘mapped’ and counted as part of the project, but the ‘stories’ that data are used to produce are an entry point to the messy, lively, and everyday practices of those who produce them, echoing Kitchin’s (2021) work on narration and the sociality of data. Kitchin calls for ‘critical reflection on the role of data in your own lives and the data-driven world we are living in’ and highlights ‘the myriad, complex, contested ways in which data are produced and circulated, and the consequences of living in a data-driven world’ (ibid, pp. 7-13). Importantly, Kitchin’s focus on data and ‘data lives’ highlights how the socio-technical is simultaneously used for surveillance, acceleration, and extraction (e.g. Kitchin and Fraser, 2020), but also ‘provides a platform to contest the seemingly inevitable, pre-ordained data landscape and how data-driven systems work, and to envisage different data futures’ (2021, p. 6). Digital geographies approaches can be understood as sitting within this impasse between the techno-utopic, dystopic, and realistic, and critical data studies approaches within human geography call attention to data as socio-technical assemblages whose production involve praxis and politics (Dalton, 2020; Kitchin et al., 2016; Kitchin and Lauriault, 2018; Pickren, 2018).

2.2 Communicative capitalism: Digital/material contention in context

‘The General paid no attention to the masterful reply, because he was shaken by the overwhelming revelation that the headlong race between his misfortunes and his dreams was at that moment reaching the finish line. The rest was darkness.
"Damn it," he sighed. "How will I ever get out of this labyrinth!"’ – Gabriel García Márquez (1990), The General in His Labyrinth, p. 267.
‘But what’s to be done
When the only way to defend ourselves
From what we’ve created is to merge with it?
What can be done to stay human?’ – Kae Tempest, ‘All Humans Too Late’ from *The Book of Traps and Lessons* (2019).

Within and beyond critical data studies, a rich and emergent literature on digital geographies has been grappling with related questions of praxis and politics, with a particular focus on so-called ‘smart city’ initiatives (see, e.g., Barns, 2018; Cugurullo, 2021; Hollands, 2008) and a broader interrogation of the connections between technology, neoliberalism, and capitalism in contemporary cities (e.g. Graham, S. and Marvin, 2001). Beyond geography, the broader conceptual positioning of ‘the digital’ and its function in contemporary neoliberalism has also been a major focus for left philosophy. Philosophical ‘takes’ on the digital range from ‘Bifo’ Berardi’s body of work on semio-capitalism and the primacy of abstraction over meaning (particularly Berardi, 2010, 2012, 2019) to Adam Greenfield’s (2006, 2017) work on digital technologies and everyday life, and, most recently, Jonathan Crary’s (2022) positioning of the ‘digital age’ as ‘the disastrous terminal stage of global capitalism’. Digital geographies literature often borrows from, and is influenced by, these broader philosophical works on the digital, which offer wider but less empirically-grounded framings of the affective- or psycho-pathologies (e.g. Berardi, 2010; Terranova, 2012) and the reconfiguration of the state, market, labour, and civil society in ‘the digital age’ (e.g. Lazzarato, 2006; Owen, T., 2015). This thesis uses Jodi Dean’s work on ‘communicative capitalism’ to engage with the ambivalent and changing role that digital technologies play in contemporary neoliberalism’s fusion of, and perpetuation through, digital technologies and participatory democracy as ideals (Dean, 2005). ‘Communicative capitalism’ provides a political economic framing within which activists’ digital/material practices can be situated. I outline what this framing does and why it is useful below.

Communicative capitalism is the political economic framework Dean uses to understand the materialization of ideals of inclusion and participation in information, entertainment, and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance and intensify global capitalism (Dean, 2009). Dean’s work
centres on how ideals of inclusion and participation are central to both liberal democracy as fantasy and the digital technologies underpinning it. For Dean (2005), these dynamics of inclusion and participation underwritten by information, entertainment, and communication technologies capture resistance and redirect it in ways which actually further intensify global neoliberal capitalism. Dean (ibid, p. 32) highlights the paradox of mediation and amplification that digital technologies produce, noting how:

‘Political intensities become shorn of their capacities to raise claims to the universal, persisting simply as intensities, as indications of subjective feeling. The more strident the voices, the more intense the feelings, the stronger is the pull of communications media in their myriad, constant, and ever-ready forms. Media circulate and extend information about an issue or event, amplifying its affect and seemingly its significance. This amplification draws in more media, more commentary and opinion, more parody and comic relief, more attachment to communicative capitalism’s information and entertainment networks such that the knot of feedback and enjoyment itself operates as (and in place of) the political issue or event. Attention focuses on reflecting and commenting on the tangle of intensities – for the moment. More energies are invested in it. And the problem or issue is neglected, left to continue along its course, undeflected and unchanging despite the massive amount of interest and energy it has generated’ (Dean, 2009, p. 32, italics mine for emphasis).

Dean’s work on communicative capitalism connects three particularly useful concepts for interpreting digital/material contention: i) interpassivity, ii) subjectivation in a context of declining symbolic efficiency, and iii) democracy as the central ideal from which communicative capitalism has grown.

Digital technologies, per Dean, operate as fetish object which are active, rather than the people themselves using these tools. Drawing from critical communication studies, Dean asserts that communicative capitalism divorces the exchange and use values of messages – messages become ‘contributions to circulating content’, rather than ‘actions to elicit responses’; ‘the message is simply part of a circulating data stream. Its particular content is irrelevant. Who sent it is irrelevant. Who receives it is irrelevant. That it need be responded to is irrelevant. The only thing that is relevant is circulation, the addition to the pool’ (Dean, 2005, p. 58). This multiplication and (re)circulation of contributions, for Dean, sublimates fantasies of participation through what Žižek terms interpassivity, wherein ‘you think you
are active, while your true position, as embodied in the fetish, is passive’ (Žižek, 2008). People ‘believe that they are active, making a difference by clicking on a button, adding their name to a petition, or commenting on a blog’ but are in reality interpassive, with the fetish object of technology being active in their stead – ‘the frantic activity of the fetish works to prevent actual action, to prevent something from really happening’ (Dean, 2009, p. 31). Accordingly, the circulation and seeming amplification of information about an issue or event are themselves circular processes, with each begetting the other.

Within this context of communicative capitalism and its extension through interpassivity, Dean fleshes out what Žižek describes as a post-modern decline of ‘symbolic efficiency’, wherein subject positions under contemporary neoliberal capitalism are unstable and temporary in ways which undercut the more fixed constructions of identity categories which are necessary for politicisation and subjectivation (Žižek, 2008). Here, Dean and Žižek are both influenced by left Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and the work of Jacques Rancière, which they use to argue that the potential for political subjectivation, understood as the dynamic and on-going construction of new politic subjectivities through collective practices, spaces, and speech, is stunted. Here, Rancière’s work has been used by Dean, Žižek, and critical urban geographers because it makes a spatial and discursive distinction between ‘the police’ and ‘politics’. Rancière (1999, p. 29) uses ‘the police’ and ‘policing’ to describe ‘not so much the “disciplining” of bodies as a rule governing their appearing, a configuration of occupations and the properties of the spaces where these occupations are distributed’. Politics, in contrast, is ‘an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration – that of the part of those who have no part’ (ibid, pp. 29-30, italics mine). This assertion of ‘the part of those who have no part’, or those who are within society but have no voice to participate in the formal political structures of the police order, is what Rancière sees as the moment for democracy, with the reassertion of the tension between equality and liberty that Balibar (2014) terms equaliberty. Both Dean and Žižek argue that this
collective assertion of ‘the part of those who have no part’ has been undermined by a post-modern decline of ‘symbolic efficiency’, wherein subject positions under contemporary neoliberal capitalism are unstable and temporary in ways which undercut the more fixed constructions of identity categories necessary for politicisations (Žižek, 2008). Politicisation requires that the particular can be generalised and made universal – that individuals can band together as collective political subjects (workers, proletarians, etc). For left Lacanian theorists like Žižek, Dean, and Badiou, subjectivity is enacted through the performative recognition of a relationship with a symbolic big Other, an empty point of reference whose existence is socially performed in ways that structure socio-symbolic reality (e.g. God, language) (Kingsbury, 2017; Žižek, 2008, 2013). Contemporary subjects lack a mutually recognisable and socially-performed big Other, Žižek argues, limiting the extent to which they can enact a subjectivity that is not foreclosed into a multiplication of particularistic ‘issues’ experienced in a highly individualised manner.

Dean connects Žižek’s reading to Hardt and Negri’s work on the society of control, in which the disciplinary logics of formerly important civil society institutions like the nuclear family or trade unions have been so eroded as to jeopardise the existence of a stable disciplined citizen-subject – for Dean, ‘the implications of this point are broad. Just as the disciplined subject of civil society can no longer be said to exist, so is there a fragmentation among the identities mobilized politically in and as civil society… The category “we” seems permanently to have been called into questions and in its place are fluid, hybrid, and mobile imaginary identities’ (2009, p. 65). While the subject is still subjected to ever-increasing control through surveillance, policing, and profiling, the shift toward neoliberal ideological hegemony has diminished the existence and importance of symbolic identities, or ‘sites from which we can see ourselves’ (ibid, p. 66). Dean runs with this stunting of subjectivity, critiquing Left defeatism, and highlighting the role that new media and technologies play in trapping individualised subjects in a form of ‘lifestyle politics’ in which communication, consumption, and (re)circulation appropriate and subvert political energies and capacities for transformative change (Dean, 2005,
2009). Under neoliberal ideology, Dean (2009, p. 67) argues, identity becomes highly individualised and performed or cultivated as and through lifestyle choices, and ‘consumption provides the terrain within which my identity, my lifestyle, can be constructed, purchased, and made over’. This sense of ‘lifestyle politics’ renders ‘activism’ as simply another thing that individuals do, but, crucially, *are seen to be doing*, with no sense of effective collective organisation and the performativity of ‘being or doing activism’ through social media eliding any actual impact of activism. Accordingly, for Dean, the extension and evolution of digital technologies in general, and social media in particular, under communicative capitalism forecloses and sublimates dissent as part of the broader intertwining of the digital and democracy as the ideals and underpinning rhetoric of late-stage capitalism.

Finally, Dean’s framing of communicative capitalism highlights the central role of democracy as an ideal and the impact this has in stunting effective resistance. The desire for collective action and to do something, in this regard, must be channelled from the temporary assertion of radical democracy to a more sustained process of organised struggle. Dean offers a critical framing of what appeals to democracy as ideal do in contemporary contexts, wherein ‘extensions in communication have been accompanied by, and indeed rooted in, amplifications of capitalism’ (Dean, 2009, p. 93). In this context, per Dean, the appeal to democracy is ‘an appeal to the status quo for more of the same, with an emphasis, however, on more – more information, more participation, more deliberation – as if sheer quantity could bridge the gap and produce a different outcome. To this extent, it falls into the traps of communicative capitalism, strengthening the very structures it ostensibly aims to change’ (ibid). Much of Dean’s earlier work, and particularly her assessment of conspiracy and the role it plays in ‘anti-establishment’ politics (especially Dean, 1998), offers an early framing of the dynamics of right-wing organising that goes some way toward explaining the appeal of such memorable enjoinders as ‘drain the swamp’ and ‘take back control’ (see also Krell *et al.*, 2018; Mouffe, 2005). More recently, however, Dean’s assessment has increasingly focused in recent work on political organisation, and particularly the repurposing of Left political frameworks of organised party (Dean, 2012, 2016) and political belonging (Dean, 2019),
which I turn to in chapter seven. Here, it is sufficient to highlight that Dean sees the contemporary embrace of social media and digital technologies by progressive left organising, and particularly the Occupy movement, as ‘the protests and revolts of the last decade as the class struggle of the people proletarianized under communicative capitalism’ (2016, p. 21). This new proletariat are atomised and individualised by the self-same digital/material processes of flexibilization, precarisation, and increasing economic inequality that shape what Dean sees as our hegemonic communicative capitalist present. While the desire to effect change is channelled into what are often high-profile assertions of collectivity (e.g. Occupy, and other temporary political occupations), Dean argues that the exhaustive pluralisation, fragmentation, and individualisation of contemporary struggles means that ‘politics becomes passionately attached to the small and weak. This gives us the shape of the Left we have in the long tail of micro-initiatives’ (ibid, p. 25).

Dean’s work, which is mainly theoretical or conceptual, is useful for contextualising the thesis’s empirical focus on post-crash housing activism in Dublin. Communicative capitalism is a political economic framing that captures the ambivalent role of the digital under contemporary neoliberalism, in which neoliberalism fuses with and is perpetuated by digital technologies and participatory democracy as an ideal. Accordingly, Dean’s work highlights how digital technologies in general (and social media in particular) and their uses for dissent that challenges neoliberal capitalism tend to emphasise and reinforce the individualistic, libertarian, and identity-reaffirming structures that neoliberal capitalism turns toward profit-seeking and exploitation. Like García Márquez’s fictionalised last words of Columbian ‘general’ Simón Bolívar, which I use to open this section, Dean’s framing of communicative capitalism effectively describes a race toward darkness in which struggle and its foreclosure rattle onward, locked together under late-stage capitalism’s stranglehold on digital technologies and an ever-expanding neoliberalisation of the planet and life itself. For Jonathan Crary (2022, p. 13), struggle and resistance under communicative capitalism results in ‘one step forward, three steps back. Unless the difficult task of creating new cooperative and communal forms of living becomes a political
priority, all kinds of online activism will continue to occur innocuously, without attaining any radical or foundational changes’.

The thesis draws from Dean’s framing of ‘online activism’ and its reinforcement of communicative capitalism, but makes two foundational points of departure which extend or complicate this conceptual framing through empirical detail. Firstly, the research aims to provide a more nuanced assessment of the types of practices that activists pursue through digital technologies, tools, and logics – rather than consigning all types of struggle that use the digital as simply ‘foreclosed’, I assess the varying and situated dynamics in which processes of individualisation, collectivisation, and subjectivation now play out as simultaneously digital/material. Accordingly, I highlight the active labour and agency that activists’ digital/material tactics are produced through, suggesting that these often undermine, circumvent, or appropriate the very tools and structures of communicative capitalism, to counter the system through subjectivized beings- and doings-together that aim for transformative change.

Secondly and relatedly, this attention to labour, agency, and subjectivation is part of a broader questioning approach that the research takes to the digital’s ambivalent position. Here, I echo Kae Tempest’s articulate framing of this challenge as ‘what can be done to stay human’ under communicative capitalism. My attention to digital/material contention is the initial starting point for responding to this question, and Dean’s work clarifies two key terms central to the thesis, contention and protest, and how the distinction between them is a central point around which this research turns. Protest involves action of disapproval or objection. Contention involves action of contending or striving together in opposition. This distinction is crucial to understanding, in a more empirical sense, the goings-on of politicisation and subjectivation (or, indeed, the failure to attain either) that Dean is discussing. I believe Dean’s work taps in to protest (action of disapproval or objection) or at best short-term contestation (action contending or striving together in opposition), rather than attending to the digital/material in longer-term contention. I would suggest that it is a broad conceptual brush that misses finer-detail empirical nuances, and the situated dynamics in which processes of individualisation and collectivisation (and
indeed subjectivation) now play out as digital/material. As a result, I proceed from the position that, in contemporary settings, digital technologies in general, and social media in particular, impact practices and processes of contestation, being-in-common, and subjectivation in ways that shape what protest and contention in the digital age look like and can do, and this seems unlikely to change. Here, I draw from Kitchin and Fraser’s (2020, p. 2) call for ‘balanced digital lives’, and argue that digital/material contention should aim at ‘using today’s computing power, but in a way that is managed, considered, and to our benefit’.

Accordingly, if subjectivation is to occur, it will likely play out within these inextricable connections between the digital and the material in contemporary societies and, by extension, contestation. Consequently, contemporary contestation is forced to navigate a digital/material context that is often either outright hostile to or more fundamentally not designed for its purposes. Here, communicative capitalism can be usefully connected to work on political subjectivation, politicisation, and a framing of the ambivalent potentiality of digital/material contention within processes of de/repoliticisation that have played on in post-crash cities. This extends the idea of subjectivation operating within ‘the police order’ to a digital sense also, in that digital technologies are typically not designed for these purposes in the first instance on functional grounds, but in the second instance (and here Dean is crucial reading) on the grounds of capture within broader political economic structures of communicative capitalism. However, if politicisation is to play out then it must do so within the digital/material environments (or police order) of dominant neoliberal political economic and social structures. In the next section, I connect communicative capitalism and the ambivalent positioning of the digital to the broader processes of de/repoliticisation in contemporary contexts, which shape digital/material contention’s practices, politics, and outcomes.
2.3 Post-politics, de/repoliticisation, and digital/material contention in post-crash cities

2.3.1 Capitalist realism and post-politicisation

‘Protests have formed a kind of carnivalesque background noise to capitalist realism… Capitalist realism as I understand it cannot be confined to art or to the quasi-propagandistic way in which advertising functions. It is more like a pervasive atmosphere… acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action’ (Fisher, 2009, pp. 14–16).

Dean’s work on communicative capitalism offers a political economy reading of what has been more expansively theorised as the hegemonic ideological project of liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism as a ‘post-political’ or ‘post-democratic’ condition in which consensus stifles conflict (e.g. Crouch, 2004). This post-political or post-democratic condition is temporally connected to the fall of the Berlin Wall, with the subsequent expansion and triumph of capitalist globalisation linked to an erosion of democracy in favour of technocratic and consensus-based governance which forecloses the possibility for alternatives. Dean (2009, pp. 12-8) critiques ‘claims for post-politics’ as ‘childishly petulant’ or an appeal to some prior acceptable practice of democracy that never existed. For Dean, depoliticisation’s main impact is its ‘figuring a lack’. For Dean, despite the ‘hegemony of democratic rhetoric’, this hegemonic articulation leaves little direct means to affect transformative or impactful change. Accordingly, for Dean, under communicative capitalism ‘democracy appears as both the condition of politics and the solution to the political condition’, in which both ‘right and left share the same rhetoric of democracy’ and ‘neoliberalism can’t appear as the violence that it is’ (ibid, p. 18). Echoing Dean’s critique of a sense of a fixed condition of ‘post-politics’ or ‘post-democracy’, in this section I connect communicative capitalism to Erik Swyngedouw’s processual reading of de/repoliticisation to theorise the emergence and prevalence ‘of new formal and informal post-democratic institutional arrangements that engage in the act of governing outside- and beyond-the-state’ (Swyngedouw, 2018, p. 3). My argument is that communicative capitalism and the positioning of the digital within it can be usefully linked to Swyngedouw’s processual reading of de/repoliticisation, which assesses how and why neoliberal capitalism and
governance is simultaneously a hegemonic and ‘pervasive atmosphere’ (Fisher, 2009, p. 16) but subject to recurrent politicisation which critical urban geographers have interpreted as ‘the return of the political’ through urban uprisings and socio-spatial rupture (Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017).

Here, Mark Fisher’s framing of capitalist realism is a useful entry point for understanding contemporary capitalism’s successful interweaving of our actions and thoughts to the extent that no alternative can be imagined, let alone properly practiced. For Fisher, in presenting itself as the only and natural reality, contemporary capitalism is hegemonic – there is little need for explicit coercion because it is widely accepted as a normal, natural, and non-ideological order that is necessary, inevitable, and the only realistic option available for how things ought to be. Using Lacan, Fisher describes how the hegemony or doxa of contemporary capitalism functions as a reality that is constituted through the suppression (always incomplete) of the Real, ‘a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality’ (ibid, p. 18). Fisher’s point is that the sense of inevitability and pervasiveness of contemporary capitalism is a tool used to cover up its inherent contingency. Two key strategies against capitalist realism, then, are to recognise this contingency and to invoke ‘the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us’ (ibid). However, capitalist realism is an adept beast, accustomed and well able to swallow all manners of fractures and inconsistencies in its voracious maw. Our changing climate and resource-depleted planet’s seemingly concrete limitations for extraction serve as a very real ‘Real’. However, when this cannot be ignored, its suppression is attempted through sustainability capitalism (e.g. the Green New Deal), sublimating the capitalist system’s creation of global environmental crises.

Swyngedouw’s account of depoliticisation and repoliticisation offers a processual reading of the governance of capitalist realism’s hegemony, which helps to understand and interpret a) how capitalist realism has come about, b) its pervasive qualities and ability to suppress alternatives, and c) whether and how another world can be made possible. For Swyngedouw, instituted representational democracy’s apparent global triumph is the political means by which the capitalist realism that Fisher describes has come
about. Similar to Dean’s work on democracy as neoliberal fantasy and Fisher’s discussion of capitalism as pervasive atmosphere, Wilson and Swyngedouw narrate how ‘democracy as the theatre of and for the pluralistic and disputed consideration of matters of public concern would appear to be triumphant… Democracy is now firmly and consensually established as the uncontested and rarely examined ideal of institutionalised political life’ (2015, p. 2). However, increasingly widespread political apathy for institutional politics and a simultaneously fervent if more niche sense of a need to, on the Left, have ‘Real Democracy Now!’, and on the Right, to ‘take back control’, makes clear that democracy is also seen by some as being in crisis, with a need for a radical re-ordering and re-configuration of the governance. For Swyngedouw (2018), this gap or impasse between formal democracy and its discontents is a symptom of a broader process of post-democratization, in which the baked-in democratic limitations and fallacies of pluralistic representational democracy are reconfigured and exacerbated by new forms of governance beyond the state. Paying attention to governance here transposes Dean’s work on communicative capitalism to consider how and why the fusion of digital and democratic fantasies under neoliberalism has occurred. Depoliticisation and repoliticisation are interlinked but fundamentally different processes which Swyngedouw uses to theorise the empirical ‘emergence of new formal and informal post-democratic arrangements that engage in the act of governing outside and beyond-the-state’ (ibid, p. 3). These processes are closely linked to, and draw from, Swyngedouw’s reading of more specialist literature on post-politics and post-democracy. Here, I introduce de- and re-politicisation as processual dynamics that are useful for contextualising contemporary activism within communicative capitalism and neoliberal governance.

Depoliticisation is Swyngedouw’s term to describe ‘the attempted suturing or colonization of social space, by an instituted police order’ through which ‘the space of the political is increasingly colonized, and sutured, by the spaces of the police/policies’ (ibid, p. 26). Depoliticisation removes the potential for meaningful choices and/or collective political agency – the range of political choices available to citizens is narrowed, choices that are available have limited political implications or impacts, and only relatively
small alterations are possible to a system seen as too complex for non-experts to comprehend. This process amounts to what Peter Mair (2013) describes as a ‘hollowing’ of democracy, in which the zone of engagement between politicians and citizens is being evacuated by both groups in a process of mutual withdrawal or abandonment. In contrast, the connected process of politicisation or repoliticisation represents the disruption of depoliticisation in a specific manner, through ‘a process of universalization of the declaration of fidelity to the egalitarian truth expressed in the inaugural event’ (Swyngedouw, 2018, p. 24). This unfolds through political subjectivation, or ‘the process of immanent appearance in public of those who disrupt the state of the situation in the name of “equality”, “the people”, the “common”, and “the democratic”’ or ‘the reassertion of the political as agonistic encounter within public spaces’ (ibid, p. 25). Accordingly, Swyngedouw is quite specific about what politicisation is—rather than protest or activism in general, politicisation or repoliticisation is an active assertion or intervention which performatively stages equality. Repoliticisation foregrounds this staging, performance, or practicing of equality, asserting unity and universalisation around the principle of equality between anyone and everyone. Crucially, per Swyngedouw, there is no arrival at a terminus of de/repoliticisation, with both processes representing mutual and continual movement rather than a teleological trajectory. While accounts of a post-political condition set out to describe the current era, the extent to which the prevailing neoliberal global capitalist consensus stifles possibilities for transformative change remains subject to dispute because the post-political as form is always subject to contingency and disruption. Within literature and thinking on post-politics, the global financial crisis of 2008 represents a key point of disruption or rupture that has informed more recent and on-going discussion and applications of thinking on de/repoliticisation, which has been a key area of focus within critical urban geography.

2.3.2 Post-crash cities, digital/material contention, and critical urban geography

‘Just because there has been a crisis does not necessarily mean that change will follow’ – Burgum (2018, p. 1).
Scholarship applying post-political and post-democracy work existed before 2008 but has become a more common conceptual tool, particularly in critical urban geography, post-2007/08. This post-crisis literature draws on earlier post-foundationalist political writings and their subsequent applications from the 1970s onward to describe a) a shift from government to governance (e.g. Foucault, 2008; Urbinati, 2003), and b) what Žižek (2008, p. 204) describes as a corresponding ‘common acceptance of Capital and market mechanisms as neutral tools/procedures to be exploited’ via the consensual agreement of the social order, within which conflict can arise over (re)distribution but the social order or system itself is seen as acceptably sound. Marcuse captures this sense of post-1970s mass culture in *One dimensional man* with the phrase ‘Happy Consciousness’, which reflects ‘the belief that the real is rational, and that the established system, in spite of everything, delivers the goods.’ (Marcuse, 1964, p. 82, italics mine). These two trends emphasise complexity and a paradoxical sense of impotence in which people, groups, and governments are powerless and unable to intervene to do things that we might all agree would be good to do (i.e. end homelessness). Disagreement is othered as irrational and irresponsible, making it difficult to stage democratic or political disagreement. Staging democratic disagreement is suppressed both discursively and materially, which leaves few options to express discontent – Mustafa Dikeç points to this foreclosure as leaving outbursts of violence (and particularly urban violence) as one of the limited options left to express dissatisfaction with the status quo (2007, 2017).

The 2008 global financial crisis (GFC, hereafter ‘crisis’), however, ruptured this Happy Consciousness and the system stalled. While temporally and spatially variable, the system was exposed as being unable to deliver the goods, but this did not necessarily lead to the transformative change that was anticipated in the heady 2011 days of high-profile post-crash activism (see Burgum, 2018). In its unfolding and aftermath, the crisis exposed the system but also provided an opportunity for the furthering, deepening, and entrenching of the very processes and positions that shaped the system, subject always to variation, unevenness, and almost everywhere to contestation (Streeck, 2011; Peck et al., 2012, 2013). For critical geographers,
post-politics offers a number of tools for thinking through the concomitant depoliticising foreclosure of the possible pursued in dominant responses to the crisis and repoliticising mobilisations of diverse and contentious assertions of democratic politics. Here, the work of Mustafa Dikeç (e.g. 2005, 2007) and Eric Swyngedouw (2007, 2009) have been particularly influential in shaping what O’Callaghan (2019) sets out as ‘three basic strands of geographical work on the post-political’. These are: i) works examining processes of depoliticisation (particularly in terms of environment and sustainability policy-making, but also around migration and asylum-seeking); ii) works exploring the possibilities of the ‘return of the political’ (particularly heterogenous and place-based contentious movements that have emerged in a number of contexts since 2008); and iii) works interrogating the ‘post-political trap’ (which questions whether the post-political interpretation forecloses our understanding of contingency and broader agency within the political). My primary interest is most specifically in the second strand of this literature, notwithstanding the importance of the first trend as a structuring process that often precedes or follows contentious assertions of the political and the third trend as a push back on post-political interpretations in human geography. O’Callaghan (ibid) usefully summarises how this strand of work often applies ‘Rancièrian frames to understand processes of political subjectivation involved in the squares movements… in this work, occupation embodies a possible encounter between the police and the political, whereby new political subjectivities can be formed’.

These post-crisis contentious movements captured the attention and interest of critical urban geographers, for whom the role that urban spaces and places have played within repoliticisation or contestation has been key. For critical urban geographers, these autonomous, heterogeneous, place-based, and insurgent movements represent contemporary ‘urban rebellions… moments in time and space when desires for and practices of political transformation animate urban movements, even – or especially – when they cannot find a place in established political spaces and practices’ (Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017, p. 3). These movements are seen as challenging neoliberal hegemony by opening new political spaces and enacting new political subjectivities (e.g. García-Lamarca, 2017a, 2017b; Kaika and
Karaliotas, 2016). Importantly, the city has played a key role as both the setting and stakes of struggle. Here, a resurgence of interest in what Pickvance termed urban movements (1985) can be connected to Lefebvre’s (e.g. 1968; 1991) work on ‘the right to the city’ and its elaboration by Marcuse (2009), Purcell (2013), Merrifield (2011a, 2013a) and others in the early/mid-2010s. This literature provides context for much of the subsequent work seeking to interpret contention and the urban, which has used Lefebvre’s work on the social production of social space to highlight the potential that social space offers for transformative change, but also how this intersects with the digital’s permeation of everyday life and urban space (e.g. Ribera-Fumaz, 2019; Shaw and Graham, 2017). Initial post-crisis discussions of contention were quick to highlight the roles of urban spaces and ‘rebel cities’ (Harvey, 2012), particularly by focusing on occupation-based movements of the squares (particularly in Greece and Spain) and Occupy (e.g. Arampatzi and Nicholls, 2012; Halvorsen, 2012; Pickerill and Krinsky, 2012). From sociological and communication/media studies perspectives, these ‘urban rebellions’ are a focus of interest as part of what Donatella della Porta terms ‘anti-austerity movements mobilising in the context of the crisis of neoliberalism’ or temporally ‘the wave of protest that started with the Arab Spring’ (della Porta, 2015, p. 205). These sociological and communication or media studies perspectives have developed in a way that is attuned to the roles that social media play in contemporary mobilisations, with post-crisis contention commonly being described as ‘networked’ (e.g. Tufekci, 2017).

While some attempts have been made to pursue a more ‘situated’ interdisciplinary approach (Mattoni, 2017), interpretations of post-crisis contention often discuss the digital and the material as a dichotomy, with spaces and places as where the online ‘moves to’ (DeLuca et al., 2012; Flesher Fominaya and Gillan, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2012; Tremayne, 2014; Tufekci, 2017). Here, ‘space’ is contrasted with ‘cyberspace’ or physical space, and occupation plays a central role in connecting the two within the literature (Juris, 2012; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Rane and Salem, 2012). From geographical perspectives, the opposite is a common feature, whereby post-crisis contention is discussed in great spatial detail and often in terms of longer-term trajectories and spatialities. Geographers
engaged with initial (what we might call) spectacular outbursts of post-crisis contention (e.g. Halvorsen, 2012, 2015; Harvey, 2012; Pickerill and Krinsky, 2012), but geographical work has also been at the forefront of engaging with the longer-term impacts, ramifications, and processes of politicisation unfolding following from and extending beyond these initial ‘squares’ movements (Arampatzi, 2017b, 2017a). However, while attentive to both the importance of spatiality in understanding post-crisis contention and the longer-term trajectories of political subjectivation that play out across space and time, geographers have a tendency to note only in passing that ‘activists used social media’, without unpicking the details of the lived experiences, practicalities, specificities, affordances, limitations, and impacts that this has on contemporary contention.

Accordingly, there is a gap in how the digital is interpreted within wider literature on critical urban geography, political theory, and activism. The ambivalent but pervasive character of digital technologies, tools, and logics means that the digital is central to how de- and re-politicisation unfold, but this is poorly understood. On the one hand, digital technologies and logics are key tools used in technocratic governance that forecloses politicisation and the broader understanding of neoliberal urbanism and urban financialisation, but this is typically implicit rather than an explicit focus of research. Data-driven urban science has been a growing and increasingly influential field since Lefebvre’s (1970, p. 185) horror at how ‘ideologically, technically and politically, the quantitative has become rule, norm and value’. Tom Slater’s (2021) recent connection between agnotology (the strategic production of ignorance) and technocratic urban neoliberalism captures the role of technology in neutralising neoliberal ideology and how ‘what disappears in the hype over data-driven innovation are the relations of power in and over space that constitute a city, about which nobody is proposing to build big data’ (ibid, p. 12). Digital technologies and logics are used to justify a depoliticisation of the economy and economisation of politics, in which the political choices available to the citizen and/or the elected politician are foreclosed by a continuous appeal to complexity and expertise to legitimise decision-making outside of the political process (Swyngedouw, 2018, pp. 32-3). The urban is accordingly restructured by and through digital and
financialised logics, and digital technologies and tools are used to facilitate speculative and extractive capital circulation (Aalbers, 2016b; Fields, 2018).

On the other hand, activism, like many other components of contemporary life, is now practiced and experienced digitally/materially, but critical urban geography approaches tend to emphasis the emplaced nature of urban struggles in ways that take for granted or ignore the digital’s key role in urban activism. Simultaneously, Left political theory grappling with de/repoliticisation and post-crash urban activism has moved from an initial sense of the financial crisis as an emperor has no clothes moment (e.g. Massey et al., 2014) to excitement and inspiration with the ‘urban insurrections’ occupying public space and squares (e.g. Dean, 2012; Halvorsen, 2012). This has been followed by a more jaded quest to narrate a) the fallout from occupation/‘movements of the squares’ and their perceived failures in living up to their emancipatory promises, and b) to question what direction post-Occupy Left politics could or should move in. Importantly, post-Occupy Left political theory has tended to connect the use of social media in 2011 movements (as documented by, for example, Gerbaudo, 2012; Tufekci, 2017) to the dispersal and foreclosure of post-crash activism. Here, Jodi Dean’s work is emblematic of an evolving critique of what has been framed as the ‘digital activism’ of post-crash movements (see Gerbaudo, 2017a; Kaun and Uldam, 2018). Initially, Dean (2012, p. 211) saw Occupy as being able to ‘temper autonomy with solidarity (recognizing that individualized autonomy can be a barrier to solidarity, that is, collective autonomy), add vertical and diagonal strength to the force of horizontality, and attune itself to the facts of leadership (leaders emerge and serve different purposes)’. In the aftermath of Occupy, however, Dean (2016, p. 4) revised this assessment, suggesting that Occupy had:

‘Foundered against a contradiction at its core… The individualism of its democratic, anarchist, and horizontalist ideological currents undermined the collective power the movement was building… The movements’ decline (which began well before Occupiers were evicted) exposes the impasse confronting the Left. The celebration of autonomous individuality prevents us from foregrounding our commonality and organizing ourselves politically.’
Here, Dean’s questioning of what can be learned by the Left, or ‘what political forms might we advance?’ (ibid) contributes to what Rodrigo Nunes (2014, 2021) theorises as ‘the return of the organisation question’, which captures a subset of Left theorising that emphasises the importance of in-person, face-to-face organising and the resurgence of traditional Left forms of party (Dean, 2016, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2019) and union (McAlevey, 2020).

In assessing the geographies of digital/material contention, I problematise the tendency for theorists and activists to ignore or dismiss the constitutive role of digital technologies and logics in contemporary contention. I argue that activist practices in contemporary contexts are best understood as simultaneously digital/material, shaped by the everyday nature of digital tools and activists’ agentic engagements and experiments with them. The desire to return to older organising forms of party or union with an emphasis on the supposedly ‘unmediated’ interpersonal relations that these forms allow for is a type of utopic thinking that cedes the digital’s ambivalent potential and is impractical given the permeation of digital tools, technologies, and logics in everyday life. I extend conceptual understandings of de/repoliticisation as digital/material by focusing on the empirical practices of housing activists in post-crash Dublin.

2.4 Post-crash housing struggles

The thesis conceptualises contention as digital/material through empirical analysis of housing activism in post-crash Dublin. Housing has emerged as a key lens for understanding both financial speculation and urban struggles in the post-crash period (Fields, 2017). The onset of the GFC was closely connected to housing financialisation (Aalbers, 2016c; Langley, 2009), and state efforts to ‘resolve’ the GFC tended to focus on restoring liquidity to property markets (Kitchin, Hearne, et al., 2017). The outcome of these dynamics in Ireland and elsewhere has been a severe and on-going crisis of housing affordability, in which the financialisation of housing and urban land has become increasingly intensive and extensive (Aalbers, 2016c; Rolnik, 2019). While I outline the relationship between housing financialisation and activism in Ireland in greater detail in chapter four, here I want to outline how housing has emerged as a key focus for post-crash urban struggles in the
aftermath of 2011 occupation-based movements in European and US contexts. My framing of post-crash housing struggles is that housing’s centrality to social reproduction and financial capitalism has made it an important site of both struggle/politicisation and financial speculation/technocratic governance/depoliticisation in contemporary contexts.

The digital is a key lens for understanding this ambivalent positioning as it both facilitates and forecloses housing’s use and exchange, the balance between which Madden and Marcuse (2016, p. 5) note, ‘inevitably raises issues about power, inequality, and justice in capitalist society’. Digital technologies have come to play a central role in how housing is produced, consumed, and commodified, and an emergent literature has begun to document the intersection between urban space, housing/real estate, and digital technologies in the form of ‘PropTech’, in which digital technologies and ‘platform capitalism/urbanism’ are reshaping rent extraction and urban financialisation (Sadowski, 2020a). This has been variously described as platform real estate (Shaw, 2018), automated landlord-ism (Fields, 2019), and the internet of landlords (Sadowski, 2020b). Importantly, housing financialisation’s enrolment of digital technologies, tools, and logics are a key factor in the active performance of complexity, abstraction, and valuation that financial actors engage in (Christiaens, 2016), but this is often implied by rather than actively unpacked through existing research (Fields, 2017; Waldron, 2018). The digital is accordingly used to legitimate financialised narratives and practices of housing speculation through the production of technocratic policy ‘solutions’ that argue for further deregulation and commodification of housing (Slater, 2021) and use digital logics of ‘evidence-making’ to justify housing and urban financialisation (Murphy, 2020; Waldron, 2019). Digital technologies, approaches, and platforms are a key but under-explored factor in how housing activists actively and collectively respond to these challenges (though see Akers et al., 2019; Dalton, 2020; Fields, 2015; Teresa, 2016). As a result, scholarship on post-crash housing activism has tended to cede the digital, itself a site of struggle, to the financialising processes and actors reshaping post-crash cities (which Fields in Porter et al., 2019 cautions against). This ignores the empirical
realities of how contemporary struggles unfold digitally/materially and epistemologically replicates a taken-for-granted character and/or activist/scholarly aversion toward the digital, and the thesis challenges these problematic aspects of existing work.

To date, the digital has been more typically discussed as a factor in how urban space is commodified (Porter et al., 2019) than as a site of struggle by housing activists. I argue that this tendency arises from the longer-term trajectory of post-crash activism and housing’s emergence as a key issue in the wake of occupation-focused contention, which was more commonly and problematically connected to digital technologies in general, and social media in particular. For critical urban geographers, sociologists, and communications scholars, the so-called ‘Occupy’ or ‘movements of the squares’ of the earlier post-crash period (c. 2011-‘14) formed a key point of reference for understanding and assessing contemporary contention as simultaneously embodied, emplaced, and digitally mediated. Work influenced by de/repoliticisation and post-politicisation tended to interpret the occupation of public spaces by activists as the ‘return of the political’ through the symbolic bodily occupation of sites of significance (Bassett, 2014). These occupations involved ‘staging equality’ through reclaiming urban spaces as sites for opening political subjectivation (Karaliotas, 2017), protest through presence (Sbicca and Perdue, 2014), and experiments with subject formation and new modes of political collective action or encounter (Merrifield, 2013b). Initial accounts of urban spaces and ‘rebel cities’ (Harvey, 2012) framed urban occupations as moments of rupture entwined with the everyday life of sustained occupation (Halvorsen, 2015; Juris, 2012), with protest camps and the occupation of public spaces providing sites for subverting and challenging social relations in a time of crisis or rupture (Kallianos, 2013). This ‘spatialisation of democratic politics’ (Kaika and Karaliotis, 2016) was emphasised as temporally and spatially specific, but, crucially, both digitally-mediated and corporeally and territorially grounded in ways which have ‘highlighted the limits of the “Facebook revolution”, and shown the need to be grounded in place’ (Halvorsen, 2012).

In the aftermath of occupation or squares movements, a strand of related literature has extended focus spatially and temporally beyond
occupation-based protest as Badiou-style Event (see Badiou, 2012a), and applied the ‘return of the political’ framing to more everyday, grassroots, and longer-term contestations. This often involves drawing on temporally specific occupation events as key context and teasing out what happens ‘after’ the Event of occupation itself, and/or how other framings ‘converge’ with and shift/shape out from occupation (Martínez-Lopez and Bernardos, 2015). Housing has been a major subject of focus for both this strand of academic literature and, more importantly, the activism that it investigates. From an academic perspective, this strand reflects and moves from García-Lamarca’s assessment that ‘although the appropriation of central city space, and valuing social life and use value over exchange value, was a powerful gesture, the disruptions were ultimately temporally limited’ (García-Lamarca, 2017a, p. 38). Here, post-occupation contention as radical political subjectivation has been decentred from occupying public spaces toward more neighbourhood-focused and longer-term assemblies, actions, and collectives (Arampatzi, 2017a, 2017b; García-Lamarca, 2017a, 2017b). Housing has been a major focus for these decentred and longer-term, socially-rooted mobilisations – as Parés notes, ‘housing has been one of the main protest topics during this period, especially in cities, such as Barcelona and NYC, where housing affordability has been dramatically threatened… at the same time, the flourishing of pragmatic and insurgent forms of bottom-up housing politics has been witnessed in these and many other cities’ (2019, p. 1654). Significantly, just as housing and real estate play a central role in dynamics of capital accumulation through finance, housing both a) provides a specific issue highlighting the fundamental contradictions of use and exchange value under capitalism, and b) profoundly impacts the everyday lives of most people.

For activists and academics, then, housing offers a lens through which broader dynamics of financialised neoliberal capitalism and resistance to it can be viewed at multiple scales and in different post-crash urban contexts. In Greece, Leontidou (2012) describes occupation-based movements as performatively staging equality at a digital/material intersection between local and global contexts, through ‘their recurrent material landscapes and their cosmopolitan virtual spaces of digital interaction’. In the aftermath of
these occupations, Arampatzi (2017a, 2017b) details the emergent neighbourhood-based ‘struggle communities’ and ‘urban solidarity spaces’ that characterise post-occupation contention in Greece. These community-based solidaristic responses in a context of extreme austerity represent attempts at collective everyday commoning, subject to the wider and local playing out of broader economic, political, and migrant reception crises (Vaiou and Kalandides, 2016; Vradis, 2019). In Italy, Zamponi’s (2012) assertion that ‘Italians don’t occupy’ is used as a jumping-off point in Di Feliciantonio’s (2017) assessment of the post-crisis resurgence of squatting in Italian cities. Here, the lack of a sustained or high-profile ‘squares movement’ is juxtaposed against the prevalence of a longer-term and vibrant social centre squatting scene and the post-crisis squatting ‘boom’ in terms of ‘new possibilities for the proliferation of alternative and challenging political experiments’ (ibid, p.710). For Di Feliciantonio (2016, 2017), post-crisis squatting in Italy is of interest in terms of its ‘collective, political character addressing a public claim’, which experiment with material solutions to the crises of neoliberal/austerity urbanism’s implications and re-assert the right to access housing.

Spanish post-crash housing activism has arguably had the most direct and significant impact on Irish housing activism, and Martínez López and Bernardos (2015) usefully trace how the ‘convergence’ of the occupation-focused M15 movement and squatters’ groups in Madrid helped shape the dynamics of housing, financialisation, and post-crisis contention in Spain. Highlighting the role that squatted social centres played in the planning and self-management of the occupation movement in Madrid, Martínez López and Bernardos trace the pre, during, and post-occupation convergence and relationships between squatting and occupy activists, as well as the resurgence of squatting following the M15 activists’ ‘eviction’ from Plaza del Sol. The vibrancy and partially publicly visible/high-profile nature of post-occupation squats as activist social centres is accompanied in the Spanish case by an emphasis on squatting for dwelling purposes for both undocumented immigrants and, with the help of neighbours and the PAH (Platform of People Affected by Foreclosures, Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca), to house families and individuals whose homes had been
foreclosed. García-Lamarca documents this longer-term trajectory of post-crisis activism and the centrality of housing rights, which for the PAH has been narrated as a move ‘from occupying plazas to recuperating housing’ (2017a). She characterises these ‘urban insurgencies’ as having ‘the greatest emancipatory potential… because they enact equality for those who have no part in the dominant system and have the potential for profoundly disrupting the dominant production of space’ (ibid, 38-‘9). Housing rights movements and particularly the practices of the PAH have been pointed to as rupturing neoliberal individualised and indebted subjectivities through collective discursive reframing, solidaristic practices, and the material enactment of housing rights through recuperation of bank-owned properties for housing and community benefit (García-Lamarca, 2017b; di Feliciantonio, 2016). Gonick positions this shift as ‘an anticipatory politics that fundamentally challenges hegemonic relationships between everyday citizens and regimes of property ownership’ (Gonick, 2016, p. 833). Significantly, the PAH’s organisational practices of mobilising around indebtedness and the foreclosure crisis impacting Spanish housing, and their specific tactics of protest, occupation, weekly assemblies, and solidarity/community-building with the aim of enacting new collective political subjectivities, have been influential for housing activists operating in Dublin (Hearne et al., 2018; O’Callaghan et al., 2018; Di Feliciantonio and O’Callaghan, 2019).

Accordingly, academic research has documented a shift in post-crash contention from the occupation of public squares to a focus on housing as a simultaneously global and local issue that materially resonates with indebted homeowners, renters, and social housing tenants. However, while often alluding to the roles that digital technologies play in the examples being discussed, scholarship on post-crisis housing activism rarely focuses on the detail of how contemporary contention uses and navigates digital technologies as part of contesting housing financialisation and broader neoliberal capitalist dynamics. While communication studies and social movement researchers have long emphasised the roles, promises, and pitfalls that digital technologies in general, and social media in particular, hold for contemporary activism, this suffers from a tendency to incorporate digital tools into explanatory models of ‘social movements’ which are implicitly
aspatial (on spatialities and social movements literature, see Martin and Miller, 2003; Nicholls, 2008; Nicholls and Uitermark, 2017). Accordingly, how, why, and to what effect these technologies are used by activists contesting housing in ways that produce, and are produced by, socio-spatial dynamics is not well-understood. This is a point on which critical academic research already contributes, often through partnership with community activists in data access/interpretation (e.g. the Urban Displacement Project in San Francisco, UPX in Detroit – see Akers et al. (2019)). An emergent literature has begun to directly explore this topic (McElroy, 2022; McElroy and Vergerio, 2022; Fields in Porter et al., 2019), but tends to focus on a small number of particular examples, mainly in or from the US. Beyond this emerging niche within the literature, it is almost as though the fact that activists’ use of digital technologies to contest housing is so banal that it goes without saying, but this banalisation occludes both the labour and the potentialities and problems that these forms of digital/material activism offer in contemporary settings. The thesis addresses this imbalance through an empirical focus on housing activism in post-crash Dublin that uses a mixed methods approach to conceptualise contention as digital/material.

2.5 Framing digital/material activist practices: publicising, organising, and mediating

This mixed methods approach extends existing literature by a) examining housing struggles within a particular digital/material context that contrasts with US scholar-activist housing research, and b) providing a wider conceptual understanding of what digital/material contention does in/for housing activism in post-crash Dublin. I accomplish these two extensions in the empirical sections of the thesis, which are presented in two main parts. First, I outline the context of how and why housing activism emerges as part of the relational articulation between neoliberal urbanism and its contestation in post-crash Dublin (chapter four) and the activist labour that produces digital/material contention (chapter five). Then, chapters six to nine outline in turn the three main framings of what digital/material contention does in contemporary housing activism, which impact how contention is publicised, organised, and mediated.
2.5.1 Publicising

Publicising is used in the thesis to describe how activists use digital/material tactics to publicly contest housing – this is often done through social media, where housing activist groups use social media accounts or pages to communicate as a unified public-facing entity. Public, and ‘the public’, is both a noun that distinguishes between legal entities (e.g. the public as the state, the private as the market or household) and is an adjective whose meaning varies based on the noun that it is attached to, where ‘in some expressions the precise sense is unambiguous, but in others more than one sense is vaguely present, and it is difficult to determine in what sense precisely the thing in question was originally called “public”’ (Oxford English Dictionary, September 2021). My use of the verb form ‘publicising’ is intended to capture a sense of action or active production. ‘Publicising’ describes the public outputs of the digital/material social media labour that I outline in chapter five and how this labour attempts to create and mobilise three main types of ‘publicness’ – i) the internal publics within housing activist groups, ii) the external public audiences that they relate to, and iii) occupied buildings as temporary ‘makings’ of digital/material public space.

The internal and external publics that digital/material contention create unfold at an intersection between three framings of ‘public-ness’ in existing literature, which are ‘the public sphere’, ‘public space’, and ‘populism’, all of which are reconfigured under communicative capitalism. ‘The public sphere’, influentially theorised by Habermas (1989) and ‘rethought’ by Fraser (1990), describes the ‘discursive spaces’ which are necessarily required for democracy to function. While Habermas’ public sphere corresponds to non-domestic spaces which may be commercial (e.g. a coffeehouse) or ‘a free space for public contacts and communications’, public space as a specific category is an important corollary as setting and construct which ‘the public sphere’ relies on, with a need for self-presentation and recognition (Goffman, 1990; Sennett, 2002). Importantly, however, following Michell (2003, p. 35), ‘what makes a space public… is often not its preordained “publicness”’. Rather, it is when, to fulfil a pressing need, some group or another takes space and through its actions makes it public… Representation both demands space and creates space. But it rarely does so
under conditions of its own choosing’. Put differently, Mitchell reads the production of public space as ‘always a dialectic between the “end of public space” and its beginning. This dialectic is both fundamental to and a product of the struggle for rights in and to the city’ (ibid, p. 26). ‘The public sphere’ as discursive space and ‘public space’ as the taking and making public of urban space both play an important role in construction of a public and, relatedly, a sense of a/the people. This sense of the public as a space of a/the people resonates with Laclau’s work on populism and populist reason (especially Laclau, 1977, 2005a), with ‘the people’ as a ‘floating signifier’, constructed through discursive division of ‘the people’ along a distinctive political frontier from its constitutive other or outside. Echoing Habermas and Fraser, Laclau’s neo-Gramscian account and its elaboration by himself (e.g. Laclau, 2005b) and others (e.g. Mouffe, 2005; Panizza, 2005a) is mainly focused on the discursive construction of ‘the people’. Populism uses discursive and public space for the collective construction of the people, whose image of ‘fullness’ is ‘at the heart of populist identification’ as ‘always incomplete, achieved by the exclusion of an outside that can never be fully vanquished’ (Panizza, 2005b, p. 16). Here, critical urban geography has usefully honed in on the spatiality that the more discursive interpretation of ‘the public sphere’ and ‘populism’ often either takes for granted or ignores. In particular, Erik Swyngedouw and others (e.g. Dikeç, 2017; Swyngedouw, 2018) have attuned to Rancière’s rich spatial imaginary and his understanding of the necessarily emplaced nature of struggle, whereby ‘politics occurs where there is a place and a way for two heterogenous processes to meet. The first is the police process in the sense we have tried to define. The second is the process of equality’ (Rancière, 1999, p. 30, italics for emphasis mine).

Importantly, all three of these senses of ‘publicness’ have been reshaped with the development of digital technologies, and particularly the internet. At the turn of the century, Buchstein suggested that ‘what the Internet means for democracy, indeed, what exactly, computer democracy might mean, is unclear and controversial’ (1997, p. 248). Subsequent visions of the internet and related technologies connect the idea of a public sphere to digital technologies, which were described as having ‘created a new public space for politically oriented conversation’ (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 9).
techno-utopic assessments, echoing Marshall McLuhan, have suggested that ‘the computer has penetrated the lives of almost all people on the planet, arranging them into an interconnected… global village’ (Valcanis, 2011, p. 34), and Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community* (1992) is a particularly Habermas-inflected reading of the internet as a levelling force in creating a new public sphere of globally-mediated simultaneous discursive communication. Habermas’ own assessment of the digital’s ambivalent relationship to the public sphere has evolved over time. Initially, Habermas suggested that ‘the phenomenon of a world public sphere [is] becoming political reality for the first time in a cosmopolitan matrix of communication’ (Habermas, 2001, p. 514). However, while Habermas (2014) argues that digital communication is ‘the third great innovation on the media plane’ after writing and printing, he has more recently suggested that the volume of information being communicated and the ways in which this is structured by digital technologies reverses the necessary preconditions of attention, inclusivity/parity, and discursive norms that he sees as central to the classical public sphere (see Geiger, 2009). Accordingly, ‘the classical public sphere stemmed from the fact that the attention of an anonymous public was “concentrated” on a few politically important questions that had to be regulated. This is what the web does not know how to produce. On the contrary, the web actually distracts and dispels’ (Habermas, 2014). In this regard, Habermas himself is ironically more aligned with critical readings, or ‘the net is not a public sphere’ (Dean, 2003), than with accounts that draw more heavily from his own earlier work.

Within the more applied scholarship on ‘digital activism’, Gerbaudo (2017a) distinguishes between two ‘eras’ of digital activism, with pre-2011 anti-globalisation movements using ICTs as ‘cyber-autonomism’ and a post-2011 turn toward ‘cyber-populism’. For Gerbaudo (ibid, p. 477), post-2011 activism:

‘Approaches the internet as a “popular space”, a generic space which is populated by ordinary citizens, and mostly dedicated to non-political activities, such as gossip, celebrity culture, or interpersonal communication, but which can nevertheless be politicised, and turned towards the purpose of popular mobilisation against the neoliberal elites responsible for economic and social disarray’.
Gerbaudo’s specific reading of populism as ‘citizenism’ positions the connection between ‘gathering in public spaces and on social media’ in contemporary movements as part of ‘a bottom-up recuperation and reclamation of democracy and political institutions by ordinary citizens… it yearns for the construction of a radical democracy that may allow a more authentic participation that the one offered by corrupt liberal-democratic institutions’ (Gerbaudo, 2017a, p. 485). Gerbaudo’s framing of ‘cyber-populism’, and in particular his emphasis on the positioning of populism and radical democracy as central to digital activism, starkly diverges from Jodi Dean’s (2005, p. 53) more critical assessment of how ‘the proliferation, distribution, acceleration and intensification of communicative access and opportunity, far from enhancing democratic governance or resistance, results in precisely the opposite – the post-political formation of communicative capitalism’. Importantly, Dean’s Lacan-influenced reading of communicative capitalism integrates critical understanding of the attention economy, in which value is produced through audiences paying attention for communication and cultural industries (Crogan and Kinsley, 2012; Goldhaber, 2006), and left-wing activism and political struggle.

‘Publicising’, accordingly, is used to pull together work on the public sphere, public space, and the people. I use publicising to interpret housing activists’ social media practices within the situated and processual interplay between the digital/material in contemporary activism. By paying attention to housing activists’ publicising practices, I connect the mixed methods of data collection that I outline in chapter three to assess how contention connects and produces digital/material spaces, and how and why housing activism appeals to or seeks to mobilise the public/people.

2.5.2 Organising
I use ‘organising’ to connect the practices that housing activists use to co-ordinate or organise contention to the wider idea of organising and organisation as a process that contention aims to carry out. The question of organisation has a long and storied tradition in Left political thought, particularly in the Marxist Lenin v Luxemburg ‘debates’ on organisation and Georg Lukács’ (1923) formulation of die Organisationsfrage. The old
Marxist ‘organisation question’ related to the proper sequencing or prioritisation within proletarian revolution, but there has been a newer return to the problem of organisation to explain what Burgum (2018, pp. 1–3) describes as a ‘post-crash age of resistance’ in which the relationship between crisis, resurgent activism, and transformative change has been underwhelming across many contexts. In the decade since 2011’s upsurge of post-crash protests and calls for ‘real democracy’, organisation has emerged as a key question of Left political thought, which has struggled to work out and through the fallout from the initial promise and hope of occupation-based movements and subsequent turbulence. I use organising to frame the digital and its positioning within this ‘new’ problem of organisation and the main question that it poses, which is how ‘the Left’ can most effectively pursue its aims under contemporary communicative capitalism. Left theory on the ‘new organisation question’ tends to critique and attribute causality to the perceived relationship between an overreliance on digital technologies and a failed and misleading ‘horizontalist’ doctrine. Accordingly, organising describes both specific practices of co-ordinating logistics but also the wider question of the organisational forms that are produced by and produce digital/material contention. I draw from Rodrigo Nunes’ work on ‘political organisation’ to situate chapter seven’s organising frame.

The digital’s ambivalent role in occupation-based movements is Rodrigo Nunes’ starting point for his recent attempt at theorising ‘political organisation’, which he describes as ‘a response to the cycle of struggles that began in 2011 and whose impacts, direct and indirect, are still unfolding around us today. It is a response to the hope that they offered, but also to the limits they encountered and which have prevented them from fulfilling their promise – at least until now’ (Nunes, 2021, p. 1). For Nunes, the return to organisation as a concern unfolds inside the broader context of democracy, identity, and inequality, three key figurings of contemporary life as being ‘in crisis’. These are firstly a sense of western representative democracy in crisis through, on the one hand, the ‘hollowing’ of the democratic system (Mair, 2013), and on the other, a surfeit of what is nebulously discussed as harmful or regressive democratic excesses in the form of so-called ‘populist’ electoral outcomes (Bale and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021; Gerbaudo, 2017b). Secondly,
as asserted by Jodi Dean and her extension of Žižek’s work on Lacan, organisation is seen as a problem in a context of declining symbolic efficiency, in which ‘the disciplined subject of civil society’ as member of solid institutions like family, union, or political party ‘can longer be said to exist’ (Dean, 2009, p. 63). Thirdly, the organisation problem returns in a time of increasing economic inequality and precarity (Berlant, 2011). For Nunes, in the face of precarity as a generalised condition of everyday life and an unevenly experienced inability to survive under unequal conditions of global capitalism, the problem of organisation reignites older arguments about how transformative change takes place and who can effect it, which was a dispute in earlier Marxist debates around the agency of the proletariat and the role of the party or organising vanguard in relation to this. Nunes’ (2021) ‘theory of political organisation’ attempts to reframe the dualistic oppositions (one or many, horizontal or vertical, diverse or unified, spontaneous/self-organised/leaderless or hierarchical) of Left political theory and philosophy.

Nunes’ theory of political organisation does three important things. Firstly, Nunes explicitly frames his work as ‘a book on how to think about organisation and strategy’ which ‘is less concerned with finding solutions than with providing adequate definitions of problems’ (ibid, p. 8). For Nunes, understanding the problem of organisation requires an understanding that recognises the fetishization of organisation and ‘its double nature as pharmakon – at once poison and remedy, danger and enabling condition’, which means that the problem of organisation can never be ‘solved once and for all’ (ibid, p. 12). As such, organisation ‘must be thought in terms of forces more than forms’ (ibid) and the main purpose of organisation is to mediate between the dualistic pairs and tensions that Left theory has tended to fall back on. Rather than aspiring to horizontality or verticality as absolute terms, Nunes theorises organisation as mediation between relative difference in vectors or intensities (hotter or colder, rather than a or the particular hot or cold). As such:

‘If forms are but the temporary, more or less fragile stability of the relations that compose them, the balance between forces is a more fundamental problem. And, since that balance changes over time, under the action of internal tendencies as well as outside factors… each situation demands an answer appropriate to that situation, to the balance verified at that moment. Neither a choice for this or that quality in absolute nor a form “discovered
at last”, an answer is a definite quantum of force that tilts the existing balance in the desired direction’ (ibid, p. 76, italics in original).

Accordingly, Nunes affirms that the ‘problem’ of organisation is not one that can be solved permanently and theorises organisation as a question of forces rather than forms.

Secondly and relatedly, Nunes’ work offers a re-reading of revolution and the revolutionary subject that addresses the inertia of Left political theorising on contemporary collective organising without prioritising a specific organisational form. Nunes critiques the ‘left melancholia’ diagnoses of Wendy Brown (1999) and Jodi Dean (2013) and the inert tipping back and forth between what Spinoza terms potentia (the power of the many to do) and potesta (the power of the few over others) in an anxious feeling of ‘permanently falling short of one’s impossible ideal and the fear of being called out for betraying it’ (Nunes, 2021, p. 178). Per Nunes, in this inertia, because of the fear of action or the actions of others, ‘the collective cannot move… The tendency is that it will restrict itself to an increasingly narrow comfort zone, or come to an end because it cannot make decisions, or fall apart acrimoniously as soon as any initiative is taken’ (ibid, p. 179). Nunes’ critique of left melancholia situates this standstill within the longer-term context of revolution in crisis, in which the teleological march of Marx’s history has become foundered in a protracted crisis, wherein the old has died but the new is lodged in the birth canal. In the absence of the ‘hype-man’ function of Marxist theory in which the proletariat must, can, and inevitably will make the revolution, Nunes avoids the specification of an ideal organising form and aims to theorise subjectivation as a process of active composition through organisation as productive forces, which need not assume a particular form to be effective. Importantly, Nunes articulates organisation as a process that actively composes subjects and collective subjectivation as on-going, incomplete, and practical. For Nunes, the revolutionary subject of Marxist thought is revised by arguing for revolution or politics with the subject in, in which organisation ‘requires a politics that implicates itself subjectively at each moment’ (Nunes, 2021, p. 157). Accordingly, Nunes rejects both the melancholic apathy, impotence, and
anxious frenzy of left melancholia, and the privileging of self-organisation and spontaneity, to instead argue for a calculated and continuous struggle to be in the best position possible to effect change. This means accepting that ‘even during a revolutionary process, things do not simply “fall from heaven”. They still have to be done; they still must be organised’ and this requires a politics ‘that does not dissolve itself into a higher unity, be that an ethereal “process” or a universal subject-to-come, but assumes the limitedness and partiality of its own perspective as a necessary condition, while striving to overcome it not in thought but in practice’ (ibid).

Finally, having outlined and attempted to steer around the traumas of the twentieth century that have stymied contemporary Left politics, Nunes offers ecosystems and ecological framings of organisation as a mode of theorising which is capable of ‘situating political subjects within a world inhabited by other perspectives and agents that are connected to one another by complex causal circuits that exceed the calculating capacities of any single one of them’ (ibid, p. 14). Drawing from his earlier work on network theory and activism (2014), Nunes’ ecological theorisation reframes collective organisation as an interconnected ecosystem with complex webs of relations, influence, and specialisation – thinking ecologically allows for the connectedness of acting in a shared environment in varied ways that can be collaborative or competitive but should be recognised as existing. Nunes asserts that:

‘My portrayal of an ecology is not meant as a blueprint for a future movement but as a description of what is always already the case to a greater or lesser extent, regardless of whether people agree with or are even aware of each other. If there is a normative dimension here, it does not lie in the imperative to create an ecology, as there always is one anyway, but in thinking about what exists in ecological terms’ (ibid, p. 170–1, italics for emphasis mine).

Echoing his practical theorisation of organisation as force not form, and politics as a pragmatic effort to affirmatively act to put oneself and one’s cause in the best position possible, Nunes’ framing of thinking ecologically similarly aims to connect thought and practice in practical ways. Importantly, Nunes’ framing of ecosystems and how they function uses the natural world to exemplify the principles of functional differentiation and unevenness that
his broader ‘theory of political organisation’ calls for. Thinking ecologically implies horizontality without horizontalism, as ‘an ecology is neither an assembly where everyone deliberates together, nor a mass that follows a recognised leader; it is the absence of either a recognised leader or a global procedure for collective decision-making’ (ibid). For Nunes, leadership as function is distinct from leadership as position or role, and thinking ecologically captures the relative leadership position of the vanguard while allowing for the functional differentiation of particular types of organisations.

The ecosystem serves as the overarching totality, varying in scale and depending on what the observer is observing, with fluctuating complexity and tempo – ‘the more complex and durable an initiative is, the more likely that one or more relatively stable organising cores will begin to form’ and ‘organising cores emerge naturally out of collective processes by responding to their increasingly complex demands’ (ibid, p. 185).

Nunes’ ecological framing offers a rich conceptual vocabulary for interpreting ‘political organisation’ which is missing in more practical or applied work on Left politics and organisation. However, Nunes’ theoretical focus elides the day-to-day organising practices and complexities of form that unfold within the ‘ecosystems’ he outlines. More applied work on organisation tends to take the opposite approach and focus on what is argued as being the best or most appropriate ‘form’ of organising, with the political party and the trade union being particularly focused on by, respectively, Paolo Gerbaudo (2019) and Jodi Dean (2016, 2019), and Jane McAlevey (2018, 2020). Whereas Nunes offers a broader prognosis of organisation and its necessity for contemporary Left politics, these other accounts tend to focus on what Nunes would describe as a specific form or force within political organisation, which is interpreted as the most appropriate or effective ‘treatment’ for the wider problems of collective organising in contemporary contexts. I turn to this question of organisational form as mediation between theory and practice in chapter eight. First, in chapter seven, I use Nunes’ vocabulary to outline the organising practices, forms, and forces that have structured post-crash housing activism in Dublin and how these have changed over time, with empirical research suggesting that the language of ‘organising’ has been particularly influential in directing housing activists’
organising practices. In chapter seven I also apply organising as a frame to assess the agentic organising practices that produce digital/material contention, and how these practices and the organisational forms/forces that create them change over time through iteration, experimentation, and learning.

2.5.3 Mediating

‘Mediating’ is used to describe how contention is experienced as mediated both in real time and in what remains or endures after specific examples of contentious action end, as well as how contention involves mediation between individuals, groups, and the mediation of space. Mediation is a core concept throughout the thesis, which draws from Leszczynski’s (2015, p. 741) framing of mediation as ‘how it is that we experience “things” in the world (and indeed the world itself), and how those experiences are influenced, punctuated, affected, marked, and/or structured by our living-with technology, as well as our being-with each other in a social reality that is constituted as much by the technical as by the human’. In chapters eight and nine, mediation becomes the key focus, with an examination of how housing activism mediates between individual and collective subjects and how activism produces mediated counter-spaces, which extend from and politicise the ‘making public’ of social media and urban space. Drawing from Nunes (2021, pp. 78-9), I use mediation to interpret how organisation is ‘the form of mediation between theory and practice’, with organisation mediating ‘between dialectics of struggle that are traditionally counterposed as one or the other, a question of emphasis and balance rather than arrival at one particular best option’ (ibid, p. 69). In this sense, I use mediation between theory and practice to assess how housing activist organisation has changed over time and contrast housing activists’ mediations between a) their own theory and practices, but also b) the idealised forms/forces of mediation that have re-emerged in contemporary Left political literature dealing with ‘the organisation question’ (e.g. trade unions and political parties). Importantly, mediation in housing activist organising and recent Left political theory has tended to view collective power as being constructed through idealised forms of unmediated social relations. However, I argue that these ideal forms of
unmediated social relations do not exist, and the accounts of ‘comradeship’ (Dean, 2019) and ‘whole-worker organising’ (McAlevey, 2014, 2018) offered in these works a) neglect the constitutive role that digital technologies play in the party and union forms being discussed, and b) tend to downplay the always-already-mediated character of socio-spatial existence, beyond a broad recognition of people and their bodies as classed, raced, and gendered.

For Nunes, organisation is mediation between what is and what could be, but this must be thought through as ‘a process in which destruction, construction and repurposing happen in parallel, and rupture as well as mediation take place at different scales at the same time’ (2021, p. 289). Accordingly, rather than a simple answer of best organisational form, what exists ‘is a plurality of timelines and rhythms of change running at variable speeds, an irregular patchwork of continuities and discontinuities that do not miraculously combine to produce structural transformation but are the object of a constant, deliberate effort to play them both in support of (to reinforce) and against (to correct the course of) one another’ (ibid, italics in original).

Here, Nunes echoes the sense of a horizon in Dean’s earlier work on communism and communist desire (Dean, 2012), but also, importantly, the sense of mediation as an active process of intervention and (re)composition that requires work. Post-crash housing activism is accordingly shaped by mediation between theory and practice, but this mediation has evolved within a broader context of what I have described above as the return of the organisation question, which has seen a call for a return to older forces of mediation between theory and practice through trade union organising (McAlevey, 2020) and ‘Left’ electoral political parties (Dean, 2016; Gerbaudo, 2019). In chapter eight, I position housing activist mediations between theory and practice within these mediations of organisational forces, which I briefly outline below.

McAlevey’s work on labour and trade union organising has been a key influence on the evolving trajectory of post-crash housing activism in Dublin. Broadly, McAlevey’s model of trade union organising, which she has detailed over time in a series of part-biographical, part-practical, part-conceptual books (McAlevey, 2014, 2018, 2020), turns around three major points of relevance for the thesis. These are her i) framing of organising, ii)
emphasis on structure-based organising, and iii) critique of digital
technologies and their uses in organising. McAlevey describes ‘organising’,
and the ‘organising model’ of trade union work, as distinct from both
mobilising and advocacy approaches, and this distinction has become a key
feature in how housing activism’s evolution has been narrated as a movement
from mobilising to organising, which I unpack in chapter seven. Organising
aims to ‘transform the power structure in favour of constituents and diminish
the power of their opposition. Specific campaigns fit into a larger power-
built strategy. They prioritise power analysis, involve ordinary people in
it, and decipher the often-hidden relationship between economic, social, and
political power. Settlement typically comes from mass negotiation with large
numbers involved’ (McAlevey, 2018, p. 11). This coalition-building is
accomplished through structure-based organising, in which the union
engages members as ‘whole-workers’ within the workplace and wider
community and recruits through ‘structure tests’, which are ‘mini-campaigns
designed to help assess the level of worker participation by work area’
(McAlevey, 2020, p. 156). Structure tests are used to both assess and build
worker capacity and organisation, with strikes being the ultimate and highest
form of structure test. McAlevey expresses scepticism about the role that
digital technologies and social media play in an organising, whole-worker,
structure-based approach, which she argues must be ‘always a face-to-face
endeavour, with no intermediary shortcuts: no email, no social networking,
no tweeting’ (2014, p. 14), centred around ‘face-to-face discussion’ (ibid, p.
113) between organic leaders and other workers, with structure tests as
‘public activities, socialising workers to take a risk together; they are

Political parties are the other force mediating between the theory and
practice of organising that are relevant for interpreting post-crash housing
activism. Here, Jodi Dean’s (2012, 2016, 2019) work on the relationship
between crowd and party, and specifically the communist party, and Paolo
Gerbaudo’s (2019) work on the emergence of what he calls ‘the digital party’
offer two useful and contrasting positions for assessing the party form as
mediation between theory and practice and its relevance for subjectivation in
contemporary settings. Importantly, while McAlevey’s work has been
incorporated in post-crash housing activism, a general suspicion toward electoral politics and a sense of frustration with Left political parties has limited the extent to which Irish housing activism has looked to the political party as a useful mediation between individual and collective subjectivation. Dean and Gerbaudo offer quite different assessments of the prospects of the electoral political party as contemporary organisational form that are useful for comparing to McAlevey and housing activists’ mediation between theory and practice. For McAlevey, trade union organising in the US context often specifically involves liaising with and pushing the Democratic Party to support union organisers. However, Dublin housing activists and their organisations often view political parties with suspicion and frustration, and typically argue that housing activism can and should be pursued as ‘non-partisan’ or unaffiliated to specific Left political parties. I outline the varying views of political organisation as mediation between individual and collective subjects in detail in chapter eight.

As discussed above, much of Jodi Dean’s evolving work has focused on Left political organising and its efficacy, with a particular focus on the USA. For Dean, the political party, and specifically the communist party, is the most effective body of and for collective subjectivation, an argument she unpicks in the post-Occupy period by considering the interplay between crowds, as moments of collective rupture and engagement which demonstrate the political strength that comes from collectivity, and the party as ‘a mode of association appropriate’ for making ‘the momentary discharge of equality that crowds unleash… the basis for a new process of political composition’ (Dean, 2016, p. 25). Here, Dean builds from Badiou and his framing of fidelity to the event as moving ‘within the situation that this event has supplemented, by thinking (although all thought is a practice, a putting to the test) the situation “according to” the event’ (Badiou, 2012b, p. 41) to argue that the crowd or event is a collective opening to political subjectivity, and ‘a communist party’ is the organisational form that best ‘organises fidelity to their equality, this justice, the blessed moment of joyous belonging’ (Dean, 2016, p. 122). Per Dean (ibid, p. 158), the party emerges as ‘a form for the expression and direction of political will. It concentrates disruption in a process in order to produce political power: these acts are connected; they
demonstrate the strength of the collective’. Dean is critical of how ‘many on
the Left think that the party is an outmoded political form’ (ibid, p. 161), and
ascribes the label of ‘multiplicity’ to supposedly ‘anti-state, anti-party’ post-
1968 suspicions of the party form from Alain Badiou and Antonio Negri. In
Dean’s view, the prevailing interest in Left theorising is subject to the same
drives that communicative capitalism sublimates more broadly, within which
‘newness and experimentation, not to mention preoccupations with changes
at the level of the individual and actions focused on media and culture, take
the place of a politics targeting capitalism and the state, ensuring that they
continue doing what they do’ (ibid, p. 164). For Dean, ‘the crowds, riots,
occupations, and revolutions of the early decades of the twenty-first century
are demonstrating that the rejection of the party is itself outmoded’ – the
moments of rupture instantiated by post-crash struggles ‘thrusts the
problematic of the party back onto the terrain of Left theory and practice’,
which has been confronted with ‘the challenge of generating, concentrating,
and sustaining collective energies… They [those engaged in struggle] are
asking again the organisational question, reconsidering the political
possibilities of the party form’ (ibid, p. 165). The party is the body or carrier
through which the collective subject persists, as ‘without a carrier it dissipated
into the manifold of potentiality’, but ‘with a carrier some potentiality is
diminished. Some possibility is eliminated. Some closure is effected. This
loss is the subject’s condition of possibility’ (ibid, p. 183).

Accordingly, for Dean, the party form provides the collective
infrastructures needed to effect transformative change (Dean, 2016), and this
is made possible by the individual and collective performance of comradeship
as the relation of social and political belonging that the party is created
through (Dean, 2019). For Dean, the comrade is the figure who brings about
the communist horizon of Left politics and the communist party as the
political form most suited to effect change in contemporary capitalism – the
comrade is ‘a political relation that shifts us… toward the sameness of those
fighting on the same side. It draws the demands on and expectations of those
engaged in emancipatory egalitarian political struggles. Comradeship
engenders discipline, joy, courage, and enthusiasm’ (Dean, 2019, p. 15).
Crucially, ‘comrade does not eliminate difference. It provides a container
indifferent to its contents’ (ibid, p. 35) to which are attached a set of practical expectations of loyalty, diligence, and solidarity to move toward a better future, or the sense that being a comrade is ‘to share a sameness with another with respect to where you are both going’ (ibid, p. 78). The figure of the comrade is a social relation of ‘political belonging’ built on collective and solidaristic agreement to work toward a common end. In the absence of comradeship, political belonging is stunted and the lack of a collective and solidaristic relation gives rise, per Dean, to ‘the end of the world: nonmeaning, incoherence, madness, and the pointless, disorienting insistence on the I’ (p. 135). In comparison to McAlevey, Dean offers a more nuanced theoretical and practical reading of digital technologies in contemporary left organising which turns around communicative capitalism’s foreclosure of dissent but also the political potential of struggles in which contention is pursued by a digital/material crowd whose affective desires for collectivity can and should be harnessed by the communist party form.

The twin suspicions of political parties and digital technologies are also raised in Paolo Gerbaudo’s work on political parties, and particularly align in his most recent work on the rise of the so-called ‘digital party’ as organisational form. For Gerbaudo, contemporary movements are characterised by their existence at ‘the nexus between digital media and protest’ (Gerbaudo, 2017b, p. 135) and their emphasis on horizontality, which can be problematic when ‘the unrealistic puritanism’ of horizontality ‘is adopted not as part of a utopian vision of the world that the movement wants to achieve, but as a strict prescription for actual practice… appeals to horizontality often provided a convenient smokescreen for de facto leaders to prevent any collective discussion about leadership, and to avoid relinquishing their privileged position or being questioned about their behaviour’ (ibid, p. 155). Here, Gerbaudo echoes Dean’s focus on the party as organisational form that can channel or make the rupture of activist struggle persist, and the ‘digital party’ is Gerbaudo’s descriptor for the organisational form that has been assumed by political parties with a purportedly activist inspiration or component, such as Podemos (Spain), Cinque Stelle (Five Star) movement (Italy), Momentum (UK), and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise (Unsubmitting France). In contrast to the mass party of the latter half of the
twentieth century, which was heavily intertwined with television, the digital (or ‘platform’) party ‘mimics the logic of companies such as Facebook and Amazon of integrating the data-driven logic of social networks in its very decision-making structure; an organisation that promises to use digital technology to deliver a new grassroots democracy, more open to civil society and the active intervention of ordinary citizens’ (Gerbaudo, 2019, p. 5). For Gerbaudo, the digital/platform party form is closely connected to and supports the role of what he terms ‘the hyperleader’, a charismatic party leader with an immediate entourage whose decisions the digital party ‘superbase’ validates in a reactive alignment where decision-making platforms restructure and legitimate decision-making through mass but superficial digitally-mediated participation (ibid).

In contrast to McAlevey on unions and Dean on the communist party, Gerbaudo is critical of the digital party as organisational form, rather than advocating for its ascendance. However, Gerbaudo’s work is useful for contextualising how housing activism mediates between individual and collective subjects for two main reasons. Firstly, Gerbaudo outlines how the use of digital platforms creates a dynamic of ‘participationism’, which yields ‘a quantitative increase in the number of participants, but with a great unevenness in levels of participation across different categories of participants’ (ibid, p. 176). Secondly, Gerbaudo’s ‘digital party’ model captures what, in other European contexts, has become the form of mediation between individual and collective in political parties that trace their origins to digital/material contention and, in some cases, the ‘movements of the squares’ in Spain and Greece. In this sense, ‘the digital party’ model is a useful counter-model to the relationship between activism and electoral politics in post-crash Ireland, in which first anti-water charges and secondly housing movements have seen uneasy alliances between community groups, trade unions, and Left political parties that have not developed into new ‘digital party’ models or radical caucuses within existing political parties.

Echoing Dean, Gerbaudo argues that the digital party reflects the resurgence of the political party as organisational form, ‘a surprising development that defies the predictions of many analysts and commentators who thought the postmodern condition would lead to the ultimate death of
the political party… the party form is alive and well, and since the crisis of 2008 there has been an increasing demand for it among citizens who feel unheard and unrepresented’ (ibid, p. 177). For Gerbaudo, these demands are indicative of what he outlines as a ‘new cleavage in society, stemming from technological and economic factors: a fracture between political and/or economic insiders and what I call connected outsiders… people who, though having levels of education and internet access above the average of the general population, often face serious economic hurdles, precarious working conditions, spells of unemployment, low wages and more generally a sense of alienation from the political system and its forms’ (ibid, pp. 177-8, italics in original). Gerbaudo’s digital party attempts to muster connected outsiders as an electoral constituency through a focus on ‘emerging wedges issues’ (including digital rights, rights to privacy), ‘demands for new forms of political participation beyond the limits of representative democracy’, and ‘new mechanisms of welfare protection and economic regulation to weather the changing economic environment and the growing insecurity of the digital era’ (ibid, p. 178). Importantly, Gerbaudo highlights how the digital is used to create a sense of the ‘digital party’ as a participatory space, or ‘fluid aggregations of individuals’, presenting as ‘“open spaces” where citizens can gather in order to cooperate, without the implications of conformity traditionally associated with the political party’ (ibid, p. 85). In doing so, the digital party attempts to wrest control from the perceived problems of an established party cadre or vanguard centred on hierarchical and emplaced branch politics, but in reality Gerbaudo argues that this emphasis on bottom-up participationism and the disavowal of formal electoral party structures creates a problematic relation between a demagogic ‘hyperleader’ who is legitimised by a reactive and unevenly engaged base.

The extent to which the contrasting mediation between individual and collective subjectivation that these organisational forms call for aligns with the trajectory of post-crash housing activism varies. This is partly shaped by the agentic and active experimentation with organisational forms and forces that housing activism has entailed, drawing inspiration from McAlevey’s work on trade unions in particular. In chapters eight and nine I assess the potentiality for individual and collective subjectivation through housing
activism, and use mediation to discuss how subjectivation and space are digitally/materially reconfigured in post-crash housing activism.

2.6 Towards researching post-crash housing activism as digital/material contention

Post-crash housing activism can be seen as unfolding through the publicising, organising, and mediating of contention in digital/material engagements with urban space. As I have discussed in this chapter, interpreting contemporary contention as digital/material means operating at the intersection of an interdisciplinary set of literatures, through which digital and critical urban geographies can be contextualised within broader conceptual framings of communicative capitalism and de/repoliticisation. Attuning to the digital draws attention to how contemporary contention unfolds and recognises the lively, agentic, and experimental practices that activists individually and collectively deploy in efforts to contest the prevalence of simultaneous politicisation and foreclosure under prevailing neoliberal capitalism. The digital/material tactics that activists use, however, should not be automatically either valorised or dismissed, and their deployment in contemporary urban settings demands empirically-rich and critical assessment.

In this chapter, I have interrogated the digital’s ambivalent positioning within contemporary contexts, which I began by assessing as simultaneously digital/material, shaped by the everyday nature of digital technologies, tools, and logics, and their role in communicative capitalism. I began by outlining geography’s digital turn and its relevance for understanding how contention has unfolded in the wake of the GFC. Subsequently, I discussed communicative capitalism and the de/repoliticisation that it entails, and the relationship between digital/material contention and post-crash struggles, with a particular focus on housing’s emergence as a key issue of simultaneous de- and re-politicisation in the latter half of the decade since the GFC. In arguing for a digital/material reading of contention, I have introduced three main frames through which activist practices can be understood. I have argued that digital/material contention intersects with and shapes how we understand publicness as a key component
of contemporary struggles. The publicness of housing activism, moreover, is necessarily organised, and I have highlighted how ‘the organisation question’ has returned as a way of diagnosing and, for some Left political theorists, treating the prevailing impasse between de/repoliticisation. Lastly, I have introduced questions of individual/collective subjectivation and space as actively mediated in contemporary activism, with the relation between specific organisational forces and their suggested mediation between the individual and the collective being an active and open question for contemporary contention.

Building on the theoretical and conceptual literatures outlined above, in the next chapter I address in detail the methodological and epistemological issues that have informed my digital/material investigation of post-crash housing activism in Dublin. Drawing from the conceptual frames that I introduced in this chapter, I begin chapter three by outlining my research questions and their relationship to the housing activist practices that inform the empirical analysis carried out in chapters six to nine. I then outline how housing activism has been researched from a scholar-activist intersection that has generally understated the role of the digital in contention, which informed my choice of methods. I use the idea of locating in the virtual to outline my epistemological positioning within the study and explain how my positionality and initial experiences of researching post-crash activism informed my choice of in-depth engagement with the digital/material dimensions of temporary political occupations and housing activist community groups. My observations of, and engagement with, a temporary political occupation campaign enabled me to examine and address the complex digital/material dynamics of contention that I used to approach housing activists. I argue that this situated digital/material approach enriched my discussion and understanding of how housing activism has unfolded in post-crash Dublin. Following chapter three, I provide an overview of how housing activism has unfolded in the post-crash period (chapter four) and the digital/material activist labour that this has entailed (chapter five). Together, these chapters provide the contextual basis from which chapters six to nine frame and theorise the specific publicising, organising, and mediating frames of post-crash housing activism in Dublin.
Chapter 3 – Diffracting and assembling digital contention

‘Begin with the material. Pick up again the long struggle against lofty and privileged abstraction… Theory can be a dew that rises from the earth and collects in the rain cloud and returns to the earth over and over. But if it doesn’t smell of the earth, it isn’t good for the earth’ (Rich, 1994, pp. 213–4).

As introduced and explored in the previous chapter, the overall aim of this research is the study of digital contention from the starting point of critical digital and urban geographies. In this chapter I discuss my methodology, which developed as part of a research design guided by situated research questions that I approached through diffraction and assemblage. The chapter begins by highlighting how existing approaches to researching post-crash housing movements shaped my positioning of the research, and how this influenced my decision to use three main sets of methods which I discuss in the second section (digital ethnography, participant observation/observant participation, and semi-structured interviews). These data collection methods were supplemented with analysis of public secondary data, which I use to analyse housing and its political economy in chapter four, and documents produced by activist groups, government, and other types of grey literature on housing and activism. In the third section, I introduce three sets of research questions, which I approach in my empirical chapters using publicising, organising, and mediating frames. In the fourth section I explain how and why I opted to use a diffractive and assemblage-influenced methodological framework to understand housing activists’ publicising, organising, and mediating practices. The chapter concludes with a short reflection on the research process.

3.1 Approaches to the study of post-crash housing movements

As discussed in chapter two, housing has been a key focus for activism in the post-crash period. Initially, post-crash housing movements were interpreted as connected to both pre-existing struggles and the proliferation of occupation-based movements (e.g. Occupy, los indignados) in the earlier post-crash period (c. 2009-2012). Research conducted on the Spanish post-crash context in particular has highlighted the relations between the
temporary occupation of public spaces and more specific housing-focused struggles (García-Lamarca, 2017a; Martínez, 2019; Martínez-Lopez and Bernardos, 2015). In Ireland, Hearne et al. (2018) usefully describe what they term the ‘relational articulation’ between activism and the evolving commodification of housing. Hearne et al. (2018) identify two main ‘phases’ of post-crash housing activism. They argue that the first phases, from 2008 to 2014, mainly focused on austerity’s impacts on previously disadvantaged groups. By contrast, the second phrase, from 2014 onward, reflected ‘new grassroots groups and national alliances, partially shaped by transnational solidarity, aiming to respond to the increasing polarization of Irish society and the housing market’ (ibid, p.165). While I return to and update this phasing of housing activism in chapter four, Hearne et al.’s periodisation captures the broader sense of evolution in post-crash housing struggles elsewhere. Here, housing has played a key role in the evolution of post-crash urban protest from specific occupations as contentious ruptures of space time (Burgum, 2018; Halvorsen, 2015) to diffusion in the form of ‘struggle communities’ (Arampatzi, 2017a) focused on housing within a broader crisis of social reproduction (Byrne, 2018; Di Feliciantonio, 2016; García-Lamarca, 2017b; García-Lamarca and Kaika, 2016; Gonick, 2016).

Critical urban approaches to post-crash housing movements raise two key issues that inform my methodological framework. Firstly, critical urban scholarship has tended to downplay or take for granted that digital technologies and platforms are used in contemporary housing struggles, with an emphasis on the ‘doings and sayings’ (García-Lamarca, 2017a), ‘spatio-political creativity’ (Watt, 2016), and more general performativity of protest in urban space (see Sachs Olsen, 2018). This is in stark contrast to social movement and communication studies research, which has highlighted the role of digital technologies and media (e.g. Chabanet and Royall, 2015; DeLuca et al., 2012; Gottlieb, 2015; Hensby, 2017) without much detailed consideration to the geographies that are embodied, structuring, and structured by post-crash contention (although, see Juris, 2012). Accordingly, critical urban approaches to post-crash contention avoid the communication studies debate on the utopic/dystopic furore surrounding the use of digital technologies, and particularly social media, in contemporary activism.
(Gerbaudo, 2017a; Kaun and Uldam, 2018; Treré, 2018), as well as the broader discussion of communicative capitalism and its foreclosure via mediation (Dean, 2005, 2009). Critical urban researchers typically allude in passing to the role of social media in post-crash housing struggles (e.g. O’Callaghan et al., 2018) but fail to engage in detail with literature or methods capturing the limitations, affordances, and implications of these digital platforms (e.g. Light et al., 2018). An emergent body of critical urban literature on the intersection between digital technologies, housing, and financialisation crucially highlights the digital’s role in the production of space, and particularly the commodification of contemporary cities (Fields, 2019; Porter et al., 2019; Sadowski, 2020b; Shaw, 2018). However, understandings of how activists and those resisting contemporary financialised neoliberal urbanism exploit, adapt, and repurpose digital tools and logics remain underdeveloped, despite calls to attend to this question (e.g. Fields, 2017; Fields in Porter et al., 2019). This issue is addressed in a number of US- and anti-gentrification specific examples (Akers et al., 2019; Easton et al., 2020; Fields, 2015; McElroy and Vergerio, 2022; Teresa, 2016) but there is a need for broader recognition that housing activism in contemporary cities is unfolding as digital/material.

A second key issue in approaches to post-crash housing movements is the (at times) partial or total absence of the positionality of the researcher and reflexive methodologies within the research. In part, this reflects what Hitchings and Latham (2020a, p. 8, emphasis mine) describe as how ‘talking fully, honestly and openly about our attempts at collecting and evaluating data remains an important, but sometimes overlooked, way of ensuring that communities of researchers really flourish’. This tendency in human geography research articles, Hitchings and Latham (ibid) note, gives rise to a sense of the interviewer as ‘invisible’, and the ethnographer as ‘elusive’. Social movement and/or critical communication studies scholars adopting mixed methods approaches to post-crash contention tend to provide more in-depth detail on methodological choices (particularly when discussing digital data, see e.g. Borge-Holthoefer et al., 2014; van Haperen et al., 2018) and researcher positionality within these (Della Porta, 2014; Eschle, 2018; Uldam and McCurdy, 2013). While a specific subset of ‘squatting’ research has
involved participatory action research and ethnographic immersion in squatting practices (e.g. Grazioli, 2017), critical urban researchers studying post-crash housing movements almost always opt for some balance between i) participant observation/observant participation (e.g. Di Feliciantonio, 2017), ii) semi-structured interviews with ‘key members’ or ‘informants’ in specific housing activist groups (e.g. Watt, 2016), and (occasionally) iii) content or discourse analysis on activist materials, which academics may or may not have contributed to (e.g. Lees and Ferreri, 2016). On this last point, anti-gentrification and struggles around urban displacements (Akers et al., 2019; Easton et al., 2020) as well as research on squatting (e.g. Burgum, 2020; Grazioli, 2017; Raimondi, 2019) have been a particularly fecund source of scholar-activist research, but the extent to which academic publications allow for a rigorous process of reflexive methodological reporting means that the post-crash housing scholar-activist remains an elusive figure. In short, engagement with critical urban approaches to studying post-crash housing movements suggests a general emphasis on one or two methods which are cursorily described as appropriate, without much detailed consideration of how or why this appropriateness is produced and accepted. The thesis counters this tendency through reflective discussion of research methods and positionality in this chapter, in which I outline how the research process unfolded as an iterative back-and-forth between the digital/material.

3.2 Researching digital/material contention
The absence of digital and reflexive discussion of research methods in critical urban scholarship reflects the absence of one clear-cut methodological approach that would capture the simultaneously and emergent digital/material geographies of housing activism. While post-crash contention in Ireland was widely observed and remarked upon as involving ‘grassroots’ groups using social media to contest austerity, water, and housing (e.g. Burtenshaw, 2015; Cox, 2017; Finn, 2017; Hearne et al., 2018), there was little to no emphasis in the existing literature on how to unpick the relationships or permeable boundaries between the locally-embedded but digitally-networked characteristics of these types of contention. Furthermore,
as do not consider myself a particularly radical urban scholar-activist, I felt somewhat methodologically adrift. Because I did not identify as an ‘activist’, I was hesitant to adopt a militant (e.g. Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015) or participatory action (Mason, 2015) methodological approach and I felt keenly (and awkwardly) aware of my own positionality and interest in the digital aspects of housing contention. Ultimately, I opted to combine digital ethnography, participant observation/observant participation, and semi-structured interviews. As I discuss in further detail later in the chapter, my observation/participation through digital ethnography and encounters with housing activist groups informed my qualitatively-focused diffractive and assembling research approach.

3.2.1. Digital ethnography
Digital ethnography, and near-synonyms like ‘virtual ethnography’, ‘netnography’, ‘cyber-ethnography’, or ‘online ethnography’, describes the creeping interdisciplinary recognition that research is now shaped by ‘how we live and research in a digital, material and sensory environment’ (Pink et al., 2016). The terminological distinctions and method-focused inclinations within digital ethnography can be at times narrow and cliquish. As noted by Abidin and de Seta (2020, p. 2) ‘claiming to do an ethnography of something “digital” as an ‘early-career academic’ means being ‘confronted with the necessity to position ourselves in clear epistemological terms while keeping ourselves up to speed with the proliferation of increasingly specialized approaches to digital media research’, devoting ‘sincere efforts to explain, in the meaty methodological sections of our doctoral dissertations, why “digital” might be a better descriptor than “virtual”, why “platforms” might be a better metaphor than “cyberspace”, or why “praxiography” might be a more precise term than “ethnography”’. Digital ethnography and ethnographic approaches to digital technologies have percolated beyond the disciplines of anthropology and ethnography, with practitioners increasingly arguing for and adopting interdisciplinary approaches (e.g. Coleman, 2010; Pink et al., 2016). Human geography’s positioning relative to sociology, anthropology, and other social science approaches is worth noting here as offering a more nuanced digital/material reading of the ‘online’, the ‘offline’,
and the ‘virtual’ (e.g. Kitchin and Dodge, 2011) while simultaneously experiencing something of an ‘ethnographic turn’ (see Hitchings and Latham, 2020b; Madden, 2017).

The approach to digital ethnographic methods that I adopted in the research was influenced by Pink et al.’s key principles for digital ethnography research, which emphasise multiplicity, non-digital-centric-ness, openness, reflexivity, and attentiveness to unorthodox or alternative forms of communication (2016, p. 26), and Hine’s reflections on the digital as everyday, embodied, and embedded in contemporary experiences (Hine, 2017). This was partly inductive and common-sense because I was interested in how activists used digital technologies, which I began to engage with by using Facebook and Twitter to find and follow the social media accounts set up to represent communities who were engaged in digital contention (often focussed on the introduction of the water charges and, later, housing). From this initial foray, it became clear that Facebook and Twitter were being used by activists to set up and maintain ‘community group pages’. These were organised around place-based collectives who used ‘community group pages’ as the social media entity of choice for narrating and engaging in contention. Accordingly, my emphasis on community groups throughout the research reflects how contention has been organised in post-crash Dublin (Hearn et al., 2018), the dominant role that this digital platform ‘group page’ structure plays in digital contention, and the ways in which community group pages mitigate ethical difficulties by publicly shielding private individuals’ identities. While I observed individuals engaged in digital/material housing both through social media platforms and at in-person events, data collection focused on ‘community group pages’, which were the most common type of social media page used by housing activists and other groups engaging in contention.

This practice of enthusiastic lurking, and the mixture of observation, participation, and ‘blended cohabitation’ in the digital/material ‘field’, is well-discussed in digital ethnography literature (see e.g. Bluteau, 2021; de Seta, 2020). I found that, over time, my on-going observation built a sense of familiarity with the time/spaces of the ways in which activist groups used digital technologies in general, and social media in particular, to exist as
public entities. I spent a number of months checking in daily on the ecosystem of social media accounts that I came to understand as central to digital/material contention and activism in post-crash Dublin, pouring over their ‘content’ and considering its formats, tropes, and the ways in which community group accounts and individuals publicly interacting with them ‘overflowed’ (Duguay, 2017) and subverted the surveillance inherent in social media platforms’ framings (Owen, 2017; Swanlund and Schuurman, 2019). It was relatively straightforward in the initial months of the project to construct a computer programming script that would extract the publicly accessible types of social media posts that I was interested in. However, doing so converted the detailed and platform-specific text, image, and video posts that I could see by logging in to platform into sterile summations in a spreadsheet. Identifying pages of interest for automated data collection meant engaging with Facebook (and Twitter and Instagram, though to a lesser extent) as ‘a messy fieldwork environment that crosses online and offline worlds’ (Mare, 2017, p. 647). I increasingly came to see the social media platforms themselves as technological architectures, akin in many ways to infrastructural systems (Plantin et al., 2018), which regulated, structured, and set the tone for how activists engaged with the public and other activist groups. My approach to digital ethnography accordingly developed as a focus on activists’ practices, and interacting with and seeing the things that activists posted in the ways that they were intended to be seen, within a particular context and temporality that is easily collapsed by social media and research on social media platforms (Brandtzaeg and Lüders, 2018; Marwick and boyd, 2011).

Maintaining a sense of the spatial, scalar, and temporal contexts of digital contention became a concern as I continued to reflexively engage with digital ethnography in the initial stages of the research. On the one hand, the content and practices of housing activist digital contention represented a sort of ‘instant archive’, echoing Geismar’s (2017, p. 336) description of Instagram as a platform through which users ‘generate remarkably generic yet personal image collections, organized by epistemologies that emerge from specific users and yet also, through key words, feeds, and comments, are shared across global communities’. However, while activists are choosing
to contribute to this ‘instant archive’, the archive itself is a relatively fixed infrastructure with its own aims (i.e., attention, engagement, ad revenue). My own archival authority and imagination in documenting activists’ activities self-consciously sought to not document and package every post outside of its spatio-temporal context, in large part because this felt unnecessary and unethical (although see Burgum, 2020, on how the opposite can also be the case in other research contexts). Over the course of the research, I settled on a digital ethnographic approach that aimed to situate activists’ practices within a broader digital/material framing, although a clear conceptual framing of the digital/material was often missing in sociological approaches using digital ethnography to discuss activism (e.g. Barassi, 2017; Juris, 2012; Treré, 2018).

The results of my digital ethnographic research were a set of spreadsheets which I used to document and describe housing activist social media pages’ content, with a specific temporal focus on the temporary political occupations that drove the later phases of post-crash housing activism that I outline in chapter four. I compiled a separate spreadsheet for the Irish Housing Network (IHN) and each of the three main housing activist occupation Facebook pages, which were ‘the Bolt Hostel’ (which subsequently became the community group Dublin Central Housing Action’s page), ‘Apollo House’/‘Home Sweet Home’, and ‘Take Back The City – Dublin’. Each spreadsheet had a separate sheet to record when and what the page had posted during the three temporary political occupations that were the main focus for post-crash housing activist labour. Rather than harvesting social media data, which generated xml files of content, I observed social media data ‘in the field’ of the platform itself, and manually logged information about activist pages’ practices (see Figure 2). My focus was on how and when these housing activist pages were actively engaged in digital/material contention, which differed between the four pages. While the IHN maintained a semi-regular public engagement with housing issues in general, the other three pages initially focused on communicating a particular campaign, which tended to give way over time to less frequent commentary on housing and reflection on what had occurred as part of the specific campaign.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
<th>Shares</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Views</th>
<th>Ref</th>
<th>tags</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23/07/2018</td>
<td>Add event</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>DCHA_23-07-18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/07/2018</td>
<td>Share image</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>DCHA_25-07-18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/07/2018</td>
<td>Shared fest</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>DCHA_25-07-18-2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/07/2018</td>
<td>Self-promo</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>DCHA_25-07-18-3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25/07/2018</td>
<td>Self-promo</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>DCHA_25-07-18-4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26/07/2018</td>
<td>Share Dublin</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26/07/2018</td>
<td>Post through</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>DCHA_26-07-18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26/07/2018</td>
<td>Post with p</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>DCHA_26-07-18-2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27/07/2018</td>
<td>Post re Ken</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>DCHA_27-07-18-2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27/07/2018</td>
<td>Share Dublin</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1485</td>
<td>DCHA_27-07-18-3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27/07/2018</td>
<td>Post repos</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>DCHA_27-07-18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28/07/2018</td>
<td>Post receive</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>DCHA_28-01-18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 - Screenshot from my DCHA social media content log, noting the page's activity and engagement during the TBTC occupations.

I recorded the date and sequence of posts with a short descriptor of the type of post (original or shared, image/video/text, with/without text), the post’s ‘engagement’ metrics (likes, shares, comments, and views for video posts), a reference code for the screenshot of the post if I captured one, and an additional ‘tags’ field that I used to document any topics or points of interest. A digital ethnography approach highlighted how temporary political occupations played a central role in housing activist social media content, with housing activist groups’ social media activity and engagement turning around three major occupation campaigns, which I discuss in further detail in chapters four and five. Although I carried out digital ethnography as a more observational practice, this content-logging focused on the four main housing activist groups’ Facebook pages and their activity and interactions during occupations, as Facebook was the most commonly used platform at the time. I looked at and logged over 8,000 social media posts as part of the project, with a breakdown of this number in Table 1. While this was at times tedious compared to harvesting data, I preferred to encounter housing activists’ social media doings on the platform that they had been produced for/through, which felt less like non-consensual surveillance, and gave a better sense of what social media doings actually looked like and how they were paced. Logging information about the types of content that housing activist groups posted highlighted two main things. Firstly, there was a broad similarity in the types of content that groups posted – while some aspects of messaging, style, frequency, and levels of engagement evolved over time, social media usage generally involved publicising, organising, or mediating contention.
Secondly, while the level of engagement with housing activist social media posts varied between occupations, the forms and content of engagement fell along a familiar spectrum from the minimal ‘like’, to the more effortful ‘share’ or ‘comment’, and onward toward actual volunteering for involvement in contention. These framings of social media content and the practices that they were oriented toward influenced the way in which I decided to deploy digital ethnography iteratively. This evolved in conjunction with the second method that I set out to use, participant observation/observant participation, to which I now turn.

Table 1 - Summary of social media content logged during research – content logging focuses on the four main housing activist community group pages and their social media activities during three separate temporary political occupation campaigns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Irish Housing Network</th>
<th>Bolt Hostel – became DCHA</th>
<th>Home Sweet Home/Apollo House</th>
<th>Take Back The City – Dublin</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bolt Hostel</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>534</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2015)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apollo House</td>
<td>881</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>2856</td>
<td></td>
<td>3902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2016/17)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take Back The City</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>1088</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>1197</td>
<td>3520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2018)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2025</strong></td>
<td><strong>1787</strong></td>
<td><strong>3479</strong></td>
<td><strong>1197</strong></td>
<td><strong>8488</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2.2 Participant observation/observant participation
While I was scoping how housing activists were using social media, I became aware of and attended a series of workshop and events organised and publicly advertised by the Irish Housing Network (IHN) in the spring/summer of 2018. At the time, the IHN was attempting to relaunch or reinvigorate housing activism with a planned national tour that did not take place and a People’s Housing Forum that did. This period profoundly impacted the project’s development, and I became interested in understanding how the activity levels of the community groups that I was mapping and following ebbed and flowed over time, with different levels of digital/material engagement centred around a set of evolving tactics and digital/material and immaterial networks of people, places, and things. Gaining access to
participate in and observe housing activist meetings and events was relatively easy because these were publicised through the social media channels that I was encountering through digital ethnography. In this project, participant observation was conducted by attending, participating in, and observing public demonstrations, protests, and marches, as well as less-public community group strategy and organisational meetings.

Participant observation and its twin observant participation are two sides of the one ethnographic research coin (see e.g. Luker, 2010). Participant observation is a well-recognised component of ethnographic research which typically involves long-term participation with individuals or groups being studied (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Participant observation is widely-recognised as an appropriate method for studying activism (e.g. Balsiger and Lambelet, 2014), reflecting in part how research on activism is often conducted by researchers who were/are themselves activists (Gamson, 1990) and often engage in observant participation in causes they believe in. Participant observation is typically documented through fieldnotes, which are a fundamental component of ethnographic knowledge construction and reflect the subjective and situated nature of researchers’ observations (Emerson et al., 2011; Till, 2009). While a ‘suspicious silence’ (Raggl, 2018, p. 191) has been observed around the practice of fieldnote writing, I followed Emerson et al.’s (2011) influential distinction and iterative movement between descriptive, interpretative, and reflective fieldnotes, which are subsequently returned to, processed, and written as an ethnographic narrative. I took detailed descriptive fieldnotes both during digital ethnographic observations and at the in-person events that I was attending, which were different contexts in which I was attuned to the varying appropriateness, self-consciousness, and medium of fieldnote-taking (Emerson et al., 2011; Lönngren, 2021).

I did not approach the project as any attempt at ‘pure’ or ‘full’ ethnography, and this deployment of ethnographic methods in a non-ethnographic study raised productive tensions around my positionality (see Till, 2009). My age, being from Dublin, some connections with friends/colleagues involved in activism, and how I was also experiencing the city’s difficult housing market helped me to ‘fit’ within housing activist
circles, but this was a position that I found uncomfortable. This uneasiness stemmed partly from my initial interest in and undertaking of research through digital technologies and partly from my lived experiences of housing precarity, and the two combined as a sense of disconnection and discomfort when attending activist housing events. I was at best a mediocre participant in housing activism, being frequently late, absent, or awkward in ‘participating’ – I am not particularly active on social media in a personal capacity, I am not a natural marcher or chanter because I am self-conscious and find that mass gatherings tend to make me anxious, and I found it difficult to get over my anxieties in the ‘in-person’ field. I was more comfortable in an observing role, and I have found a sense of kinship with James Todd’s recent work on anxiety in spaces of academia and social research. For Todd, the experience of researching and writing through and thinking with anxiety in research spaces destabilises assumptions about researcher stability, acknowledging ‘the place held by anxiety and mental health in relation to the forces, identities, emotions, and bodily experiences which constantly shift their subjectivities’ (Todd, 2020, p. 14). In the same way that the activist subject is ‘a contingent and context-specific work-in-progress’ (Rutland, 2013, p. 997), so too is the researcher and the research project as process, but also the ‘constant interplay between the personal and the emotional on the one hand, and the intellectual on the other’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 151). Correspondingly, however, this sense of contingency extends to and engulfs the fuzzy distinction between researching subject and research subjects. I felt the link here between broader conceptual literature on subjectivation, and the more specific ‘tortuous psyche of the academic-activist, forever caught between the two worlds and sets of people with competing priorities, expectations, and pressure’ (Chatterton et al., 2010, p. 248). The debate and discussion of the embodied affect of ‘capital A activism’ (Askins, 2009; Pain et al., 2011; Taylor, 2014) echoes with the somewhat-tortured subject position of ‘activist’ as ‘perfect standard’ for those who ‘live’ the pursuit of their issue (Bobel, 2007). The potentially exclusionary and implicitly/explicitly gendered emphasis on ‘dramatic, physical, “macho” forms of activism’ (Maxey, 1999, p. 200) reflects broader dynamics in which the gendered division of unpaid social reproduction work
impacts who has the time to ‘be an activist’ (Craddock, 2017, 2019), who can or feels comfortable engaging in different types of activist practices (Dodson, 2015), and who takes on what is seen as generally organisation and administrative activist labour described by some as ‘shitwork’ (McAdam, 1992; Thorne, 1975).

Accordingly, I learned a lot about myself during participant observation and observant participation but also began to apprehend a richer and more nuanced sense of what it was to do or practice activism. Combined with digital ethnography, I began to be particularly interested in temporary political occupations as key housing activist practices during the post-crash period. Importantly, the period in which I was most engaged in participant observation coincided with the renewal of housing activists’ temporary political occupation practices through the Take Back The City campaign, which lasted from roughly August to October 2018. Over the course of approximately three months, I attended eleven different events (mostly rallies, workshops, and marches) which were organised around the short-term occupations of three vacant buildings in the north inner city. While I participated in, observed, and recorded detailed ethnographic field notes on digital contention and grounded activism during this period, I found it impossible to go to every event being organised, and the pace and intensity of the campaign highlighted the necessity of finding a sustainable way to study temporally and spatially fluid practices that involved high levels of emotional and affective labour. I began to see the temporalities and geographies of the practices I was unearthing through digital ethnography as shaped by these questions of energy and affective labour, with temporary political occupations playing an important and high-profile role in punctuating fallow periods of lower-profile, more community-oriented, lower-energy housing activist efforts. I began to see temporary political occupations and the digital/material practices surrounding them as key to understanding what the geographies of digital contention were and how these change over time. My emotional entanglement with housing activism and growing awareness of the affective labour and social dynamics behind and within housing activist groups demonstrated that open-ended discussion with housing activists about their own assessments and experiences of digital
contention would be important for understanding how these geographies were produced and what impacts they could have. Accordingly, as I began pulling together digital ethnography around temporary political occupations and fieldnotes from participant observation, I resolved to conduct interviews with activists to better allow ‘protestors to speak for themselves, and to treat their language as the language in which our [my] analysis is cast’ (Prentoulis and Thommassen, 2013).

3.2.3 Semi-structured interviews

Ethically, positioning my research in terms of feminist theory meant committing to maintaining a sense of the project as situated, emergent, and open to reciprocity and epistemic justice. For me, these ethical commitments meant framing the research as iterative digital/material encounter, rather than reconnaissance on activists as objects of social reality to be studied and reported back on. These commitments had two main impacts on shaping my approach to the project. Firstly, while the thesis examines social media activity and engagement, a key priority throughout the project has been what Prentoulis and Thommassen (2013) term the ‘necessary and impossible’ aim ‘to let the protestors speak for themselves, and to treat their language as the language in which our analysis is cast’. Secondly, adopting a feminist post-structuralist approach, I intentionally proceeded from a) an ontological understanding of the socio-spatial-digital as ontogenetic, and b) an epistemological starting point open to the messiness and co-constitution of the research by myself, digital technologies/platforms, and activists’ tactics. I used interviews to let housing activists speak for themselves and to generate a livelier and more human understanding of the geographies of digital/material contention.

Interviews are a useful reflexive and emergent technique for qualitative research, allowing the researcher to get a better sense of the interviewee’s thoughts, feelings, and opinions (Luker, 2010). Interviews are a commonly accepted method for generating empirical data on activism (Blee, 2013; della Porta, 2014) and within human geography more generally. This is reflected in Hitchings and Latham’s note in a recent methodological review that ‘in our experience, when asked about methods, many of today’s
geographers would simply say that they individually “do interviews”… we suggest that this taken-for-granted quality could be standing in the way of an enriching discussion of how we collectively “do” them better’ (Hitchings and Latham, 2020c, p. 398). Generally, interview techniques vary from fully structured, with a series of specific questions administered in a specific order, to fully unstructured (something of a misnomer), in which there are no set questions or pre-arranged order for discussion (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). I opted to use an in-depth semi-structured interview approach that was open to interactional exchange, relatively informal style, fluid/flexible structuring, and the (re)construction of knowledge rather than its excavation (Mason, 2002). My aim in approaching interviews was to be attentive to the direction of the discussion without imposing my own views (King et al., 2019). Partly as a tool to help me manage anxiety about the interview as an encounter, I approached interviews with a structural aim of showing interviewees the types of social media data and practices that I had identified through digital ethnography and was particularly interested in – an example of the types of data and images that I went through with interviewees is included as Appendix 1. Within the literature this is often discussed as photo-elicitation, which uses imagery to ‘promote more direct involvement of the informants in the research process and to encourage and stimulate the collection of quantitatively and qualitatively different information to that obtained in conventional interviews’ (Bignante, 2010) and contributes to a more general ‘enriching’ of the interview format (see Crang, 2003; Dowling et al., 2016).

Interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling, where I began with a small number of initial housing activist contacts that I met through participant observation who acted as gate-keepers recommending and connecting me to other housing activists (Parker et al., 2020). Snowballing worked well in this context for recruiting interviewees but also for understanding the broader constellation of housing activist social circles and spaces. I conducted ten interviews, with basic demographic and practical information about interviewees summarised in Appendix 2. Interview audio was recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis in Nvivo, where I used mainly in vivo coding (using interviewee language) followed by process coding to sift through the practices and attitudes that interviewees described
(Saldaña, 2016). In an ironic turn, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic coincided with interview data collection, which raised a number of practical and ethical challenges but meant that interviewees were likely more closely attuned to the day-to-day affordances and limitations of digital technologies. As a result of the pandemic and public health restrictions, three of the interviews were conducted online using Zoom and seven of the eight interviews conducted in-person took place outdoors and socially distanced in varying locations in and around Dublin. Interviews in general lasted between an hour and an hour forty-five minutes regardless of medium. I was forced to update and carefully consider the ethics and practicalities of conducting interviews during the pandemic, and this meant that pre-interview discussion over email with participants became something of a back-and-forth as we closely monitored public health guidelines as well as the weather forecast. I encouraged participants to co-produce the interview format by suggesting locations that they would feel comfortable about discussing housing activism but in general the main factor in location tended to be an outdoor space that was near or adjacent to where interviewees lived (three interviews took place in public parks, two outside cafés, one on the grounds of a university, and one in the interviewee’s back garden). While the use of video conferencing software to conduct interviews and its consequences for qualitative research is an expanding topic of interest in methods literature (e.g. Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Longhurst, 2017), this was not ideal given my aim of structuring interviews around in-person connection and working across the digital/material. Online interviews raised some challenges that are discussed in methodological literature, with audio and video call lag and ‘the inability to read nonverbal cues as a result of inconsistent and delayed connectivity’ (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 2).

My experience of conducting interviews online or in-person chimed with methodological literature on the ‘embodied’ nature of research (Crang, 2003). Although online interviews used computer screens, webcams, microphones, and speakers to connect us, I would argue that online interviews should still be understood as ‘events that take place between two or more people – a face-to-face spoken interaction in a particular physical and social context’ (Hitchings and Latham, 2020c, p. 392), with the physical context
being interviewer and interviewee oriented toward our respective computers. The overhanging context of the pandemic featured in all interviews in one way or another, and both interviewees and I often mentioned or alluded to our newfound understanding or appreciation of the conversations we were having as peopled encounters, perhaps because of the narrowing and stunting of social contact that was a pervasive feature of pandemic times. In part due to this stunting of social contact, while I found that I still experienced and embodied anxiety as a part of the socio-materiality of ‘the interview’ as research space (Todd, 2020), I found conducting interviews easier and less emotionally challenging than participant observation/observant participation. By the time I had secured the necessary ethical approval to proceed with in-person socially-distanced interviews, I was trepidatious but excited to conduct interviews, if only to speak to someone who I was not supervised by, related to, or working with. This excitement and desire for social connection mitigated much of the unease I felt around my positioning within ‘the field’ and allowed me to feel more present in delving into and experiencing in-depth conversations that were fascinating but often required emotional labour and work. While I was not necessarily setting out to do research on a sensitive topic (Lee, 1993), interviewees’ accounts often dealt with charged or sensitive experiences and motivations – almost all described a sense of ‘burnout’, depression, and/or alienation as a key factor in their experience of post-crash housing activism in the city, particularly in the wake of intense temporary political occupation events.1 Two interviewees disclosed experiences of physical and/or sexual assault. Almost all interviewees described relief or anxiety about things that might have happened or gone wrong but had not in temporary political occupations, and more than one interviewee alluded to the emotionally-charged nature of the discussion with a quip like ‘Oh my god. Are you my therapist?’ (M02).

I found that interviewees exhibited some of the characteristics that Kuus (2016) and Tokatli (2015) describe in terms of the importance of ‘non-attributable and off-the-record’ interviews or segments and the relative

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1 Interestingly, these retro-active descriptions of negative affects and emotions following temporary political occupations are often missing in existing scholarship on housing activism in post-crash Dublin.
comfort and practiced narratives of so-called ‘elite’ or ‘expert’ interviewees. Four of the interviewees described their experiences in media and, to a lesser extent, research interviews, but I found that the niche nature of my focus on digital technologies often punctured practiced narratives of activist practices and doings, which tended to take for granted digital, and particularly social media, tactics. While housing activists often had detailed and well-considered opinions on social media platforms, broader issues of surveillance and attention economy dynamics, and the efficacy of using digital tools in housing struggles, the specific day-to-day practices or ‘nitty gritty’ of doing digital/material contention were often taken for granted.

3.3 Initial reflections and emergent research questions
My project began with an interest in the geographies of how activists use digital technologies, and was guided by three initial reflections drawn from academic literature and a set of emergent research questions. Firstly, as discussed in chapter two, my aim of understanding the geographies of digital contention highlighted a number of interdisciplinary tensions in how activists’ uses of digital technologies were discussed. While social movement and communication studies approaches struggled to offer an understanding of geographies beyond an acknowledgement that spaces and places mattered, critical urban and digital geographies approaches were less developed in their focus on post-crash contention. While the latter’s burgeoning feminist strand of work was very useful for understanding the embodied and at times paradoxical potentialities that digital platforms offer (McLean et al., 2016, 2019), a focus on gender and feminist activism was not my main interest. To explore the potentialities and limitations of digital contention, I felt it was important to begin from a situated engagement with post-crash struggle as it was actually occurring, with housing activism in Dublin, and particularly temporary political occupations, offering a lively existing case study that could enrich an emergent literature on digital technologies and housing activism, which tended to be US-focused.

Secondly, I was concerned about developing a research design that would be able to capture an understanding of digital contention that was situated and coherent, but simultaneously attuned to how fragmented and
emergent digital/material contention necessarily is. I had originally intended to study the longer-term trajectory of post-crash digital contention but in the course of my preliminary observations I realised that I had underestimated the extent to which post-crash activist efforts had their own uncertain temporalities and trajectories. While my initial focus was on the longer term and broader ecology of post-crash activism in Ireland, it became apparent that post-crash digital/material contention was too broad a focus, and the project narrowed in on housing, which had become a key issue of de/repoliticisation in Ireland and internationally. Furthermore, even within housing as a subfield of post-crash activism, the temporalities of digital contention were highly variable, with short periods of intense, high-profile, and resonant activity punctuated by longer ‘fallow periods’ (echoing Di Feliciantonio and O’Callaghan, 2020) of uncertainty, ambiguity, or inactivity. My initial interest in using computer programming to automate data collection began to uncomfortably resonate with wider discussions around social media as surveillance (Lanchester, 2017; Nic Lochlainn, 2018) and made it difficult to take a situated approach, given the unnatural and extracted tidiness of data harvesting methods. During this phase of my research, I was juggling exploratory digital ethnography and participant observation with Dublin housing activist groups, because these were the main type of groups who were active. My initial periods of focused exploration here allowed me to develop an awareness of the personal and analytic demands of participation in housing activism. The temporalities, uncertainties, and requirement for flexibility were obstacles to consistent participation in, or engagement, with digital contention. The pace of action was difficult to keep up with, particularly during the most high-intensity and protracted period of housing activism that I participated in as part of my research on Take Back The City in the summer of 2018. The uncertain spatialities and temporalities of activism, and the emotional, practical, and connective labour that this entailed (Boler et al., 2014), became a central concern. I sought to adopt a pragmatic approach by remaining flexible, connected, and informed through long-term digital ethnography and observation of online behaviours and practices, which I used to choose specific examples of temporary political occupations to study closely and reflect on with research participants.
My third reflection related to critically assessing the political potentialities of digital contention. Reading secondary literature on the foreclosure of, and potential for transformative change within, contemporary capitalism brought me to focus my attention on how activists used digital technologies, and how these uses produced impacts and outcomes. Digital ethnography highlighted the complexity and range of digital/material practices that activists were involved in which offered varying levels of commitment to intervening in, exposing, and/or proposing alternatives to existing configurations of power, each of which felt like different pieces of a puzzle. In practical methodological terms, this meant that I resolved to connect in-depth and long-term digital ethnographic engagement, participant observation, and activists’ own accounts and voices within a wider framing that could assess the de/repoliticising tendencies of digital contention.

From these three reflections on the need for a situated engagement with post-crash activism as it was unfolding, on the importance of temporality and flexibility within the demands for engagement and coherent analysis, and on the need to focus on the varying political potentialities of digital/material contention, three main sets of research questions emerged. The first questions concerned how to work across and between gaps in existing approaches, and how to represent this work, particularly in connecting existing digital/material contention to socio-spatial geographies. How can contention using communication technologies be represented or understood as geographical? What do geographies of digital contention entail, and how do they connect and produce digital/material spaces? These questions lent themselves toward digital ethnographic analysis of digital contention as a map-able phenomenon, using mapping to connect fluid and subjective geographies of community activism to situated geographical contexts.

A second set of questions concerned more specifically the temporalities and situatedness of digital/material contention, comprising different assemblages of technologies, people, and places, which shifted and interacted. How is digital/material contention produced? How are activists’ digital/material practices produced and do they change over time? To what extent do digital practices reflect and/or shape on-the-ground actions in specific places? Placing the temporalities and situatedness of digital
contention involved an attention to material activism and changes in dynamics of contention over time, along with how activists shaped and responded to these practices, and their emotions and reflections on this. Answering this set of questions required in-depth engagement with specific temporal periods of activism, and their digital/material production and mediation. This was addressed with participant observation of digital/material contention and targeted semi-structured interviewing.

Finally, a third set of questions addressed the political potential of digital/material contention to intervene in and challenge existing conditions, and create alternative practices toward transformative and meaningful change. What impacts does digital/material contention produce? How are collective political subjects shaped and mediated by contemporary activists’ uses of digital technologies? In what ways and to what extent do geographies of digital/material contention shape the outcomes of contemporary activism? How do these impacts and outcomes relate to broader questions of the foreclosure and return of the political that were discussed in the last chapter? These questions were addressed through continuing and reflexive observation of housing activism, and sustained and ethnographic engagement with its everyday, imagined, and practical impacts. The next section of this chapter explains why and how methodological approaches of diffraction and assemblage were adopted to work with and between this set of questions, before outlining how a focus on diffracting and assembling was taken to frame the practical cuts that structure the third part of the thesis.

3.4 Diffracting and assembling as methodological framework for digital/material contention

The various strands of data collection that I conducted complemented each other but produced different types of knowledge. While a rich literature exists on the benefits and implications of doing mixed-methods research (e.g. Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018), I felt that the emphasis on integration and triangulation in methodological literature foreclosed the emergent and messy process of knowledge production that I was engaged in. Influenced by post-structuralist theory and feminist work building from it, I adopted a diffracting and assembling methodological framework. My aim was to use different
methods to understand different components of a contingent whole, with an emphasis on the practical composition and decomposition of digital/material contention. Diffraction is a key term in feminist theorising on difference which originates in physics. Within feminist theory, Haraway juxtaposes reflection, which describes the normative heterosexual and masculinist Enlightenment emphasis on vision, observation, truth, and knowledge, and diffraction, which proceeds relationally from the situated position of being an ‘inappropriate/d other’ (Haraway, 1992, p. 299). Barad elaborates on Haraway’s writings by offering diffraction as a method of study that ‘attends to the relational nature of difference’ and understands ‘entanglements in reading important insights and approaches through one another’ (Barad, 2007, pp. 29–30). Barad echoes Haraway’s interest in physics by dwelling in detail on what is described as the wave-particle duality paradox. Diffraction means attending to the specific material entanglements between observations and observer and the performativity of understanding as critical engagement. Diffraction is operationalised by Uprichard and Dawney (2019) as an alternative to integration or triangulation in mixed methods approaches, which influences how I deployed different methods of data collection that influenced each other (diagrammed as Figure 3). Integration is usually positioned as both possible and desirable in literature on mixed methods. Contra this reading, Uprichard and Dawney mobilise diffraction to frame mixed methods approaches as agential ‘cuts’ – these can reveal different aspects of the object of study (e.g. the parable of the blind men and the elephant), potentially capturing ‘multiple aspects of multiple parts that are entangled together instead of revealing some (singular) “thing” as “more” whole’ (ibid, p. 22, italics in original). This interrupts and splinters the object of study, allowing for the mess and multiplicity of dynamic, complex, and contingent research subjects, which digital/material housing activism, myself, and my interviewees were. This sense of making multiple cuts with different methods that do not necessarily cohere but unveil different parts captures the multiple sets of methods that the project deployed. In practice, this meant that I was cutting, together and apart, as an active practice wherein myself, my research, and participants were entangled, and this usefully highlighted how the
digital/material ‘thing’ being studied, which was contention, was ontologically unstable and subject to varying perspectives.

Figure 3 - The diffractive 'cuts' of mixed methods data collection deployed in the project to 'assemble' digital/material contention.

I used assemblage as both a method and as a way of thinking to operationalise diffractive cuts within a broader reading of the socio-spatial as contingent. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of assemblage and subsequent interpretations of the idea compliment diffraction by offering a spatially sensitive analytical tool within or from which diffraction can proceed and return to. Assemblage offers a means of relationally arranging diffracted entities as linked but separate, forming an assemblage that exceeds these links. Assemblage thinking’s take-up in geographical scholarship relates to methodological practices derived from an epistemological commitment to multiplicity, processuality, and contingency. The oscillation between ontology-epistemology-methodology within assemblage thinking had been debated in geographical scholarship, wherein the term assemblage has
diverse applications which echo Anderson and McFarlane’s note that ‘there is no single “correct” way to deploy the term’ (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011, p. 124). This lack of definition in assemblage’s application has led proponents, and McFarlane in particular, to be criticised for ‘attributing to it [assemblage] some rather impressive explanatory capacities, up to a point at which its definitional parameters become extremely vague’ (Brenner et al., 2011, p. 229). Anderson and McFarlane’s description of assemblage never sets out to specify ‘definitional parameters’, but it does give a good overview of the commonalities of assemblage approaches in human and particularly urban geography, noting that ‘the term is often used to emphasise emergence, multiplicity, and indeterminacy, and connects to a wider redefinition of the socio-spatial in terms of the composition of diverse elements into some form of provisional socio-spatial formation’ (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011, p. 142). They identify four inter-related processes as the focus of assemblage approaches – gathering, coherence and dispersion; groups, collective, and distributed agencies wherein ‘assemblages are not organic wholes, where the difference of the parts are subsumed into a higher unity’; emergence; and fragility and provisionality (ibid, p. 143).

Assemblage thinking understands the social as ‘materially heterogeneous, practice-based, emergent, and processual’ (McFarlane, 2009, p. 561), with assemblages gathering or drawing together different elements with capacities for agency within and beyond the assemblage. These elements can be humans, materials, technologies, norms, events, or organisations. Furthermore, assemblages of elements produce and are produced by spatialities which are themselves relational. Assemblages are intrinsically contingent and ontogenetic, continuously and actively composing and de/recomposing. Assemblage thinking’s attentiveness to practices and processes of coming together, changing, and dispersing has led to useful assemblage-influenced geographical approaches to both contention (Davies, A., 2012; McFarlane, 2009) and critical policy/policy mobility studies (Baker and McGuirk, 2017; Clarke et al., 2015). Echoing Tonkiss (2011, p. 588), I see ‘the real value of assemblage to critical urbanism’ as ‘its capacity to generate critical descriptions that trace out the workings of a given empirical context’. Crucially, assemblage thinking, and assembling as a shorthand for
a methodological commitment to its principles, offers a means of reading and situating the materiality and heterogeneity of diffractive cuts and connections within an interrelation of power, politics, and space. My diffracting and assembling methodological framework (Figure 3) represents a focus on diffracting and dis/re-assembling what digital/material contention is and how it is produced, with an emphasis on the critical potentialities, practices, and infrastructures that housing activists continuously and processually draw together, perform, iterate, and survive when they fall apart. Difracting and assembling means making multiple ‘cuts’ into the shifting research subject and pulling together a processual and contingent socio-spatial understanding of how things come together and fall apart, as well as their potential. Accordingly, I use diffracting and assembling as tools to pick at and unpack how processes of de- and repoliticisation actually unfold in digital/material contention, with both the digital and the urban operating as settings of hegemonic control which are simultaneously sites of possibility and potentiality for contestation. A diffractive and assemblage-inflected methodological framework accordingly situates the three main sets of methods that I use to trace, construct, and destabilise understandings of contemporary digital/material contention, which also account for my own positionality and responsibilities within the research.

3.5 Cutting apart and pulling together digital/material contention: Housing activism as publicised, organised, and mediated

The three sets of research questions and methods that I outlined above were approached with a commitment to a methodological framework putting diffraction and assemblage in dialogue, which helped me make sense of the different forms of primary data collection as diffractive cuts to assemblages of digital/material contention. As I began with increasingly detailed and qualitative digital ethnography and participant observation, I began to understand how diffraction and assemblage pulled together the situated, practical, and embodied nature of the research methods I was adopting into an understanding of housing activism as digital/material contention that was more than the sum of its individual components of groups, people, places, and things. This was particularly true of temporary political occupations,
which I decided to use as an entry point for understanding activists’
digital/material practices because they were the most high-profile and high-
energy comings together that stood out in my initial reflections and
ethnographic research approaches. I was particularly struck by what I came
to understand as the three main practices that framed digital/material
contention in general and temporary political occupations in particular –
publicising, organising, and mediating – which I drew from secondary
literature and use to structure chapters six to nine of the thesis.

3.5.1. Publicising
Digital technologies in general, and social media in particular, are central to
how housing activists publicise digital/material contention. This point is
attested to in media/communication studies and sociological discussions (e.g.
Tufekci, 2017) and often noted by geographers discussing contemporary
contention who distinguish between or connect the digital and the material
(Arampatzi, 2017b; Leontidou, 2012), but the socio-spatialities of this as an
enduring contemporary digital/material phenomenon are underexplored.
Social media are used to communicate with a wider public audience,
publicising contention in ways which interweave material space, its digital
representation, and broader contentious meaning and performances. Here,
social media are used as a digital platform to gather an audience and
disseminate information, often in the form of one-to-many public
representations of housing activist causes. For housing activist groups, a
social media page is often their main form of public-facing existence.
Temporary political occupations are often publicised using a specific
campaign social media page separate from any one or other of the housing
activist groups involved in the action. A recurring dynamic that became clear
through digital ethnography observing the ecosystem of housing activist
groups was the interplay and transmission of people, attention, and labour
over time back and forth from high-profile temporary actions to longer-
running housing activist groups.

In the chapter six, I address my first set of research questions. I use
publicising as the practical lens to pull together the results of digital
ethnography and situate subsequent discussion within a nuanced
understanding of what digital/material contention looks like and how this has changed over time. I used digital ethnography to document and diffract the unfolding trajectories of post-crash housing activism, mapping where housing activist groups were publicising themselves as operating using social media. As discussed above, I was conducting digital ethnography during what became a resurgent period of housing activist efforts, with a focus on building a more consciously intersectional profile and a diffuse base of locally-rooted but national support. In some respects, housing activism in the city overtook and synchronised with my unfolding digital ethnography – it was an absorbing and challenging task to keep up with the social media doings of housing activists, and I was doing so at the same time as the most recent social media content was being created. The campaign of temporary political occupations that coincided with digital ethnography, Take Back The City, was demonstrating in real-time the digital/material dynamics that I was documenting through digital ethnography on earlier post-crash housing activist occupation campaigns. This experience of time in digital ethnography and participant observation as a flurry of frenzied activity informed my methodological strategy going forward, and I began to specifically focus on temporary political occupations as spatio-temporal moments or events that illustrated digital contention as a diffractive assemblage of relations.

The embodied nature of digital ethnography and participant observation, and the emotional and affective difficulties and frustrations that I was experiencing with digital/material fieldwork, contributed to a sense of persistent unease with how the research was progressing. Firstly, I was keenly aware of critical assessments of digital technologies and social media’s role in our so-called attention economy (Odell, 2019) and the often-exploitative dynamics of the platforms that I was using to conduct research (Lanchester, 2017; Terranova, 2000, 2004). Secondly, I was also attuned to the implications of communicative capitalism and its inventive capabilities for incorporating dissent (Dean, 2005, 2009). My critical reading of, and instincts about, social media were compounded by the amount of labour that I was expending, and seeing housing activists expend, in practices of, respectively, researching and doing digital/material contention. What, I often asked myself, was the point of the frenetic cycles of publicising event after event?
In chapter six, I address this question by using practices of publicising to explore how digital technologies are used to make known, and in turn bring into being, contemporary housing activism.

3.5.2 Organising

Digital technologies also play an important organisational role in contemporary contention, with the role that social media play in co-ordination, logistics, and organisational bureaucracy a key part of giving practical information and ‘the construction of common collective identification among participants, without which such practical information would fall on deaf ears’ (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 41). Part of the process of constructing collective identification are the practical aspects of organising contention, in which digital technologies and tools have come to play an important but still underexplored role. This organisational role uses digital technologies in ways which are often explicitly socio-spatial, particularly when ordering the bureaucracy of who should be where, when, and what they should be expecting to do. The use of event pages and hashtags to co-ordinate contention has been recognised and in many respects echoes functions which are often replicated offline and not novel (i.e. these are and always have been necessary concerns when seeking to co-ordinate the movement or presence of multiple people anywhere at any time, from an invading army to a family holiday). But the existence, and acceptance of the existence, of digital/material mediations in contemporary housing activism fits with wider discussion regarding the creeping insertion of digital technologies in the banal organisation of everyday life (Greenfield, 2017). Digital contention co-opts the platforms provided by social media and digital tools, conforming to but also subverting or ‘overspilling’ their intended uses (Duguay, 2017).

In chapter seven, I use organising practices as a frame to answer my second set of research questions. To understand how and why housing activists were using digital technologies and social media to organise contention, I used the digital remnants or echoes of temporary political occupations to structure interviews. Speaking to housing activists and connecting the examples of organising practices I had observed through digital ethnography and participant observation helped me to better
understand how the geographies of digital/material contention are produced, including whether and how these change over time. Crucially, the term ‘organising’ recurrently across interviews to explain the shifting trajectories of post-crash housing activism, and particularly a shift away from temporary political occupations and toward the founding and expansion of a direct action-oriented tenant union. In part this reflected the specific temporal context in which I was conducting interviews, between one to two years after Take Back The City, the last temporary political occupation campaign. However, organising is also the term and frame through which I came to interpret and understand how the geographies of digital contention shift over time, with individual interviewees putting forward a shared narrative shifting from ‘mobilising’ toward ‘organising’. Explicitly and implicitly, interviewees were echoing Jane McAlevey’s terminology for diagnosing the ills of Left politics and prescribing a return and extension of what she describes as ‘total organising’ trade unionism to affect transformative change (McAlevey, 2014, 2018).

Chapter seven accordingly sets out two ways in which organising practices are central to answering my second set of research questions about how the geographies of digital/material contention are produced, and how and why these change over time. I use digital ethnography and semi-structured interview empirical data to position post-crash housing activism within broader debates on Left-wing political organising in contemporary contexts.

3.5.3 Mediating
Digital technologies impact how contention is experienced as mediated both in real time and in what remains or endures after specific examples of contentious action end. Mediation is useful for understanding, per Nunes (2021), how organisation mediates between forces and theory/practice, but also for interpreting the mediation between individual and collective subjectivation and the mediation of space in digital/material contention. Through mediation, digital/material contention contributes to and reshapes how processes of subjectivation and contemporary urban struggles are experienced and understood. The research begins from an understanding of
space as always-already mediated (Leszczynski, 2015) and chapters eight and nine return to mediation to consider the third set of research questions, which consider the impact and political potentialities of digital/material contention. Mediation influences the ways in which digital/material contention plays with individual and collective subjects, but also the urban time-spaces of contestation. The digital/material remains and traces of housing activism are mediated by digital technologies that document, preserve, and attest to the assemblages of housing activism that come together, evolve, and fall apart. In contrast to the DIY archives that Burgum (2020) traces in a number of urban movements, these digital remains are shaped by the platform that hosts them. However, similar to Burgum’s reading of city as archive, the mediated remains of digital/material housing activism offer another possible means of piecing together the radical counter-narratives of post-crash Dublin and contentious subjectivation in the city.

In chapters eight and nine, I discuss housing activists’ digital/material practices of mediation, examining how and why housing activists mediate between theory and practice, and between individual and collective subjectivation. Here, subjectivation turns around shifting forms of mediation as organisation that are related to but differ from the re-emergence of union (McAlevey) and political party (Dean and Gerbaudou) mediations. Drawing from all three strands of empirical data collection, and the ways in which they diffract digital/material contention, I address the third set of research questions, concerning the political potential of digital/material contention to intervene in and challenge existing conditions and create alternative practices toward transformative and meaningful change. I outline how digital/material contention mediates subjectivities and spaces, and assess what types of mediations seem more likely to create impactful and meaningful change in contemporary cities.
3.6 Reflections on the research process

‘I did not become someone different
I did not want to be
But I’m new here
Will you show me around?...
Turn around, turn around, turn around
And you may come full circle
And be new here again’ – Bill Callahan, ‘I’m New Here’ from A River Ain’t Too Much to Love (2005).

This chapter has detailed the framework and methods that I used to carry out my research. I began by outlining existing approaches to the study of post-crash contention and the strands of data collection that I draw from. Next, I turned from my initial reflections to introducing three sets of research questions, which I set out to unpick using a diffraction and assemblage-influenced methodological framework centred on housing activists’ digital/material practices of publicising, organising, and mediating. Overall, I experienced the research as a series of recursive turnings back and forth between digital/material. Trying to capture housing activism’s digital/material characteristics, I immersed myself in the hectic collision of digital/material that the Take Back The City campaign’s temporary political occupations represented, and this experience impacted the research’s overall trajectory. In the aftermath of Take Back The City, I began to see and trace the parallels between my exhausting, anxious, and frantic back-and-forth turning between the digital and material, and the hectic digital/material rhythms of temporary political occupations and the ‘fallow periods’ (Di Feliciantonio and O’Callaghan, 2020) of recovery and regrouping in their aftermath. Researching the practices and processes of struggle in the post-crash city demanded both availability to attend, witness, observe, and participate in contentious events, but also to be drawn into and become familiar with the digital/material activist infrastructures that structured and adapted around these events. Over the course of the research, I learnt and became familiar with the who, what, and where of housing activism in post-crash Dublin, and internalised some of the practices and framings of social media and the housing activist ‘scene’ that participants described. During my field work I began to understand housing and social media from a contentious perspective that differed from the more impersonal critical political economy
reading which I would have described myself as having prior to the project. I became attuned to the rhythms and specificities of housing struggles and their digital/material marks on the city, doubling back to photograph stickers and flyers, closely monitoring the development of buildings that had been temporarily occupied, and following the transition of housing activists’ digital/material attention toward the fledgling Community Action Tenants Union, whose establishment coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic and the interview components of the project.

In this way, my object of study turned from digital contention into digital/material contention, and then turned from object into methodological practice and an embodied condition of conducting the research. These turnings were all fundamental to the research, shaped by and shaping my identity and practices as a scholar. The becoming digital/material of my research captured the diffracted waves and arcs of what contemporary struggles actually look like and how they unfold, but also the boundaries and limitations of a diffracting and assembling approach. The first of these is that the richness and varying scales of data required key decisions to be made about where and when the project’s focus would be – which diffractive cuts to make and widen. While I began with the plan of using API querying and scaping, digital/material engagement required committed ethnographic qualitative data collection and sifting. Ultimately I chose to pursue this more intense qualitative data collection to capture the digital/material practices of post-crash housing contention in Dublin, but this meant that housing struggles in other parts of Ireland and elsewhere that influenced Dublin remained more satellites than properly explored planets in the post-crash contention galaxy.

The second boundary or limitation of becoming digital/material is the extent to which immersion in activist practices and the digital/material field can lead to internalising the claims and beliefs of community-based housing activist groups. I found this particularly challenging with regards being part of a temporary political occupation campaign, and subsequent activist assessments of organising and the (re)direction that subsequently unfolded in the post-crash housing activist ‘scene’. This in turn intersects with a third boundary or limitation which itself concerns how to set a boundary to the
digital/material field, or where/when the research stops. The boundedness of the field, and how the researcher ‘leaves’ it, is a recurring question in ethnographic research and ‘is not always a straightforward matter… frequently, the ethnographer leaves the field with mixed feelings, and some sadness, but often with not a little relief’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, pp. 95-6).

To address the second limitation, I found it helpful to space out and allow time to reflect on the diffractive cuts or strands of data collection that I deployed. This was partly not a question of design, as the interim between the hectic period of initial digital ethnography and participant observation during the Take Back The City campaign and subsequent interviews reflected my digestion of what I had experienced, the becoming digital/material of the research, and the lull in activist energies that followed Take Back The City. The third or latter boundary, about the boundedness of the research and the field, was more of a struggle. Unlike an ethnographer visiting a distant field, I could not simply leave Dublin, and the housing activist scene that I have been researching continues to be a feature of the city and how its future is being struggled for. To address this, I removed myself from continuous critical digital/material engagement with housing activism during the final stages of the research and its write-up. In part this reflected the tunnel vision of being a final year PhD student, but also a conscious disengagement from my digital/material research practices – I largely stopped checking social media or attending housing activist events, which were beginning to restart with the loosening of public health restrictions. My overall aim here was a repositioning within, rather than a removal from, digital/material housing contention, and to effect this I ultimately joined the local branch of the Community Action Tenant Union as an ordinary member. This repositioning allowed me to adopt what I found a more comfortable positionality toward housing activism, while maintaining the emotional and physical distance necessary to critically assess the potentialities and limitations of digital/material struggle.

In the next two chapters, I trace the political economic context and digital/material labour that housing activist assemblages have developed within. Chapter four outlines the trajectory of housing and activism before,
during, and after the onset of the global financial crisis in Ireland, and identifies three ‘phases’ of post-crash housing activism. This chapter mainly draws from analysis of publicly-available secondary statistical data and academic literature. Chapter five uses digital ethnographic data, social media data, and primary interview data to delve into the digital/material labour that produced these phases of activism, and how this has changed over time.
Chapter 4 – The relational articulation of housing crisis and digital/material contention in post-crash Dublin

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I build from an urban political economy approach to give a basic outline of the phases of post-crash housing activism in Dublin. The chapter establishes the trajectory and scope of post-crash housing activism, which is explored in more detail as digital/material contention in later empirical chapters. The chapter draws from Hearne et al.’s (2018) urban political economy framing, which illustrates how ‘the particular character of housing systems both creates specific crises and necessitates specific contingent and conjunctural responses from activist movements’ (ibid, p. 153). The chapter updates and extends Hearne et al.’s framing of post-crash housing activism by classifying three main phases of housing activism (visualised in Figure 4). The urban political economy approach to housing and crisis in this chapter echoes Madden & Marcuse’s (2016) framing of housing as a political-economic problem, in which tensions between use and exchange have played out across space and time in global and local contexts. Importantly, discourses on Ireland’s on-going ‘housing crisis’ and its Celtic Tiger backdrop should be contextualised against the backdrop of the housing system’s longer term role in Ireland’s national history. This is captured by opposition spokesperson for housing Eoin Ó Broin (2019, pp. 2–3) discussion of the inadequacy of existing terminology of ‘crisis’, ‘scandal’, or ‘emergency’ in assessing the housing system, with Ó Broin concluding that ‘our housing system never worked properly. It was never in a fixed or whole state only to be broken and fragmented somewhere along the way. It certainly is in crisis but whether this is a key moment in the creation of something better is not yet clear’. The chapter outlines Ireland’s contemporary ‘housing crisis’ in three periods, which I discuss as the ‘Celtic Tiger’, ‘Crash’, and ‘Crisis Ordinary’ of the post-crash period. I connect these periods of housing crisis to the post-crash housing activisms to which they have given rise, which I distinguish as the years from the onset of the GFC to 2013 (phase 1), 2014 to 2017 (phase 2), and 2018 to 2022 (an on-going phase 3).
4.2 The Irish ‘housing crisis’ in three phases

Figure 4 - Phases of post-crash housing contention. These do not align with the temporal boundaries of the three phases of ‘housing crisis’ that I use to structure the chapter.
4.2.1 Ireland’s ‘Celtic Tiger’: The inflation of a property bubble


‘Celtic Tiger’ housing

The past two decades of Ireland’s history have been dominated by what Kitchin et al. (2012, p. 1302), writing during the fallout from the GFC, described as a ‘property led-boom and bust which has brought Ireland to the point of bankruptcy’. From the mid/late 1990s to the onset of the GFC in 2007, Ireland’s so-called ‘Celtic Tiger’ era was heralded as an international success story, in which the ‘Irish model’ of neoliberal economic policy was celebrated for ending two decades of economic stagnation and bringing the country from relative poverty to being one of the most successful economies in the European Union (Ó Riain, 2014). The ‘Celtic Tiger’ is important contextual background for understanding post-crash housing contention for two main reasons. Firstly, during this period, housing came to play a central role in the inflation of a debt-fuelled property bubble which was the main factor driving national economic growth by the 2000s. Kitchin et al. (2012, p. 1303) describe the period from 2002 to 2007 as a second phase of Celtic Tiger expansion ‘involving a property boom mainly consisting of Irish developers capitalised by Irish banks who, in turn, were borrowing from European banks’. Secondly, and as a result, the inflation of property values and the neoliberal Irish state’s vested interest in the real estate ‘boom’ created a crisis of housing affordability that was differentially experienced. These two factors shaped the political economy of housing and its contestation in the onset and fallout from the GFC.

Importantly, like other Anglophone contexts, homeownership has historically played a key role in the Irish neoliberal housing model, but this intersects in the Irish case with a particular colonial history, in which land ownership emerged as one of the key issues in national independence struggles (Dooley, 2004). Over the course of the twentieth century, successive governments of the fledgling Irish Free State, and later Republic from 1949, used housing as a core component of national policy, with the majority of house building and financing prior to the 1960s being state or
Local Authority-funded or built. Norris (2016) characterises Irish national policy up to the 1970s as an asset-based welfare regime, in which the state prioritised homeownership and the ownership of property as the main focus for state intervention, rather than redistribution of income or the provision of social services. The international ‘stagflation’ of the late 1970s/1980s was experienced in Ireland as a severe economic recession, with high unemployment rates and economic contraction bringing a decade of cross-party concern for spiralling national debt, which peaked at 130% of GNP in 1987 (Hogan, 2010). Housing became a key area where successive governments aimed to cut state expenditure, which was justified as a response to the specific crisis of economic recession. As a result, the 1980s brought a dramatic shift in the state’s role in housing provision by a) reducing capital expenditure on social housing and direct state supports for private homeownership purchase, and b) liberalising building society and bank financing of housing (Ó Broin, 2019). The state increasingly assumed a match-making role between Building Societies (and later banks) and aspiring home owners, weanin would-be owner-occupiers from public to private financing with regulatory techniques intended to ease this transition and continue to ensure high levels of owner-occupation, which went from 60% of housing stock in 1971 to 80% in 1990 (Murphy, 1995). Concerned by the potential impact inflation would have on house prices, in the early 1990s the government implemented a number of reforms to the planning system that were intended to increase housing output/construction. However, this increase in housing output failed to moderate house price inflation because of a dramatic growth in mortgage lending fuelled by access to European credit markets, and a mismatch between where people wanted to live and where new housing stock was being built (Norris and Coates, 2014).

Compared to other north-western European countries, Ireland’s economic performance prior to the Celtic Tiger was underwhelming – Eurostat data captures an increase of GDP per capita from 14.8% below the EU 15 average in 1995 to 48% above the EU 15 average in 2006, and a concurrent drop in the unemployment rate from 10% above the EU 15 average to 45% below the EU15 average (see Norris and Coates, 2014, p. 299). Kitchin et al. (2012, pp. 1306-‘7) describe how Ireland’s twentieth
The ‘Celtic Tiger’ years accordingly arose as part of a specific historical conjuncture, wherein credit liberalisation and European monetary integration intersected with the interests of an Irish state that wanted to continue to prioritise homeownership but did not (or could not) continue to directly fund or build housing. Speculative investment drove up the cost of both housing, with average house prices increasing by 300-400% between 1991 and 2006 (Kitchin et al., 2012), and construction itself, with land values being artificially inflated by speculative investment backed by increasing and increasingly cheap sources of capital, mainly from European banks (Drudy and Punch, 2005; Ó Broin, 2019). Dublin experienced extensive population growth and dispersal during this period, with Lawton et al. (2010, p. 51) highlighting the Dublin region’s ‘extensive and un-coordinated suburban sprawl’. This dynamic of speculative boom impacted homeowners, renters, and social housing tenants in different ways, which shaped the extent and types of housing activism during the period.

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Homeownership, and the gap between being and wanting to be a homeowner, was a key economic, political, social, and cultural facet of the Celtic Tiger years, during which media coverage was heavily oriented toward
and supported by commercial and residential property investment (Mercille, 2017). For would-be homeowners, access to low interest credit was an important prerequisite for entering a heated property market, in which house prices were continually increasing at a higher rate than income growth from 1996 onwards. Importantly, first-time buyers or owner-occupiers were increasingly competing with and being priced out of homeownership, particularly in Dublin, by financialised property ownership as a form of asset-based welfare, which exacerbated inter- and intra-generational unequal access to homeownership (Arundel, 2017). As a result, the role that homeownership has historically played as an asset counteracting the deficiencies of pensions, healthcare, and elderly care in Ireland’s minimal welfare state was increasingly accessible only to those able to cover increasing house prices, either through intergenerational support or the extension of credit, facilitating deepening household indebtedness (Hearne, 2020). By 2006, the proportion of new mortgages being extended to owner occupiers had decreased from almost 25% to 18.3%, with a corresponding increase in lending for buy-to-let mortgages from 18.8% in 2004 to 25.1% in 2006 – this shift in mortgage holder was accompanied by a shift in total mortgage value, with mortgage loans >€250,000 increasing from 2.3% of new mortgages in 2000 to 41% in 2006 (Norris and Coates, 2014, pp. 306-’7).

Importantly, this dynamic of increased lending to landlords contributed to, and was accompanied by, a shift in tenure status, with the proportion of owner occupier households decreasing for the first time in the history of the state between 2002 and 2006 (see Figure 5). While homeownership had been prioritised throughout the history of the state, the Celtic Tiger years shifted the proportion and conditions of private rental and social housing. The decreasing proportion of owner-occupier households was accompanied by an increase in the number and share of households living in the private rental sector. This shift was particularly impactful in urban areas where owner occupation rates have tended to be lower, with Ó Broin (2019, p. 77) noting that in 2002, nationally, 13% of households were renters, but 39% of Dublin’s population lived in private rental accommodation. Importantly, private rent controls were abolished following a 1982 court
ruling which deemed rent control incompatible with the Irish constitution’s prominent emphasis on private property rights and their protection (Kenna, 2011). As a result, this growing but still marginal private rental sector operated as a largely unregulated tenure of last resort for those who did not qualify for residualised and means-tested social housing support but could not afford to purchase a home. Despite some legislative reforms in the early 1990s, the ‘Celtic Tiger’ rental sector was characterised by a lack of security of tenure, rent regulation, or regulatory oversight of the landlord-tenant relation (Ó Broin, 2019).

The 1990s also saw a decrease in the proportion of households living in social/Local Authority-rented housing (see Figure 5). This decrease was caused by four interconnected factors. Firstly, while the state had played an active role in social housing construction over the course of the twentieth century, by the 1990s this role had changed from providing for and building housing to a market-making function for private developers and would-be homeowners (Murphy, 1995). This meant that social housing became an increasingly limited and residualised offering for those unable to purchase property (Byrne and Norris, 2018). Secondly, from the 1970s on, contracting social housing stock output was compounded by the sale of Local Authority housing to tenants, incentivised through grants and tax reliefs, which peaked...
in 1989 with 18,166 purchases (Norris, 2016). This depleted the amount of social housing stock available to Local Authorities (see Figure 6). In addition, existing communities with high proportions of social housing were impacted by the 1984 Surrender Grant, which supported a marked exodus of higher-earning households from social housing to newly-built private housing estates. The narrowing of income mix in social housing estates arising from this contributed to the territorial stigmatisation (Norris et al., 2019), with the Surrender Grant contributing to the geographic concentration of disadvantage in specific areas (Ó Broin, 2019; Threshold, 1987). Thirdly, new social housing units that have been created since the 1990s have tended to come through partnerships between the state/Local Authorities and private developers, with public funds, incentives, and planning policies placing the responsibility for social housing construction in the hands of private developers and/or public-private-partnerships to ‘regenerate’ specific social housing estates (Hearne, 2011, 2020). Finally, the state’s increasingly neoliberal approach to social housing has been characterised by a retreat from direct provision of housing through Local Authorities. In effect, this has marketised public housing by displacing those unable to house themselves in the private sector from public responsibility, a move which was justified from the 1990s on by the up-front cost of construction and the limiting of Local Authority borrowing as part of broader EU monetary policies constraining the state’s debt-to-GDP balance. The shortfall in social housing provision has been met primarily by expanding state subsidies to house social housing-eligible households in private rental tenancies. While this was initially envisaged as a short-term measure, by the mid-2000s government policy had ‘converted rent supplement from what was effectively (but unofficially) a form of quasi-social housing into an officially sanctioned replacement for social housing’ (Byrne and Norris, 2019, p. 10). The extent and number of households qualifying for and requiring rent subsidies expanded during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ period, with Rent Supplement claimant numbers increasing by 101%, in comparison with a 15% increase in mainstream social housing tenants from 1994 to 2004 (Byrne and Norris, 2018, p. 8). By 2009 there were over 94,000 rent subsidy claimants, with the state paying €595 million per
annum in direct subsidy to private landlords to house these social housing-eligible tenants (Ó Broin, 2019, p. 80).

Overall, rather than a specific frontal attack on social housing, the decline in social housing output and shift in the relationship between social housing and the private housing market has been mainly driven by a political consensus from the late 1980s that public spending had to be cut from the ‘unsustainable borrowing’ which financed home-building in the past (Byrne and Norris, 2018). Subsidised private rented housing and Approved Housing Bodies have been the two main forms of alternative social housing provision used since the 1990s, with subsidised private rented housing in particular becoming a key substitute for social housing in the 1990s and 2000s (Byrne and Norris, 2019). The cumulative effect of these developments was to financialise housing and marketise social housing provision, with social housing supply failing to keep pace with demand. The responsibility for housing social housing-eligible households has increasingly been shunted from Local Authorities to Approved Housing Bodies and a subsidised private rental sector, which ‘effectively meant that the Irish capitalist state – at both the central and municipal scales – was using a portion of the social surplus to subsidise private rental landlords by guaranteeing rental payments for impoverished households who qualify for social housing’ (Soederberg, 2021, p. 250). While successive governments have essentially normalised this role for the state as a private rental sector tenant on behalf of social housing-
eligible households, these households do not have the same security of tenure or guarantee of affordable rents that mainstream social housing tenants have and waiting lists for social housing have remained consistently long, with an average wait of seven years for a social housing allocation in Dublin City (Adams et al., 2022; Byrne and Norris, 2019).

‘Celtic Tiger’ housing activism
The displacement of state responsibility for housing, and the interaction between homeownership, private rental, and social housing tenures, impacted the extent and types of housing activism during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ period in two main ways. Firstly, the media, developer/construction lobbies, and the state pursued a commonsensical and hegemonic articulation of the booming property sector as a hallmark of economic growth, rather than a source and subject of rampant inequality (Mercille, 2017). In the face of this ‘Celtic Tiger’ economic growth narrative, critical assessment of housing policy from academic (e.g. Drudy and Punch, 2005; Murphy, 1995) and advocacy (e.g. Threshold, 1987) audiences was largely ignored and marginalised. Additionally, the community development model in which third-sector community and voluntary organisations have, since the 1990s, largely been reliant on state support limited the extent to which civil society organisations could effectively intervene to address the growing inequality that the ‘social partnership’ model has produced (Meade, 2012; Murphy, 2002). Grassroots community organisations responding to local needs and conflicts flourished during this period, in which Michael Punch (2014, p. 253) describes ‘a busy micro-world of bottom up community organisations… the concerns of these movements have been diverse, including local economic development, community culture and heritage, the anti-drugs movement and housing and urban environmental struggles’. Over time, shifts toward neoliberal urban governance and the intensification of development pressures on working-class communities has tended to de-radicalise these pre-existing local struggles, as EU and state funds for local projects combined with a strategic emphasis on ‘community consultation’ have been used to appease and absorb local resistance within the social partnership system (ibid). Secondly, and as
a result of this hegemonic articulation and its seemingly consensual inclusion of third-sector organisations, housing activism during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ period played out mainly in the emplaced struggles of specific disadvantaged communities, who struggled with state/Local Authority disinvestment and selective reinvestment, typically in the form of public-private partnerships (PPPs) to ‘regenerate’ former council estates or apartment complexes (Hearne, 2011). Examples of these types of community-based campaigns include St Michael’s Estate in Inchicore, where a successive set of redevelopment plans have been subject to local struggles with PPPs and private finance providers since the 1990s (Bissett, 2008). Importantly, these forms of local activism in historically working-class communities often unfolded in parallel to the nominally participatory planning ideals espoused by Local Authorities and private developers, with community activism exercising determined resistance to co-option within broader neoliberal urban development and planning processes deploying a rhetoric of participatory regeneration (Attuyer, 2015; Kelly, 2008; Punch, 2014). Accordingly, the local was a key scale for Celtic Tiger housing activism in areas where social housing schemes were slated for redevelopment. Community resistance to neoliberal regeneration struggled ‘to find organisational structures that can facilitate a balance between the value of maintaining autonomy and a critical distance and the need to access resources in order to support and diversify activity and achieve their goals’ (Punch, 2014, pp. 261-2).

4.2.2 ‘The Crash’: Post-crash housing and property-led ‘recovery’

‘We always sing, even when we’re losing, ’cos Dublin’s drone is hard enough especially when you’re down and you’re boozing’ – Lankum, ‘Cold Old Fire’ (2014).

Housing during ‘The Crash’

By 2006, the dysfunctional ‘Celtic Tiger’ housing market had begun to stall, and was particularly vulnerable to the international credit crunch that the GFC presented in 2007/08, which resulted in a severe housing and financial crisis, and ensuing recession. House prices and building collapsed, declining by 41.6% and 90.9% respectively by 2012 (Norris and Byrne, 2015). Unemployment increases, which peaked at just over 15% in 2011, were part
of a broader landscape of indebtedness and financial ruin, in which the state’s blanket asset guarantee on national banks was supported by implementing austerity policies (Kitchin et al., 2012). Between 2008 and 2013 this resulted in €28.8bn in tax increases and spending cuts (Whelan, 2014), having been furthered from late 2010 on as part of the conditionality surrounding Ireland’s bail-out by the ECB, European Commission, and IMF. Ireland’s reputation as an austerity ‘success story’ is often connected to a perception of muted or limited resistance to austerity in this earlier post-crash period, from 2008 to 2014 (see Layte and Landy, 2018). However, this narrative has been produced through active governance techniques to collectivise blame/shame and assign culpability for the crash (O’Callaghan et al., 2014). Successive waves of cuts to shape and discipline civil society have been met with varying public responses oscillating between resistance and resilience (Gaynor, 2020).

Housing financialisation had significantly contributed to the pre-crisis economy and was equally significant in terms of the financial crisis’ impacts. Importantly, the state’s efforts at post-crash resolution used housing financialisation as a means and indicator of recovery, with Ireland following a similar trajectory to what Yrigoy (2018, 2020) describes in the post-crash Spanish context as state regulation aimed at supporting banks in rent extraction, dispossession, and speculative investment to reboot accumulation and capital circulation. In a sense, housing financialisation has been used as a means to ‘solve’ the crisis caused by housing financialisation. The state played a significant role in priming this ‘solution’ or ‘resolution’ via housing financialisation through a) the National Asset Management Agency/NAMA as a ‘bad bank’ or asset management company to acquire and offload large-scale toxic real estate loans (Byrne, 2016a, 2016b), b) supporting Central Bank lending restrictions on loan-to-value ratios restricting expansion of mortgage credit in the post-crash period (Waldron, 2019; Waldron and Redmond, 2014), and c) cuts to capital expenditure and Local Authority provisioning of social housing, with an increased reliance on private sector delivery of social housing stock either through council acquisition/procurement, rental subsidies, or delivery as part of private housing developments (Byrne and Norris, 2019; Hearne, 2020).
With the immediate onset of the crash, housing prices plummeted, and a geographically uneven landscape of unfinished speculative residential and commercial developments, often beyond the extended Dublin region commuter belt, were visible remnants used to narrate the crisis and its market-oriented neoliberal ‘resolution’ (O’Callaghan et al., 2014). The proportion of mortgage accounts in arrears peaked for mortgages on principal dwelling homes (i.e. owner-occupiers) at 18.5% in June 2013 and for buy-to-let mortgages at 27% in September 2013, with almost one-in-five mortgaged homes and over one-in-four buy-to-let properties in mortgage arrears (see Figure 7). The state’s efforts to ‘reboot’ the national economy by rebooting the property market have reshaped homeownership, private rental, and social housing (O’Callaghan and McGuirk, 2020). Firstly, increasing house prices from 2013 onwards have accelerated up to 2020 and been pointed to as evidence of economic recovery rather than evidence of a new phase of crisis caused by residualisation of social housing stock, increasing market rents, and deeply insecure private-rental sector tenancy regulations (see Figure 8, and also Kitchin et al., 2017). Coupled with mortgage-lending restrictions and a collapse in the construction industry, homeownership has become increasingly unaffordable and unattainable, particularly for first-time-buyers, with households spending longer in the private rental sector and similar class and intergenerational inequalities in mortgage and home acquisition.

Secondly and relatedly, the private rental sector, which doubled in size over the decade since the Celtic Tiger, has continued to experience acute issues of regulation, supply, and affordability, particularly in Dublin (Byrne, 2019). Residential Tenancies Board data on rents shows that, while rents decreased in the immediate fallout from the GFC, by 2011 rents had begun to rise and had surpassed ‘Celtic Tiger’ peaks by mid-2016 (Figure 9).
Figure 7 - Mortgage Arrears Data from the Central Bank of Ireland, note that values used are for September/Q3.

Figure 8 - Mean sale price for all residential properties in Dublin and nationally from 2010 to 2021, using Residential Dwelling Property Transaction data from CSO Ireland, HPA02 dataset – note, data series begins in 2010.
While small private landlords, many of whom were buy-to-let-investors owning their own home and one other property, make up the majority of the Irish rental sector, the post-crash period has seen the introduction of global player institutional investors to the Irish housing and rental markets. This was facilitated by NAMA sales to initial high-risk high-reward ‘vulture funds’, who have since sold on to, or reconfigured investment through, private equity firms and Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) (Waldron, 2018). The role and importance of institutional investors has increased in the post-crash period, rising from 3.6% to 22% of residential property purchases and from 15.5% to 48% of residential landlord purchases between 2010 and 2017 (Byrne and Norris, 2019). An increase in institutional investor landlords has been theorised as a key feature of post-crash cities and their restructuring in the interest of ‘global corporate landlords’ (Beswick et al., 2016), and the increasing number and geographic concentration of institutional investor landlords has impacted the affordability, segregation, and disempowerment of tenants in post-crash Dublin’s PRS (see Nic Lochlainn, 2021b).

Thirdly and finally, social housing provision has been increasingly financialised and connected to the private rental sector. The existing Rent Supplement and Rental Accommodation Scheme were followed in 2014 with the establishment of the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP), through which
HAP claimants rent private dwellings and a portion of their rent is paid by the government. The number of households in receipt of rent subsidies expanded in the wake of the GFC, with HAP households increasing from 5,770 in 2015 to 32,810 in 2017 and 57,630 by 2019 (CSO data). HAP is accordingly the most recent policy which furthers the number and amount of private landlords being paid by the state to house households eligible for social housing, with Byrne & Norris (2019, p.10) noting that by 2018 HAP and rent supplement tenancies accounted for just under a third of all private rental tenancies. Increasing house prices, a lack of available stock, reduced social housing output, and increasing private rent costs beyond the capacities of state subsidies have resulted in a homelessness crisis from 2014 onwards, characterised by family homeless wherein low-income households are unable to meet rising private rent costs and cannot access the inadequate supply of social housing stock. Homelessness data captures a pronounced and steep increase in the number of homeless people (and particularly homeless children) accessing emergency accommodation from early 2015, visualised in Figure 10. The rising costs of private rental sector rents have been a key driver of new and increasing family homelessness, which has disproportionately impacted lone parent families headed by women (Hearne and Murphy, 2018; Soederberg, 2021). This situation is particularly acute in Dublin, and has resulted in the Local Authority relying on private hotels to provide emergency accommodation for homeless people and families (Nowicki et al., 2019) Spending on private hotels as a form of emergency accommodation accounted for over 40% (€49 million) of Dublin City Council’s 2018 total spend on emergency accommodation (Dublin Region Local Authority Homelessness Financial Report End of Year 2018).
Housing activism during ‘The Crash’

Hearne et al. (2018) periodise the evolving trajectory of urban neoliberalism and housing activism in Ireland in the wake of the GFC as unfolding in two phases, which I use to distinguish between earlier (2008 – 2014) and later (2014 –) post-crash housing activism. In the next section, I extend Hearne et al.’s framing and identify a third phase of housing activism from 2018 on that has responded to and sought to intervene in the shifting dynamics of the housing market (see Figure 4). Per Hearne et al. (ibid, pp. 156-160), the first phase of post-crash housing movements, unfolding from 2008 – 2014, arose mainly from pre-existing struggles in disadvantaged communities which were relatively isolated and localised reactions to the implementation of post-crash austerity in places that had already been suffering housing disadvantages during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ boom. These areas were often impacted by the stalling of planned regeneration through PPP schemes that collapsed with the onset of the GFC, and community groups from affected areas participated in a national alliance, with some support from trade unions, to hold national and local anti-austerity demonstrations contesting failed housing regeneration developments and cuts to community development and
youth supports (see van Lanen, 2017). However, these pre-existing movements, which Hearne et al. (2018, p. 160) describe as ‘a reaction to austerity from communities already suffering from housing disadvantage during the boom’, were unable to rely on support from the contracting third-sector community development projects that were being cut by successive waves of austerity budgets (Gaynor, 2020).

In other European post-crash settings like Spain, mortgage debt and property repossessions were politicised by collective organising, and indebtedness functioned as a key subject role around which activism was organised (García-Lamarca and Kaika, 2016; see also Di Feliciantonio (2016) on Italy). However, while Ireland had high mortgage arrears and default rates (Figure 7), repossession rates on mortgages in arrears have been low, particularly for owner-occupiers (see Figure 11). Hearne et al. (2018, p. 158) argue that the limited extent of repossessions, although having increased over time, ‘contrasts’ with the extent and volume of foreclosures in Spain between 2008 and 2014, which were a key organising issue for the Plataforma de los Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH).

![Figure 11 - Comparing property repossessions for Principal Dwelling Home and Buy-to-let mortgages in arrears from 2009-2021. Repossession data from the Central Bank of Ireland, note that values used are for September/Q3.](image-url)
For Hearne et al. (ibid, p. 159), the absence of mortgage foreclosures and repossessions as a factor to mobilise housing activism is a key component in explaining why ‘new housing movements did not emerge immediately following the crisis. And indeed, rather than indebtedness forming the main political antagonism, the issue of family homelessness, stemming from evictions in the PRS, became the focus of new movements’. This focus on family homelessness is characteristic of the second phase of post-crash housing movements, which emerged from 2014 on as the initial crisis of the GFC gave way to a homelessness crisis. Housing activism responding to family homelessness emerged at a point of intersection between a) the provision of practical care for the homeless as a form of activism, and b) a critique of the extent and governance of urban vacancy in the city (O’Callaghan et al., 2018). The combination of these two tactics in temporary political occupations has been the most ambitious and high-profile form of subsequent post-crash housing activism and is a key feature of the second phase Hearne et al. (2018) identify from 2014 on, which they frame in a political economic context as a response to ‘the new housing crisis’ of homelessness. Here, I use this focus on homelessness and the tactic of temporary political occupations to distinguish between Hearne et al.’s second phase of activism (which they describe as 2014-present) and what I characterise as a third phase in post-crash housing activism from 2018 on, which I discuss in the next section.

The emergence of temporary political occupations as a tactic to provide for the homeless was shaped by national and international factors. Nationally, Hearne et al. (ibid) connect this second phase of housing activism to a resurgence of interest in local, contentious, and independent community group organising, created by the anti-water charges movement and some ‘grassroots groups’ focused on using direct action tactics to contest housing, with a particular focus on parents and families impacted by homelessness. These direct action approaches drew in part from a set of temporarily active independent spaces in the inner city, which served as nodes of material and immaterial infrastructures that subsequent housing activism has drawn from (McArdle, 2019). This includes material and practical support as venues where housing activist groups strategise and hold public and private events,
but also overlapping interest in direct action tactics to a) identify and occupy vacant buildings, and b) provide practical care for the homeless as a form of activism. Internationally, the PAH were a direct influence on housing activist organising in this period and a key inspiration for the establishment of the Irish Housing Network (IHN). Hearne et al. (ibid, p. 161) describe the 2015 creation of the IHN, an umbrella network under which a number of more localised and/or sectoral housing activist groups collaborated, as ‘pivotal to the coalescing of these new housing movement politics’. One of the key tactics that the IHN has used to pursue its strategic aims of building a horizontal activist network structure to carry out direct actions and build capacity among communities affected by housing inequality has been a focus on vacant buildings and temporary political occupations, which ‘show the public how vacant buildings could be used to respond to the primary needs of an increasing number of people’ and ‘challenges the increasing institutional response based on providing homeless emergency accommodation in hotels and beds and breakfasts, an extremely expensive solution that does not offer any stability to people in need’ (ibid). While Hearne et al.’s discussion of housing activism as a ‘movement’ outlines cross-sectoral campaigns and coalitions between activist groups, sympathetic unions, and Left political parties, I use temporary political occupations, their strategic aims, and the digital/material tactics that produced them to distinguish between second and third phase post-crash housing activism.

In second phase housing activist movements, homelessness as an issue and ‘the homeless’ as subjects were used to frame activist responses to the increasing and increasingly apparent homelessness emergency being driven by rising PRS costs and the residualisation of social housing. Hearne et al. (2019) highlight the campaigning work of the National Homeless and Housing Coalition (NHHC) around ‘the rent crisis’ and community struggles over social housing regeneration/public housing as significant in this second phase. However, temporary political occupations of vacant buildings to house ‘the homeless’ were the most high-profile and radical response characterising this second phase of housing movements, which grappled with ‘the homeless emergency’. The IHN was involved in two temporary political occupations during this phase of struggles – these were the Bolt Hostel occupation in May
2015 and the Apollo House occupation in December 2016. Both occupations involved vacant buildings in Dublin’s city centre and the key features of the two are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 - Summarising key information on second phase temporary political occupations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bolt Hostel</th>
<th>Apollo House</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When</td>
<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; July – 14&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; August, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupied by</td>
<td>Irish Housing Network (particularly An Spréach and North Dublin Bay Housing Crisis Community); homeless people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building history pre-occupation</td>
<td>Former hostel providing temporary emergency accommodation for the homeless.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building owner (when occupied)</td>
<td>Dublin City Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational labour in occupation</td>
<td>Small-scale, mainly focused on managing donations and work to make habitable; no specific figures on residents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal proceedings</td>
<td>Fire safety inspection; injunction order sought by DCC and granted; some discussion of prosecuting two specific housing activists which ultimately did not happen.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.3 Post-2016 ‘Crisis Ordinary’: Housing financialisation and activism resurgent

‘You could try the house share, try rentin’, bit of money for the landlord’s pension’ – Kojaque, ‘Town’s Dead’ (2022).

Building from Hearne et al.’s (2019) ‘phases’ of post-crash housing activism, I characterise a third phase of housing activism unfolding from 2017 on. Importantly, this third phase responds to the shifting post-crash urban
political economic context of housing and activists’ agentic reflections on and assessments of the earlier second phase of post-crash housing activism. This third phase emerged after Hearne et al. (ibid) were writing, and ends the post-crash framing of the thesis from the GFC up to the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. My identification of a third phase accordingly updates Hearne et al.’s (ibid) relational typology, and this third phase is characterised by activists’ efforts to shift housing struggle a) away from the central framing of homelessness, and b) toward a geographically wider and more sustainable form of activist organising. While Hearne et al. (ibid, p. 164) highlight campaigning in 2017 around regeneration and public housing as a feature of second-phase housing activism, Di Feliciantonio & O’Callaghan’s (2020, p. 208) subsequent description of ‘a fallow period’ of ‘fragmentation of groups involved in Apollo House’ usefully captures the ebb of activist energy and organising that followed Apollo House/Home Sweet Home. The occupation’s focus on providing temporary emergency accommodation, the scale of mobilisation, difficulties of coalition-building, and high-profile media coverage that this entailed, which I discuss in chapter six, contributed to a period of burnout and re-grouping, during which many of the people who had been involved in the occupation either took a step back from activism altogether or became involved in other activist campaigns.

‘Crisis Ordinary’ housing

From 2016 on, post-crash housing financialisation has restructured homeownership, private rental, and social housing in Dublin. In this context of successive rounds of speculative financial investment, Dublin’s resurgent post-crash property market has been shaped by and fosters what Waldron (2019) terms a ‘development viability’ policy narrative, in which the high yields that investors are pursuing are reshaping the city (e.g. O’Mahony and Lawton, 2019) and preclude affordable urban and housing development (Murphy, 2020; Paccoud et al., 2021). Importantly, within these financialised conditions, the ‘viability’ margin of profit and yield shapes what does or does not happen with urban spaces and development (Waldron, 2019). From 2016 on, Dublin as an urban space has been reshaped by highly speculative
financial pressures in which the abstract demand for profit and yield dictates what types of development happen. The state and local governments’ roles in post-crash market-making, Ireland’s favourable corporate tax regime, and an emphasis on increasing housing ‘supply’ in national and regional housing strategies has incentivised and permitted housing and urban financialisation that has increasingly connected local actors to footloose international and global equity-based investment (Lennon and Waldron, 2019; O’Callaghan and McGuirk, 2020). This has been strategically pursued through two main overarching national policy frameworks, which was the 2016 Fine Gael government’s ‘Rebuilding Ireland – Action Plan on Housing and Homelessness’ (DHPCLG, 2016a), and the current Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael-Green Party coalition government’s (DHPLG, 2021) ‘Housing for All – a New Housing Plan for Ireland’, launched in September 2021. However, despite an emphasis on ‘streamlining’ the planning and urban development process, the number of housing developments and residential units permitted continues to vastly outnumber the amount of actual construction or addition to housing supply that has taken place. Accordingly, despite the state and local authorities’ emphasis on boosting supply through these overarching policy efforts, a substantial and widening gap has opened year-on-year across the Dublin region, with the number of permitted residential units significantly outnumbering the number of units built or under construction (Figure 12). This gap is at least partly connected to developers’ practices of applying for planning permission on sites that they intend to sell-on for a higher return on the basis of what the planning authority has granted permission for – this is conveyed in resale by advertisement of the site having FPP (full planning permission) or ‘suitability for’ a specific high-yield development that the owner themselves will not seek to realise. In Dublin City, as of 2021, the level of extant planning permissions had doubled from approximately 8,000 units in 2017 to almost 23,000 in 2021, but the average ratio of extant permission to units actually under construction is 1:4.7 as of Q1 2021 – this suggests that the emphasis on adding supply has created a situation where only a fifth of granted/planned units are actually being realised, which Dublin City Council’s Development Plan connects to ‘the complex nature of site
development, acquisition, land speculation and funding models in the city’ (Dublin City Council, 2022, p. 24).

For would-be homeowners, the ‘Crisis Ordinary’ of the housing system from 2016 onwards has been characterised by an acute shortage of affordable supply. House prices have spiralled beyond the reach of low-to-average income households, with new supply being noticeably more expensive and first-time buyers being particularly impacted by rising house prices (see Figure 8 and also Figure 13). Despite ‘help to buy’ for first-time buyers in the form of the ‘Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan’ and its replacement through the ‘Local Authority Home Loan’, the maximum market value of eligible properties, which both schemes cap at €320,000 in Dublin, have been outstripped by market house prices. Government policy has tended to focus on increasing the supply of housing units, but these new units are typically command a higher price than state supports for first-time buyers allow for. Annual dwelling completions, which were approximately 20,500 total units per annum in 2020 and 2021 (CSO, 2022), remain well below the 35,000 new dwellings per annum that the Central Bank has calculated are needed to meet demand (Hearne, 2020, pp. 23-4). Beyond these issues of affordability and supply, a key trend impacting homeownership from 2016 on has been the increasing number of non-household purchases of residential dwellings – from 2010 to 2021, the percentage of all residential property purchases by non-household buyers filed with the Revenue Commissioners went from 3.6% of to 19.9% of transactions (see Figure 14). While the majority of property purchases nationally and in Dublin are carried out by household buyers, non-household purchasers have been increasingly active, particularly in Dublin, and non-household purchasing has increased in volume (Figure 14) and value (Figure 15). Interestingly, from 2016 on, non-household purchasers began to acquire new dwellings as an increasing share of their overall acquisitions, suggesting that, when the number of new housing units available increases, non-household purchasers will acquire new rather than existing units (Figure 16).
Figure 12 - DHTF Returns from 2017 to 2021; summarised from DHTF Quarterly Reports. Note that ‘Tier 1’ describes sites where a final grant of planning permission has been obtained and the permission can be implemented immediately – Tier 1 sites account for the majority of units under DHTF returns, but do not include developments that have been completed or ‘phased’ developments. DHTF returns do not include student accommodation, ‘shared living’ (co-living) accommodation, social housing units (although Part V units are included), or Part 8 Planning applications.

Figure 13 - Median house prices paid by First-Time Buyer Owner Occupiers from 2010 to 2021, from CSO HPA02 – Residential Dwelling Property Transactions figures. Note that median values mean half of all transactions were more and half were less.
Figure 14 – Household and non-household residential dwelling purchases from 2010 to 2021, using CSO HPA02 - Residential Dwelling Property Transaction figures. Note these values are the % of overall volume, i.e. the number of transactions.

Figure 15 - Household and non-household residential dwelling purchases from 2010 to 2021, using CSO HPA02 - Residential Dwelling Property Transaction figures. Note these are the € (millions) values of dwelling purchases, i.e. the amount of money exchanged in transactions.
The vast majority of non-household purchases are carried out by construction, financial & insurance, and real estate firms (Figure 17). While the majority of non-household purchasing is carried out by companies and institutions registered in Ireland (in 2020, 87% of non-household purchasers), purchases by non-household institutions from outside the island of Ireland have been increasing year-on-year, doubling from 7% in 2016 to 14.5% of market purchase value in 2020, with European (excluding UK) and, to a lesser degree, US investment increasing from €29 million in 2016 to over €410 million in 2020 (over 90% of this coming from European investors) (CSO, 2021). The increasing role of institutional investment in property transactions from 2016 on highlights what O’Callaghan & McGuirk (2020, p. 820) describe as ‘transformations in the property-finance nexus’, with the ‘opening up of new housing market opportunities for increasingly influential financial actors’. Interestingly, while household non-occupier (typically, buy-to-let) purchases of residential properties increased as a percentage of the overall volume of household purchases in the earlier stages of the post-crash period from 2010 to 2014, property transaction data suggests that the buy-to-let market has decreased from 2016 on (Figure 18), which is likely an outcome of accelerating property prices.
The difficulty of accessing homeownership and the increase in institutional investment in residential property has impacted the private rental sector in this latter half of the decade since the GFC. From 2006 on, an increasing number of Irish households have been living in the PRS, either by choice or because of being unable to afford or access the limited number of
residential properties for sale or social housing. Renting has become particularly common as a form of housing tenure in Dublin, where average rents increased by 60% from 2011 to 2018 (Byrne, 2019; see also Figure 7 above). The resurgence of private rental in this post-crash Irish context fits with wider international discussion of housing inequality as a classed and generational experience, with ‘generation rent’ facing stark obstacles in efforts to access decent and affordable housing (Arundel, 2017; Byrne, 2020). Importantly, the post-crash private rental sector has been reshaped by further rounds of housing financialisation, driven by the welfare-asset needs of smaller scale landlords (Byrne, 2019; Hulse et al., 2019) and the financialised and financialising demands of built-to-rent and global company landlord investors (Beswick et al., 2016; Nethercote, 2020). In Ireland, the majority (86%) of rental tenancies are between tenants and a landlord owning their own home and one other property (Byrne, 2019). However, investment in the PRS by institutional and company landlords has been increasing, with the post-crash ‘rebooting’ of the Irish property market drawing successive waves of investment from initial ‘vulture funds’ seeking to capitalise on the ‘disposal’ of ‘toxic assets’ (Byrne, 2016a) to subsequent resale, development, and extraction from real estate investment trusts (REITs) and longer-term institutional investors seeking higher yields from rent extraction than can be attained from investment in production (O’Callaghan and McGuirk, 2020; Waldron, 2018). While landlords with > 100 rental properties account for fewer than 10% of registered tenancies, institutional investors are increasing their share of the PRS year-on-year, have acquired and are developing new large-scale build-to-rent developments, and exhibit specifically clustered geographies of investment and ownership. In some parts of the city, institutional investor landlords play a disproportionate role in setting and controlling local market rents because of their ownership of specific large-scale housing developments, which are in turn reshaping the city toward denser and higher build-to-rent developments that are subject to new, lower design standard thresholds (Nic Lochlainn, 2021a).

The growing importance of the PRS in this later post-crash period has been a recurring urban governance problem, and national and local policy has struggled to respond to the widely recognised need for reforms aimed at
providing secure, long-term, and affordable private rental housing. Successive national governments have identified the rental sector as a key area for reform in housing policy, with the 2016 *Rebuilding Ireland* Plan issuing a ‘strategy for the rental sector’ aimed at addressing ‘the supply/demand mismatch and the associated affordability challenge’ (DHPCLG, 2016b). In contrast, 2021’s *Housing for All – a New Housing Plan for Ireland*, which introduced ‘cost rental’ pilot schemes, conspicuously does not include the rental sector as one of its ‘four pathways to achieving housing for all’ (DHPLG, 2021), but did extend a set of policy reforms developed from 2016 on aimed at improving conditions in the private rental sector. Historically under-regulated, the private rental sector has been targeted by successive legislative reforms to the 2004 Residential Tenancies Act since 2016 (see Table 3 below), which have extended the duration of tenancies and introduced rent caps in most urban areas. However, Byrne & McArdle (2022, p. 131) note that ‘the impact of this ambitious range of policy interventions has been disappointing’, with high homelessness figures and market rent increases continuing to exceed rent caps. Byrne & McArdle connect the limited effect of PRS reforms to a culture of non-compliance that pervades among small-scale landlords and the tenant-led nature of PRS regulations, which are overseen by the Residential Tenancies Board, a quasi-judicial body that adjudicates disputes between landlords and tenants, and local authorities, who have an important but often under-supported role in enforcing minimum standards violations. The ability of tenants to effectively pursue issues that they have with their landlord is impeded by the individualised and individualising character of PRS regulations, with Byrne (2018, 2019) documenting the difficulties that tenants face in this regulatory context. These difficulties are compounded for migrants, who are disproportionately more likely to live in the private rental sector, overcrowded accommodation, and/or homelessness (ESRI, 2022).

Pressures on homeownership and private rental have been exacerbated by a chronic and on-going shortage of social housing. By 2018, the number of homeless people accessing temporary or emergency accommodation had exceeded 10,000 but the rapid growth in homelessness, driven mainly by the displacement of social housing-eligible households
from the PRS, had slowed (see Figure 10). While preventing homelessness and increasing the provision of ‘housing solutions’ for disadvantaged households has been positioned as a primary goal under both the ‘Rebuilding Ireland’ and ‘Housing for All’ plans, the delivery of social housing, or, following government language, ‘housing solutions’ for vulnerable and disadvantaged households, has been underwhelming, and the majority of new social housing ‘units’ continue to be provided through the Housing Assistance Payment (or HAP) scheme nationally and in Dublin (Figure 19). Social housing provision is accordingly still directly connected to state subsidisation of private landlords to house social housing-eligible tenants, and as of November 2020 there were 61,880 households on the national social housing waiting list, with the four Dublin Local Authorities accounting for just over 40% of the national total. Crucially, while ‘Rebuilding Ireland’ and ‘Housing for All’ both generally emphasised the need to increase affordable and social housing, both policies have prioritised the delivery of private homes and housing supply, with an emphasis on delivering ‘new units’ that skews toward private homeownership. This emphasis on private homeownership is particularly damaging given the current and predicted unmet demand for social housing, which is captured in the ‘Housing Need Demand Assessment’ models that local authorities were ordered by the Department of Housing to carry out. Three of the four Dublin local authorities predict that, in their area, 6 in 10 future households (2023-2028) will require state support to have their housing needs met, with half of those households having an income above the cut-off for social housing eligibility but below capacity to rent or purchase through the private market (Figure 20).
Table 3 - Selected legislative changes to PRS, drawing from Byrne & McArdle (2022, p. 131).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legislation</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2015</td>
<td>Rent review permitted once every 24 months, rather than 12 months as it previously had been. Notice of rent review period extended. Notice of termination of tenancy periods extended.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016</td>
<td>Rent Pressure Zones introduce 4% rent caps in designated areas that experienced annual rent increases of 7% or more in 4 of the last 6 quarters. Part IV tenancy period extended from 4 to 6 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act August 2020</td>
<td>Revision to rent arrears law for those impacted by Covid-19 – tenants financially impacted by Covid-19 could not be made to leave their rental accommodation before 11th January 2021 and did not have to pay increases in rent until after 10th January 2021.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential Tenancies (Amendment) (No.1) 2021</td>
<td>Rent caps in RPZs linked to Harmonised Indices of Consumer Prices (HICP), rather than 4%.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential Tenancies (Amendment) (No.2) 2021</td>
<td>Extension of RPZ designations to December 2024. Annual rent increases capped at rate of general inflation or 2% per annum, whichever is lower.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 19 - Summary of DHLGH figures for social housing unit delivery, 2016-2021. Nationally and in Dublin, HAP continues to be the most common type of new social housing unit being added.

Figure 20 - HNDA calculations by Dublin local authorities, summarised by author from 2022 HNDA and County/City Development Plans. Note that the HNDA models future additional households’ needs, and that ‘affordability constraint’ describes those who cannot afford to buy or rent but are above the income threshold for social housing.

‘Crisis Ordinary’ housing activism

Overall, the reconfiguration of the property-finance nexus toward international and institutional investment has had knock-on effects across homeownership, private rental, and social housing tenures, and contributed
to broader shifts in housing and its financialisation in post-crash Dublin. Rising property prices have impacted the extent to which homeownership is affordable or accessible, and the property market has been increasingly reconfigured toward institutional investment backed by European and US credit and equity-financed Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) as vessels for pension and insurance fund investment (Waldron, 2018). Institutional investor landlords, while still accounting for a minority of private rental sector tenancies (with over 80% of landlords being small-scale owners of 1-2 properties), have been increasing their share of the private rental sector, which has directly impacted affordability, segregation, and tenant management in specific parts of Dublin city (see Nic Lochlainn, 2021b). Social housing provision has continued to be connected to private housing market development, with HAP accounting for the majority of new social housing units (Figure 19). The combination of the political economy and regulatory context outlined above has given rise to a third phase of post-crash housing activism in which activist framings focused on homelessness and the state/Local Authority have shifted in three key and interrelated ways. Firstly, the private rental sector has been a key focus for third phase housing activism, with the exploited tenant and the broader ‘residential rent relation’ (Byrne, 2019) being the main way in which housing activists have framed struggle. Secondly, with this framing of the tenant as the subject around which and through whom activism is undertaken, the ‘target’ of this third phase of post-crash housing activism has shifted from the state/Local Authority to a focus on speculating and financialising actors who are identified as directly and financially benefitting from the housing market that governance has enabled. Thirdly, drawing from earlier phases, this third phase of housing activism has included significant tactical and strategic evolutions. These three shifts are exemplified by the two main forms of housing activism that have shaped this third post-crash phase, which are the Take Back The City campaign in summer 2018 and the formation of the Community Action Tenants Union in autumn/winter 2019, which I discuss in detail in chapters seven, eight, and nine.

Take Back The City (TBTC) was a coalition within which housing activists undertook a set of temporary political occupations of vacant
buildings in Dublin from August to September 2018. The campaign was coordinated by a number of housing action and migrants’ rights groups, some of whom were part of the IHN, and positioned intersectional and class struggle within the PRS as a central issue for mobilisation (Sassi, 2021). Di Felicianio & O’Callaghan (2020, p. 208) note how TBTC drew on the tactics deployed in the Bolt Hostel and Apollo House occupations in a number of ways, including ‘targeting vacant properties to exemplify housing inequality, the mobilisation of actions and protests surrounding the occupations to promote the group’s demands and generate wider public support, [and] the use of social media to amplify the actions and shape a narrative about the housing crisis’. Importantly, however, TBTC also experimented with these tactics by practicing rolling or multiple occupations of smaller buildings owned by private property owners, which I summarise in Table 4. These vacant privately-owned properties were used to shift the framing of housing activism from homelessness to a broader framing of housing insecurity within the private rental sector, which is experienced as notable sub-standard and exploitative for migrants, students, and other tenants particularly vulnerable to precarity. Homelessness was accordingly not the focus or framing of TBTC, and occupied properties were not used to temporarily house homeless individuals or families. While TBTC engaged in a ‘festival of direct action’ and called for housing activism to spread beyond the inner city, this desire to move from the spectacle of temporary political occupation to wider emplaced community responses to housing insecurity proved difficult to effect under the TBTC banner.

The Community Action Tenants Union (CATU Ireland) has been the latest evolution of this third phase of housing activism, following TBTC’s framing of housing insecurity and particularly the experience of this in the PRS as the focus for activist organising. Where TBTC experimented with an iteration of earlier temporary political occupation tactics, CATU represents a step change in housing activism, which participants have narrated as a shift ‘from mobilising to organising’. In effect, CATU reverses the spectacular framing of temporary political occupation as a particular moment and time of confrontational struggle, and instead pursues housing struggle as organising rather than activism, with an emphasis on collective struggle rather than
engagement with the individualised regulatory oversight of the RTB (which was a problem in earlier tenant organising efforts, per Byrne, 2018). CATU frames contention as ‘community organising’, and consciously aims to create a locally-grounded and intersectional approach to housing struggle, with an emphasis on migrants and anti-racism in the union’s structure through dedicated working groups.

Table 4 - Summary of TBTC temporary political occupations. Details from media, activist coverage, and participant observation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>35 Summerhill Parade</th>
<th>34 North Frederick Street</th>
<th>41 Belvedere Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>When</strong></td>
<td>7th – 17th August 2018</td>
<td>17th August – 11th September 2018</td>
<td>8th September – no definite end but not long beyond 11th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Building history pre-occupation</strong></td>
<td>Former subdivision as overcrowded accommodation, mainly for migrant tenants – evicted following fire inspection in May 2018. Historically listed building.</td>
<td>Vacant residential or commercial property. 2002 planning permission granted for apartment redevelopment but commercial prior to sale by auction in 2014. Historically listed building.</td>
<td>Vacant residential property. Purchased in 2016 for €490,000. Planning sought and granted in early 2018 for alteration from 10 bedsits to 4 apartments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organisational labour in occupation</strong></td>
<td>Small scale. No donations or management of emergency accommodation. Events outside of, but connected to, the occupation included ‘Family Fun Day’, guest talk from South African Shackdwellers movement.</td>
<td>Small scale. No donations or management of emergency accommodation. Work inside building mainly focused on filling occupation roster, some cleaning, and security of building. Events outside of (but connected to) the occupied buildings included a guest talk from a Focus E15 representative, women-only occupation to highlight gendered dimension of housing issues, and</td>
<td>Small scale and short timeframe. No donations or management of emergency accommodation. No events outside of the occupied building.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition, the union focuses on eviction defence as a key tactic for mobilising, organising, and recruiting members, with direct action ‘member defence’ to resist evictions, picket landlords’ homes, and other types of intervention being prioritised by local groups. The digital/material tactics involved in these two main forms of third phase post-crash housing struggles varied. TBTC attempted to learn from and change some of the media-oriented aspects of earlier temporary political occupations, with an emphasis on participation in struggle rather than donations to help the homeless – the digital/material labour that this involved, which I discuss in the next chapter, in some ways is an iteration of repetition and difference of tactics from the earlier temporary political occupations that characterised the second phase of post-crash housing struggles. CATU, in contrast, has used digital/material technologies to pursue a longer-term aim of housing organising as endless and continuing process, which has been partly framed by its organisers as a ‘deprioritisation’ of the digital and temporary political occupations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legal proceedings</th>
<th>rallies overstaying injunction.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overcrowded tenants evicted following Fire Department inspection in May. Injunction sought and granted, occupiers ‘turned over’ property on 17th August and moved on to Frederick Street.</td>
<td>Injunction order sought and granted. Occupiers overstayed injunction order and were evicted on 11th September by private security, with An Garda Síochána present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injunction order sought and granted. No public definitive end to occupation but petered out after Frederick Street eviction.</td>
<td>Injunction order sought and granted.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**4.3 Conclusion**

Heads are gonna roll soon, no warning, this town’s not dead it’s just dormant’ – Kojaque, Town’s Dead, 2022.

Following Hearne et al. (2019), the evolving trajectory of urban neoliberalism in the wake of the GFC is key to understanding how housing activism has been shaped by and responds to the characteristics and ‘crises’ of urban political economy, in which existing inequalities arising from housing financialisation were exacerbated by post-crash austerity and further post-
crash financialisation aimed at ‘rebooting’ the national property market. Post-crash housing activism has responded to, and attempted to reshape, this political economic context, with varying tactics and strategies adopted over time. Temporary political occupations have played a particularly prominent and important role in post-crash Dublin’s housing activism and how this has evolved over time. This evolution has developed primarily through iterations and experiments with digital/material tactics and activist labour, to which I turn in chapter five.
Chapter 5 – The digital/material labour of post-crash housing activism

5.1 Introduction

Building from the political economic contextual framing given in the last chapter, this chapter focuses on the digital/material labour of post-crash housing activism. Specifically, I use digital ethnographic data and semi-structured interviews to piece together how the second and third phases of housing activism identified in the last chapter have unfolded as simultaneously digital/material. I explain the role that temporary political occupations have played as focuses for activists’ digital/material labour, show how these occupations function as simultaneously digital/material, and analyse the types of digital/material labour that produce occupations and housing activism more generally.

Figure 21 - Mural by Subset, graffiti collective, on the gable wall of 34 North Frederick Street, painted during Take Back The City - Dublin's occupation of the property. My image, taken Sunday 9th September 2018.

5.2 “Empty? Occupy!”: Digital/material housing activism and temporary political occupations

‘Those were the big public actions that took up a lot of time and kind of… that's when all the structures break and stop working, kind of. Or at least… the ones that don't work, and you just have to throw them away and.. you then have to adapt or make it work. And then that's what you're left with afterwards… What you learned putting your structures under intense stress positions’ (interview with M01).
Temporary political occupations have been a key feature of post-crash housing activism in Dublin, with the tactic of temporarily occupying vacant inner-city buildings recurring across second and third ‘phases’ of housing activism. Prior to 2018, as described by Di Feliciantonio and O’Callaghan (2020, p. 204), occupations ‘focused on the political antagonism of homelessness rather than, comparatively, longer-term strategies to normalise squatting for housing need’. The central focus on homelessness in the second phase of post-crash housing activism was largely responding to the acute crisis of increasing homeless (see Figure 10, p.126), driven by new forms of family homelessness connected to rising PRS rents and the lack of social housing (Hearne et al., 2018; O’Callaghan and McGuirk, 2020). While increasing homelessness and the unevenness of economic recovery were common topics raised both online and at in-person events by non-governmental organisations, the media, and academics, community groups used direct actions centred on homelessness to politicise housing. This second phase housing activism involved two main temporary political occupations focused on housing the homeless which the IHN was centrally involved in, the Bolt Hostel in 2015 and Home Sweet Home/Apollo House in 2016 (see Table 2 in chapter four and Table 6 below). The third phase of high-profile post-crash housing activism followed what Di Feliciantonio and O’Callaghan (2020, p. 208) describe as ‘a fallow period after the fragmentation of the groups involved in Apollo House’. Existing work on these occupations has tended to reinforce critical urban geography’s dichotomous treatment of the digital and the material, with the occupation as a material site of struggle or confrontation emphasised and the use of digital tools and social media to produce this material struggle being mentioned in passing, if at all (e.g. Di Feliciantonio and O’Callaghan, 2020; Hearne et al., 2018; Lima, 2021a, 2021b; O’Callaghan et al., 2018).

While housing activist groups have been involved in varying forms of on-going contestation across and between these phases, temporary political occupations have played an important structuring role for post-crash housing activism, which tends to build toward occupying vacant buildings as a direct action that stages confrontation with the state, local authorities, and private property owners. Property owners (which have included the Local Authority
but more commonly private companies or individuals) have responded to these high-profile confrontations through the courts, applying for injunction orders requiring ‘trespassers’ to vacate the property (or ‘refrain’ from continuing to trespass), subject to arrest and criminal prosecution for contempt of court and/or trespass. Irish law distinguishes between trespass of buildings and land. Trespass of buildings was made a public order offence in Section 13 of the 1994 Public Order Act when carried out ‘in such a manner as causes or is likely to cause fear in another person’ (Oireachtas na hÉireann, 1994). Trespass on land was controversially amended in Section 24 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provision) Act of 2002 (Oireachtas na hÉireann, 2002) ‘to create an offence of entering and occupying land without consent… [and] has been used against Travellers who occupy land without permission, [as] it allows the State to confiscate and dispose of caravans and other temporary homes’ (Kenna, 2011, p. 830). While temporary political occupations are accordingly carried out in a legal context where occupiers have little to no standing, the tactic has recurred across second and third phase housing activism, in which occupations were ‘the big actions that took up a lot of time and energy’ (interview with M01). Occupations and other types of activist community group direct actions (e.g. walking tours, postering campaigns) have played a key role in steering the national conversation around homelessness, housing, and vacancy, with national and local government, non-governmental organisations, celebrities, journalists, and the public responding to, critiquing, and/or commending housing activist community group actions (see Hearne, 2020; Lima, 2021a; Ó Broin, 2019).

Accordingly, temporary occupation has been the most high-profile form of post-crash housing activism, and the appropriation of vacant buildings as political confrontation has been a focus and driver of housing activism (see Di Feliciantonio and O’Callaghan, 2020; O’Callaghan et al., 2018). These appropriations rely on and are mediated by digital technologies and social media, which are sources and sites of lively and reflexive activist labour. In this chapter, I unpack how occupations unfold as simultaneously digital/material and the digital/material labour that goes in to producing occupations, and housing activism more generally. I argue that the digital/material character of occupations has created recurring tensions across
the second and third phases of post-crash housing struggle in Dublin, which arise from the a) dynamics of engagement/attention, b) emphasis on participation, and c) translation from specific and local to general and longer-term politicisation, which I unpack in greater detail in chapters six to nine.

Temporary political occupations are characterised by periods of intense engagement and attention for housing activist groups, who use social media to publicise and narrate occupations. In all three examples of post-crash temporary political occupations, occupations exist as digital/material entities, with specific social media pages established before or just after occupations are publicly announced. These occupation-specific social media pages are used to narrate the occupation. In second phase housing activism, occupation was narrated as ‘a clear message’ of ‘radical common sense’ to house the homeless in vacant buildings, ‘whereas homelessness while homes are empty is radically nonsensical’ (Radical Whispers, 2016). HSH’s occupation of Apollo House was announced on national television by musician Glen Hansard, who described the action as ‘an act of civil disobedience’, with activists having ‘taken a building that essentially belongs to the people of Ireland and has been lying empty’ to ‘bridge the gap’ and house homeless rough sleepers, with the appeal for the host and audience to ‘imagine walking home Christmas eve after doing your shopping and there’s no homeless people on the street – that’s what we’re tryna do’. In third phase housing activism, occupation narratives differed, with the initial occupation of Summerhill Parade being justified as the creation of ‘alternatives’ to profit-seeking forms of urban development, with occupation being:

‘the only way to get these basic necessities… This is why we’re taking back the city… This is why we’ve taken matters into our own hands and taken over an empty building in the area. But this isn’t just symbolic, this is a start… It’s criminal that so many buildings lie empty – taking initiative and occupying them is common sense. We want to build support and to grow, to take over more empty buildings that could easily be used by people who need them, turned into homes by the council or put to community use to meet our other needs’ (Take Back The City, Summerhill Parade leaflet, collected by author).

Despite the varying targets and rhetoric between second and third phase occupations, occupations themselves followed a common digital/material format, with an occupation-specific Facebook account being
the main way housing activists engaged with the public. During occupations, these Facebook accounts attracted a significant amount of attention and engagement from the public. Digital ethnographic data collection was useful for understanding and analysing this dynamic of activity and engagement. Activity described when a social media page did a thing, with ‘posts’ being specific time-stamped actions that pages did involving ‘original’ or ‘shared’ social media content. Figure 22 provides an annotated example of two of the Irish Housing Network’s social media posts to illustrate this distinction between ‘original content’ and ‘shared content’. Housing activists’ original and shared discursive framings aimed to connect to the public and draw engagement through likes, comments, and shares. Occupations were the main driver of high-profile public activity and engagement, and the material sites of occupied buildings were reframed through social media activity and engagement. In all three occupation campaigns, occupations were staged as direct actions that intervened in urban space and were digitally mediated through social media in a set pattern. Once occupiers were in situ, an occupation-specific Facebook page was created with an announcement of the occupation. This was typically accompanied by mainstream media coverage confirming basic details about the occupation and a more expansive or direct framing via social media of how occupiers wanted their actions to be understood. The social media artefact that served a stratigraphic-type function in dating occupations was accordingly the first ‘profile picture’ that an occupation’s social media page set itself up with, which became the page’s ‘first post’. Figure 23 shows these first ‘profile pictures’ for the three temporary political occupations in order, with Bolt Hostel top (6th July 2015), Apollo House/Home Sweet Home centre (14th December 2016), and Take Back The City bottom (7th August 2018).
Figure 22 - Basic distinction in publicising practices - original posts or sharing content/posts from others.
Each of these occupations involved a spike in the activity of housing activist social media accounts, with a layering over time of accounts for specific occupations being used to publicise subsequent campaigns. Housing activist social media pages were more active during temporary political occupations, with occupation-specific pages providing frequent updates and efforts to frame the occupation, and other pages often responding to or more generally amplifying this occupation-specific content. These increases in social media activity were accompanied by increases in engagement, with members of the public and supporters interacting with an on-going occupation by liking, sharing, and commenting on the social media content that the occupation page posted. The number of interactions with housing activist social media pages was higher during temporary political occupations and gave a sense of the varying scale of occupations, with Apollo House being the most ‘high-profile’, followed by Take Back The City and then the Bolt Hostel. These activity and engagement dynamics are visually represented from Figure 24 to Figure 29, which show the comparative activity levels of housing activist social media accounts during temporary political occupations (Figure 24, Figure 26, and Figure 28) and the amount and types of engagement.
with occupation-specific social media accounts (Figure 25, Figure 27, and Figure 29).

Social media activity varies between the three occupation campaigns, with housing activist accounts being most active when occupations are taking place. Social media activity and engagement shows two specific peaks across all three occupations and social media accounts associated with or publicising them. The first peak coincides with the early surge in interest and activity related to the occupation. The second peak coincides with the end of the occupation as a material urban site, which comes subject to legal injunction (the Bolt Hostel and Apollo House) and/or the physical eviction of occupiers (Take Back The City – North Frederick Street). These two peaks in social media activity are the moments when the temporary political occupation’s digital/material character is clearest. In the first peak, which was larger or comparable for the Bolt Hostel and Apollo House, the occupation of vacant buildings was a practical and material gesture, with social media used to a) selectively update and share the work of occupation and making habitable, and b) narrate the occupation as a radical and meaningful political act. In the second peak, the loss of this material site was subject to similarly heightened activity and engagement, with activists using social media to a) call for support to resist the occupation’s end, and b) narrate the confrontation that ended the occupation as a second politically meaningful confrontation.
Comparing activity levels around Bolt Hostel Occupation - IHN and the occupation (became DCHA)

09/07-11/07: updates re work on building and seeking support

28/07: court date

Figure 24 - Social media activity around Bolt Hostel occupation, July – September 2015. Note that the DCHA page was initially the Bolt Hostel’s social media account but was renamed in 2016 following DCHA’s establishment.

DCHA - Bolt engagement

Peak 1

Peak 2

Figure 25 - Social media engagement with the Bolt Hostel occupation account during the occupation, July - September 2015.
Figure 26 - Social media activity around Apollo House occupation, December 2016 - February 2017.

Figure 27 - Social media engagement with the Apollo House occupation account during the occupation, December 2016 - January 2017.
Figure 28 - Social media activity around Take Back The City occupations, August - December 2018.

Figure 29 - Social media engagement with the TBTC occupation account during and beyond the campaign, August - December 2018.
The eviction of TBTC from North Frederick Street on 11th September was a more heightened second peak, which unfolded as a high-profile direct confrontation between occupiers, a private security firm hired to evict them, and members of An Garda Síochána, the Irish police force, who oversaw the eviction to enforce any breaches of public order committed during it. The dynamic of two peaks in activity and engagement during temporary political occupations can accordingly be seen as shaped by activists’ digital/material practices, which drive the first peak, and how these bump up against the specific legal techniques that restrict these practices, which drive the second peak.

The structuring of social media data around two peaks is useful for understanding how participation is digitally/materially driven in temporary political occupations. This echoes calls for digital geographies that go ‘beyond the geotag’ (e.g. Crampton et al., 2013; Shelton, 2017) by considering the spatio-temporalities of social media data that are not explicitly geographic but can be used to retroactively deconstruct the ‘here and now’ of digital/material contention. In the first peak of activity and engagement, housing activists typically used social media to narrate where, how, and why an occupation was occurring and call for support to maintain it. As a minimal form of support, housing activists used social media to encourage the public to ‘like’ and ‘share’ their content. These forms of basic online interaction created a digital footprint around the occupations that contributed to and drove the dynamics of attention/engagement outlined above. Online interactions unfolded through but spilled over from social media into mainstream news media and public consciousness. In chapter two, I outlined how participation and ‘activity’ in digital/material contention is a source of debate within academic literature and public discourse. The minimal participation via social media of liking and sharing that housing activists encouraged drove and contributed to the peaks of engagement in social media data, which I contextualise within Dean’s framing of interpassivity under communicative capitalism in chapter six. These minimal forms of participation contribute en masse to a heightening of the temporary political occupation’s public profile, which had both direct and diffuse impacts. In direct terms, public awareness of and support for occupations
created leverage that occupiers used to push for specific outcomes, often through and during the second peak of attention/engagement when the occupation itself ended. For the Bolt Hostel and Apollo House, this meant negotiating for homeless residents to be given better accommodation options, although in practice this often meant offers of other temporary or emergency accommodation. In diffuse terms, temporary political occupations were critical moments in the longer-term narrative of housing’s politicisation throughout the post-crash period. The ‘radical common sense’ of temporary emergency accommodation in second phase housing activism broadly succeeded in narrating and highlighting the ‘homelessness emergency’ that was unfolding. The violent eviction of occupiers from North Frederick Street during the Take Back The City occupations was a similarly high-profile, if more ambiguous, public event. Notably, the Garda presence at the eviction was internally reviewed by the Garda Inspectorate in an unpublished report, which was subsequently referenced in a published Policing Authority report carried out by the Garda Inspectorate (Garda Inspectorate, 2019, pp. 12-3) as having ‘identified a number of lessons’ which included ‘the need for advice from a public order tactical advisor or commander in advance of any pre-planned event or operation’, with a record in writing of ‘any subsequent decision regarding the appropriateness of a public order deployment’

 Social media were also used to encourage the public to become involved in the occupation and give more direct forms of support. These forms of more active or direct support typically involved greater commitment and participation. Rather than ‘liking’, ‘sharing’, or ‘engaging’ with the temporary political occupation’s social media content, more ‘active’ forms of support encouraged the public to donate material goods or money, attend

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2 I submitted a Freedom of Information request related to this unpublished report, a second unpublished report on the policing of an anti-water charges protest at Jobstown, and correspondence relating to these to the Garda Inspectorate and the Policing Authority. I was given access to correspondence relating to the reports but not the reports themselves.
rallies or events, or volunteer their time/labour in support of the occupation. ‘Active action’ was almost always digital/material, and shaped by activists’ publicising, organising, and mediating practices. Importantly, some of these more active forms of action took place within the occupied buildings themselves, with social media being used to recruit volunteer labour to sustain the occupation – I outline these different types of specialist and non-specialist labour in the next section.

The third and final tension arising from occupations’ digital/material character related to the extent to which occupations tried and were able to translate from the local and specific site of struggle to general and longer-term politicisation of housing, or to effect a broader politicised subjectivation for volunteers, activists, and the public (see Rutland, 2013), a point that I return to in chapters six to nine. In the period between peak one and peak two, the temporary political occupation and its digital/material character dominated how housing activists interacted with and framed their struggle, tying activist and volunteer labour to the digital/material site of the occupied building. During second-phase occupations, much of this labour and framing focused on providing temporary emergency accommodation. Comparing the activity of housing activist social media accounts during occupations (Figure 24, Figure 26, Figure 28), the period between peak one and peak two was characterised by a higher frequency of activity by the occupation-specific social media page. The amount of activity and engagement varied greatly across the three temporary political occupations, with Apollo House having much higher rates of both activity and engagement than either of the other occupations. In all three occupations, the period between peak one and peak two was when the occupation-specific social media page was most used to narrate unfolding activism, and social media activity and engagement were driven by and focused on the occupation. Before the establishment of a specific temporary political occupation account and the first peak in social media activity, occupations were preceded by an uptick in activity from other housing activist social media accounts. This included the IHN, prior to the Bolt Hostel occupation, and both the IHN and Dublin Central Housing Action prior to Apollo House and Take Back The City occupations. In the wake of peak two, the activity of the temporary political occupation’s page tended to
decrease, evening out with the frequency of updates from more established housing activist social media accounts. This social media data dynamic is part of a trend in post-crash housing activism, whereby the aftermath of temporary political occupations is a lower-energy period of regrouping or reorientation of collective struggle and management of activist ‘burnout’, as well as a processes of reflection or learning that would go on to shape subsequent organisational forms and practices (which I discuss in chapters seven and eight). After occupations ended, social media and local or national events were used to translate activity and engagement away from the specifics of the occupied building toward a broader and longer-term politicisation of housing, with more established housing activist social media accounts and groups playing a more active role in trying to channel and direct this transition.

Accordingly, in the aftermath of losing the physical site of the occupation, social media activity became less intense across housing activist pages and the support roles that established housing activist groups and pages played changed, with efforts to use the specific end of the occupation to inspire longer-term participation redirected toward existing housing activist groups. The result of this dynamic of shifting activity, attention, and engagement was a back-and-forth movement from established housing activist groups toward the specific occupation, and a movement back toward established housing activist groups when the occupation ended. In both movements, housing activists were one part of the wider public constituency that the occupation was seeking support from. However, members of existing housing activist groups were typically the first to volunteer within and give time, energy, and labour to support occupation. I discuss the labour involved in producing occupations and housing activism below, but here it is important to highlight the dynamics through which attention and involvement move back and forth between occupations and longer-term housing activist group infrastructures. These infrastructures have played a key structuring role in occupations and housing activism more generally. I outline the digital/material labour that produces and is produced by housing activist groups below.
5.3 Digital/material labour pains: Producing occupations and activism

Digital ethnography collecting social media data helped to make sense of what housing activist social media pages do, and the role they played in temporary political occupations. Social media data were a useful entry point for understanding the digital/material labour that produced temporary political occupations, and housing activism more broadly, and I used digital ethnographic data as a discussion prompt in interviews with ten housing activists, as discussed in chapter three. Interviewees tended to describe the main organisational labour that produced temporary political occupations, and housing activism more broadly, using three different categories, which were ‘media’, ‘care’/‘support’, ‘outreach’/‘admin’. Each of these categories involved further subsets of labour practices, like ‘finance’, ‘press’, and ‘social media’, but interviewees generally discussed activist labour as part of one or other of these three categories, which recurred as the ‘teams’ driving contestation in interviewees’ descriptions of different groups and occupations. ‘Media’ and ‘media team’ were used to describe work focused on managing social media accounts and/or mainstream news media enquiries and dissemination. ‘Care’, and the related term ‘support’, was used to describe both specific and general labour. In its specific use, ‘care/support’ and ‘care/support team’ described the specialist labour required to care for homeless people in occupations, with an emphasis on social work, counselling, and healthcare. In a more general sense, ‘care’ and ‘support’ were used to describe labour within or on behalf of occupations, or to describe working with those seeking support from housing activist groups. I use support in this more general sense to capture both skilled and layperson maintenance, cooking, cleaning, and other types of support labour in occupations. ‘Outreach’ and ‘admin’ were more nebulous categories that interviewees referred to but did not clearly distinguish between, and the catch-all nature of ‘admin’ as a description was a recurring topic of discussion. Here, the simplest way to distinguish between the two terms is to use ‘outreach’ to describe the labour of liaising with other groups or people outside the activist group or occupation and to use ‘admin’ for administrative work. These two types of work substantially overlapped during occupations because of the need to vet and recruit larger pools of volunteer labour.
Interviewees were involved in different housing activist labour roles over the course of the post-crash period, but all ten interviewees were involved in some form of digital/material labour during temporary political occupations, and at least one interviewee worked in each of the three categories (Table 5). Importantly, this structuring of labour was created to ‘do’ housing activism both during and apart from occupations, and the IHN’s connection to occupations was usually justified by interviewees because its ‘team’ labour structure had been designed for occupations and evolved through them. One interviewee described this connection by noting how the IHN played a central role in Apollo House at least in part because ‘the work of running Apollo House actually mapped on very closely to the [IHN] team structure. So there was… the media team of Apollo House, there was the outreach team of Apollo House, [and] there was the kind of care support team’ (interview with M01). In Table 6 I outline the key characteristics of labour across the three occupation campaigns and how these were shaped by their tactics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bolt Hostel (BH)</th>
<th>Media: M10, M02</th>
<th>Care/support: M07</th>
<th>Outreach/Admin: M10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apollo House/Home Sweet Home (HSH)</td>
<td>Media: M01, M02, M07</td>
<td>Care/support: M03, M07</td>
<td>Outreach/Admin: M06, M09, M10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take Back The City (TBTC)</td>
<td>Media: M02, M03, M05</td>
<td>Care/support: M03, M04, M05, M08</td>
<td>Outreach/Admin: M04, M05, M06, M08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviewees narrated their involvement in housing activism as connected to the increased energy, attention, and need for labour that occupations created, with interviewees being the small subset of participants in occupations who were involved in housing activism before the occupation and/or stuck around after the occupation ended. In this way, occupations, which required a wider pool of volunteer labour, served as a key mechanism for recruiting participants, but their demanding nature called for a volume and intensity of labour that was unsustainable. I discuss the organising practices underpinning
and co-ordinating this activist and volunteer labour in chapter seven. However, it is important to note that the IHN and occupation ‘team’ structure was created through and did the work of creating a digital/material infrastructure for recruiting volunteer labour during occupations, with volunteers typically being asked to specify the ‘team’ or ‘group’ they would prefer to be involved with (Figure 30). Apollo House, during which Figure 30 was created, was a particularly clear example of ‘team’ labour and its organisation because the scale of the occupation relied on a pool of organised volunteer labour with a set of specific focuses and objectives. This volunteer labour was recruited and managed through a combination of the occupation’s social media presence and Google Forms (like the extract included as Figure 30), which were used to sort volunteers based on aptitude, experience, and interest. In this section, I outline the three main categories of digital/material labour that produced occupations, and housing activism more broadly, as media, care/support, and outreach/admin, which I use to group the more technical or specialist functions listed in Figure 30. I use digital ethnography and semi-structured interview data to piece together what these types of labour look like and do, before discussing how and why activist labour and the organisational forms that it produces have changed over time.
Table 6 – Summary of the types of labour and characteristics of demands for labour in the three temporary political occupation campaigns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media</th>
<th>Bolt Hostel (BH)</th>
<th>Apollo House/Home Sweet Home (HSH)</th>
<th>Take Back The City (TBTC)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smaller-scale and more ad-hoc than subsequent occupations – small team, one or two spokespeople who were used for interviews.</td>
<td>Larger-scale and more professionalised approach to social and news media.</td>
<td>Larger than BH but smaller than HSH, with less of an emphasis on having media inside occupied buildings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social media used but not as actively and lower levels of engagement from public.</td>
<td>Celebrity involvement impacted media coverage and ‘spokespeople’ often from celebrity/artist or union sides of coalition, with IHN doing back-end co-ordination of journalists on-site.</td>
<td>Media ‘spokespeople’ from media team, with some tensions within the coalition around who most appropriate to have in spokesperson role and split between occupiers and public spokespeople.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Coalition social media page, which caused some tensions because of different approaches. Highly active and high engagement.</td>
<td>Small social media team, more direct control but tensions over general statements and centralised nature of social media team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care/support</td>
<td>Smaller-scale emergency accommodation (&lt;10), requiring specialist medical, social care, and tradespeople support.</td>
<td>Larger-scale emergency accommodation (&gt;30), requiring specialist medical, social care, and tradespeople support.</td>
<td>No accommodation for homeless, no specialist medical or social care support, and limited need for tradespeople because not intending to ‘house’ the buildings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outreach/admin</td>
<td>Smaller-scale, some work to connect with volunteers and supporters but generally not standardised and more ad-hoc.</td>
<td>Larger-scale co-ordination of &gt;2,000 Google Form submissions for volunteers to fill and coordinate with wider set of specialist teams.</td>
<td>Co-ordination of &gt;1,000 Google Form volunteer submissions but limited need for specialist teams, so little specific work for volunteers to do. No monetary donations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.3.1 Media: ‘Press and media spokespeople, social media outreach, press writing, content creation’

‘A lot of the… communications or social media end of stuff, does come from bad experiences but it also comes from… experiences that maybe weren’t bad, they were maybe just like, that didn’t get an awful lot of attention. We need more’ (interview with M02).

There were two main components of housing activist ‘media team’ labour: managing social media pages and ‘handling’ mainstream news media interactions. The former involved running housing activist social media accounts, which could be specific to an occupation or a particular group (like the IHN or DCHA). The latter involved liaising directly and indirectly with the press, which often meant being interviewed, preparing others to be
interviewed, drafting press releases, and negotiating or overseeing news media access to occupied buildings. Both components involved simultaneously digital/material labour and overlapped within the broader remit of the ‘media team’, which was one of the organising cores of the IHN and a specific volunteer team established during each of the temporary political occupations. Media team labour shaped the broader framing of activists’ publicising practices, which I discuss in chapter six, but here I use interviewee accounts to unpick the digital/material labour involved in activists’ social and news media engagements. This labour was particularly important during occupations, when social media and mainstream news media coverage were used to publicise the on-going occupation and housing activist groups sought to manage public awareness of and participation in digital/material contention. The relationship between these two types of ‘media’ work was co-constitutive during occupations, when media coverage and social media content reflected and boosted each other. Activists and the public used social media to share and narrate news media coverage of the occupation, and journalists reported on the social media content that activists used to publicise the occupation, as well as the public’s digital/material engagement with these narrations and calls to action.

**Social media labour**

Media team labour created the social media activity and engagement that I outlined in the last section. Social media accounts were the main way for housing activists to control how contention was narrated – while social media platforms are not ideal or neutral settings, and are not designed for this purpose, housing activists’ labour appropriated the fast, low-cost, and publicity-oriented characteristics of social media to publicise, organise, and mediate contention. Importantly, social media were one of the main tools that housing activists used to recruit volunteers to participate in the practical support labour that occupation required. Social media were also the most direct way for housing activists to communicate with ‘the public’, circumventing the narration of contention by traditional news media. In terms of practical support, social media were used to publicise a continuum of options for volunteers to become involved in housing activism in general and
occupations in particular, which ranged from sharing social media content to organising a DIY occupation (Figure 31, from TBTC campaign). In more general terms, social media updates were used to publicise housing activism as it unfolded. This created a public-facing digital/material front for occupations that bridged the ‘inside’ of the occupied building and the ‘outside’ of how occupation and activism was portrayed to the public. In the Bolt Hostel and HSH, the emphasis on using occupied buildings to house the homeless was a focus for social media labour, with images, videos, and text used to bridge the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of what was going on in the occupations (providing emergency accommodation) and why (the state and Local Authority’s failures to address homelessness) (see Figure 32).
Figure 31 - TBTC social media post, 13th August 2018, suggesting what members of the public could do to support the Summerhill Occupation.
While a number of interviewees had been involved in media team work (see Table 5), M02 was a key informant for understanding digital/material media labour because she was involved and influential in shaping social media practices over the course of post-crash housing contention. M02 was involved in setting up and updating Dublin Central Housing Action’s use of the Bolt Hostel occupation Facebook page, and was a key figure in subsequent media teams for the IHN and DCHA, and during HSH and TBTC – in interview, she offered a detailed account of housing activist social media work and how this evolved as an active and thoughtful form of labour. In second phase occupations, M02 described the media team narrative as ‘kind of a double prong… generic feel good [social media content] with then a little stinger in the tail of, government’s useless, not doing it, that’s why we’re doing it, everyone’s great now for doing it, that kind of thing’ which involved ‘nice kinda feel-good stuff. Content-generating, that’s what that was!’ (interview with M02). This ‘content-generating’ involved active media team labour, which during the HSH occupation involved ‘going around trying to get some like “slice of life” content from the rest of the building. What’s so and so doing? And then we were also trying to think up new things because it was like how do we keep
people engaged? You don’t want the media to get bored of us, because then they’re gonna start getting negative toward us. That was the big fear’ (interview with M02, italics for emphasis mine). This recognition of some forms as social media work as ‘content-generating’, with content being ‘that enigmatic abstraction of message from medium’ (Crogan and Kinsley, 2012, p. 4), speaks to a broader digital/material tension in post-crash housing struggles where direct action’s impacts are often simultaneously practical and symbolic, but the balance between these is ambiguous. Here, social media work and housing activist social media accounts function as the public façade from which activists attempt to narrate their actions but also engage with an interrogative press and public.

Interviewees who had been involved in social media work narrated the behind-the-scenes of this public façade as a collective and pragmatic endeavour that could be emotionally draining and a fraught experience. For M02, a collaborative and communicative social media team was essential for ensuring that ‘it wasn’t about one person running the page, so that it wasn’t about one person’s ego, the page becoming an extension of someone’s ego’. For M02, social media work should involve ‘more than one person, generally, and there would be chats going on behind the scenes, as always’. Private group chats were a key infrastructure for social media work, per M02, because ‘you want someone else to bounce off, even if it’s just to go “oh for fuck’s sake look what this person just said. And everyone can have a laugh together, because otherwise you’re just sitting there on your own going “fuck””’ (italics for emphasis mine). While these group chats could be ‘stressful’, M02 ultimately described how ‘generally speaking, I would sooner have a group chat than not… Now, that depends on the people [laughs wryly]. And what’s actually being posted about, and the specifics of the action or the campaign’. Accordingly, social media work is digital/material in more than one sense in that it produces digital content, but this production is itself facilitated by digital technologies for communicating and collaborating, echoing what Kitchin & Fraser (2020, pp. 35-6) describe as the ‘moving, connecting, and accomplishing’ of ‘networked computing’ which can ‘enable us to be enmeshed in several competing temporalities simultaneously’ in ways that ‘can be exhilarating’ but are mainly ‘mundane
and routine. They are just a part of everyday life’. This ability to experience the chronotopia of varying temporal relations also involves, as M02’s account attests to, the experience of varying social relations, the maintenance of which through social media is described by Boler et al. (2014) as gendered, hybrid, and embodied connective labour.

**Mainstream media labour**

A further aspect of digital/material media labour related to the mainstream media and external mediation of temporary political occupations, as housing activist groups’ experiments with media involvement and coverage unfolded over time. Interviewees tended to use language like ‘spinning’, ‘courting’, ‘controlling’, ‘managing’, or ‘turning’ when discussing press relations, with an active assertion of agency in publicising and mediating housing activism. This labour of managing news media coverage unfolded alongside social media work within the media team. M02 was involved in both of these types of media team labour, but other media team members tended to specialise in one or the other, with M01 and M07 in particular describing themselves as enmeshed in news media work during the Apollo House/HSH occupation. Media team labour to manage news media evolved throughout the post-crash period, with a recognition that news coverage could sometimes be used to ‘leverage a positive outcome’ (M02) but that, particularly in occupations, there were limits to this strategy in that ‘you make a big media spectacle about occupying a building, you’ve made a point, but you actually have no power, no leverage’ (M02). Interviewees often described managing news media relations as frustrating, and particularly intense and difficult during temporary political occupations. News coverage of post-crash housing activism is one part of a broader media narrative in which housing has emerged as a key source of political discontent (Waldron, 2021). This chimes with long-term recognition of the media’s pivotal role in whether and how activism and protest can shape broader social change (Andrews and Caren, 2010). However, media coverage has a tense power in choosing whether to portray activists as legitimate or not in the ‘hierarchy of social struggle’ (Kilgo and Harlow, 2019). Irish news outlets played a direct role in property
market speculation and its narration both pre- and post-crash, contributing to a discursive framing of the necessity of austerity and a social complicity in ‘the crash’ (Mercille, 2017; O’Callaghan et al., 2014). News media have also actively narrated post-crash contention, which has tended to be minimised and under-reported (Layte and Landy, 2018) and involved the othering of anti-water charge protesters as ‘the sinister fringe’ distinct from a majority of ‘reasonable people’ (Power et al., 2016). Importantly, housing activist relations with media play out within the broader political economy of Ireland’s media market (Mercille, 2015), which is characterised by a concentration of ownership by the national State broadcaster, RTÉ, and Independent News and Media (INM), the country’s largest newspaper publisher. While this in part reflects the small market size for Irish newspapers, INM’s shareholder holdings in newspaper publishing and radio broadcasting are often alluded to in assessments of ‘cronyism’ or clientelism as a feature of Irish society (Kusche, 2017).

For housing activists, this political economic context and the media’s role as both a specific ‘lever’ of politicisation as well as an at-times indifferent or adversarial critic required labour to manage, trying to maximise the former while mitigating the latter. This media labour was most demanding during occupations and notably during the HSH occupation – a quick comparison of newspaper coverage of the three temporary political occupations using LexisNexis returned 266 articles mentioning HSH, in comparison to 19 on TBTC and just 6 on the Bolt Hostel. During HSH’s occupation, managing media attention required active and collaborative labour from the media team and the wider occupation, and M01 and M07 were key informants on this. M01 described his role as being ‘a housing issues fixer for journalists’, which meant ‘you'd have a couple of journalists, maybe, who are interested in writing about housing stuff. You help them get interviews, you give them background, you send them press releases. So it was kind of just like being a point of contact for the media… that’s kind of typical of public relations or being a press officer’ (interview with M01, italics for emphasis). In addition to this ‘point of contact’ role, the HSH media team was also responsible for managing how and when journalists would be given access to the occupied building, with M01 noting how:
‘maybe there’s a news crew coming in – we had quite strict rules, so that would involve kind of minding them! But also kind of, like, look after them – like, “oh, ok, now what would you like? Oh, you want to talk to a resident, I’ll see if there’s a resident who would like to speak with you”. “Oh, you want to talk to someone who’s volunteering – I have just the person who you’d like to talk to”… That would be maybe do one or two of those a day’.

M07 described her role during HSH as somewhat unique, as in her own words, ‘my experience was completely mad because I ended up being one of the spokespeople’, appearing in news media herself but also ‘prepping’ celebrities for media appearances during the occupation. For M07, this work was enjoyable (‘I liked speaking to the media because I like talking [chuckles] and I like thinking about the questions they asked us and how to answer them’) but also stressful and emotionally difficult. Some of this stress related to M07’s identifiability as a point of contact for the press, which meant that she had ‘people ringing me from everywhere, saying, “oh, look, you can talk to me, I’m not a bad guy, like”… there was a lot of underhanded tactics and I think that they thought they could take advantage of us, especially me because I was young’.

While this type of media work was particularly important during HSH, the work of managing the press recurred in interviewees’ accounts of the Bolt Hostel, TBTC, and housing activism more generally. The two main tensions this labour created were related to a) the positioning of ‘spokespeople’, and b) the drafting of ‘press releases’. The former was complicated during the Bolt Hostel and Apollo House occupations by the IHN’s ideological emphasis on affected-led struggle but the complex needs of the affected homeless people that occupations were intended to support. This is picked up on in Hearne et al.’s (2018, pp. 163-4) description of how, during the Apollo House occupation, ‘the sensitive and difficult nature of the action meant that Home Sweet Home activists were often obligated to speak on behalf of homeless individuals’. Importantly, media spokespeople were key figures representing the wider housing activist movement in the press and to the wider public, with housing activist social media circulating and amplifying media coverage. The representational politics of who did or did not talk to the press on behalf of the wider movement and fulfilled the work of public news media relations could be complicated and a source of conflict,
with some interviewees criticising the role of an unscrutinised core of ‘press contacts’ (M05) and the ‘disconnect between its [the housing movement’s] media portrayal and what actually goes on inside in terms of who services and organises within the housing movement today’ (M04).

This perception of a power asymmetry, however, must also be understood in the context of how spokespeople could be negatively impacted by their media work. Four of the ten interviewees described instances where journalists wrote or threatened to write personally upsetting and/or damaging coverage about named individuals they had interacted with, and the more general public connection between named individuals and direct actions could have legal and professional repercussions. Accordingly, media work through social media and/or the drafting of ‘press releases’ as collective statements, rather than the words of individual housing activists, played an important role in creating housing activism as a unified digital/material public façade that shielded individual participants. The work of drafting and issuing press statements meant relying on digital tools to collectively write and edit text and social media to disseminate the update, and this work recurs in post-crash housing struggles as part of activists’ wary engagement with and attempts to manage the news media. The process of drafting and collectively agreeing on public statements was an at times complex negotiation, however, and this was particularly true with statements ‘speaking for’ more diverse collectives. This was an issue during the TBTC campaign, which attempted to narrate housing as a more intersectional issue than earlier activism focused on homelessness. M05, who was involved in both news and social media labour during TBTC, suggested that ‘the most contentious thing of all sometimes were the statements and what we’d say about specific actions and stuff. So at times it could become fraught, the type of messaging we’d get out there’.

5.3.2 Care/Support: ‘Skilled social care/support workers, skilled tradespeople, keeping the building in shape’

Care/support labour in post-crash housing activism covered a spectrum of highly skilled specialist to less skilled general labour, with skilled specialist labour being particularly important in occupations housing the homeless (see
Table 6). Three main types of skilled specialist labour were required during occupations. Firstly, specialist, skilled, and professional volunteers were sought to deal with medical and social care requirements during occupations offering emergency accommodation. This was part of housing activist groups’ recognition that homeless individuals are often vulnerable and have complex needs above and beyond the offer of a bedspace. Secondly, specialist, skilled, and tradespeople volunteers were often requested when setting up an occupation, with some types of work to make buildings habitable requiring experience in carpentry, plumbing, electricity, and other types of construction trades. Thirdly, occupations relied on volunteer labour to meet occupiers’ and, when offering emergency accommodation, homeless residents’ subsistence needs. This was a focus for a number of ‘soup runs’ and other groups focused on feeding and providing for the homeless as a form of direct action through care. In addition to skilled specialist labour, occupations typically involved some specialist ‘security’ support, but this was discussed by interviewees as a questionable need, rather than the universal recognition of medical/social care, tradespeople, and food provision as essential labour. In occupations, these three forms of ‘skilled’ care/support roles were typically met through volunteer recruitment, with volunteers asked to identify themselves as having experience or training in these types of care/support work in recruitment forms circulated via social media (e.g. Figure 30, p.167). Security during occupations was generally described as provided pro-bono or at a discount by a firm connected to a housing activist who was not interviewed. However, volunteers were often enlisted in less formal types of security during occupations by ‘keeping watch’ or ‘doing door duty’.

Less skilled/specialist care/support labour
Less skilled care/support work also happened during and beyond occupations, but the most basic form of practical support work that housing activism drew on was participation or ‘showing up’ to housing activist events, which could be pre-planned, ad-hoc, and/or urgent. During occupations, general support work involved sorting donated goods, cleaning, and less
professionally demanding forms of DIY labour like painting and decorating, although there was less of this done in TBTC occupations (Table 6). While this type of work was often a focus for social media ‘feel good content’ narrating its transformative impacts on vacant and often poorly-maintained buildings, interviewees’ interpretations of general support work were ambivalent. On the one hand, some interviewees enjoyed the work of making habitable, with M07 describing how she:

‘loved it [the Bolt]. I like DIY so I loved painting [laughs]... I remember really clearly, I was painting when the court injunction came through... I was so happy, I was painting this windowsill, I was in my element, and [redacted] came out and they were like “we’re having a meeting now because there’s an injunction about to happen”. And I remember I looked at the paint brush, and I looked at them, and I was like, “so this isn’t a priority, is it?” And they were like “no, it’s not a priority” [interviewer laughs]. And from that moment, things went... [chuckles] my life was never as good as then’ (interview with M07).

Interviewees involved in media work also described an enjoyment in highlighting the practical impacts of work on buildings. For M01, this was a way of challenging the injunction against the Bolt Hostel, because:

‘part of the occupation had involved tradespeople volunteering to come in and help fix up the place... The injunction came down saying this was vandalism and that all the alterations had to stop and there was gonna be an inspection from someone from the Council... to document for the court or prove that it was unsafe. And so we kind of tried to then spin that or turn that around by inviting journalists to come along for that inspection and then... being able to say “yes this is fire unsafe, we were gonna fix it but we were told we're not allowed, this we did fix actually, this is fine now”’ (interview with M01).

On the other hand, the intense requirements for maintenance work in vacant buildings during occupations was also stressful and, for some interviewees, caused resentment, particularly during the TBTC campaign. In some ways, TBTC’s choice not to offer accommodation meant that work on cleaning and making habitable was less important as part of how housing activist groups publicised contention (Table 6). This arose because of a lack of interest in ‘spinning’ this point via social media, rather than there being a lack of cleaning or maintenance work to be done. For occupiers, the reality of spending time in vacant buildings without a push to make them habitable was ‘grim’, with M03 describing how she could ‘remember us being in the Mountjoy Square gaff and it was grim as fuck! [laughs] I was like, if I walked
in here right now, I would never want be involved in anything, ever! I was like, we’re not gonna get, like, y’know, people involved after coming to this place, like, this is grim! We’re just sitting around this horrible grim house’. The work to improve these material surroundings during TBTC fell on the shoulders of a smaller number of occupiers with a less clear purpose or daily routine because of the absence of the structures needed to offer temporary emergency accommodation. For occupiers, this meant that an unfair distribution of support work was created, in which:

‘it was a decision clearly by the people who were in control of TBTC to use the second wave, of younger enthusiastic participation, to kinda use us as grunts. So they were still issuing dictats, to a large extent, but, like, we were doing the work, and it was shit work. Like, we were doing maintenance work, we were doing admin work, we were doing, y’know, the stuff that just doesn’t get seen. We weren’t on megaphones and we weren’t aspiring to be on megaphones because we just wanted to help’ (interview with M04).

Over time, this uneven distribution of work contributed to a difficult situation, which M05 described by saying that ‘there was a lot of tension inside [the Frederick Street occupation]… there were a lot of tensions, there were a lot of disagreements, all the meetings were very fraught whenever they happened.’ Importantly, occupiers providing general unskilled support work in occupied buildings were mainly sharing the space with the campaign’s ‘security team’, because media, outreach, and admin work was often not conducted on-site. Both M04 and M05, who were students during TBTC, identified this as a major source of tension because the security team’s presence contributed to ‘an atmosphere of kinda secrecy and suspicion as well over what we were doing’ (M05) which deterred or ‘probably alienated so many kids and minorities and, like, fuck it, just, “normal people”’ (M04). Both M04 and M05 described the security team as playing a more ‘aggressive’ (M04) or ‘very kinda strict’ (M05) role and exercising power over the predominantly younger and less ‘ultra’ (M05) occupiers in a way that made them uncomfortable at the time and critical of the occupation in retrospect, with M04 criticising how:

‘we weren’t listened to… we were often just felt fucking grunt workers, yknow?... It was like people, young, naive, em, doey-eyed kind of idealists that were inside the buildings and we were like frequently inside the buildings with like dangerous people… and we didn’t know how to temper
our attitudes, eh, to deal with people with like intolerant views and stuff like that.’

Beyond occupations, DCHA was also involved in running two types of recurring ‘events’ requiring general care/support work, which were semi-frequent ‘support tables’ for those with ‘housing issues’ and infrequent ‘community dinners’. These ‘support tables’ relied on general care/support work in dealing with others’ housing issues, with varying expectations of skill or experience. M10 described this as a longer-term focus ‘outside of the confrontation moments’ within DCHA, which ‘was a good group who shared out the work doing a consistent support group, being able to take actions, connect people, it was good, it was kind of a holding ground’. ‘Community dinners’ were a staple of DCHA’s attempts to carry out community organising in the North Inner City, with volunteers setting up, cooking for, and cleaning up after communal and public meals held in Jigsaw, an independent space where DCHA and the IHN had a small office space. M06 drew a parallel between DCHA’s community dinners and organising with ‘people from the local area, especially people living in the hotels… that were used for emergency accommodation, the families in there, they come, we can bring food, and people can meet and talk and relax for a day… And I was like “that’s just like the Black Panthers did it!” [laughs], except way less radical’. These basic and specific examples of care/support work were all organised at least in part through social media, ‘community dinners’ requiring the most co-ordination and typically involving a shared Google Doc in a group chat for volunteers to sign themselves up for a specific job or to confirm what they would be cooking/bringing.

**Skilled care/support labour**

While five interviewees had been involved in a type of housing activist care/support work, M03 was the only interviewee who did specialist care/support during occupations and was a key informant on the challenges of co-ordinating specialist medical and social care supports during temporary political occupations. Importantly, M03 described her involvement in activism and this care/support work as an extension of her motivations for
becoming a social care worker. Her involvement in housing activism stemmed from an intersection between care/support work and voluntary labour to feed the homeless, which she began participating in during her studies. For M03, this overlap of care/support through social work with the homeless was a natural evolution toward housing activism, and she described this process by narrating how, in 2013 to 2014, she was ‘in college and doing soup runs and stuff, that was the first group I was involved in… a lot of the lads on the soup runs were homeless themselves at one point. And they were kind of explaining to me, who was never on that side of things, why people won’t go into hostels and what the problems there are’. For M03, housing activist care/support work was a way to counter the ‘really frustrating’ limitations to social care that austerity governance created, whereby ‘you can only do so much in your day-to-day role and… NGOs are NGOs and they are funded, and so… They can’t really bite the hand that feeds them, in a certain way, so they can be kind of frustrating’.

M03 was a key member of the HSH care/support team, which she described as ‘the first proper kind of thing I was involved in, in terms of action’. Of the three main ‘factions’ in the HSH coalition of trade unions, artists, and housing activists, it was the latter who were mainly responsible for the occupation’s day-to-day running – this stemmed from the IHN and its member groups having had experience in offering emergency accommodation during the Bolt Hostel occupation. While M03 was not involved in care/support during the Bolt Hostel, she mentioned that, prior to Apollo House, ‘we did know we were going to need an actual care team because in the Bolt… there was like a few little issues about, like, drink and drugs and stuff, I think. And there was a few bits of conflict around that at one stage. So they kind of knew that would be a thing, we’d need an actual team’. M03 pointed out the practical accomplishments of this care/support during HSH, where ‘we’d a paramedic or a nurse there 24/7, you wouldn’t get that in a hostel’. However, this was made possible by intense and unsustainable volunteer labour (‘I actually was there every single day, sometimes we were there for 24 hours, we fucking slept there then… it felt like it went on for months, it really did… it was quite intense like that’) and the working environment ‘was actually organised chaos, now thinking about
it’, in which ‘on the support team, there was, like, a lot of near misses’ (M03). Being part of the care/support team shaped M03’s assessment of HSH, and she was pointed in her description of the occupation’s limitations. By the time of our interview in 2020, for M03:

‘thinking about it now, thank God we weren’t in that building any longer because anything could have happened. Especially now that I’ve worked in services a lot, I have a lot more experience since then… It’s not that we didn’t have people with experience, we did – and there was a medic and stuff there all the time – but it wasn’t… some of the people I’ve worked with professionally that are so vulnerable and have such complex needs, we could have had any of them in there and anything could have happened, d’you know what I mean? So I think the three week mark [chuckles], three or four weeks or whatever, was a bit of a godsend in the end’.

M03’s involvement in care/support work accordingly shaped her assessment of the occupation, and this included her description of how the HSH coalition functioned. Activist, academic, and public accounts of HSH describe the HSH coalition as being made up of trade unions, artists, and housing activists. However, M03’s position on the care/support team meant that she actually saw HSH as involving ‘a big whole other group that I don’t think is talked about when we reflect on it… the soup runs kind of people, that were just involved on their own’. M03 described this often-ignored faction as ‘all these random heads that got involved just at Apollo House, and most of them were the soup run heads that got on the support team’ – this grouping, in M03’s account, ‘had their own buzz’ and ‘with any of these heads, they just wanted this thing to last forever and I ’spose they didn’t really, even today… – they don’t have any politics or anything really at all [chuckles]… They just seen this as we're providing shelter, this needs to last forever, rather than it being a political occupation’. Here, the contrast within the care/support team on the necessarily time-bound nature of the occupation is interesting, and speaks to a wider tension in why people become and stay involved in housing activism, with some groups being a focus for people looking to do something practical that is not necessarily political or contentious.

Accordingly, care/support work unfolded through a series of different practices, with varying demands and intensities over the post-crash period. Just as occupations were temporary high-points for social and news media labour, occupation typically called for a higher level of both specialist and
less-specialist care/support work. In occupations that offered emergency accommodation for the homeless, there was a prominent and pressing demand for specialist care/support work to meet the material, as well as more complex social and psychological, needs of homeless people ‘accessing’ occupied buildings for accommodation (Table 6). While meeting these needs was a mainstay of housing activist social media ‘content’ during occupations, the somewhat superficial narrative of ‘feel-good’ content belies the complex care/support labour and organisation that occupations required.

5.3.3 Outreach/Admin: ‘Finding volunteers and linking in with other teams; Experience with spreadsheets, excel, data, and people management desirable’

Outreach and admin were terms interviewees used to describe two types of labour. The distinction between the terms tended to be less important during occupations, when ‘admin’ became a catch-all for the occupation’s day-to-day bureaucracy. Outreach originated as an IHN ‘team’ focused on working across and between groups in the network. However, during occupations, outreach tended to split into a) outreach to would-be volunteers supporting the occupation, and b) outreach to organise other groups and communities to support or spread the occupation. The former ‘outreach’ was mainly with/to individuals and the latter aimed for a more collective or community-focused approach. In HSH and TBTC, outreach to would-be volunteers tended to become a focus for admin labour because of the scale and digital/material infrastructure that this work involved (Table 6). Most of this volunteer labour was co-ordinated through Google Forms (e.g. Figure 30, p.167), and the work of co-ordinating volunteers called for ‘experience with spreadsheets, excel, data, and people management’. As a result, during occupations the term ‘admin’ and ‘the admin team’ tended to take responsibility for contacting volunteers, while ‘outreach’ tended to describe efforts to build out from the occupation by contacting other housing activist groups or encouraging others to set up housing activist groups. This partial overlap reflected the nebulous character of ‘admin’ as a recurring descriptor of teams, roles, and practices in post-crash housing activism. The IHN, HSH, and TBTC were all described as having an ‘admin team’, and interviewees tended to use ‘admin’ to
subsume a range of organising practices and labours. The emphasis on ‘data and people management’ in Figure 30 speaks to the expansive digital/material amalgam of the human and non-human involved in admin, with the skill to manage any and all of these possible arrangements being required to ‘do admin’ successfully. Beyond co-ordinating volunteer labour, the admin team were also responsible for some aspects of internal communication and finances both during and beyond occupations. In this section, I use the temporal framing of during and outside of occupations to distinguish between outreach and admin roles. I begin by describing the nuts and bolts of admin labour as two main types of practices, which relate to a) finances and b) co-ordinating volunteers, before contextualising the emergence and framing of admin labour and its description as classed, gendered, and unattractive. While six interviewees were involved in outreach/admin (see Table 5), most were focused on co-ordinating volunteer labour, which speaks to the importance of this practice during occupations. M06 was a key informant on the evolution of more specialist forms of admin during and outside of occupations, with particular specialism in finance during HSH.

Finance admin labour
While fundraising was an anticipatory focus for the IHN prior to HSH, the Apollo House occupation was the main example of admin finances labour in post-crash housing contention. Apollo House and the fundraising carried out as part of the occupation was narrated as a learning experience for housing activists and groups, with M01 surmising a key lesson as being that ‘money will tear a group apart faster than not having money’. M06 was the interviewee who was most directly involved, in her own words, in ‘the finance kinda end of things’ during HSH. The Bolt Hostel and the IHN had done some small-scale fundraising and established an infrastructure for doing this, which included a bank account and the formation of an ‘admin’ team that anticipated, but had limited actual need for, fundraising. During HSH, this mainly anticipatory infrastructure was rapidly outpaced by the campaign’s unanticipated scale and intensity. M06 described her involvement in ‘the finance end of things’ as ‘very stressful [chuckles]. And
that’s kind of why I stepped away from it… I didn’t have the skill set, and I wasn’t trained up, so kind of was out of my depth, and felt like the whole team was out of our depth. Which we were’. Fundraising during HSH was mainly facilitated through a campaign GoFundMe. GoFundMe is a crowdfunding platform that allows people or organisations to raise money for events or causes. A registered user creates a GoFundMe page, which acts as a website, typically linked to the user’s social media accounts, and the page allows people to donate to the user’s cause using a debit or credit card or PayPal account, with the site collecting a percentage and transaction fee from each donation. Usefully, the HSH campaign released detailed financial reports in January 2017 (see Home Sweet Home, 2017) which show the extent and intensity of fundraising involved – the HSH GoFundMe page raised over €174,000, which was over 90% of total HSH campaign donations (see Figure 33).

Interviewees described the volume of financial donations as part of HSH’s unanticipated scale, but M06 was the interviewee whose digital/material labour was most focused on HSH’s finances. For M06, the GoFundMe initially felt secure and easier to manage than cash donations, in that ‘at the beginning it was like, great, don’t need to worry about that, it’s straight into the bank account, it’s safe’. Cash donations, which amounted to
roughly 7% of total campaign figures, were, per M06, more stressful, and she described how:

on one occasion I just kinda freaked out with the idea of having so much cash on-site. So, I insisted that we bring some of the cash to the union, because the union had a safe... And then I still didn’t feel really comfortable, so we brought money to the bank and lodged it into the bank account. But... Yeah, it was just, that was an aspect of how disorganised it was, like, I was cycling several grand across the city, in coins and shit! It was crazy.

In contrast, GoFundMe ‘at the time [was] not stressful’. However, the amount of money donated ‘definitely brought us into a realm that we weren’t ready to be in, and, like, I don’t think we should have been in either’. The IHN admin team, which M06 was part of, was both surprised by and ill-equipped to deal with the unanticipated influx of donations – the GoFundMe ‘got so big, and the bank account got so big, and we weren’t ready for that or didn’t expect it to happen or know what we’d do with the money, which is, like, a really bad situation to be in really when you think about it’. The amount of money drew media interest and speculation which the GoFundMe’s ill-defined aim ‘to end homelessness’ did not clarify. M06 described how ‘people were starting to ask what was the money being used for. It was just being used for what was needed, like supplies, but... it started to actually, like – like become a lot more official and real. And I think we weren’t really prepared for that’. While M06 was an experienced member of the IHN admin team and an active DCHA participant, she described the administrative labour of HSH’s finance as ‘quite – really – stressful, at the time and... I would have been totally burned out, I think... I definitely was burned out at that point’. As a more strategic point, M06 also critiqued the emphasis on monetary donations in the HSH coalition by describing this as ‘getting into an area that is... essentially, it’s not a radical area, it was... a stunt, resulting in charity... it was an occupation and in that sense radical... But we mixed in this other... side of thing... which resulted in us kinda in an area that we didn’t really need to be fundraising. We didn’t know what we were fundraising for’.
Outreach and more general admin labour

The other main type of admin labour during occupations was the co-ordination of volunteer labour, which created a circular demand for admin labour. This admin labour involved contacting would-be volunteers who had completed a Google Form to assess and organise if/when they could do a shift in an occupied building or support the campaign in other ways. Doing a shift in the occupation involved being ‘on watch’ or doing support work inside the building, but also involved the admin labour of filling future occupation rosters, which meant ‘processing’ would-be volunteers’ information and making calls to establish if and when they would be able/willing to do a shift in the occupation. The experience of admin labour co-ordinating volunteers was typically described as important but tedious. M09 summed up his experience of this during HSH as having ‘felt like going and doing a shit call centre job’. M06 made a similar comparison between admin outreach in TBTC and office work, noting how the absence of taken-for-granted aspects of a workplace could complicate and stymie admin labour, as ‘it was funny the amount of… it was a very simple issue, that if you’re in a work place, you’d do really quickly, but you didn’t have internet so you’d use your phone as a hotspot. Then you’d have to make sure there was credit on the phone and the phone was charged. There were all these little tiny things that made basic admin a lot more difficult’. The digital/material tools and skills that admin labour required were often not ‘radical’, and interviewees described varying levels of aptitude for or interest in these types of labour. For M04, the ‘grunt labourer’ work of rostering volunteers during TBTC was a struggle, in that ‘we were trying to process too much data, with very little data processing skills [laughs], y’know?... I probably should have been competent on Excel by that point in my life, but I wasn’t [laughs] and, y’know, none of the other people were’. M04’s frustration with and self-criticism for not having the skills required for this back-end admin labour was compounded in TBTC by difficulties on the front-end of volunteer co-ordination, with M06 describing ‘trying to, like, formulate what is best to say to people on the phone’ as challenging. For M06, this reflected a generational gap, as ‘students and people growing up maybe a little bit younger than me, they’re not as comfortable on the phone as people of my own generation, and so we’d have
to make sure there was a script for people so that they’d feel comfortable when they’re volunteering to ask people to volunteer at another time’. The digital/material labour of co-ordinating volunteers was accordingly differently experienced, with varying levels of aptitude for or comfort in working across the digital/material characteristics of admin labour.

Gaps in aptitude and comfort echoed with wider discussion of admin as classed and gendered. Prior to HSH, M06 described the IHN and DCHA’s admin work as being ‘fundraising, trying to organise the minutes from the last meeting, this kind of stuff. Which is important, it definitely is important, and it definitely was important when it came to Apollo’ but ‘we were a little bit ahead of ourselves with the admin for kinda really no reason… it kinda was a little bit unnecessary at the beginning I suppose’. For M06, prior to HSH, admin work was often either practical or aspirational, with the IHN’s admin team having ‘kinda like a foresight that this would be this great organisation but it was like we didn’t actually know exactly what we wanted’.

For M06, this meant that much of the IHN’s early admin work ‘was a little bit separate to what was going on on the ground’ and lacked a clear and collective purpose, with the admin team being ‘focused on fundraisers… I don’t know even know what we were fundraising for when I think about it. I think - there was no kinda vision of where is this going’. M10, who was also involved in housing activism pre-HSH, described admin work as emerging from and being shaped by ‘two dynamics’. The first of these was gendered and emerged from the anti-water charges movement’s influence, wherein admin was:

‘probably seen as back-room work, because it is kind of care work but it doesn’t quite fit it. So it’s kind of like, to be honest with you, it’s seen as the least attractive work, it’s seen as the least good work to do and it gets dumped on women who kind of conscientiously take it… so it’s kind of care work, but it doesn’t fit. So it’s like, to be honest with you, it’s seen as the least good work to do and it gets dumped on women who kind of conscientiously take it… there was big pockets of women-led direct actions around things… and then men, mostly who are unemployed, who are able to move around, got into the confrontation side of it. So yeah, the admin is kind of the dumped work’.

The second dynamic was that ‘the only other people who like admin are smart nerdy young people but that has its own dynamic to it because then it becomes a slightly semi-professionalised power thing. And they do like really, really, amazing minutes’. M10 described admin as emerging at an intersection
between these two dynamics, in which admin labour was simultaneously ‘in that context the dumped work and the other context it becomes like a little power thing. Both of them are at play and it is always kind of interesting… It can be good; it can work really well too. At the time [pre-HSH] it was more just dumping it, shit work’. M06 also noted this second dynamic, describing how the IHN’s pre-emptive or aspirational admin ‘came from people’s work backgrounds, and also maybe class background I suppose? … The majority of us on the admin team it was… like a middle class kinda background… in a cultural sense’. Here, people’s class and occupational backgrounds intersect, and M06 described how ‘that’s something I’ve noticed, even in myself, that you rely on those things because it’s a comfortable space that you’ve… been in before and you’ve been useful before and I think that’s something that happens a lot in activism where people want to be useful so they do something that they’ve done before, even if it’s not really needed particularly’.

Beyond admin labour as classed and gendered, another recurring point that interviewees made was that admin was unattractive or boring. Interviewees who pro-actively engaged in admin tended to describe this labour as comfortable and satisfying. M06’s involvement in housing activism was often focused on administrative labour, and she articulated satisfaction when she was comfortable and happy with how this labour was going, describing how during TBTC ‘I used to want to get the roster as full as possible, I remember there was one occasion that I got four people up into a room and I was like [assumes cheerful voice], “we’re gonna do admin, yay!”’. And the four of us did admin for a solid few hours and filled a roster and it was great, like’. M09 was thoughtful about their administrative labour, noting how ‘I always feel like it’s one of those things that’s less attractive to people because it’s not necessarily fun? But… I feel like admin is like the bassist in the band. It’s like, no one ever thinks too much about the bassist but if your bass player is out of tune the whole thing collapses’. For M09, this was both necessary (‘you need your things in order and your spreadsheets in the right way and everything structured in order to kind of allow everything else to function’) and enjoyable (‘I’m a bit weird in the sense that I enjoy boring admin stuff… I think in general I prefer being… not having to talk too
much and being in the background… that’s probably what drew me to
admin’). Tellingly, M09 framed their enjoyment as a personality quirk, in that
‘the first thing people go for is outreach or media or that kind of stuff’,
whereas ‘not to put myself down, but there’s just too much thinking and I
prefer typing away doing the work, and doing the admin and doing the
practical stuff – I’m not much of a big ideas person’. M09’s sense of their
aptitude for and enjoyment of administrative labour was framed as a
necessary factor for successful activism, in that ‘you need someone who
actually likes to do it, because if you’re in a situation where the people doing
the admin are the ones who just didn’t get to do the other stuff that they
wanted and they’re just doing it because it’s all that was left, that’s not really
conducive to a good thing’. In chapters six and seven, I return to this
positioning of admin as necessary but undesirable, unpicking how publicising
and organising practices are shaped by and shape activists’ labour.

5.4 Conclusion
This chapter has outlined the digital/material characteristics of post-crash
housing activism, paying particular attention to temporary political
occupations and the digital/material labour that produced them. Temporary
political occupation has been a recurring tactic for housing activists in post-
crash Dublin, particularly in the second and third phases of housing struggles
identified in chapter four. This chapter has illustrated i) how occupations
unfolded as simultaneously digital/material periods of intense activity,
engagement, and attention, and ii) the centrality of social media and digital
technologies in how occupations functioned. I have outlined how
occupations, and housing activism more generally, are produced through
different types of labour, which are digital/materially shaped and call for
different types of specialist and non-specialist volunteer work. The three
main types of labour in temporary political occupations and housing activism
more broadly are media, care/support, and outreach/admin, the importance of
which has varied across occupations depending on tactical decisions (Table
6).

Tactical variations in occupations produced and were produced by
changing digital/material labour practices. As discussed in chapter four,
temporary emergency accommodation for the homeless in occupied buildings was a key feature of second phase housing activism, which focused on homelessness as an emergency and the city’s growing homeless population as the subject position from which to argue for affected-led activism. Providing emergency accommodation through temporary political occupations was positioned as a ‘radical common sense’ and a major focus for housing activist groups’ increasingly sophisticated media, care/support, and outreach/admin labour. A shift away from homelessness toward a more expansive critique of the housing system in third phase activism led to a change in how temporary political occupation functioned as a tactic during TBTC, as outlined in the first section of the chapter. The decisions not to fundraise or offer emergency accommodation, and to target private property owners, were key points of difference, learning, and evolution between second and third phase post-crash housing activism. However, despite these tactical shifts and learning points, the digital/material nature of temporary political occupation tactics have thrown up overarching tensions around engagement/attention, an emphasis on participation, and difficulty in translating from the local/specific to more general political subjectivation in both second and third phase post-crash housing activisms. This chapter accordingly established a framework for understanding activist labour as digital/material and the tensions that this creates. The remaining empirical chapters assess how the contention that activist labour has produced is digitally/materially publicised, organised, and mediated. In chapters seven, eight, and nine, I interrogate how this has evolved, through individual and collective activist reflection and learning over time, toward new efforts at political subjectivation.
Chapter 6 – ‘Please like and share the Take Back The City Facebook page’: Publicising digital/material contention and its discontents

‘It's the BoredOfItAll generation
The product of product placement
and manipulation
Shoot ‘em up, brutal,
duty of care
Come on! New shoes!
Beautiful hair.
Bullshit.
Saccharine ballads
and selfies,
and selfies,
and selfies
And here’s me outside the palace of ME!
Construct a self and psychosis
Meanwhile the people are dead in their droves
And, no, nobody noticed;
well,
some of them noticed
You could tell by the emoji they posted’
Kae Tempest – Europe is Lost from Let Them Eat Chaos (2016).

6.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines activists’ publicising practices and focuses on the digital/material production of temporary political occupations. ‘Publicising’ describes the public outputs of the digital/material labour that I outlined in chapter five and how this labour attempts to mobilise ‘the public’. The chapter is structured around these two senses of ‘publicising’. First, I discuss the outputs of activists’ digital/material social media labour and how these created the public façade of housing activism. Activists’ publicising practices sought to mobilise public support, narrated occupations as the contentious seizure and ‘making public’ of vacant buildings, and managed the gap between public and private labour. I use ‘internal’ and ‘external’ to describe the different types of publics that activists’ digital/material labour produced, with housing activist groups operating as ‘internal publics’ that tried to appeal to, engage with, and manage the ‘external publics’ they encountered digitally/materially. I then situate these internal and external publics and
publicising practices within the broader framing of communicative capitalism, connecting housing activists’ digital/material contention to Jodi Dean’s assessment of the foreclosure and limitations of digital protest, which I discussed in chapter two. I argue that housing activists engaged in digital/material contention that made public the privately-owned and commercialised ‘spaces’ of social media and the post-crash city, with this ‘making public’ aiming to mobilise the public toward contention against an unjust housing system. These tactics and strategies, however, were subject to limitations shaped by their digital/material production, and the tensions this created for both the internal publics of housing activist groups and their relations to the external publics they interacted with. The need to give volunteers/supporters something meaningful to do, and the management of the digital/material social relations that this created in temporary political occupations, were recurring difficulties. Accordingly, the chapter explores what publicising practices are, the role that they play in contemporary contention, and the ways in which this role shapes the publics or people that can be mobilised under communicative capitalism.

6.2 Publicising practices in post-crash housing activism and temporary political occupations as digital/material public spaces

In chapter five I outlined the social media labour that housing activists engaged in as part of ‘media’ work. I used digital ethnographic data to show the varying levels of social media activity and engagement during and across temporary political occupations, a recurring tactic in post-crash housing activism in Dublin. Here, I focus on how social media labour was a publicising practice, which used occupations to create digital/material ‘public spaces’ through occupied buildings. Housing activist social media pages and occupied buildings have worked as co-constitutive digital/material façades from behind which housing activist groups engaged with and sought to mobilise an ‘external public’. The nature of this mobilisation varied between second and third phase housing activism, as is outlined below.

6.2.1 Publicising and the gaps between activists, occupiers, and public audience
Drawing from the discussion of activity and engagement in chapter five, housing activists’ social media labour articulated two important distinctions or gaps. The first was the gap between ‘activists’, whose doings were being publicised via social media, and ‘the public’ as audience who viewed, interacted with, or scrolled past these digital/material doings. The second was the gap between ‘occupiers’ inside occupied buildings and their supporters ‘outside’. These two gaps were digital/material in ways that varied – the audience member might have been en route to an occupied building, refreshing the housing activist page’s feed to keep up with what was unfolding, or standing elbow-to-elbow in a crowd in front of the building with their phone held aloft to ‘livestream’ or document proceedings, or living eight hours behind in Vancouver and beginning the morning commute by opening a middle of the night Whatsapp message with a prompt to ‘look at this’. Bodies, machines, and time-space collide and stretch in contemporary contention. This was reflected by the prevalence of comments on occupation social media content offering solidarity from x/y/z, wishes that the commenter could be present, or a note explaining why or when the commenter would or would not be available to participate. Participation as publicised during occupations drew a second gap between ‘occupiers inside the house and supporters outside’ (Figure 34).

Figure 34 - DCHA text posts during 7th August event launching Take Back the City campaign. Note the subject positions of we and you, as well as the need for ‘bodies’.
The crossing of the threshold to physically occupy a building, and managing how and when volunteer members of ‘the public’ became ‘occupiers’, was a core component of activists’ admin labour, as discussed in chapter five. From a publicising practices perspective, the gaps between participant/audience and occupier/supporter translated into efforts to share options for people to become active or ‘do’ something to support occupation, and housing struggles more broadly, which ranged from sharing social media content to organising a DIY occupation (Figure 31, p. 170). In the Bolt Hostel and HSH, the emphasis on using occupied buildings to provide accommodation for the homeless meant that activists’ publicising practices drew from what was going on inside the occupied building, creating a public-facing front of what the occupation was doing (Figure 32, p. 171). During the Bolt Hostel and HSH, campaign social media accounts were used to create and amplify a conscious staging of occupation as a practical and positive intervention, seizing vacant buildings to house the homeless and narrate this seizure as a good thing. As noted in chapter five, M02 described her work on the HSH social media team as ‘content-generating’, with social media used to publicise the goings on of the occupied building. This emphasis on doing, and publicising what was being done during occupations, configured the digital/material space of the occupation as caught between present and future, with live action and labour being publicised to attract attention and resource the occupation’s continuation.

During TBTC’s occupations, there was less emphasis on showing the internal life of occupied buildings. In part, this reflected the more cautious and anonymous positioning of TBTC occupiers, with M06 describing her instructions for volunteers to ‘wear a scarf… because there were Gards around, and you don’t want your picture taken or anything like that’. TBTC occupiers were publicised with photographs and videos taken outside of occupied buildings, with their faces covered by cardboard cut-out masks of then-Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, or then-Housing Minister Eoghan Murphy (Figure 35). While the TBTC Facebook page publicised photographs taken outside of occupied buildings (Figure 36 and Figure 37), very few photographs were shared from inside TBTC occupations. Those that were publicised were almost all taken pointing outward or with occupiers’ faces
covered (e.g. Figure 38). The shift in emphasis in what was being publicised from occupied buildings between the Bolt/HSH and TBTC echoes the shift in the nature of volunteer labour and the purpose of occupations, which I highlighted in discussing care/support labour in chapter five. For TBTC occupiers, the material reality of occupation contrasted with the ‘feel good’ practical emphasis in earlier occupations providing temporary emergency accommodation. M03, M04, and M05, who were all involved in TBTC occupations, described the vacant buildings that were occupied as ‘grim’ (M03) with ‘an atmosphere of kinda secrecy and suspicion’ (M05), and M04 described the work of TBTC occupations as ‘shit work’ carried out in ‘hovels’ (M05).

Figure 35 - TBTC Facebook photo from 7th August 2018, accompanying 'statement from Summerhill Occupation'. Note the Leo Varadkar masks on occupiers, and the positioning of the camera outside of the occupied building.
Figure 36 - Two photographs from outside of Frederick Steet occupation, posted on 25th August 2018 by TBTC's Facebook page.
Figure 37 - Photograph shared by TBTC on Twitter on 8th September 2018 showing outside of Belvedere Place occupation. Note how the photo is again from the outside of the occupied building, the covered faces of the occupiers visible in the windows, the re-appearance of signs from Figure 36.
Figure 38 - Two images posted by TBTC - Dublin Facebook page on 25th August 2018 documenting a 'woman only' occupation of the Frederick Street building to coincide with the Papal visit. These are characteristic examples of what the limited number of internal photographs shared by TBTC looked like.
6.2.2 Publicising how occupations ended

A second contrast between activists’ publicising practices in second and third phases of post-crash housing activism was the role that social media played in narrating the end of the digital/material occupation. Publicising practices were used to narrate how and why occupations ended. Typically, this was a key part of how occupation tactics were framed within a broader trajectory of housing struggles. The different digital/material timelines and pressures shaping publicising practices were important for understanding the trajectory of post-crash housing struggles. In all three examples of occupation campaigns, publicising practices distinguished between definite (the Bolt Hostel, HSH) or ambiguous (TBTC) endings.

The Bolt Hostel: ‘Relinquished control’
The Bolt Hostel’s end was publicised by the occupation’s Facebook page on 14th August 2015, with a post confirming that occupiers had ‘relinquished control of the premises on 38/39 Bolton Street’. This came in the wake of a tense legal back-and-forth between occupiers, Dublin City Council, Dublin Fire Brigade, and DCC’s Public Lighting Services. Between the issuing in late July of a court order requiring maintenance work to cease and mid-August, the occupation’s social media account was used to rally support at court dates, thank participants/supporters, and carry out the practical steps of storing donated furniture. The campaign’s account was also used to narrate and frame the occupation as a response to an on-going homelessness emergency and called for a longer-term neighbourhood-focused approach to housing issues in Dublin’s north inner city, supported by the Irish Housing Network. This led to the renaming and relaunch of the occupation’s social media page as a local community group, Dublin Central Housing Action.

Apollo House: ‘Does Not End Here’
The Apollo House/HSH occupation unfolded at a similar intersection between legal conflict and attempts to use social media to rally support and narrate occupation, albeit on a more intense and high-profile scale. HSH’s page was used to confirm the occupation’s end on Thursday 12th January
2017, with a post giving the campaign’s press statement that ‘HSH have left Apollo House, but it Does Not End Here’. The campaign’s page was frenetically updated to publicise and share media coverage on what would be the occupation’s end-stages, having operated since 21st of December under an injunction order whose enforcement was delayed by the courts until 11th January. In the fortnight preceding the occupation’s end, HSH used the occupation Facebook page to spin-off public awareness of and conversation around emergency accommodation standards, as well as broader discussion of a homelessness emergency. On January 5th, HSH hosted and livestreamed a press conference in trade union Unite’s offices to launch the HSH Emergency Housing Plan.

For interviewees, the frenetic publicising efforts of the end-stages of the Apollo House occupation were the public façade behind which tensions inherent to the occupation’s coalition were escalating. As such, the HSH page provided a single voice publicly representing what was a more fragmented and at-the-time tense coalition. The HSH page was used to narrate the campaign’s end but this was a subject of internal and external tension. Internally, members of the coalition differed in their desired end to the campaign, with M03 noting how some people not connected to housing activist groups who were ‘just involved on their own’ vociferously ‘wanted somewhere to go every day and they wanted that buzz to continue, they wanted to take another building, really – and everyone was just like “no!”’ [chuckles]. Externally, HSH’s Facebook became a point-of-contact for press and public interrogation. This external tension was complicated by press and public scrutiny of the campaign’s use of donated funds. The campaign’s publicising efforts around finances and the end of the occupation relied on a two-pronged strategy of using news media to publicise the amount of money raised and how this was being spent, and following up with the public release via social media and the IHN’s website of detailed financial accounts in February. These publicising practices were an attempt to stave off what M01 described as how ‘the money… became one of the main kind of criticisms’. For M02, social media labour became a customer-services-style repetitious approach to emphasising how “we are preparing the accounts, we are preparing the accounts”, that was all we could say… That was the constant
thing we were putting out. And the whole time, the longer you wait for something like this, and the longer you delay something like this, obviously the more the conspiracies start going. So that's exactly what happened’. In effect, following the occupation’s end, HSH’s social media page carried out activist-public relations work to address and narrate the fallout from the campaign, and engage in responsive digital public engagement efforts.

**TBTC: ‘Dead before we were evicted’**

TBTC’s publicising practices differed in three key ways from second phase housing activism, and each of these differences was narrated by interviewees as learning or tactical evolution from earlier occupations. These were to not take monetary donations, not provide accommodation to vulnerable groups, and to deliberately overstay the injunction order on the Frederick Street building. M02 described this third difference by suggesting that ‘by the time the injunction was served on Frederick Street there was enough people involved or there was enough energy… there was enough people willing to stay and also willing to risk whatever could come from that. And then there seemed to be enough practical support on the outside that it made sense because, strategically, we could hold it’. The result of these differences was that the end stages of TBTC and the way they were narrated through activists’ publicising practices varied from earlier occupations. The eviction of occupiers from North Frederick Street on 11th September 2018 in many respects marked the ‘high point’ of the campaign and a boost in public engagement and awareness. However, identifying an end to TBTC is less clear-cut than was the case for earlier occupations. TBTC’s publicising practices placed less emphasis on press statements or updates, and the campaign never announced their withdrawal from Belvedere Place, the third, last, and least discussed of their occupations. TBTC’s withdrawal from Summerhill was narrated not as an ending but an expansion and the campaign’s decision to occupy multiple buildings was attributed to ‘boundless enthusiasm’ and the strategic benefits of having a second occupied building that was not under an active injunction order (M02). However, M03 described how ‘by the time we got to Belvedere… it was
definitely beginning to dwindle’, and M05 felt that TBTC ‘was dead before we were evicted that day in Frederick Street’.

TBTC’s occupation of multiple buildings and deliberate overstaying of the Frederick Street injunction order were both escalations of temporary political occupation tactics. The campaign also used social media to publicise ‘flash’ and ‘pop-up’ actions around housing demonstrations and shorter temporary occupations of Airbnb and the RTB which prolonged the campaign’s public engagement efforts. Each of these actions was accompanied by posts detailing what had occurred and some attempt at narrating these shorter occupations as part of a broader framing of TBTC as responding to the pervasive nature of the housing crisis. The end and aftermath of the campaign was marked by an effort to redirect energies and interest toward local communities, with eight new housing activist community group pages being launched in the two months following TBTC. This combination of occupying multiple buildings, overstaying an injunction order, and ‘popping up’ at Airbnb and the RTB resonates with Paul Watt’s (2016) description of the London-based Focus E-15 campaign’s efforts at becoming a Deluzoguattarian ‘nomadic war machine in the metropolis’, although TBTC lacked Focus E-15’s clear narrative framing of ‘social housing not social cleansing’ centred on the displacement of working-class mothers from regenerated housing estates.

Interviewees’ assessment of these publicising practices aimed at spinning-off from TBTC were ambivalent, with an overall sense that their efforts to broaden housing activism or renew the IHN were unsuccessful. Likewise, the campaign’s end was discussed as an unpleasant and fraught experience. Digital ethnographic data confirmed that only half of the eight new housing activist groups created during TBTC were still online and active as of 2021. All interviewees described TBTC’s trajectory as an initial upsurge in energy and enthusiasm, a subsequent decline that was countered by the eviction from Frederick Street, and a longer tail end of diminishing efforts to connect the specifics of the TBTC campaign back toward neighbourhood-focused activism. This spatio-temporal structuring differed from earlier occupations and meant that publicising practices toward the end of the campaign were also different, relying on smaller ‘pop up’ direct actions to
redirect public interest. For M02, TBTC ‘was an interesting kinda hybrid between the things we'd been doing already in terms of reaction [i.e. anti-eviction efforts] and just kinda stunt [e.g. Bolt Hostel, Apollo House]’. M02 described the campaign’s evolution and dwindling as a trajectory from ‘the early days of it, like lots of energy’ toward

‘it maybe went on so long that energy did dip a lot… that maybe started to happen in Apollo but Apollo we were kicked out so we... weren't maybe as ready for the complete dip in numbers that would happen towards the end… I think energy was just really depleted, not immediately after – I mean, after the eviction [from North Frederick Street] there was more interest again… These things come in waves, and it was, obviously, there was a sense of this is a little bit of a triumph – they really shot themselves in the foot by going in so heavy… there was a decent surge in interest for the new place in Belvedere and then that kinda petered out slowly over the course of a few weeks, I think people were just burnt out. I was burnt out. And I think we'd made enough points, and the media was bored of us [laughs], we could only do so many more things on social media and it became... more about people's personal safety than about anything else.’ (interview with M02, italics for emphasis mine).

M03 echoed a sense of ‘triumph’ around the Frederick Street eviction, which she interpreted as a major win for the campaign by noting how ‘it still has the most fucking... reach on the page when we're doing anything else 'cause of the Frederick Street eviction, it was something nuts, it was like 7,000 extra likes or something we got from that eviction [laughs] and we were like, “thank you Garda!”’. This relationship between the eviction’s violence as a negative, but the reach, ‘likes’, and public awareness of its social media publishing as a positive was indicative of social media’s ambivalent and reactive characteristics. Notably, the metrics of ‘doing well’ at public engagement and interaction were driven by and incentivised violence and conflict, rather than nuanced, sustainable, or safe activism.

M02, M03, and other interviewees who were involved in earlier occupations narrated TBTC as an experiment in sustaining high-intensity public-focused occupations which foundered as a question of energy. In this narrative, TBTC was reliant on high-profile confrontations or public-facing actions, which were delivering diminishing returns in terms of media and public interest (e.g. M02’s comment that ‘the media was bored of us’). Interestingly, interviewees who were not involved in earlier temporary political occupations tended to be more negative about TBTC, its publicising
practices, and its conclusion, and were critical of the extent to which internal organisational tensions and a lack of care created a physically and mentally damaging environment. When viewing digital ethnography data, M04 described how:

‘looking at all these peaks and troughs here [referring to diagram] I can almost see like the peaks and troughs [chuckles] of what was emotionally happening for us inside the occupations at the time… All those troughs, a lot of us, the younger enthusiastic student types, who weren’t seen as like master strategists within the fucking housing committee? There was no real practice of mutual care so you were just… in between [chuckles] these peaks, kind of like waiting out something sensational to happen… We were just kinda sitting in buildings all the time waiting for escalation points. And then all of the escalation points were like – people got hurt’ (interview with M04, italics for emphasis mine).

M05, who was similarly involved in TBTC but not in earlier occupations, described TBTC as having gone ‘from ecstatic to manic… It was non-stop. And I think like a lot of us that would’ve been around from the early days of it, by the end of it we were fucking totally fed up, and a lot of people just disappeared’. M05 ‘felt that Take Back the City was dead before we were evicted that day in, in Frederick Street’ but the eviction operated ‘kind of like a shot out of the blue’ and ‘the nature of the eviction… sort of by sheer chance propelled us to the front of the agenda again… when some of us were arrested, assaulted, whatever, and the protest the next day. But I don’t think we had the energy to really do anything after that to escalate further to do anything’. M06, who had been involved in HSH and TBTC, described this third phase of housing activism as a learning process, through which it became clear that housing activists were failing at identifying a ‘direct target… where you know who the bad person is, you know what to do to affect them, and you do that and then you leave… you don’t need to stay there all night… there’s no need for that kind of martyrdom’, with an overarching sense that to ‘build a movement, you can’t be dwindling in numbers but be growing… in terms of your targets’.

Overall, temporary political occupations showed that housing activists engaged in a range of publicising practices. These practices varied before, during, and after temporary political occupations as flashpoints of activist energy and public engagement. The publicising practices that defined
housing activism for participants, the media, and the public were almost always digital/material, with social media playing an essential role in allowing activists to produce and narrate contention. Furthermore, housing activist groups and individuals collaborating within them demonstrated critical and reflexive understanding of social media engagement as an important way for activist campaigns and groups to interact with and try to influence the public. These publicising practices accordingly should be recognised as forms of activist labour, creativity, and learning which evolve over time. In the next section, I position this reading of publicising practices within a wider understanding of what types of publics are created through digital/material contention, how activists interpret these publics, and how publicising practices highlight the digital’s ambivalent possibilities under communicative capitalism.

6.3 Digital/material contention, its internal/external publics, and mobilisation of ‘the people’ under communicative capitalism

‘I think that social media has changed now, to what it used to be. Now, it’s far more image-based and it’s far more… people will scroll, scroll, scroll and may not engage with what you’re saying for very long. So I think now like the snappier the better, and we’ve definitely learned in terms of our design skills’ (interview with M07).

6.3.1 The work of publicising practices in housing activism

As noted above and in chapters two and three, my use of ‘publicising’ is intended to capture a sense of action or active production, and how housing activists’ digital/material practices produced three main types of connected ‘publicness’ – the internal publics within housing activist groups, the external public audiences they relate to, and occupied buildings as temporary ‘makings’ of digital/material public space (see Figure 39). Through these practices of ‘making public’, housing activists sought to mobilise the external publics they imagined and interacted with in a broader politicisation of housing. Importantly, however, these three types of publics were shaped by tensions that the use of digital technologies, tools, and logics created for activism. Here, digital/material contention unfolded in the gap between publishing practices, public engagement, and the extractive role that digital
platforms play under communicative capitalism, Jodi Dean’s (2003, 2005) conceptualisation of contemporary neoliberal capitalism which I outlined in chapter two. In this section, I situate activists’ publicising practices within the broader framing of communicative capitalism, analysing both the internal/external publics created through digital/material contention and their affordances and limitations.

Publicising practices

![Diagram](image)

Figure 39 - Connections between internal and external publics within publicising practices.

The internal and external publics that housing activists’ digital/material contention created unfolded at an intersection between three framings of ‘public-ness’ in existing literature, ‘the public sphere’, ‘public space’, and ‘populism’, which are reconfigured under communicative capitalism. In chapter seven, I explore Dean’s work on political organising in greater detail, but here I use communicative capitalism to situate housing
activists’ publicising practices. My main argument is that a digital/material reading highlights how activists’ publicising practice repurpose digital technologies and social media in more collective and agentic ways than Dean’s argument permits. While this does not invalidate the problematic extractive, circular, and accelerative dynamics of digital technologies that Dean outlines, a digital/material reading provides a more practical and messy interpretation of the lived reality of public and collective contentious subjectivation. Mitchell’s (2003, 2020) framing of the production of ‘public space’ is useful here because of its processual emphasis on agency and foreclosure in urban space, which resonates with the dynamics that, for post-crash housing activism, play out in and through digital platforms and urban space.

Echoing Kitchin & Fraser’s (2020) work on slow computing, I highlight the ubiquity and pervasiveness of digital technologies in contemporary activism and argue that activists’ individual and collective responses to their relationships with technology were nuanced and considered. Activists’ individual and collective responses to the digital’s extractive, circular, and accelerative impacts on publicising practices took two main forms. Firstly, housing activists and groups were self-aware, and they reflected on, drew attention to, and/or tried to counter digital technologies’ impacts and influences. Secondly, housing activists and groups tried to mitigate the worst impacts or influences of digital technologies by collectivising their digital/material experiences and practices. I position and discuss a third response to the digital’s impacts in chapters seven and eight, where I outline how housing activism has changed over time and sought to limit of ‘deprioritise’ the digital.

6.3.2 Communicative capitalism and digital/material publicising practices – critiquing and mitigating the digital’s ambivalence

Housing activists’ publicising practices intersected with Dean’s conceptual assessment of communicative capitalism and its foreclosure of dissent in two main ways, seeking to critique and mitigate the digital’s ambivalent role in contemporary activism. The digital ethnographic overviews of social media data capturing housing activist social media accounts’ activities and
engagement presented in chapter five visualise the dynamics of the attention economy that Dean sees social media platforms as reliant on and propagating (e.g. interpassivity; the scarcity/finiteness of attention as resource; the abstraction of message as ‘content’). Importantly, however, housing activists’ discussions of their publicising practices demonstrated an awareness of this ‘fetish of activity’ dynamic and the dangers of falling into it. The remark from M07 which I use to start this section reflected activists’ interest in and engagement with the affordances and limitations of social media, and how these have changed over time. Interviewees discussed the importance of converting attention into action for both the internal publics of activist groups, who require volunteer labour, and for their sense of an external public, who they saw themselves as communicating with and attempting to mobilise. The emphasis on doing in activists’ publicising practices turned Dean’s reading of the fetish of activity inside out – the practical things that were being done were what was publicised, at least in part in the hopes that this type of public engagement would inspire others to join and take part in future housing activist actions, events, and groups. Empirical data collection complicated Dean’s conceptual framing of communicative capitalism, in which there is a fetishistic frenzy of online activity and participation, but little is happening.

Close analysis of housing activists’ publicising practices suggested that the interplay between consumption, digital technologies, and subjectivation was more complicated than Dean’s focus allows for. Digital ethnographic data collection supported Dean’s reading of interpassivity on the part of the vast majority of ‘the public’ with whom housing activists interacted and to whom their publicising practices were addressed. If housing activism can be understood as digital/material, it must also be understood that the level of commitment or effort involved in engaging with housing activism varies. Digital technologies and platforms are designed to make engagement and interaction as easy and streamlined as possible – as Kitchin and Fraser (2020, p. 5) note, ‘in many ways digital technologies do simplify things. The weight of some everyday problems has been reduced. A sense of convenience is created. Time and energy is seemingly saved’. Activists’ publicising practices, and the public engagement or interaction that these aimed to
promote, were often structured by, and took advantage of, the affordances that digital technologies offered, from social media updates to more specific fundraising efforts via GoFundMe. At times, the metrics, measures, and narrative-management of digital technologies were mentioned by interviewees as positive indicators that their efforts were making an impact or reaching a wide audience, like M03’s jubilant assessment of the TBTC page as having ‘the most fucking reach’. However, interviewees were also critical of digital technologies, and social media platforms in particular, and how these tools and logics had impacted post-crash housing activism. Echoing Dean’s critique of the interpassivity that prevails within communicative capitalism, interviewees more typically critiqued social media usage and publicising practices from a variety of angles, for example:

‘I think there’s a Facebook brand bible where it’s like [in a movie-trailer-type voice] “what if everybody in the world had a printing press!?” And that’s actually kind of ignorant, I think, because really the case is there’s only one printing press, and they own it… And the editorial values are geared towards sensationalism in the sense that, all these studies that the algorithm for, y’know, YouTube stuff, it takes you to crazy territory very quickly, or stuff that’s very compelling, or maybe just makes you angry or something, that’s what it likes to show you… the idea that if you focus on digital you’re getting a self-selecting sample, and that’s not what you want. So like rather than… posting two or three times a day, it’s actually kind of better to post less because you want to actually kind of meet people in real life, or through personal relationships’ (interview with M01).

‘The nature of a lot of socials [social media platforms] is you’re supposed the keep engagement going, that’s the way the algorithms are built, and I just – no. Not what I’m interested in… Social media, and this is like for everything, it’s only useful when it’s complimenting real connections with people, if you get me’ (interview with M02).

‘people love those outrage tweets where it’s all like, oh my jacks is in the kitchen and it’s a grand a month. Righteous outrage, but like, y’know, what does that going viral on social media really do? I’m kinda skeptical about like the impact of accounts like these, that just kinda draw attention to the issue, because… they tend to view themselves as having a fucking inordinate impact. They have some kind of impact, they start in anger and they start a conversation. I think ultimately today these types of accounts are necessary. They’re inspiring, in a certain sense. I mean, we don’t tend to think of things that give us very negative emotions as inspiring but they are inspiring accounts’ (interview with M04).

**Interpassivity, ‘active action’, and belonging in internal publics**

For housing activists, interviews and the digital ethnographic data that we looked at together turned around interpassivity, but also its refusal. Publicising practices that mitigated the dynamics of communicative
capitalism involved ‘being active’ and being active as part of a collective, which I describe as the ‘internal public’ of housing activist groups. The ‘being active’ of activism was a consistent topic of discussion, with interviewees describing how social media practices were intended to publicise what people were doing and could do to intervene in the housing crisis. Returning to the importance of doing within publicising, interviewees emphasised how practical actions, particularly to support occupations, contributed to a sense of belonging (at least for a time) to a ‘we’. The high-profile nature of Home Sweet Home, and its large-scale mobilisation of volunteers, was explained by M01 as an occupation which:

‘hit the right note at the right time, people were very angry about the very visible level of homelessness that had been rising quite sharply at that time and so people wanted to do something? They just wanted to do something. That’s partially why Apollo was so popular – I mean, I think at least seven or eight hundred people did at least one volunteering shift’ (interview with M01).

This resonated with M02’s assessment of Apollo House, and the distinction between donating to the GoFundMe or volunteering in support of the occupation, which she described by saying that:

‘People were eager to like physically do something… people are happy, if they have money, to give money a lot of the time, but they often will feel like [assumes a voice here] “I gave money every year and it’s still a problem, what the fuck is going on, maybe I should do something”. And you’re like “well, here’s something you can do”. People often will be very happy to be able to do something small, and that, like, it’s nice to be able to, like, facilitate, I suppose? Everyone, loads of people, doing that – because they might just be angry otherwise, or they might just feel like “god, I wish something could be done”’ (interview with M02).

Accordingly, interviewees offered nuanced thoughts on the trade-offs of social media publicising, and the role that social media played as an affective and practical influence on the ‘external public’ that housing activism has tried to mobilise. This large-scale mobilisation of the public, however, tended to be sporadic and, for the most part, structured around high-profile, high-energy, and intense temporary political occupations (although I outline how and why this has shifted in chapters seven, eight, and nine).

This desire to be active or do something was also a key factor in interviewees’ narratives of their own involvement in housing activism, their
identification with housing struggles, and their sense of themselves within the internal public of one or more housing activist groups. Interviewees often discussed their ‘activation’ in terms of a desire to do something practical in the face of post-crash austerity and worsening housing conditions – this reverses Dean’s emphasis on imaginary action and/or consumption as the terrain through which identity is constructed in a context of declining symbolic efficiency. For interviewees, direct action or activism’s practicality was what made it attractive, building from a desire to belong, but crucially necessitating active, as opposed to imaginary, action. Interviewees positioned housing activist publicising practices as part of their own personal stories of becoming and remaining active as an affirmative, social, and committed decision that differed from the more fleeting involvement of other ‘randomers’ or temporarily mobilised members of the external public. This sense of purpose was narrated as a form of collective identification that responded to the absence of clear institutions of party, union, family, or church that the Dean and Žižek’s Lacanian reading of the decline of symbolic efficiency is connected to, for example:

‘I had recently gotten back from Istanbul, which had been during the Gezi Park occupation and the kind of uprising or protests there, and having been there and around that I was kind of very interested in getting involved in something… radical, I suppose? Or actually, like, getting involved or doing stuff. And so, through people I met in We’re Not Leaving, I was asked or invited to help or join or do stuff with Housing Action Now’ (interview with M01);

‘The idea of the Bolt Hostel and seeing that it was possible, I think, was really important… like, it wasn’t just a hypothetical… To see it for your own eyes, and, like, to know people that were involved in it I think was really, really important in going further with housing activism and direct action, definitely, for me’ (interview with M06);

‘Yeah, I was completely disconnected – I probably would’ve had some experience with like student politics and student societies and the kinda Trotskyist groups that would’ve been around the colleges, would’ve been how I initially got involved. And then I kinda fell out of that and I was looking for a way to become politically active or to become politically engaged with something that was happening that maybe would’ve fit my politics more, that I felt comfortable with or that I felt was useful’ (interview with M08);

‘I think I was drawn in, partly by Apollo House itself as a spectacle and partly by just frustration. 2015/2016, the [housing] crisis wasn’t as pronounced as it is now but it was definitely starting to emerge, starting to become a real problem – you could see it. And then my own personal experience of renting, getting kicked out of a place because the landlord was selling or there was some money to be made, and the constant transience of living in different places. Getting fed up with that and wanting to do
Accordingly, for interviewees, the desire to ‘do something practical’ or active action differed from Dean’s emphasis on imaginary action and belonging. Furthermore, the active action that interviewees discussed as important to their own trajectories within housing activism often turned around and contributed to longer-term activist infrastructures, through community groups like Dublin Central Housing Action, and involvement in a wider milieu of independent spaces like Jigsaw, which I discuss in greater detail in chapter nine. Interviewees involved in first and second-phase housing activism tended to narrate their involvement in housing activism as a refusal of a wider experience of austerity, precarity, and transient existence in Dublin’s private rental sector. In contrast to post-TBTC housing activism, which I discuss in chapters seven and eight, this identification was not connected to a sense of an emplaced community, with M03 noting how ‘a lot us were involved in DCHA I suppose because the demographic of the group was just young renter college type, and a lot of us just identified with the group… a lot of us were in groups that we necessarily didn’t actually live in the catchment area’.

This combination of pursuing active action and the ensuing sociality or construction of social relationships was narrated as mitigating some of the worst individualising and commodifying impacts of communicative capitalism and the lived experiences of the post-crash city. However, these were the key distinctions that interviewees drew between themselves within the ‘internal publics’ of housing activist groups and the ‘external public’ that their publicising practices aimed to mobilise. Interestingly, while all interviewees described an occupation as important to their ‘becoming activist’, they also felt that occupations were not effective in recruiting ‘members of the public’ into housing activism. For M07, social media’s usefulness for housing activism related to the ability to translate interest or engagement into practical action, or ‘it’s a good recruitment tool if there’s something to recruit people into’. For M02, who distinguished between peoples’ willingness to donate money and the desire to do something, ‘a lot
of people do want to be able to do something but it’s hard to give them something to do, that they feel is meaningful’. For M03, this desire to be useful and ‘do something’ required management as a part of activist labour within occupations. Because Take Back The City did not offer accommodation, this meant:

‘for people who were volunteering to do shifts, they had really fuck all to do. So you’d all these new people coming in that were kind of sitting around like spare thicks, d’you know what I mean? There was a few of us that were then like maybe doing like the social media or whatever, so trying to get people in, involved in a way that they could actually [do] something was a bit harder in the three [buildings]… [For M03, who had been involved in previous actions] I could go in and sit somewhere and feel comfortable because I’m not like [assumes voice] “I should be doing something”, d’you know that kind of way? But people that were like out, outside of this, or volunteering to do shifts, were kinda the ones that there really wasn’t anything for them to do at that stage’ (interview with M03).

The distinction that M03 draws between people ‘who were involved in the groups and had been involved in stuff before’ and people ‘outside of this, volunteering to do shifts’, was a motif that recurred in other interviews – M03 described this as ‘a cliqueishness’, and M04 acknowledged that ‘it can feel very intimidating if you’re coming into the occupations and people like me are there all the time but unfortunately it was people like me who were there all the time that kept it going during the lull’.

M08, who became involved in activism through TBTC, described the inverse, whereby ‘getting involved’ for them began through social media engagement with the public-facing façade of the occupation. M08 described this process of becoming active as ‘a bit intimidating’ or ‘daunting’, saying how ‘it’s harder to translate this information directly to some kind of like expectation of reality, I found, for someone without the experience of it… It’s a bit of a leap of faith and waiting to see what happens’. Having been recruited through social media to do a shift in a TBTC occupation, M08 described the process of coming to understand housing activism as:

‘a shift, once you get involved in something like this… the people you see or the kinda echo chamber of social media is very different, and the things you see online… like, people are blank slates when you go in, you don’t have an idea of how people carry on or portray themselves on the internet, which I think is a lot of the part of activist culture, is that online performance or the way you kinda deliver information about the causes you’re involved in or what you believe in. So it was like going and meeting people from a bunch of different kinda traditions and backgrounds, em, without really
having any contextualisation of that. Like, not really having the history of oh, those people, those are the dissident Republicans, there’s the Trots, these are the DCHA people… I feel like that was the first thing, which was just like having a lot of conversations with different people who’re from kinda walks of life that I wouldn’t have had any encounters with before that. The like waiting around and the slow kind of emptiness at that time where nothing really happened inside the occupations and you’re kind of just waiting and waiting. There’s a lot of, like, there was interactions with people that I suppose at the start I was very naïve about, without having some of that context… I think that kind of became a bit more aware to me over time, the, the kinda subcultural aspects of things’ (interview with M08).

M08 was the only interviewee who followed the idealised trajectory that activists’ publicising efforts set out (e.g. recruitment by volunteering through social media and subsequent activity and involvement in housing activist groups). However, for M08, the desire to be active or involved translated into longer-term activity and involvement because of the social interactions that unfolded when ‘waiting around’ is comparable to Merrifield’s (2012) work on subject formation through the politics of encounter. M08’s account contrasted both with Dean’s description of the fetish of activity and the connection that other interviewees drew between activity or involvement as the means of identifying with collective struggle. Coupled with other interviewees’ reflections, this suggested that the sense of belonging in contemporary housing activism came through social relationships that were fostered during periods where action and specific types of inaction coincided, rather than action itself. It was these periods ‘where nothing really happened’ wherein M08 described his education and, for want of a better term, activation. For M08, this occurred through learning to recognise and position oneself within ‘a bunch of different kinda traditions and backgrounds’, a description that echoed with other interviewees’ senses of housing activism as a particular form of sociality that became more comfortable over time. This sense of sticking around and becoming comfortable in an uncertain, shifting, and, in some sense, uncomfortable digital/material milieu offers an alternative sense of collective identity that does not rely on the type of symbolic efficiency that Dean sees as central to political action.
Collectively mitigating ‘ego’ within internal and toward external publics

Dean’s emphasis on democracy as ideal and its propagation under communicative capitalism was also somewhat mitigated by activists’ focus on housing and disavowal of electoral politics, which I discuss in greater detail in chapter eight. Interviewees were often critical of electoral politics and sometimes connected their involvement in activism to a rejection of electoral politics, with M02 offering the blunt assessment that ‘the voting thing was useless’. For most interviewees, housing activism was framed as an alternative to political party involvement, and generally positioned as more direct, and grassroots- or community-focused. However, M05 addressed the broader electoral political party context within which housing activism unfolded by critiquing activists’ failure to address housing ‘as a national political issue’ because ‘there’s a suspicious view of all political parties’ (interview with M05). While M05 connected this tension to political parties, other interviewees ascribed these divisive instincts to ‘egos’ and ‘eliquishness’ within a small and somewhat insular Dublin ‘scene’. For M01, being involved in the planning of temporary political occupations was to be avoided as he ‘didn’t really want to be involved in the run-up planning stuff’ [as] there’s a lot of internal politics involved in things like that stuff’. M01 described online criticism of and hostility toward the Apollo House occupation from people who had been involved in the Bolt Hostel, ascribing this to:

‘many egos, really… It was hostile and, y’know, it would seem, on face value, it would look like attacking it [Home Sweet Home/Apollo House occupation] from the Left… but really it’s just egos and resentment or whatever. And that happens… y’know, Ireland’s small, Dublin’s small, and… in some ways… the like “activism” or whatever scene can be quite insular as well’.

M02, who did social media labour for HSH and TBTC, similarly saw ‘ego’ as something disruptive to be managed, particularly in using social media for publicising purposes. One of M02’s main recommendations for maintaining housing activist social media accounts was to collectivise and depersonalise the labour of doing so. Speaking more generally, M06 described the management of ‘in-fighting and disagreements’ and ‘insider stuff’ as central to ‘any kind of organising’. Importantly, the internal publics of housing
activist groups, which operated behind the public façade of the group’s social media page, mitigated the atomising and individualising dimensions of communicative capitalism through a conscious construction of the internal public as a collective. This involved in-person meetings but also on-going digitally mediated collaboration and communication, which was relied on to carry out the publicising practices of the group as a public-facing entity.

M02 emphasised the need for on-going and collaborative discussion about how to ‘run’ housing activist group social media pages, so that ‘it wasn’t about one person running the page, so that it wasn’t just about one person’s ego, the page becoming an extension of someone’s ego’. The internal public behind the page’s publicising practices involved ‘more than one person, generally, and there would be chats going on behind the scenes, as always’. The labour of social media publicising practices was particularly seen as requiring a behind-the-scenes discursive sphere. This was comparable to Habermas’ (1999) sense of the importance of the norms of a public sphere, in which ‘private people’ act together to form an internal and purposeful public. However, in this case it was structured around mutually agreed discursive norms. Interviewees who did social media labour had been involved in these types of digital/material internal groupings, where social relations and communicative norms were collectively managed. These were described as being ‘a self-selected group… group chat of the kind of core of people that would’ve been doing the social media stuff, managing the Facebook and the Twitter’ (M05), or the practice of groups having ‘like a social media volunteer group so a lot us became admins then to like post when other people were off and whatever’ [M07]. The internal public of these types of ‘social media work’ groups was described as playing an important role in controlling the publicising practices and discursive norms of the housing activist social media page that interacted with the external public, with M05 describing how:

‘we tended not to kinda give control of social media to other people because there were a couple of, like, as there always are, eh, headers, so like there were times where people were making [pauses] remarks inside the occupation that weren’t great… so we did kind of keep it tight, we didn’t want a disaster where someone was getting on and speaking on behalf of the coalition and saying something that didn’t reflect where we were coming from. I remember it was quite agonising though… the most contentious
things of all sometimes were the [social media/media] statements and what we’d say about specific actions and stuff… when we were actually trying to get a message out I remember it being quite fraught to decide what it was that we were trying to emphasise at a given time’.

‘That’s a real person’: Digital/material sociality as on-going relationship

Importantly, the digitally mediated characteristics of these ‘internal public spheres’ could be sources of tension. For M02, ‘WhatsApp and Signal groups – they’re fine. They can be absolutely hell sometimes, if you’re in a big group…’. However, M02 described how she had ‘definitely been in group chats where they just spiralled and we had to shut them down. Or like the purpose of them, you have this group chat and it’s for a particular say action or occupation, and that’s over, and people still [chuckles] still keep trying to get the party going [laughs]. It’s like when everyone has left and there’s one person left in your house and you’re like will you fuck off [laughs]’. The parallel that M02 drew here between a party and a group chat reflected how the internal publics of housing activist groups were sites of digital/material sociality that could be difficult to manage, a point which M02 further illustrated by describing how group chats function best when they are:

‘clear about their purpose… and if someone does go against the purpose or, like, starts wandering off topic, you need to be able to say “okay, not here”’, like, that’s not what we’re here for… And actually the way people react to that really depends on how you know them already as well. So they [group chats] do compliment real life. They have to compliment real life connections… If it’s complete randomers in the group chat, they’ll be like “fuck off!” [laughs]. Very easily. And y’know I’d be the same, I’d be like, I don’t know this person, what the fuck are they talking about. But if you know them, you’re like [sighs], ah yeah… and I think you can kind of come back to like, is there a real life connection of any type between me and this person? Have I met them before? Ever [laughs]. And even if it’s just someone you’ve just met because they’ve just joined up or something, you’re like, grand, well, that’s a real person’.

Accordingly, the internal public of the housing activist group that digital communication facilitated was subject to discursive norms and practices, similar to Habermas’ framing of the public sphere, but these internal publics were often structured around and reliant on the overlap between digital/material offline or in-person social connections. For M02 and others, the role of ‘real life connections’ within the internal publics of housing activist groups could mitigate the difficulties that the digital communication
tools they used to collaborate could introduce. For example, M08 described how when ‘dramatics and tensions play out online, there’s no real accountability to that, there’s like that there’s the de-personalisation element of not having to chat to someone face-to-face’. This occurs in the absence of active action being publicised, at times ‘when nothing’s really happening, or there’s a lull, things do shift more online to our back and forth chats, to angry comments of why aren’t we doing anything. Why is nothing happening?’. Some interviewees highlighted how an inability to manage these types of conflict could have negative repercussions for the broader housing activist collective and its relations to the ‘external public’, with M07 describing how ‘there were times when our minutes were leaked by people who kind of had come in and were really pissed off about different things’.

For M02, these types of leaks and tensions could be partly mitigated by a sense of ‘real life connection’. However, this sociality could also be policed through the affordances of digital technologies and platforms, which activists exercised agency in engaging with by finding loopholes and repurposing digital tools. In HSH, for example, M02 described how the influx of volunteers made it difficult to develop the ‘real life connections’ which she had highlighted as playing an important role in communication and internal public cohesion. In the absence of this within the expanded HSH social media team, on which M02 worked with ‘a few people who I don’t think I ever even met’, the social media team outsourced work to people working from home or remotely by having ‘someone who had to… monitor the randomers we were letting access our Facebook’ overseeing

‘a dummy account, just like a fake personal account, that had low-level editor access, with very limited permissions. And people were allowed to sign into the dummy account then, they were given the password for that, and that password was changed like every day… It was called, eh, Apalla Hoose [M02 and interviewer laugh]… I think now if you tried to do that Facebook would shut that fake account down right away. They know what you’re at, like’.

As this specific example suggests, housing activists’ communication practices were often creative and repurposed or created new affordances through inventive uses of digital technologies and platforms. These communicative practices were also structured around and attempted to work
through conflicts and tensions within housing activist groups, which could in turn be exacerbated by the demands of specific types of communicative practices.

6.4 Conclusion
Temporary political occupations played a contradictory role in the digital/material sociality of housing activism. On the one hand, occupations staged political confrontations in urban space, taking and making public vacant buildings. This process of contentiously making public was used to narrate a call to the external public as an audience to be mobilised to action and intervention in the prevailing status quo of the housing system. Occupations targeted the Local Authority and state, highlighting their failure to address increasing homelessness, and, in TBTC, private property owners and, in the specifics of Summerhill Parade, ‘slum landlords’ (Slumleaks, 2018) running overcrowded rentals. Occupied buildings were digitally/materially mediated, a point which I return to in chapter nine, and the entanglements of occupation social media pages and activists’ temporary holding of urban space worked as sites of the digital/material political that captured media and public attention. On the other hand, the digital/material labour of running an occupation relied on the temporariness of the tactic itself, with even the highly dedicated activists I interviewed being candid about the difficulties and tensions that these temporary public spaces created and struggled to work through. The ability to make and hold occupations as digital/material public spaces was unsustainable, in part because of the legal framework’s prioritisation of private property rights and ordering of urban space, but also in part because the external and internal publics that occupations created could not cohere. Managing the external digital/material public, who mainly engaged with occupations through social and news media, was a difficult organisational task to carry-out in the intense and stressful time-spaces of occupying. Even when ‘the people’ could be mobilised, the internal public that they were being organised by and recruited into was itself an at times tumultuous setting, in which individual and collective sociality were often strained by the digital/material settings that created them. Ultimately, the recurrence of temporary political occupations
and the activist publicising practices that developed around them gave rise to an unsustainable interplay between the internal and external publics they created, despite efforts at adapting the message or improving the focus of the occupation tactic over time. It is this question of the production and organisation of housing activism, and how this changed over time, that I turn to in chapter seven.

Overall, digital ethnographic data and interviewee accounts of activists’ publishing practices complicate and nuance Dean’s reading of struggles under communicative capitalism. Interviewees described a fetish of activity within housing activist campaigns but articulated a distinction between activity for the sake of activity and the sense of belonging to a collective engaged in struggle. The interpassivity and decline of symbolic efficiency that Dean sees as fundamental components of communicative capitalism were countered by the sociality that housing activists built around, during, through, and after temporary political occupations. Rather than attending to a democratic ideal, housing activists’ reflections on doing and the materiality of struggle threw up tensions between the personal and the political, the individual and the collective, and how best to organise in contemporary contexts. I turn to this in the next chapter.

Housing activist groups, and individuals within them, deployed critiquing and mitigative approaches to what they saw as the harmful impacts of digital technologies. This critique and mitigation structured the publicising practices that housing activist groups used to communicate between themselves as ‘internal publics’ and the ‘external public’ as audience whom they sought to mobilise. Temporary political occupations played a prominent role in post-crash housing activist groups’ construction of internal publics and their appropriation of social media platforms and vacant spaces as digital/material spaces ‘made public’ for contentious purposes. Activist assessments of and reflections on temporary political occupations as a recurring tactic foregrounded the importance of converting attention into action, most often through volunteer labour, but also highlighted the limitations of temporary political occupations as highly publicised ‘spectacles’.
Chapter 7 – ‘Join the union + raised fist emoji’: From mobilising to organising in digital/material contention

‘And finally, we have to realise that all politics is organised, and that the most difficult question is probably that of what type of organisation we need’ – Alain Badiou (2015, p. 49).
‘For our demands most moderate are, we only want the earth’ – James Connolly, quoted in CATU Ireland Training and Education materials.

7.1 Introduction
In this chapter, I use organising to answer the project’s second set of research questions, which related to how digital/material contention is situated, produced, and changes over time. The chapter uses Rodrigo Nunes’ (2014, 2021) work to outline how organisation structures housing activism, with digital ethnography and interview data being used to dissect the organising practices, forms, and forces that have evolved between the second and third phase of post-crash housing activism. In the second half of the chapter, I focus on a shift in what Nunes would describe as housing activist organisational forms/forces, which interviewees narrated as a move away from mobilising toward organising, and specifically tenant organising. I introduce the Community Action Tenants Union (CATU) and connect the trajectory of post-TBTC housing activism to the contemporary Left political literature on organisation that the chapter draws from, before unpacking this shift as a question of mediation in chapter eight. Understanding organising practices, and the positioning of organisation as a process more generally, is necessary for understanding how contention is produced in contemporary digital/material settings, in which the digital components of collective organising play an important but often maligned role.

7.2 Organising practices, forms, and forces in digital/material contention

7.2.1 Organisational forms: Teams, groups, and coalitions
I outlined the practical digital/material labour that produced post-crash housing activism in chapter five. This labour was structured by housing activists’ organising practices, forms, and forces. Here, Nunes’ (2021) distinction between forms and forces is useful because it distinguishes between the former as ‘the temporary, more or less fragile stability of the
relations that compose them’ (ibid, p. 76) and the latter as the forces (internal and external) that act on them. This means that the two terms are distinct but related, as ‘every organisational form is only ever good for a determinate end, in determinate circumstances, there being none that would be good absolutely. In its existence over time, as the forces that act on it change, every form necessarily faces questions of the “how much” type: how much autonomy? how much coordination? how much planning? how much spontaneity?’ (ibid, italics in original). Nunes uses forces to think mediation as the form that organisation takes between theory and practice, which I pick up on in the next chapter. Here, I focus on Nunes’ distinction between forms and forces to dissect how housing activists’ digital/material labour was structured by organising practices which produced contingent but distinct organising forms within housing activism, typically described as ‘teams’ or a ‘team structure’, ‘groups’, and ‘coalitions’ by interviewees. These temporarily stable organising forms, which I describe as assemblages of the human and non-human, were shaped by internal and external organising forces, with the iterative use of temporary political occupation tactics creating intense labour, time, and energy demands, and straining the social relations within organising forms. In this section, I describe these dynamics, with a particular focus on TBTC and the campaign’s efforts to resolve these strains by learning from and adapting some of the tactics of the Bolt and HSH occupations. Interviewees narrated these efforts as largely unsuccessful and connected TBTC’s failures to a subsequent shift ‘from mobilising to organising’, which I discuss in the chapter’s next section.

The housing activist labour that I discussed in chapter five produced through three main types of organising forms within the ‘internal public’ of housing activism, which I outlined in chapter six. These were teams, groups, and coalitions (diagrammed in Figure 40). ‘Teams’ were functionally differentiated groupings based on labour (e.g. admin, care/support, or media) that unfolded behind the public façade or within the ‘internal public’ of a housing activist group or coalition. Housing activist groups (e.g. DCHA) had their own internal team structures, with individuals in the group contributing labour that could be continuous (i.e. maintaining the social media page) or sporadic (i.e. eviction resistance), but was typically digitally/materially
organised. Coalitions varied within post-crash housing activism. The IHN as a ‘network’ or grouping of groups aspired to provide a long-term association between and across housing activist groups. This long-term organisational form differed from the other main type of housing activist coalition, which focused on specific occupation campaigns, like HSH as a coalition of ‘activists, unions, and celebrities/artists’ or TBTC as a coalition of housing, migrant rights, and student activist groups. Both types of coalitions involved co-ordination between a number of locally-rooted housing activist groups (e.g. Dublin Central Housing Action/DCHA) and other stakeholders, who were sometimes sectorally rather than spatially grouped, as was the case with many IHN member groups (e.g. SPARK – Single Parents Acting for the Rights of our Kids), or other types of formal or informal groups (e.g. Left political parties, trade unions, or the more diffuse ‘celebrity/artist’ stakeholders in HSH). These three organisational forms can be understood as nested (Figure 40), with teams typically existing either within specific groups or temporarily being created in coalitions to meet the demands of running temporary political occupations. A group might consist of multiple teams, which may share overlapping members, and some individuals may be members of multiple groups. These three layers of organisational forms (team, group, coalition) were temporary arrangements of social relations that structured housing activist labour and were subject to both internal and external forces pushing them together and pulling them apart. Building from Nunes’ focus on forms as ‘the temporary, more or less fragile stability of the relations that compose them’ (ibid, p. 76), teams, groups, and coalitions can be understood as human and non-human assemblages produced by housing activists’ digital/material labour and sociality. Sometimes, these forms were pre-emptive efforts at organising digital/material labour and social relations, like the ‘admin team’ that M06 described within the IHN as ‘a little bit big for what we were actually doing on the ground’ prior to HSH. At other times, teams, groups, and coalitions were reactive and, rather than being aspirational, were engaged in high-profile public and direct action while struggling to organise a united internal public or organisational form that could contain the social relations and energy that had been mobilised, which describes the later temporary political occupation campaigns (HSH and
TBTC). In this section I use these later campaigns, and TBTC in particular, to outline the organising practices, forms, and forces that have evolved over time in Dublin’s post-crash housing activism, before detailing how and why activists have consciously sought to change these in the wake of TBTC.

Figure 40 - Visualising organising forms in post-crash housing activism. Teams can exist with or across groups and coalitions, for example almost all of the DCHA media team (3-4 people) were part of the Apollo House media team, which was larger.

7.2.2 Digital/material organisational forms, communication practices, and learnings

Importantly, all three organisational forms were digitally/materially publicised, organised, and mediated. Housing activists’ publicising practices, as outlined in chapter six, produced teams, groups, and coalitions as ‘internal publics’ which attempted to mobilise the external public that they imagined themselves as interacting with through social and news media. Housing activists used digital technologies and tools to organise the social relations of team, group, and coalition forms, whose human and non-human elements can also be understood as assemblages. Assemblage, which I introduced in chapter three, is Deleuze and Guattari’s term for the contingent composition,
decomposition, and recomposition of relations between agentic elements, which can be humans, materials, technologies, norms, events, or organisations, and assemblages of elements produce and are produced by spatialities like place, space, or scale, which are themselves relational. Housing activist organising forms are digital/material assemblages of the social relations, practices, and technologies that produce housing activism. Behind the public façade and publicising practices that media team labour produced, the organisational forms of post-crash housing activism were created through digital/material communication and labour. Labour, which I discussed in detail in chapter five, was digitally/materially structured both in terms of how volunteers were recruited (e.g. Google Form sign-ups) but also in terms of some types of volunteer labour being digital/material (e.g. social media team work). All three types of organisational form were typically organised around collaborative communication channels that structured social relations, which I discussed in chapter six.

The communication practices of post-crash housing activism reflected how sociality and social interactions were digitally/materially organised as an interplay between ‘real life connections’ and ‘complete randomers’ in housing activist teams, groups, and coalitions, both during and beyond temporary political occupations. Importantly, the outreach/admin labour that I discussed in chapter five was one of the main digital/material organising practices that structured housing activism, particularly during occupations. In social media data and interviews, ‘admin’ as a term tended to describe a nebulous range of organising practices and labour focused on ‘data and people management’, which included internal communications (particularly in terms of minute-taking at meetings) and external communications (especially in contacting volunteers). In this interplay between internal and external, ‘admin’ was a particularly generative form of activist labour. ‘Admin’ tended to structure, organise, and, in some sense, call into being the organisational forms of housing activism, in terms of ‘teams’ (e.g. ‘admin’, ‘care/support’) within the internal publics of housing activist groups (e.g. DCHA) and groupings of groups (e.g. the IHN, or temporary coalitions like HSH or TBTC). In turn, the a) functional differentiation of and b) high demands for volunteer activist labour that temporary political
occupations created led to particularly intense types of purposeful sociality, which activist interviewees often reflected on as problematic or ‘learning points’ that they tried to address in subsequent organising.

Organising Apollo House
Interviewees who were involved in Apollo House described three main and interconnected tensions during the HSH campaign that ‘admin’ organising practices struggled to address – these were labour, hierarchy, and ‘ego’. Interviewees connected these tensions to HSH as a sudden shift in the scale of housing activist organising, with the occupation of Apollo House being a more ambitious project than the IHN groups had been planning for. For M10, the IHN, and its two most active member groups at the time, DCHA and North Dublin Bay Housing Crisis Committee, planning an occupation as a way of:

‘learning from the Bolt, learning from the smaller occupations, smaller direct actions. Having a structure, like a kind of way of making decisions all done in advance. So we had meetings with the unions and all, in Unite [Trade Union Headquarters]… about that, and started planning out and structuring it and all, and they were like “cool, cool”, and they were like, “oh, well, we’re moving next week”. And, ah, we’d need a bit more time. So there was that tension from the start – but exciting, all the same’ (interview with M10).

The IHN’s team structure, which was established during and after the Bolt Hostel, was an important factor in the network’s positioning within the HSH coalition, wherein the unions and the celebrity artists were reliant on the IHN to organise the occupation’s practicalities and to provide care for the residents offered accommodation in Apollo House. Interviewees highlighted how the IHN’s team structure was translated to run Apollo House, frequently describing their involvement as part of one of four teams (media, admin, outreach, and care/support). However, the intense labour of the occupation and its scale shift was narrated as a source of internal and external pressure for the teams and housing activist groups whose labour structured the occupation. M03 noted how she and others on the care/support team were ‘there every single day, sometimes we were there for 24 hours, we fucking slept there then’. The intense sociality that this labour fostered contributed to internal tensions within the care/support team’s efforts to respond to the
complex needs of Apollo House’s residents, which was a day-to-day struggle. M03 described this day-to-day labour as demanding and noted how ‘if you weren’t there for one day and next of all, you come back, and someone’s going around calling themselves the team leader… this hierarchy kinda did come out of nowhere, and that’s definitely a learning curve I think for further actions down the line. People appointed themselves as this team leader role and stuff and that kind of took over, their own kind of thing in a way’. M09 described a similar experience on the admin/outreach team during HSH, suggesting that

‘every campaign has it, but Apollo House I think uniquely had this – just certain people really relished the idea of getting to be the boss of certain things… I think there was a few people who, y’know, the power just went to their head a little bit… Y’know, usually, like, with organising or any kind of voluntary thing, obviously you’re doing it for a reason but there’s also… there’s the camaraderie between you and the other people… you’re kind of just buzzing off the energy that the thing is generating. But with Apollo, sometimes it was just kinda – people got really into boss mode, and, y’know, it got a bit kinda annoying… This might sound crass, and maybe it’s harsh, but I think there were certain people trying to make a name for themselves, and make, y’know, kinda, a bit of career-boosting going on. And that kinda soured the experience a little bit’.

Here, the emergence of hierarchy within specific teams was connected to a wider perception of what interviewees typically described as ‘ego’ or individualistic tendencies. Ego was the term that four interviewees used as a euphemism to describe ‘egos and resentment or whatever… internal political and egos and stuff’ (M01), ‘vain egotistical perspective[s]’ (M04), and the ‘feeding into a sense of ego’ (M08) within housing activism, in which organising forms had to create accountability and collective norms so that ‘any ego that might pop out is kind of kept in check by others in the group’ (M02). During HSH, M03 described these individualistic tendencies as particularly prominent for the care/support team and their intersection with the assortment of volunteer ‘soup run’ groups who ‘just wanted that buzz [of the occupation] to continue’. Importantly, interviewees tended to describe ego as a key tension within the wider HSH coalition. The HSH coalition of housing activists, trade unions, celebrities/artists, and soup runs was described as a site of tension by interviewees, who described how, over time, ‘things began to split… between the artists and the unions and stuff’ (M03).
Interviewees described how ‘one particular character in the unions was complaining he was getting a lot of flak over the occupation’ (M03), and ‘the celeb elements’ were critiqued as having ‘wanted it to be a kind huge, like, cause’ without ‘any idea how they were going to transform this theatrical element into actual political action’ (M07). The gap between the inner work of running the occupation, which largely fell to housing activist and soup run groups, and the more external symbolic narrative support offered by the unions and celebrities/artists was a fundamental tension, with M06 ruefully describing how ‘there’d always be kinda people knocking around… some of the organisers were, like, artists… and then there was [trade union official] and stuff, and there was an aspect of publicity to being involved with it for people like that. So they might be in the building, but they might not be any use to you [laughs]’. M10 described himself as having been, at the start of the occupation, ‘the one to be like fuck off, you are not allowed in the building to most of the trade union [and] artist people because they all wanted to come in and take selfies and do all this shit, and I was like “fuck off” so they really hated me’. Per M10, there was ‘definitely a tension’ between the IHN’s work within the occupation and the wider coalition as a form of public engagement, but this public engagement was necessary because ‘you need the encouragement… the big events and parties and music sessions and all that, they do give a good buzz and sense of community in a way’. This ‘buzz’, for M10, where ‘you have hundreds and hundreds of people and you have people buzzed all around the island’, was the main way that tensions could be temporarily mitigated. This was only possible, however, when activists could ‘lean into there, where there’s so much energy, and you just go for it and there’s no point in over-thinking the tensions or contradictions at that point but that maybe comes back to haunt you eventually when things start breaking down’.

Organising Take Back The City

TBTC functioned quite differently as an organising coalition, as member groups were mainly housing, migrant/reproductive rights, and student activist groups. The campaign’s relational articulation focused on occupying vacant, privately-owned buildings, and criticising conditions in the private rental
sector, rather than providing emergency accommodation. Interviewees who had been involved in HSH described TBTC as an effort at learning, and in some senses, recovering from the difficulties and burnout of HSH. M02 captured this by suggesting that:

‘going into it there was a bit of, like, *anyone who had been in Apollo or around it, or talked to anyone who’d been heavily involved, was like “we’re gonna do it right this time!”* [laughs]. In the media end of things, I was like, we’re not gonna have any other randomer pipping us to the post and, like, changing the plans without telling anyone, and *it’s all within our control here*”. Em. So that was nice, having the control’.

In chapter six, I outlined how interviewees’ assessment of TBTC was narrated differently by those involved in housing activism prior to TBTC, who tended to be more positive, and those for whom TBTC was their first experience of housing activism, who tended to be more negative. Memorably, M04 (one of the latter) described the social media data and publicising practices of the TBTC campaign as ‘peaks and troughs’ of ‘escalation points’ and being ‘in these bitchy little hovels between [chuckles] these peaks, y’know, kind of like waiting out something sensational to happen’. Importantly, the gap in how these publicising ‘peaks and troughs’ were experienced reflected the organising practices structuring the division of labour during TBTC. M04 and M05, who had both become involved in TBTC through student activism, described tensions within the occupied buildings as mainly unfolding between the younger student occupiers as ‘fucking grunt workers’ (M04), and the security team, who were ‘very kinda strict’ and ‘ultra’ (M05). This uneven distribution of labour was keenly felt as an uneven experiencing of the material demands of sustaining occupations of buildings that were, after Summerhill Parade, described as ‘horrible’, ‘grim’ (M03), ‘dirty, filthy, old’, ‘kips’ (M04), and ‘really disgusting… with no flushing toilet and no water and no electricity’ (M06).

TBTC’s decision to overstay the injunction order on the Frederick Street occupation was an important tipping point for organising practices within the campaign. On the one hand, overstaying the injunction order was seen by interviewees involved in earlier occupations as a strategic and feasible win. For M10, TBTC represented ‘probably in a psychological way… some healing of the older stuff. We actually were prepared this time
to break an injunction and to hold ground… it was fucking great, it was really enjoyable, it was so fun’. On the other hand, overstaying the injunction exacerbated internal organising tensions, which were being strained by resentments over the division of labour and the material reality of spending long periods of time in vacant buildings. Interviewees who spent more time inside occupied buildings during TBTC were more negative in their assessment:

‘With the Frederick Street one, things started to dwindle as well though inside…—even the people showing up for shifts, it just wasn’t as buzzy, there wasn’t as much going on’ (M03);

‘Frederick Street was where, like, it all went wrong… they were all kips after Summerhill Parade. And, like, d’you know, it was just, like, [laughs] increasingly volatile people sitting inside these kips going nuts. So yeah, there was definitely, like, a clear, I suppose, disconnect there’ (M04);

‘I think, like, I mentioned how tired people were and there was a lot of tension inside… There were a lot of tensions, a lot of disagreements, all the meetings were very fraught whenever they happened’ (interview with M05);

‘When it came to North Frederick Street, at that point we were dwindling. ‘Cause, like, it was still great, people were arriving on the street and stuff like that, like, there was a great occupation… there was those events that are short-lived, but… it’s a big ask… and people would come in for maybe a shift, but like it’s not a comfortable place, and also, people were really burned out and stuff like that… People aren’t gonna be super fun inside; it’s not gonna be this really cool setting… It was really draining kinda just like managing the workload… And also I think we started to realise where are we going with this?’ (M06).

While the initial overstaying of the injunction drew large crowds of supporters rallying outside of the Frederick Street building, conditions inside the building were becoming more difficult over the course of the fortnight between the injunction and the eviction. Interviewees who had been inside the buildings during this time described the rostering of volunteers as increasingly challenging:

‘There’d be a team of people, maybe not on the admin team but just on shift in the occupation, they’d make phone calls and things like that. I guess that work became harder when the injunction went on North Frederick Street and there were very few people willing to go in and even fewer, I think, that were actually able in the end to get into the building… there was a team of people if I’m remembering correctly… but it was a very small group and they’d been doing it at an enormous pace, like, they couldn’t keep that going themselves. So I just think… that the team of people that would keep engagement up, would follow through whenever we got phone numbers or whatever, that fell apart’ (interview with M05);

‘I think there were like five or six of us but it basically was something that you’d try to pass on to anybody who was on the next shift, to start making phone calls… trying to, like, get people to fill a roster, em, and agree to
come to a shift is huge, and then people often wouldn’t turn up. So we would try and do like a text reminder… when I would come on shift, you’d send a text out for the next shift, which would be four hours or something like that, em, and then often you’d get replies being like oh sorry I can’t make it. And then you’d have to fill that – you’d have to like urgently ring people’ (interview with M06).

M05 described how, toward the end, ‘we were getting to a situation where there would’ve been three people on a shift’. The difficulty of organising adequate numbers of occupiers became a safety issue, with M03 noting how ‘when things begin to dwindle you need to call it a day, like, d’you know what I mean? In terms of safety and stuff – at one stage people weren’t even showing up for shifts… I remember at one stage two people were in the building or something like that and that’s it, y’know, that kind of way… where this is actually not safe’.

Difficulties in filling these rosters meant that the occupation-side of the campaign was increasingly reliant on a small number of activists willing and able to commit time and energy. Overstaying the injunction narrowed the pool of potential occupiers, both within TBTC member groups and from the general public. Partly in recognition of this and partly as a broader aim of the TBTC campaign, social media publicising and organising efforts within the coalition attempted to shift focus from the occupation to building a broader and more engaged base of housing activism across and beyond Dublin. These outreach efforts were being pushed through campaign social media, highlighting the solidarity that was being expressed with occupiers and calling for other groups to carry out occupations in their own communities. M03 described these social media efforts as a key component of why:

‘people wanted to keep some kind of campaign going, a new kind of campaign and keep that energy. But no one was really arguing to let’s keep this occupation going. Because what was happening was that we were putting all our resources into the actual occupation… and it was all city centre based… We were kinda using social media in that way for a while, to kinda try and push it back out into communities and to get people to come down to their local group or whatever. But… unlike Apollo, there was nobody arguing, as far as I can remember, to keep the occupation itself going’.

M04 expressed frustration with both the social media team and this framing, critiquing how ‘the social media team had somehow managed to give
themselves the remit where they were like the mouth piece for Take Back The City… they would do these sign-up pages where they would be like [assumes voice] “oh, you like Take Back The City? Come, like, y’know, volunteer for us” because they knew that us, like, fucking grunt labourers who were actually in hovels all the time were struggling’. Accordingly, a small core of activists were being relied upon to sustain occupations, with most of their efforts focused on processing Google Form submissions to fill the occupation roster as a pressing concern. For M09, this pressure undermined efforts at mutual care and was both unsustainable and somewhat toxic:

‘there was no kind of, whatever about looking after yourself, there was no kind of structure of people looking out for each other and saying [assumes voice] “well this person is doing too many shifts”… Like, if someone wants to do loads of work that’s great, but if, like, they’re doing so much that they’re gonna jeopardise their own wellbeing, there should be some way of being able to pull them in and say “look, take a break” – and that kinda wasn’t really there with Take Back The City’.

Similar to M09’s sense of a lack of individual and collective care, M08 noted how the overidentification and, in a sense, over-participation of a small number of people was a defining feature of both HSH and TBTC, which meant that ‘you’re inevitably going to come up against the same results of an activist core that can’t expand itself just burns itself out, that means the development of characters and personalities that have the greatest sense of ownership over the project and can’t sustain it beyond four or five months when their attention inevitably turns to some other shiny thing on the horizon’. M04’s self-description as ‘ultra-volunteer, in my head – y’know, I was like born to fucking volunteer. And like, yeah, it felt like, eh, it was like a vocation almost’ captures this sense of identification with activist labour.

Beyond the tensions between occupiers and those involved in but not occupying buildings during TBTC, the wider TBTC coalition was also a source of tension. While the coalition involved housing, migrant/reproductive rights, and student activist groups who had opted-in, interviewees narrated three main tensions within the coalition that made it difficult to sustain. Firstly, there was tension between collective and individual representation. M05 described this as a ‘part of Take Back The City’s nadir’, in which ‘it
was probably a group of 20 people, quite a small group that was consistently involved. Sometimes groups substituted for individuals, when you said a group’s name you actually meant a person. Eh, so that, I think, that structure wasn’t ‘healthy’. M08, for whom TBTC was his first active involvement in housing activism, connected ‘the kinda Trotskyist parties that exist in Ireland and the kinda mad energy that these groups put into certain things and how everything is a mad rush and it’s like high energy, high stakes, high intensity’ to a broader activist culture in which ‘the biggest characters often end up being the people who are maybe the most anxious people or the most hurting people in certain ways’, and ‘the biggest part of the burnout is… because these figures kind of dominate rooms, protests, microphones, whatever – and you constantly exist in their orbit when you’re in that’.

Secondly, a small number of individuals were highly-involved in the occupation but this was an unsustainably small pool of activists to do the intense labour of occupation, with interviewees noting how ‘by the end of it, in terms of who was actively doing stuff on a day-to-day basis, you were down to like 10, 15, 20 people at most, and it just wasn’t enough to sustain it’ (M09). The level of personal and emotional investment required for this, while being ‘an important part of forming that collective identity and feeling’, can be ‘overwhelming’ and ‘could be problematic and it can go to bad places obviously if people get too attached to that or feed off it too much’ (M08). By the time of the Frederick Street eviction, M05 described how the arrested occupiers and ‘the people who weren’t arrested but were central all the same’ were ‘very much exhausted at that stage – it was sorta petering out. So we had [post-eviction]… maybe two or three thousand people registering their interest to come along and do shifts and help out with Take Back The City. But the infrastructure within Take Back The City had kinda fallen apart at that stage’. The demands of being an ‘ultra-volunteer’, or having a ‘vocation’ (M04’s phrase) to participate in housing activism, were specifically identified by some (M04, M06, and M09) as problematic neoliberal and culturally Catholic enjoinders to do unevenly distributed and taxing work for free.

Thirdly, the coalition itself was subject to tensions and arguments between and within teams and groups inside it, with M04 being particularly critical of ‘the social media team’. There was also tension between groups in
the coalition, with M09 describing their ‘weird experience’ of TBTC meetings ‘as a rep of DCHA and also as a rep of a thing called Queer Action Ireland, QAI’, where when they attended organising meetings ‘as a rep from DCHA, and the men from those things [specific housing and Left political groups] would be kinda saying “oh yeah, DCHA, oh, you’re great”’, but ‘if I was there from QAI they’d be saying “…so it’s all about trans this and gay that and you don’t understand working class people”. And, but, like – I’d be the same person there at the meeting! But just with a different sticker on’. For M05, coalition meetings were ‘quite agonising… groups would go on, the meetings would go on for ages to talk about strategy, to talk about tactics and protest’. For M10, the main tension within TBTC as a coalition derived from a split between:

‘PBP’, who had become a lot bigger, who wanted to do more things like occupy the Residential Tenancies Board and those types of actions, and kind of the grassroots housing groups and anarchists and migrant groups. That was the tension… PBP felt they had more sway because they were a lot bigger and they actually were running three or four groups and they wanted to be more mobilising and less seizing buildings. And we wanted to just roll building seizures forever’.

However, M10 was the only interviewee who expressed a sense of wanting to continue to seize buildings during TBTC as a feature of this tension, with M03’s comment that ‘…nobody [wanted] to keep the occupation itself going’ being a more widely-expressed sentiment.

Interviewees’ assessments of organising practices, forms, and the internal and external forces shaping them during the latter phases of post-crash housing activism accordingly highlighted a set of recurring themes and tensions around hierarchy, the individual v the collective, and the exciting but draining characteristics of occupations. Importantly, TBTC marked a turning point in third phase post-crash housing activism in that, while the campaign ‘relaunched’ the Irish Housing Network, this ‘third generation’ of the IHN was short-lived. After TBTC, tensions within the IHN and criticism of the

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3 PBP is the acronym for the ‘People Before Profit Alliance’, a smaller socialist left-wing political party formed in 2005 by members of the Socialist Workers Party

4 In generational terms, the IHN’s first generation refers to the Bolt Hostel era, the second generation refers to the HSH/Apollo House era, and the third generation was the short-lived era from the late stages of TBTC, during which the IHN was ‘relaunched’.
IHN as an organising form, particularly by younger or newer activists, led to a shift in housing activist organising practices, forms, and forces, which interviewees narrated as a shift from mobilising to organising.

7.3 From mobilising to organising: The evolution of post-TBTC activism

7.3.1 ‘Two men and a dog eating the head off each other all the time’: Post-TBTC organising and its discontents

‘The third generation of the IHN had a long, long, long, long fruitless history with lots of intrigue, and in-fighting… it’s nothing worth delving into because none of it was really new from the kind of dynamics I’m talking about in Take Back The City which is, like, small groups had aspired to represent the national housing movement, but they weren’t building the national housing movement… Basically it was just like two men and a dog eating the head off each other all the time! So that sorta collapsed’ (interview with M04).

I noted in chapter six that efforts at moving from TBTC back toward more locally-grounded activism largely failed. This failure occurred in part because, in the wake of TBTC, tensions within TBTC’s activist core were exacerbated, often along digital/material lines that M08 described as an interplay between ‘comments, threads online’, ‘back and forth chats’, and ‘the next protest or action or meeting’. M08 identified a key tension being housing activists’ iterative reliance on ‘tools that people had picked up through Take Back the City and through the Irish Housing Network that were in themselves kinda flawed… When you pick up those tools that aren’t growing the Irish Housing Network or building that. If you try to apply them to another group you’re inevitably going to come up against the same results’. Interviewees for whom TBTC was their first involvement in housing activism were in general more critical in their assessment of this abortive final or third-generation IHN. Notably, M04 (quoted above) and M05, who had not been involved with the IHN before TBTC, described this attempt to shift back toward the IHN as problematic, and a symptom of a longer-term hierarchy or power inequality within the housing activist scene. For M05, who ‘wouldn’t have been in that crop that [redacted] and others would’ve been in where they had been involved in the IHN for a while before that took off’, ‘one of the biggest weakness in the Irish Housing Network was how loose it was, how lacking structure it was’ and ‘there were groups that were very small that had
maybe two or three members, maybe ten members, and they exercised an absolutely inordinate weight within the IHN and within Take Back the City’. Interviewees who were more actively involved in the IHN narrated the network’s relaunch differently, with more of a sense of an on-going interplay between locally-rooted activism, occupations, and the IHN as an enabling structure. For M03, who described TBTC as ‘not necessarily everyone involved in the Irish Housing Network’, ‘the network itself had dwindled even though DCHA and stuff was very active, the network itself kinda hadn’t been what it was supposed to be’. Following the IHN’s ‘relaunch’, M03 described how ‘there were other fragments going on in the Irish Housing Network at that stage… There was… a bit of a split… it didn’t happen because of that but it was around the same time that… I think the Irish Housing Network’s days were just kind of up’.

Overall, these tensions within housing activist circles both during and after TBTC meant that the organisational pattern of earlier temporary political occupations, in which occupation as event was followed by a digital/material shift back toward local activism under the IHN’s ‘grouping of groups’ organisational model, did not occur. Efforts to decentralise or spread housing activism beyond the main TBTC occupations were most successful in organising ‘flash action’ occupations (Occupy Airbnb; Occupy the RTB) toward the end of the TBTC occupation. For interviewees, the later-stage ‘flash actions’, and particularly the Occupy Airbnb action, were ‘handy, very easy to organise’ (M02) and ‘really fun and it was great, it was like a real short sharp attack on something that was relevant’ (M06). However, M05 described these shorter ‘pop-up’ actions as reflecting the tension between motion and inertia that came with the ebb of energy within TBTC. Echoing M03, M05 described how ‘there was no desire, even though a couple of proposals were made, to take other buildings’ – this created ‘an inertia, but there was no vehicle for that inertia to carry forward. So I guess what we kinda fell back on then was these sort of symbolic protests instead? Like the Airbnb one, the RTB… things like that… it was all external, it wasn’t like what we’d been doing up to that point and I think that was because of how fraught Take Back The City was internally and how burned out some of the core people that had been involved since the start had become’. For M09,
although ‘obviously the whole point of Take Back The City was to be kind of a bit more aggressive, a bit more confrontational, a bit more direct’, the RTB occupation:

‘rubbed up people the wrong way because it seemed… Y’know, it was led by… someone from Dublin South West Housing Action. He has a particular gripe with the RTB. I’ve no time for the RTB as an entity, but they’re not – I don’t see them as The Enemy, y’know?... So I didn’t really see a huge benefit in that action. The Airbnb one was good because, obviously [they] have a lot to answer for in terms of where we are now with the crisis and the shortage of housing and the short termism and the transience of the way things are in Dublin… I would’ve seen more value in that than in the RTB one, to be honest’.

Accordingly, interviewee descriptions of these ‘flash actions’ varied, but reflected a sense of transition or experimentation when TBTC’s occupations could no longer be sustained. This period of transition, and the attempt to move from occupying vacant buildings to a more expansive critique of housing that covered short-term rentals and the tenant-landlord arbitration process, was summed up by M06 as TBTC moving from ‘initially there was the landlord that evicted people [at Summerhill] but then it became everything… But… you can’t be dwindling in numbers and still be growing in terms of your targets’.

Attempts to build out from TBTC-Dublin led to three spinoff ‘Take Back The City’ community groups in Waterford (launched 6th September), Galway (launched 7th September), and Belfast (launched 19th September), and five other ‘housing action’ groups (Louth Housing Action, Finglas Battalion Direct Action Group, Right 2 Housing, Midlands Housing Action, and Limerick Housing Action). Importantly, for housing activists, this meant a shift in organising practices away from the occupied buildings and toward a more dynamic interplay between local housing groups and a broader national struggle, which the IHN had been ‘relaunched’ to engage in. Interviewees narrated this reorientation toward the local, and particularly the use of door-knocking in local areas, as deriving from two different factors related to the IHN. Firstly, while the IHN had become a source of tension, some people in groups within the network were in contact during and after the dissolution of the IHN’s third generation and shared a sense of frustration with what seemed to be a stalling of housing activist campaigning. Secondly,
TBTC and the prominence of Dublin’s ‘housing crisis’ had been noticed by ACORN, a long-running international mass membership tenant organisation active in the US, Canada, and the UK. These two sets of factors were decisive in shaping post-TBTC housing activism, which interviewees described as a movement a) away from the IHN and toward the establishment of Community Action Tenants Union Ireland, and b) from mobilising to organising.

7.3.2 To make a more perfect union: Community Action Tenants Union Ireland as a formal organising form

Interviewee accounts tended to describe post-IHN contact between locally-focused activists and ACORN’s influence as something they either directly experienced or were subsequently influenced by. M01 described how:

‘after Take Back The City, there had been some of the people involved in all that stuff had been invited to do some workshops with ACORN, which is a kind of community activism institution, kind of?... So basically a few people got ACORN training and that then went in to setting up the Community Action Tenants union, which is a tenants’ union. And so I’d say that’s kind of where the energy is now today’.

Similarly, for M04:

‘part of what CATU was based around was that like over a period of months people who were enthusiastic and actually were trying to do the local work of CATU, we’d already formed alliances in the IHN’s national committee because there was a sorta like a “fair play to you” thing, where it’s like “oh, I see that you’re actually recruiting and doing door knocking in Mountjoy, or in Maynooth, that’s grand, that’s cool. D’you have tips to share with me, I’m struggling in Drogheda” and stuff like that. So we reconnected after the dissolution of the IHN. And we kind of got in touch with each other again and we were like, let’s think about what’s next. And ACORN international, particularly representatives from ACORN UK, had already been sniffing around the IHN quite a lot and they came over and gave a talk to us in February... it would’ve been February 2019. So by the time it was summer, some of us had maintained relationships with them. And others of us had just maintained good social dynamics with other people who we considered to be, like, organisers, to be happy sitting behind the scenes, like, not like, Little Napoleons, y’know. And we, like, as kinda friends, we should think of each other, and discuss the next phase and we formed a working group’.

Interviewee accounts of this transition from the IHN and toward CATU varied. For some interviewees, this was a natural evolution, with M03 describing how ‘I suppose with CATU – I think the Irish Housing Network was useful and… we obviously did a lot with it and stuff, but I think things
were always going to go towards an actual union. Like even in the Irish Housing Network we were still like linked in with ACORN and stuff, and we were very much aware that like we aren’t a union? They are. So I think it was always going to go that way eventually’. Similarly, M02 described a longer process of drift around a central tension in which ‘we were constantly asking ourselves how do we make it a thing where people actually, em, not collaborate but like collectively are engaged and involved and feel ownership over what’s going on, and work together in structured way that’s not just scrambling, and that was something we’ve been going over and over in our heads, every couple of months, with DCHA… that was like a constant struggle’. For others, CATU represented a more decisive break from earlier housing activism, with M04 in particular describing CATU as ‘organisation – I mean… CATU isn’t about housing. There’s no housing heads in CATU because CATU begins with a conversation, you knock on the next door down to you and you say to the person – I live here, nice to meet you, we’re just going round, we’re asking people how you’ve noticed the area change over the last while, what d’you think, d’you have any issues?’ Overall, while interviewees varied in terms of their involvement in or their framing of the transition from the IHN, CATU was unanimously identified as a) the main development in housing activism after TBTC, and b) a concentrated effort to alter ‘activist’ dynamics and practices.

In chapter eight, I use mediation to assess how CATU mediates between theory and practice, and individual and collective tensions, within housing activism. Here, however, I outline CATU as an organisational form and describe how this form was shaped by two main influences, which interviewees described as a) organising rather than mobilising (shaped by ACORN and Jane McAlevey’s work), and b) deprioritising the digital in general and social media in particular (an aim I assess in greater detail in chapter eight). CATU is premised on the ‘simple’ idea of ‘a union for people outside of their workplaces’, and has positioned itself as taking the ‘basic ideas’ of labour unions to ‘cities and towns across this island’ (CATU, 2021a). In this respect, CATU echoes the 1960s/70s Italian Left concept of operaismo (see Gray, 2018), in which Marxist protagonism shifted from the industrial worker to a broader framing of the ‘social factory’ and the relation
between production, factory, and society, in which ‘at the highest level of capitalist development… the whole of society becomes an articulation of production, the whole society lives in function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive dominion over the whole society’ (Tronti, 2019, p. 26).

Secondly, CATU has positioned itself as a collective of ‘ordinary people’ who must ‘organise themselves’. Rather than proceeding ‘on an individual basis’ or focusing on tenants, CATU (2021a) describes itself as a collective ‘organisation’ for ‘all people’ who do not profit from housing to ‘defend their communities and housing… in a coordinated struggle on issues we all share’.

Thirdly, CATU (ibid) positions itself as ‘an organisation in cities and towns across this island’, emphasising a specifically urban and cross-border ethos.

CATU has emphasised organising as the central generative practice around which a union is formed, with the union’s model having a few specific features set out in its ‘union explainer’ (CATU, 2021c). Firstly, organising means ‘reaching out to people where they live’, with the location or neighbourhood being both the site and reason for contact, rather than existing social networks or political affiliations. Secondly, contact within organising must have a specific purpose, which the union distinguishes as ‘organising’, rather than ‘mobilising’ or ‘advocacy’, and this distinction has been an important feature of CATU’s positioning and practice. For CATU, organising means ‘creating a structured and disciplined union where members work together to collectively better their situation’ and ‘the less obvious, behind-the-scenes work necessary so that when we do pick a fight we have the resources to win’ (ibid, p. 6). This contrasts with mobilising, which means ‘bringing out people who already support us onto the street as a show of strength’ (ibid), and advocacy, ‘a legalistic process by which social change is affected [sic] through public support of an idea, ultimately leading to a change in legislation or policy, usually done on others [sic] behalf’ (ibid). Thirdly, CATU has described organising as being targeted toward ‘taking direct action’ as ‘our primary goal’, with the union’s ‘main strength’ being ‘numbers’ and direct action being the union’s mechanism for contesting housing (or ‘the best way we can use that strength’) (ibid). CATU’s (ibid) explainer identifies several key premises and features of direct action:
• direct action does not ‘lobby politicians, get candidates elected, or only raise awareness’;
• direct action involves identifying ‘concrete, achievable demands’ which are directly targeted at ‘those people who can give in to our demands’;
• direct action should be preceded by a specific calculation of power and impact, with the advice that ‘we should always go into an action knowing what exactly we want to achieve from it and how can determine if it was a success or not’;
• relatedly, direct action should also be preceded by tactical planning for how action can ‘escalate or carry the threat of apparent escalation’;
• direct action is affected-led, with an emphasis on ‘encouraging affected members to stand up for themselves with union backing’;
• direct action ‘should also be public-facing and collective’, with the specific point that ‘sending emails for example is not direct action’;
• because of this public and collective character, direct action ‘is also a recruitment tool’;
• union members should ‘always make wins public’ because ‘this demonstrates the power in a union’.

The union’s description specifies how direct action must be preceded by rigorous calculation of demands, targets, and tactical progression or escalation, should be carried out as a public and collective process, and should translate into a clear win or outcome that ‘leaves the union in a stronger place after the action than before’ (ibid, p. 9). Overall, CATU has positioned direct action as a central component of organising and positioned organising as the union’s main purpose. While direct actions follow specific steps, organising has been foregrounded as an on-going process that involves empowering tenants and communities, building confidence and raising expectations, and continuous work to ‘more effectively use the leverage we have as ordinary people to bring about wider systemic change’ (ibid). CATU’s framing of direct action contrasts with earlier housing activist strategies, including occupations, with an emphasis on demands, targets, and outcomes that echo the now-ubiquitous business-speak emphasis on SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound). The union as organisational form differs from earlier housing activist groups (see Figure 41, which contrasts with Figure 40, p. 225). CATU Ireland legally exists as a not-for-profit company incorporated on 20th September 2019, with a business address at 10 Belvedere Court, Mountjoy, Dublin 1 (the postal address of Jigsaw, an independent space that is discussed in greater detail in chapter nine).
The union’s status as an incorporated company is more formal than earlier housing activist community groups’ nebulous existence as informal associations. Importantly, the union bylaws specify that the union is ‘a nonpartisan organisation’, with clear formal disciplinary and oversight policies. The union has detailed policies to address complaints, grievances, discipline, and appeals, as well as a formal constitution and bylaws governing its organisational structure and functions.

Importantly, however, CATU’s early experiences have been impacted by Covid-19, which limited the extent to which local branches could carry out the type of on-going organising work that interviewees and CATU
materials describe as the union’s key focus. I discuss how this formal organisational form and the union’s organising practices contrast with earlier housing activism in chapter eight. Here, it is worth nothing that CATU’s main impact has been a shift in organisational form that has impacted the intensity and timing of housing struggles. In contrast to the spectacular character of earlier housing activism, CATU Ireland is an attempt at a step change toward longer-term, continuous, and more sustainable organisational forms and practices. This was perhaps best described in conversations I had with two CATU members. The first, M02, described CATU’s organising practices by saying that ‘the timing is, it’s like, sloooow. Yeah. It’s like putting down roots, I suppose? Do I wanna use those words? Yeah, it’s a little bit more like planting something [laughs]. Like, a little, planting a little acorn and eventually [chuckles] it’ll be a tree’. The other CATU member, a microbiologist who I spoke with but did not interview, described CATU’s organising as like mycelium, which are the threads of larger fungal or mushroom organisms which wrap around or through tree roots and connect individual fungal plants to each other to transfer water, nitrogen, and other minerals. For this CATU member, union members and groups were akin to mycelium, which compose a network in which the individual mycelium ‘tag’ or ‘index’ nutrients across an underground network of roots. These grow across the underground to a specific scale of equilibrium in which resources are shared and growth consumes only what is needed to expand until conditions across the network are prefect and the organism breaks the soil surface to bloom. In this naturalistic framing, CATU’s organisational form and practices can be interpreted as an initial form that sets out with a clear purpose to take root and grow, but has been responsive to and shaped by surrounding circumstances, which can be unexpected and evolving, as I outline in the next chapter.
7.4 Conclusion

‘…the question of organisation is the most profound intellectual question facing the revolution…’ (Lukács, 1923, p. 338).

This chapter has engaged with organisation and organising as a way of understanding how digital/material contention is produced, and how this changes over time. Drawing from Rodrigo Nunes’ (2021) theorisation of political organisation, the chapter used Nunes’ vocabulary of organisational forms and forces to understand and distinguish between organising practices, structures, and the factors that shape them. The first section describes the organising practices, forms, and forces in post-crash Dublin housing activism, which structured the labour of housing struggles that I analysed in chapter five. I outlined the distinctive and temporarily stable organising forms or assemblages that have operated in housing activism, with ‘team’, ‘group’, and ‘coalition’ structures recurring between and across the various phases of post-crash housing struggle. Organisational forms were shaped by both internal and external forces, in which labour, time, and energy demands recurrently varied and created tensions that these organisational forms struggle to handle sustainably. The intensity and high-profile characteristics of occupations created particularly acute challenges for activists’ organisational forms, despite the iterative and experimental nature of occupation tactics over time. Importantly, activists asserted individual and collective agency in their organising practices, forms, and responses to internal and external forces, with TBTC being consciously constructed around lessons from earlier occupations. While interviewees were broadly in agreement that TBTC differed from earlier occupations in some key respects, they critiqued the extent to which these shifts in organising practices translated into a more effective or sustainable organisational form. Interviewees who had not been involved in earlier temporary political occupations were more negative in their assessment of TBTC, but all interviewees described learnings from TBTC as part of a shift toward the founding of Community Action Tenants Union (CATU) Ireland.

CATU’s establishment featured prominently in interviewee assessments of the most recent phase of post-crash housing activism.
Interviewees narrated a movement from mobilising and toward organising as a conscious rethinking of housing activist organisational practices and structures, and CATU’s formal incorporation, governance structures, and clear delineation of direct action (and its purposes) contrasts with the more unstructured and informal ‘groups’ (e.g. DCHA), ‘grouping of groups’ (e.g. the IHN), and coalitions (e.g. HSH, TBTC) characteristic of earlier phases of housing struggles. For interviewees, CATU’s organisational form responded to some of the most extreme tensions around labour, time, and energy that earlier housing activism and occupations were constrained by. Crucially, interviewees saw CATU’s development as part of a wider shift away the spectacular components of earlier housing activism, with priority being given instead to formal structure, the local, and organising as an on-going and everyday practice to be collectively undertaken by ‘ordinary people’, rather than housing ‘activists’. In the next chapter, I use mediation and Nunes’ work on mediation as organisation to unpick this transition from the spectacular to the mundane in post-crash housing struggles and read contention as more mundanely digitally/materially mediated than existing scholarship and interviewee accounts tended to admit.
Chapter 8 – ‘From the spectacular to the mundane’:

Mediating digital/material contention

In those years, people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of we, of you
we found ourselves
reduced to I
and the whole thing became
silly, ironic, terrible:
we were trying to live a personal life
and yes, that was the only life
we could bear witness to

But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
into our personal weather
They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove
along the shore, through the rags of fog
where we stood, saying I


8.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I use post-crash housing activism in Dublin to assess digital technologies’ role in mediating collective and contentious subjectivation in contemporary settings. The chapter approaches mediation from two angles. Firstly, drawing from Rodrigo Nunes (2021, pp. 78-9), I contextualise organisation as ‘the form of mediation between theory and practice’ and focus on how organisation mediates ‘between dialectics of struggle that are traditionally counterposed as one or the other, a question of emphasis and balance rather than arrival at one particular best option’ (ibid, p. 69). Specifically, I assess CATU Ireland as a collaborative shift in housing activist organising, which has attempted to change how housing activists’ organisational practices mediate between theory and practice, or what some philosophical literature has discussed as ‘the virtual’ and its actualisation (Shields, 2003). Secondly, I use mediation to assess how digital/material contention shapes housing activists as individual and collective subjects. In doing so, I critically assess the extent to which housing activism should or could pursue the ‘deprioritisation of the digital’ which interviewees framed CATU as being representative of. I connect this framing to the broader positioning of the digital in recent work on Left political organising through party (Dean, 2016; Gerbaudo, 2019) and trade union (McAlevey, 2020)
forms. CATU and its’ founders’ aim to deprioritise the digital offers a similar imaginary to these works and their emphasis on collective power being built through idealised forms of unmediated social relations. However, I argue, these ideal forms of unmediated social relations do not exist, and the accounts of ‘comradeship’ (Dean, 2019) and ‘whole-worker organising’ (McAlevey, 2014, 2018) offered in these works a) neglect the constitutive role that digital technologies play in the party and union forms being discussed and b) tend to downplay the always-already-mediated character of socio-spatial existence, beyond a broad recognition of people and their bodies as classed, raced, and gendered.

Rather than being a failure to adhere to its founding aim of deprioritising the digital, I interpret CATU’s digital/material mediation as a typical example of the spectacular and mundane enrolments of digital technologies in contemporary societies. I argue that, rather than a deprioritisation of the digital, CATU’s mediating practices can be better understood as a shift in the digital/material time-spaces of housing activism, with the tenant union making individual and collective subjectivation in housing struggle a more on-going and everyday digital/material process. I argue that this on-going and everyday process of mediation has shifted the forms, tactics, and outcomes of digital/material contention, and that the tenant union offers a potential structure between party and union with potential for political subjectivation and what Purcell (2013) terms ‘the down-deep delight of democracy’. I use Purcell’s work as an entry point in the next chapter to reflect on the important role that urban space plays in this process, and offer a digital/material reading of housing activism’s appropriation and mediation of urban spaces for contentious collective subjectivation.

8.2 ‘What’s a union good for?’ CATU as mediation between theory and practice

8.2.1 Theorising CATU

In this section, I discuss how CATU mediates between theory and practice, with a particular focus on tenant organising as the desired form of mediation between union members. Here, theory-practice bumped up against the imagined future of tenant union organising and the reality of the union’s
growth during the Covid-19 pandemic. Nunes (2021) argues that organisation should be thought as mediation between dialectically related pairs that do not exist in an abstract or pure form (e.g. theory-practice; horizontal-vertical) and this pushes for a focus on what is and could be in relative terms, rather than an idealised form of one or the other. Here, I use Nunes’ work on mediation as an active process of intervention and (re)composition that requires work to assess CATU as mediation between theory and practice. For interviewees, CATU represented a conscious collective reconfiguration of housing struggle, with the organisation’s ‘Union Explainer’ (from which the title of this section comes) setting out what the union is and how it aims be an organisation of ‘ordinary people’, which I discussed in the last chapter on organising. CATU mediates between theory and practice through its articulation of and emphasis on organising, which interviewees and union materials explicitly connected to Jane McAlevey’s work on labour unions.

For interviewees, there were three main features of the union’s structure and practices, derived from McAlevey’s work and earlier housing activism, which shaped the theory and practices of the tenant union. These were an emphasis on organising rather than mobilising, the collection of membership dues to fund paid tenant union labour, and a deprioritisation of the digital. The union’s emphasis on continuous organising in local communities is a conscious departure from the ‘capital A activism’ (M08) of earlier housing contention. M01 described how CATU ‘is applying an organising model as opposed to a mobilising model, as Jane McAlevey would have it… her book, Raising Expectations and Raising Hell, was something that people were reading back in 2014, being passed around. That has had kind of an influence I would say in the Irish Housing Movement, and that is kind of what CATU is trying to do, kind of apply a kind of a rank-and-file trade unionism approach to housing’. In drawing this distinction, M01 outlined how ‘in the organising model you’re empowering people to contribute… An NGO or charity might say “let me help you”, and an activist might say, “I’m fighting for you”, and an organising model would say, like, “here’s how you can help yourself and others”’, which M01 described as ‘more empowering and it recentres agency’. In contrast to earlier ‘activist groups or even the approach to campaigns’, CATU is ‘mass membership
versus self-selecting. And it kind of takes the ego out of it a little bit’. M01’s use of the word activist and McAlevey-influenced framing was echoed by other interviewees, who stressed a similar emphasis on mass membership of ordinary people as opposed to a dedicated activist core. The self-selected and intense character of the activist role was something that interviewees felt limited long-term engagement in earlier housing contention, with interviewees often pointing to an awkward and self-conscious sense of the activist role or position as problematic. In contrast to the IHN, which ‘was too vague’, CATU is ‘actually what the IHN was trying to do but couldn’t, for various reason. So it’s great’ (M02). This emphasis on organising as continuous process of recruiting ‘ordinary people’ as opposed to inculcating or spreading activism was nicely summarised by M08’s reflection that ‘the idea of constantly asking more people to join, to come to something, to be asked to do stuff, it breaks down that barrier between… y’know, people recognising the same people and a distinction between that’s them and this is me, or like us and them. That those are the activists, those are the people that do the thing, I’m just a normal person’.

CATU’s connection between membership and paying dues was described as a necessary feature because it gives members a sense of ownership of the union as an organisation and allows the union to pay salaried staff to carry out essential organising work, rather than relying on volunteer labour. With regards the former, M06, who had been a union representative in her place of work, described the importance of membership dues as a realisation that:

‘we need to have people involved and knowing that they’re giving something, I think, is a really important thing. Like they are giving maybe whatever their membership is, and that can be as low as, as whatever they want. But they’re getting something in return. And like that idea of knowing that you’re giving something back makes you kinda think like well what am I getting back for that, like, why am I paying that every month out of my bank account. And I think that’s actually really important, and it’s worked for unions in the past, when they were actually radical’ (M06).

5 CATU waives dues for low-income members and members in Direct Provision. In general, €5 is recommended as the minimum monthly dues payment and members are instructed that dues should be equivalent to one hour’s wages.
The connection between dues and trade union organisational structures was also noted by M09, who was employed by CATU in a part-time role at the time of our interview but described themselves as initially ‘a little bit unsure about it... when the idea of CATU was first floated’ specifically because ‘I found it difficult to get around the idea of all of a sudden a condition of involvement would be people having to pay, and I kinda made that argument, well, what about people who can’t pay? What about people, y’know, people who can’t – even a fiver a month is too much for them’. For M09, this initial scepticism was resolved precisely because of an understanding of trade unions and their radical potential and an awareness of examples of tenants unions in other countries and their work, as:

‘it took me a while to get around to the understanding of, y’know, this is not an advocacy group, this is a union. And it’s like, if you think about it in the same way as a trade union, and that kind of model and that kind of collective power – rather than one person helping another person, rather it’s like helping each other. So it took me a while to get my head around that and to kind of get on board it, but I’m glad I did’.

Paying dues accordingly creates a tangible connection and role for members in which the minimum threshold for involvement is a direct and recurring financial contribution, which M03 described as creating a sense of ‘a card carry thing – you join and you’re a member. We have a much better pitch for what we’re speaking to people about’. Accordingly, paying dues alters the timing and formal structure of involvement, but also facilitates a further organisational shift by making it possible to pay organisers for their labour, as opposed to the reliance on dedicated voluntary activist labour in earlier housing groups. M04 noted the importance of payment for organising labour by describing how, for him, volunteering in housing activism felt ‘like a vocation almost. And it’s like, if it’s a fucking vocation well then it should be paid, and organisers should be paid to do what they do’. For M06, the payment of dues is in effect a ‘radical’ gesture, and M06 echoed M04 by specifically connected this point to reversing the Christ-like ‘ultra-volunteer’ activist role that I discussed earlier in chapter seven, noting how ‘a major thing that we learned was that when you start receiving membership subs, you can employ staff and I think that’s a key thing, that, like, it’s great to give
somebody a job doing – like, it *doesn’t seem revolutionary [chuckles] but like hopefully it is revolutionary admin, like it can be*.

CATU’s organisational structure is designed to take a different approach to the digital/material dynamics of contention, with interviewees and union materials foregrounding attempts to ‘deprioritise digital communications’ as a key feature of CATU’s form and strategy. Earlier temporary political occupations and housing activist organisations focused on ‘communicating the spectacle and using the opportunity of the spectacle to make the point about… the injustice of what’s happening and… hopefully suggest that like it shouldn’t be like that’ (M01). However, CATU aims to use social media more so as ‘a structure test… you’re trying to see how many people you can get to commit’, and ‘that gives you a sense of the resources and power that you’re working with… What’s happening here [taps CATU image] in a digital communication sense is quite different, and *that’s kind of the difference between CATU and the IHN*, or at least, like, the previous housing activism’ (M01). The distinction between social media activity and local on-the-ground organising, and particularly an emphasis on door-knocking, was a recurring theme in interviews. For M06, ‘it’s essential that we do grow our base and grow it deeper and it’s not just tenants, and… I wonder is there a use for social media in that’. M07 expressed the strongest scepticism about social media, describing how:

‘there’s a kind of a younger membership that do see social media as a great recruiting tool, which I still think is not really the way forward. I think there’s groups that maybe are very active on social media but aren’t very active in person or not as active as they probably look. I think there’s a reliance on social media as like an awareness being the main function, or like being a, y’know, an important function of a group when actually it’s winning and the transformative change that comes in people and people gaining agency’.

For M08, McAlevey’s writings on trade unions was particularly key in identifying ‘a structure and a model that if you do A, B, and C, and maybe D, you can win. *And concretising it in a way that what I suppose I’d seen on social media and what I’d read in different sources didn’t, and kept it more about the spectacle and the image and the appearance.* Not to say that that’s all it was, but, that’s all that’s, like, available to the outside, and to see from the outside’. It was in this context of critiquing earlier housing activist phases
that M08 used the phrase ‘from the spectacular to the mundane’ to describe how earlier housing activism ‘doesn't often translate well or stably from the spectacular moments to the mundane. And then you're trying to find a way to… generate hype around that, 'cause the way you’ve learned to engage with social media to promote stuff is from stuff that is a lot more exciting to a lot more people’. M02, who had been heavily involved in running earlier housing activist social media accounts and teams, described ‘the pressure of running the DCHA socials [which] was very like, we had to be very, we felt in some ways we had to be reacting to everything that came about to do with housing and that’s exhausting… and none of us are paid for it’. For M02, this contrasts with CATU work, in which ‘we don’t do hot takes!... The kinda set-up of it allows for… well, most of the work can happen offline. Or no, not offline, ‘cause we ended up having to do a load of Zoom ’cause of this lockdown but like it can be behind the scenes work and we just post about something that’s happening when it’s happening. And maybe a little bit of posting to say “you should join”. That’s it. So it’s a nice rest… it’s way less frenzied’.

8.2.2 Practicing CATU

Importantly, despite these theoretical orientations, local groups and the union as national organisation in practice echo earlier housing activist forms in that their continuous public existence (between internal and external public) unfolds through digital technologies and social media. As of the 27th of March 2022, the CATU Ireland website listed 17 local groups but I identified 22 groups while conducting digital ethnography (mapped in Figure 42), with branches in Donaghmede/Kilbarrack/Balcoyle, Lucan/Palmerstown, Limerick, and Waterford having been established on social media but not yet included on the union website.
From a digital ethnography perspective, CATU exists on social media as a national entity (CATU Ireland), and 21 local groups had established their own social media accounts during my research. 18 of the 20 local groups had Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts. This was, in practice, a more extensive and standardised cross-platform approach to social media than earlier Dublin housing activism, in which Facebook was often exclusively-used. Social media metrics supported interviewees’ sense that Facebook had become a less important social media platform for housing activism, with CATU’s social media audience as measured by proxy through Facebook ‘likes’ and Twitter/Instagram ‘followers’ demonstrating a greater presence on Twitter. Twitter is the social media platform on which CATU has the largest audience, but is also the platform on which the gap between national and local groups audience sizes is widest (Figure 43). While Twitter is the social media platform on which CATU Ireland and local groups are, on average, most active and have the largest following, in general local groups tend to establish themselves across the three social media platforms at the same time as part of ‘launching’.
CATU has issued guidelines on when and how local groups are supposed to use social media, which is an interesting effort at pre-empting and standardising social media as an organising practice (Figure 44). While local groups are not explicitly instructed to create social media accounts, the union’s ‘local group committee information’ takes for granted that this will be the case, and instructs committees to ‘get into the habit of taking pictures at any actions or events you participate in as a group, even Zoom calls, so as to have a selection of images to use to accompany future social media posts or send in to the national committee to be used for the website’ (CATU, 2021d). The union has emphasised how social media can be used during specific moments of crisis or urgency, but also to share the longer-term labour of organising practices within local areas (e.g. door-knocking, stalls, ‘building community, building roots’) and to narrate the use and importance of ‘the principles and work of the Union’. Notably, local groups are instructed to produce and share social media content in specific ways that the union
describes as best practice or more impactful, and CATU Ireland’s social media tips echo the emphasis on impact and outcome that interviewees discussed in terms of organising practices. Crucially, the union’s social media tips take and run with the language of social media engagement for corporate or public engagement purposes, with an emphasis on standardising social media practices such as who to follow, how frequently to post, and what type of ‘content’ is ‘best’ for ‘views’, ‘likes’, and ‘attention’ (Figure 44). In many respects, digital ethnographic observation of CATU’s national and local group social media accounts suggests that, rather than a deprioritisation of the digital, social media practices remain a priority at national and local levels. In practice, social media and digital strategy have been standardised as locally-rooted, everyday, and continuous digital/material practices, echoing M08’s description of moving from the spectacular to the mundane.

**Social media tips**

1. Emphasise that CATU is both a community and tenants union in posts.
2. Steer away from long posts, as they don’t usually track as much attention.
3. Always post a picture with a post as it gets more views.
4. Generally try to post pictures with the CATU logo somewhere on the picture.
5. When posting a picture featuring a member, ask permission first.
6. Avoid posting late at night.
7. Try limit posting to once per day, unless giving important live updates like a Facebook video stream or urgent Twitter posts.
8. Don’t endorse any political parties or politicians in posts.
9. Keep it relatively professional and don’t use slurs or anything like that online.
10. If you feel like you may be posting something a bit risky, run it by someone else in the committee.
11. Photos are best to accompany posts where available, videos are useful if they are succinct (less than 1min where possible) and good quality (subtitles are always good for accessibility and views).
12. Follow other local committees, branches, other tenants unions & housing groups for ideas and to keep you up to date on what kind of campaigns are going on around housing. Examples of other tenants unions include Acom (England & Wales), Living Rent (Scotland), London Tenants Union, LA & NY tenant unions.
13. Also follow local community groups, campaigns and more. Follow the people that follow these groups as well! This is a great way to get your name out to perhaps more established groups or persons in the area who you can contact if you see they are interested in housing or CATU campaigns.
14. (If capacity) Try directly messaging people who interact with your posts who are not members to see if they’d like to hear more about the union or join. At the very least invite them to like your page!

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Figure 44 - CATU local committee intro, social media tips section (CATU, 2021d, p. 10).
8.3 Mediating between theory and practice in union organising: Positioning CATU within the ‘organisation question’

The sense of a gap between the expectation of deprioritising the digital and the reality of organising during the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted one of the major unexpected developments that the fledging tenant union was forced to adapt to. Interviewee accounts tended to ascribe a causal relationship between public health restrictions and a necessary but unwanted reliance on digital technologies. Importantly, this causality and its narration as an unwanted development fit with the ambivalent position of digital technologies and logics in mediating between theory and practice in CATU’s establishment and ethos. This derived from a narrative of ‘learning from’ earlier temporary political occupation tactics and the union’s emphasis on Jane McAlevey’s work, which I introduced in the last chapter. In this section, I position CATU’s mediation between theory and practice within the wider context of what I described in the literature review as the old/new organisation question. Specifically, I trace how McAlevey’s work on trade unions and Paolo Gerbaudo and Jodi Dean’s work on political parties can be used to assess CATU’s mediation between theory and practice, and the positioning of digital technologies, tools, and logics within this, which I summarise in Table 7 below. In the next section, I discuss how the tenant union fits within this organisation question and has sought to digitally/materially mediate and shape individual and collective subjectivation in ways that resonate with but differ from the subject positions of worker, member, comrade, and tenant. Here, I provide the organisational foundations for this discussion of subjectivation by outlining how CATU’s mediation between theory and practice compares to McAlevey’s work on labour union organising and Gerbaudo and Dean’s work on political parties, which I introduced in chapter two.

The former is of interest because of its explicit emphasis in CATU’s model, despite the tensions in translating McAlevey’s work to a tenant union given a) its specific privileging of the workplace as an organising environment, and b) the predication of the US collective bargaining legal framework within which McAlevey’s work (2014, 2018, 2020) is situated.
While McAlevey’s approach to trade union organising differs from CATU’s emphasis on tenants and communities, her framing of organising, emphasis on structure-based organising, and critique of digital technologies have heavily influenced CATU. Recent work by Jodi Dean (2012, 2016, 2019) and Paolo Gerbaudo (2019) on political parties is of interest because of CATU’s explicit avoidance of electoral political engagement, which derives in part from the longer-term trajectory of a tense relationship between housing activism and Left political parties. While CATU specifies a formally ‘nonpartisan’ stance, Gerbaudo and Dean’s works are useful for understanding how the tenant union is comparable to the resurgence of the Left political party as an ideal, with its theoretical and practical emphases on participatory and active membership. Dean’s (2016) excavation of the relationship between crowds and party is a useful comparison to draw with CATU, with Dean arguing that the party, and specifically the communist party, is the ideal mediation between theory and practice that can work across and between the episodic event and the longer-term struggle, or in M08’s phrase, from the spectacular to the mundane. Gerbaudo’s (2019) work on what he calls ‘digital parties’ provides a digital/material framing comparable to CATU in how membership-based organisations mediate between theory and practice. After evaluating McAlevey’s impact on CATU, I turn to Dean and Gerbaudo’s works on the electoral party as mediation between theory and practice for impactful Left politics, and assess the extent to which CATU can be compared to these models.
Table 7 - Unpicking digital/material dynamics and subject positions within trade union and political party forms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>McAlevey</th>
<th>Dean</th>
<th>Gerbaudo</th>
<th>CATU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ideal political mediation</strong></td>
<td>Labour union</td>
<td>Communist party</td>
<td>Digital party</td>
<td>Tenant union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positioning of the digital</td>
<td>Opposes, though tacit structuring role</td>
<td>Opposes, communicative capitalism and digital technologies as individualising</td>
<td>Large pool of de-responsibilised participationist ‘membership’</td>
<td>Theoretical deprioritisation, but in practice reliant on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subject position from which subjectivation unfolds</strong></td>
<td>Worker</td>
<td>Comrade</td>
<td>Member</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Counter-space’ from which subjectivation unfolds</td>
<td>Workplace</td>
<td>Somewhat absent, but ‘social space’ as general category</td>
<td>Deprioritisation of ‘public space’, reconfigured as digital platform</td>
<td>‘Neighbourhood’ and the local; temporary contentious interstices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8.3.1 Organising for power through powerful organising: Jane McAlevey’s trade unions as mediation between theory and practice that shapes CATU

McAlevey’s work on labour and trade union organising is a key influence in CATU’s development. Interviewees and union materials were influenced by, and at times made explicit links to, McAlevey’s writings. For CATU, McAlevey’s work offers a practical and, in some senses, theoretical framing of union organising as the means of building power. While McAlevey’s approach to trade union organising differs from CATU’s emphasis on tenants and communities, three central points to McAlevey’s work, which I outlined in chapter two, have influenced CATU. These are McAlevey’s framing of organising, her emphasis on structure-based organising, and her critique of digital technologies and their uses in organising.

McAlevey’s assessment of how trade unions can and should contest power through ‘an organising model’ was referenced by interviewees and recurred in CATU training materials, with an emphasis on organising as distinct from mobilising. While organising may involve mobilising as a tactic, this occurs as part of a broader strategic approach that focuses on
‘recruitment and involvement of specific, large numbers of people whose power is derived from their ability to withdraw labour or other cooperation from those who rely on them’ (McAlevey, 2018, p. 11). This distinction between mobilising those who already agree with or are sympathetic to a cause and organising for collective power highlights the importance of structure-based work in which ‘the goal is building majorities of a bounded constituency’, which means that ‘organisers are constantly forced to engage people who may begin with little or no interest in being part of any group (ibid, p. 14). McAlevey offers a specific structure-based organising model, which has influenced CATU’s emphasis on ‘organising’ as its primary goal, although McAlevey’s work is explicitly focused on the workplace and whole-worker organising, approaching the worker as a ‘a person embedded in a range of social relationships in the workplace and in the community’ (ibid, p. 19) as the agent of effective power, rather than proceeding from the community. McAlevey’s (2020, p. 156) emphasis on ‘structure tests’ within the workplace to ‘assess’ and ‘build’ worker capacity and organisation have also been repurposed by CATU as applicable to the community in the form of petitions, landlord pickets, and other types of actions. Interviewees narrated structure tests as a useful and important way of making contention systematic, as an on-going and quantifiable endeavour that engaged ‘ordinary people’ in a continuum of actions as part of the tenant union.

As part of this whole-worker structure-based organising, McAlevey’s negative assessment of digital technologies in general, and social media in particular, has been used to support a framing of CATU’s organisational approach as a ‘deprioritisation of the digital’, although the extent to which this is possible or desirable is ambivalent both in McAlevey’s work and CATU’s practices. In McAlevey’s framing, social media usage is both inadequate and potentially harmful, in that it pulls energy from more effective organising tactics. Face-to-face conversations, in contrast, socialise, build solidarity within, and have the potential to bolster the confidence of the workforce. At times, McAlevey (cf. 2020, pp. 115-’6) is almost folksy in her prioritisation of the ‘face-to-face’ and derision toward social media, which she accuses of having ‘broken… standard social norms – like looking people in the eye when you’re commuting and, say, starting up a conversation – not
to mention our democracy’. While McAlevey is often negative in her assessment of digital technologies in general and social media in particular, her work can also be read as more positive and often implicitly accepting of the digital’s usefulness. In part, this stems from McAlevey’s emphasis on organising as a systematic method, which interviewees described as compelling through its reliance on numbers, strategic planning, and continuous assessment on ‘empowering and recentring agency’ (M01). McAlevey’s emphasis on process and method, which she describes as bringing aspects of community organising to trade union organising, chimes with M06’s description of ACORN’s emphasis on community organising as a methodical process, in which ‘they [ACORN] identify the target, they identify weaknesses in the target… it’s like scientific, nearly, like, they have a formula’ (interview with M06). Crucially, digital technologies and logics play a central but understated role in this part of McAlevey’s organising framework, primarily in quantitative power structure analysis/research.

While CATU’s organisational structure is strongly influenced by and aims to follow McAlevey’s organising model, the extent to which this is practicable or attainable is questionable. McAlevey’s suspicion of digital technologies in general, and social media in particular, which interviewees shared, both underestimates the extent to which digital technologies, tools, and logics are an understated component of the organising approach, and sets an emphasis on face-to-face communication which is more applicable to a workplace setting than a tenant union setting. In addition, the tenant union holds no public legal status as a recognised vehicle for collective bargaining on behalf of tenants. Accordingly, CATU’s abilities to organise differ from McAlevey’s trade unions, who proceed from the workplace and make use of an established legal framework for collective bargaining. This raises an important point of comparison between CATU and the other organisational structure which has been experiencing a resurgence in political theorising, the political party.
8.3.2 ‘The great dark birds of history’: CATU and the gap between resurgent Left political parties in theory and in practice

In stark contrast to the declining rates of political party membership or affiliation described by Peter Mair (2013) as part of a broader ‘hollowing of western democracy’, the return of the organisation problem has reignited critical interest in political parties and electoral politics as holding the potential for effecting meaningful change. Examples of ‘radical’ left and right of centre caucuses within established electoral political parties have abounded in the latter half of the decade since the GFC, with the right-wing ‘BrexiTrump’ phenomenon being accompanied by a swing toward left-of-centre caucuses within mainstream New Left parties backing Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders. This somewhat puzzling dynamic of a return to the political party as mediation between theory and practice is characteristic of the post-crisis period in which, despite a broad sense of depoliticised malaise or unease about the limited impact of electoral politics, there have been a series of seeming ‘crises’ of electoralism. Voters have been variously accused of falling for populist candidates who are ‘on the rise everywhere’ (Müller, 2017; see also Rueda, 2021) and being misled and manipulated into voting against their own interests through the ‘shadowy powers’ of ‘Silicon Valley utopians, ad men, venture capitalists’ and data analysts (Bartlett, 2018). As outlined in chapter two, Jodi Dean (2012, 2016, 2019) and Paolo Gerbaudo (2019) offer quite different assessments of the prospects of the electoral political party as contemporary organisational form. These are useful for comparing to CATU and the tenant union’s mediation between theory and practice, which is explicitly positioned as nonpartisan. Here, I assess how the different imaginaries that Dean and Gerbaudo put forward in their return to the electoral party as privileged Left political form can be put in dialogue with McAlevey’s emphasis on unions and CATU’s nominally avoidant attitude toward electoral politics.

Dean’s prognosis on social media differs from McAlevey’s issues with ‘antisocial media’, in that Dean sees the rise and prevalence of social media platforms as a symptom of the individualisation that McAlevey sees them as causing. Accordingly, while Dean is attuned to, and warns against, the dangers of co-option and subsumption within communicative capitalism
that social media create for left struggles, she likens their usage to the affective and collective desire of the crowd which can and should be reconfigured from temporary moment of rupture to persistence in and through the party as organisational form that aims for a division of us v them (Dean, 2016). In effect, Dean’s work frames the trajectory of how housing activist struggles in post-crash Dublin have evolved over time. Echoing interviewees’ self-criticism of the emphasis on temporary political occupations as ‘stunts’ or ‘spectacles’ aimed at courting media attention to highlight the contradictions of government housing policy and politics, Dean’s work has cooled over time on the necessity and function of spectacular moments of rupture that cannot be linked forward to class struggle as capitalism’s fundamental antagonism (Dean, 2012) and, ultimately, the party form (Dean, 2016). Dean’s (2009) recognition of the affective function that social media play – and how this is a central part of their success within communicative capitalism as an ideological order privileging ideals of participation, inclusion, and democracy – also captures the gap between housing activists’ reasoned disavowal of social media and the use and usefulness that their social media practices attest to. However, Dean’s (2016, 2019) emphasis on the communist party form and its social relations of comradeship contrasts with housing activism’s development toward a McAlevey-influenced ‘rank-and-file trade unionism but for community organising’ approach. The tenant union, rather than the communist party or trade union, accordingly assumes the position that the party occupies in Dean’s work. Despite the union’s emphasis on ‘tenants’, this collectivity is actually based on the framing of ‘ordinary people’ (who, for CATU, are people who do not directly profit from housing) and ‘community’, which contrasts with the workers and communists who Dean and McAlevey focus on and the clear division between employer-employee and comrade-enemy that their works address.

Interestingly, no interviewees mentioned Dean or her writings. The emphasis on the political party, and specifically the communist political party, in her most recent work starkly contrasts with the suspicions that many interviewees expressed toward political parties and electoralism in general, but also the specific vagaries of Left political party forms in Ireland. For interviewees, CATU’s nonpartisanship was explicitly premised as the
disavowal of political interest or political parties, with M03 describing CATU as ‘a move away from that, as in, you don’t have to be this person who knows this about housing or, like, is politically involved in this. You’re just a person who lives in places and it’s a community union, you’re a member of a community so you should join… We’re trying to move away from that’. Left politics and the Dublin Left political scene was often criticised by interviewees as being ‘really subcultural and unhelpful… Dublin Left politics is cliquey, if you’re not in the party and stuff like that, you don’t get invited, you’re not on the insider belt of organising things… You really have to be, like, Facebook friends with certain people in their parties and on their mailing list and if you don’t do that, it’s like, Fuck You’ (M04). Euphemisms to describe the tension within and between Left political parties tended to refer vaguely to ‘internal politics’, ‘ego’, and ‘resentments’. Some interviewees described in detail the difficulties of managing political party involvement in direct actions, with M06 in particular noting ‘major disagreements’ during TBTC when:

‘politicians wanted to come in, Left politicians, PBP [People Before Profit] and stuff. And there were people from those parties involved and they were great but it was inappropriate – well, we decided it was inappropriate, them using for their own popularity when they hadn’t, like, done a shift and this kinda stuff… there were those kind of disagreements, like the in-fighting, the lack of kinda direction, and then like just the mounting organisation that was needed’ (interview with M06).

For M05, who was a member of a Left political party, this ‘anti-political party sentiment’ was a common feature in post-crash Left politics, with ‘a great suspicion of political party involvement’ existing in tension with a sense that ‘there was always kind of an exception that they were willing to make for me, or the people that they were close to that were in the parties’.

Paolo Gerbaudo (2019) offers an alternate set of suspicions of political parties and digital technologies that can be put in dialogue with McAlevey, Dean, and CATU. While Gerbaudo specifically writes about the political party as organisational form, aspects of his description fit with how housing activism has evolved in post-crash Dublin, and particularly in the establishment and evolution of CATU. Gerbaudo echoes Dean’s focus on the party as organisational form that can channel or make the rupture of activist
struggle persist, and the ‘digital party’ is Gerbaudo’s descriptor for the organisational form that has been assumed by political parties with a purportedly activist inspiration or component in a number of international contexts. Gerbaudo is sceptical about the extent to which the digital party is an effective or positive organisational form for Left politics, but the dynamics of ‘membership’ and ‘participation’ that he outlines as a core part of digital parties are useful for assessing CATU. Gerbaudo’s conceptual framing derives from empirical analysis of examples of what he describes as digital/platform party operations. However, the dynamic of ‘participationism’ he describes resonate with the evolution of housing activism in post-crash Dublin and particularly the advent of CATU. Echoing Dean, Gerbaudo argues that the digital party reflects the resurgence of the political party as organisational form. Both temporary political occupation campaigns and the more recent formation of CATU can be connected to the tension that Gerbaudo (2019, p. 178) outlines as a ‘new cleavage in society’, with ‘connected outsiders’ who feel alienated from the existing political system being drawn to the ‘digital party’ as a participatory space, or ‘fluid aggregations of individuals’ (ibid, p. 85), in which a demagogic ‘hyperleader’ is digitally/materially legitimised by a reactive and unevenly engaged base.

In contrast to Gerbaudo’s model, CATU has tried to create new forms of community participation, primarily focused on mitigating the worst impacts of the economic environment through a focus on housing and social reproduction as community issues. In this sense, CATU’s constituency of ‘connected outsiders’ fit with work on indebtedness, austerity, and political subjectivation through direct action in other European contexts (e.g. Di Feliciantonio, 2016; García-Lamarca and Kaika, 2016). The union’s emphasis on direct action and emplacement through local groups and branch structures inverts what Gerbaudo documents, but the wider positioning of the union as a membership organisation that largely relies on an annual general meeting of ‘the membership’ to set strategic aims and tactical priorities echoes Gerbaudo’s work, and particularly the role of e-voting and virtual conferencing software to hold AGMs. The use of digital technologies here in part has reflected Covid-19’s impacts but also the practical affordances that digital tools and platforms have offered the tenant union, allowing ‘the
national membership’ to attend virtual hustings and vote on motions in a transparent and asynchronous manner. Gerbaudo’s digital party operationalises platform logics for electoral gain, putting forward a participatory and dynamic identity as distinct from traditional electoral political parties. While CATU’s aim is fundamentally different from this electoral focus, there is an interesting overlap in organising vocabularies and practices between the tenant union and the digital party as formulated by Gerbaudo. Both aim to construct a collective culture of mass participation within a framing of contemporary capitalist society as individualised and individualising.

Additionally, both the digital/platform party and the tenant union are premised on logics of growth that Gerbaudo links to ‘the platform logic of digital oligopolies such as Facebook, Amazon and Google’ but can equally be applied to McAlevey’s discussion of trade unions as data-driven (‘operating on the back of an ever-expanding database’), focused on membership recruitment/expansion (‘that comes close to the sign-up process of social media’), and reliant on a small core of paid staff supplemented by ‘the free labour provided by their members/users to communicate and interact with the electorate’ (ibid, p. 178). For Gerbaudo’s digital parties, the platform is the mechanism for legitimating and channelling participation, with digital technologies playing a mediating role in setting political priorities and policy ideals that are nominally participatory but tend to work ‘as a sort of decoy used by party leaders to concoct the impression of a non-existing or weak and purely facilitatory leadership’ (ibid, p. 179). For the organising union, whole-worker organising through a continuous process of structure testing and expansion within the workplace and in the broader community means ‘empowering’ workers to participate in the formal mechanisms that the law allows for collective bargaining, with a particular focus on contract negotiations and the spectre of strike action (McAlevey, 2020). For CATU, membership expansion is a similarly prominent focus (e.g. M08’s description of ‘the idea of constantly asking more people to join’), with continuous recruitment into something that exists and has meaningful work for members to do being the main way for the union to fulfil the need for its ‘reach to get deeper into communities’ and avoid ‘that clique element of things starting
again’ (M06). However, while Gerbaudo’s digital/platform parties echo CATU’s framing of the need for a participatory membership, the tenant union’s focus on local communities and emplaced direct action, which I unpack below, contrasts with the mainly aspatial ‘fluid or evanescent structure’ that Gerbaudo’s (2019, p. 97) digital parties pursue.

8.4 ‘The meaning of we, of you’: Digital/material mediation of individual and collective subjects

CATU’s mediation between theory and practice can be usefully put in dialogue with all three of the organisational forms outlined in the last section. While the tenant union explicitly draws on McAlevey’s work, it is useful to situate CATU’s mediation between theory and practice within Dean’s more nuanced understanding of the affective collective drives within communicative capitalism and Gerbaudo’s assessment of how the digital enables new forms and rhetoric of collective political organising. Crucially, all three mediations centre on a different individual and collective subject position that is interpreted as a privileged site from which subjectivation can occur (Table 7). These are worker (McAlevey’s labour unions), comrade (Dean’s communist party), and member (Gerbaudo’s digital parties). CATU’s mediation between theory and practice draws from aspects of each of these, although the union oscillates between ‘members’ and ‘tenants’ as privileged subject positions from which to organise. In this section, I connect these subject positions to CATU as a digital/material mediation between the individual and the collective, in which aspects of the worker, comrade, and member are digitally/materially melded in the tenant union’s contentious and collective subjectivation processes. This process of collective subjectivation is most politically potent when the overarching subject position of the tenant (and, critically, the unionised tenant) is digitally/materially produced and practiced, and in the next chapter, I draw from Lefebvre to conclude the thesis’ empirical work by highlighting how this is furthered through the mediation of counter-spaces.

McAlevey, Dean, Gerbaudo, and CATU put forward different mediations between individual and collective subjects as having the greatest potential for collective subjectivation (Table 8). For McAlevey, the
workplace is the site from which political subjectivation can be best pursued, and this is accomplished through structure-based whole-worker organising. Structure-based whole-worker organising is accomplished by forcing workers ‘to engage in face-to-face conversations’, a strategy that she argues ‘was already important before the advent of social media’ but is ‘even more important today because chatting late at night on social media is very different than when a worker looks another worker in the eyes and helps them work through fear, ambivalence, and all the normal things that happen when a union buster shows up’ (McAlevey, 2020, p. 157, italics for emphasis mine). Face-to-face conversation is in some respects the ‘secret sauce’ of McAlevey’s collective organising model, and her work often returns to and turns around narrating the ‘hard conversations’ that labour union organising drives are made or broken by, with the overall point that ‘pulling off a big, successful strike means talking to everyone, working through hard conversations, over and over, until everyone agrees. All-out strikes then produce something else desperately needed today: clarity about the two sides of any issue. Big strikes are political education, bigly’ (ibid, pp. 14-’5). McAlevey’s emphasis on face-to-face conversation has been directly translated by CATU into recommended local committee practice, with a particular emphasis on the local neighbourhood, community, and street-by-street recruitment through ‘door-knocking’. The union’s training materials have described ‘door-knocking’ as a means of ‘recruiting and building a base in our communities’ that is ‘a structured way to go out and talk to people, often complete strangers, on their doorstep’ which aims ‘to spread the idea of the union, get people thinking about the issues in their lives and areas and who is responsible, and encourage collective action as a solution’ (CATU, 2021b, p. 1).
Table 8 - Subject positions and subjectivation in unions, Communist/digital parties, and tenant unions summarised from literature and analysis of CATU.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How is subject position constructed?</th>
<th>McAlevey’s workers</th>
<th>Dean’s comrades</th>
<th>Gerbaudo’s members</th>
<th>CATU members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic; Workplace.</td>
<td>Political; Voluntary association, within Communist party.</td>
<td>Political; Voluntary association via open membership.</td>
<td>Social reproduction; Voluntary association via closed membership.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are social relations between subjects organised?</td>
<td>Face-to-face structure-based whole-worker organising from the workplace.</td>
<td>Relation of political belonging with specific expectations crafted through emancipatory egalitarian struggle coalescing in Communist party.</td>
<td>Open membership in participatory, digitally-mediated model.</td>
<td>Closed membership through dues, centred on face-to-face (door-knocking), place (neighbourhood) and (some) identities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the role of ‘the digital’ in this?</td>
<td>Explicitly to be minimised, but implicit reliance on digital technologies in structure-based organising.</td>
<td>Communicative capitalism forecloses, but social media contribute to affective sense of crowd and performative staging of ‘events’ which party mediates and performs ‘fidelity’ to.</td>
<td>Digital mediates membership and disaggregation of political party model.</td>
<td>Aim to deprioritise, however rely on during Covid-19 and also for organisational functions (dues, AGM, local structuring).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Crucially, CATU has explicitly positioned door-knocking as a means of organising social relations within and between the union, the local neighbourhood, residents, and union members. CATU’s training guide outlines this organising of social relations and the potential for political subjectivation that it mediates by instructing that members should not ‘third party the union. Try not to use words like “I”, “we”, “union” etc. as much as possible - try use “you” and focus on the person you’re talking to. Remember the union isn’t a fee for a service, it’s the common experience of people in struggle’ (ibid, p. 4). Here, door-to-door recruitment is done to expand local
union membership through a two-part process, in which local residents are
the focus for union expansion and local members ‘door-knock’ as a collective
and solidaristic practice, which in itself is used to build capacity, confidence,
and social bonds within the local branch. However, this emphasis on face-to-
face social relations as a priority in McAlevey’s model is simplified by the
workplace as the site from which whole-worker organising proceeds, whereas
the tenant union must proceed from the community or neighbourhood, which
is necessarily a fuzzier and more complicated site of social relations than the
direct employee vs shared employer collective organising that McAlevey
deals with. This is further complicated by what Mick Byrne (2018, 2019) has
variously described as the affective and complex ‘residential rent relation’,
which, in Ireland, turns around the individualistic tenant to small-scale
landlord relations that characterise the private rental sector. Although
homeowners can join CATU, the union has more broadly attempted to
collectivise ‘the tenant’ position, and begun to do some work on organising
the more naturally collectivised tenant bases of Local Authority, Approved
Housing Body, and institutional landlord tenants. However, these efforts have
generally been stymied by the individualising and limited nature of private
rental sector regulations and protections (Byrne and McArdle, 2020) and the
wider precarity that characterises the Irish PRS tenant experience (see also
Waldron, 2022).

Where McAlevey attunes to the worker, which is an economically-
deﬁned subject position, Dean and Gerbaudo’s works on political parties
focus on voluntary political associations which are, respectively,
comradeship and membership. These subject positions are shaped by
economic, social, and cultural factors, but carry different sets of expectations
and are structured by different types of political party approaches, with
varying usefulness for housing activist organising. For Dean, echoing
McAlevey’s emphasis on face-to-face organising, the digital is of limited use
for left and communist political parties. Parties can and should rely on and
muster deeper solidaristic social relations (e.g. Dean, 2019) which cannot be
digitally produced without being diverted into the broader workings of
communicative capitalism (Dean, 2005). However, the digital does play a
role in the ‘crowd’ as collective social relation, in which social media
platforms are ‘manifestations of the affective intensities associated with crowds—cascade effects, enthusiasm, bandwagoning, contagion, and imitation’ and the use of social media in contention marks how contemporary struggles are ‘fronts in global communicative capitalism’s class war, revolts of those whose communicative activities generate value that is expropriated from them’ (Dean, 2016, pp. 15-16). The party form, and specifically the communist party, is, for Dean, the ideal mediation between individual and collective subject positions with the potential for political subjectivation. This positioning turns around the party as the stable form of emancipatory egalitarian struggle faithful to the crowd ‘event’ (or social media ‘spectacle’) and comradeship as the social relation whose practices ‘materialize this fidelity, building its truth into the world’ (Dean, 2019, p. 124).

Accordingly, the party emerges as ‘a form for the expression and direction of political will. It concentrates disruption in a process in order to produce political power: these acts are connected; they demonstrate the strength of the collective’ (ibid, p. 158, italics in original). The party is the body or carrier through which the affect and collective subjects that digitally-networked contention mobilises are made to cohere, as ‘without a carrier it dissipates into the manifold of potentiality’, but ‘with a carrier some potentiality is diminished. Some possibility is eliminated. Some closure is effected… this loss is the subject’s condition of possibility’ (ibid, p. 183). This mediation between the individual and the collective unfolds, per Dean, through comradeship as the privileged social relation through which individual members and the party can persist, despite how ‘the party superego incessantly charges us for failing on all fronts, we never do enough, even as it taunts us with the sacrifices we make for the sake of the party, we have always done too much’ (ibid, p. 189). This is an evolving and fraught collective and individual process, in which ‘seeing yourself as changing the world requires you to look at yourself from a position that makes relentless demands on you, a position that compels and judges and accepts no excuses… organising us, the party compels us, or, differently put, it is the apparatus through which we compel ourselves to do what we must, to do what has to be done’ (ibid, p. 210). The party form provides the collective infrastructures to effect transformative change, and this is made possible by the individual
and collective performance of comradeship as social and political relation of belonging that creates the party. For Dean, the comrade is ‘a political relation that shifts us… toward the sameness of those fighting on the same side. It draws the demands on and expectations of those engaged in emancipatory egalitarian political struggles. Comradeship engenders discipline, joy, courage, and enthusiasm’ (Dean, 2019, p. 15). Crucially, as noted above, ‘comrade does not eliminate difference. It provides a container indifferent to its contents’ (ibid, p. 35) to which are attached a set of practical expectations of loyalty, diligence, and solidarity to move toward a better future. In the absence of comradeship, political belonging is stunted and the lack of a collective and solidaristic relation gives rise, per Dean, to ‘the end of the world: nonmeaning, incoherence, madness, and the pointless, disorienting insistence on the I’ (p. 135).

For Gerbaudo, the digital is a more ambiguous but meaningful component of organising, whether in occupation-based movements (Gerbaudo, 2012), subsequent left and right populism (Gerbaudo, 2017b), and the digital party’s more recent emergence (Gerbaudo, 2019). In contrast to the active and affective role of the comrade, Gerbaudo’s work on the digital party outlines its mediation of participatory ‘members’, whose social and political relationality is valued through quantity. For the digital party, membership is flexible and streamlined, with an ‘open’ model in which ‘registering as a member is often as easy as signing up for social media such as Facebook… new members do not need to pay to register: membership is delinked from financial contribution… This is presented as a way of making the party more open to society and making political participation as immediate as participating in online discussion on social media’ (ibid, pp. 17-’8). The digital party’s aim is ‘to rapidly accrue a vast base of registered members’, with deliberation and membership action through what Gerbaudo describes as ‘the “quantitative” model of plebiscitarian democracy, centring on initiatives and referenda proposed by the top, rather than towards the “qualitative” model of participatory democracy, with individual members intervening actively in strategy building and policy development’ (ibid, p. 18). While CATU uses the language of ‘membership’ to describe mediation between individual and collective subjects, the tenant union’s structure
differs from Gerbaudo’s digital party framework. Importantly, the union draws from labour union structures of being a dues-paying member and is intent on avoiding the possibility of Gerbaudo’s ‘hyperleader – superbase’ relation. For CATU’s founders, the tenant union’s mediation between individual and collective subjects required a conscious negation of the dynamics of individualistic ‘ego’ that were problematic in earlier post-crash housing activism. M04 described this framing as ‘one of the earlier positions’ of CATU, with an emphasis on how ‘when you talk to CATU, it tries to be an adequate representation of what it aspires to be. It’s like a Hydra. There’s no one head, there’s no one spokesperson, there’s no one central figure.’ In this regard, the union incorporates aspects of Dean’s comradeship through an incessant emphasis on participation that goes beyond superficial deliberation of the membership base on referenda points. While this type of lower-grade participation does occur at annual general meetings, in which CATU members electronically vote on amendments to union byelaws and what strategic campaigns the union will pursue, the member role is intended to involve social relations of activity and discipline that Dean describes as central to comradeship.

CATU’s positioning of membership as an individual and collective relation draws from McAlevey’s organising approach, with the union’s structure designed to grow through member recruitment and active involvement in a broadening place-based scale, from local committee to regional branch to national committee. This organising model focuses ‘in our communities’ on ‘door-to-door recruitment’, which ‘is different from other models of organising because it means we break out of the normal model of “activist organising” where people try to ‘organise’ people they already know or who are already active in activist politics. Instead we are trying to organise all of our community, and to have strength in our community, we need to bring as many people into the union as possible’ (CATU, 2021d, p. 13). The union ‘encourages all members to take part in door-knocking’, and local branches are charged with holding regular ‘door-knocking training… for new members’, with the union’s recruitment script being ‘role-played in pairs before every door-knocking session to give people confidence’ (ibid, p. 14). New members are to be encouraged ‘to become active and organised and be
able to develop an empowered collective ownership of their local committee (branch) as part of the union’ (ibid, p. 18). CATU’s framing has closely followed McAlevey’s work on trade union organising, but the union’s emphasis on ‘empowered collective ownership’ through continual involvement, recruitment, and collective discipline also echoes Dean’s discussion of comradeship and the balance of rights and responsibilities that comrades afford to and police from each other within the Communist party model. This sense of membership turns around an enabling structure that aims for mass membership of ‘ordinary people’, with CATU creating a structure in which ‘people do feel they can participate more, ‘cause it isn’t just a bunch of people who like know each other for so long that they’re actually just a bunch of mates doing mad shit’ (M02). This shift and CATU’s defined membership structure, per M03 (italics for emphasis), allows people to be involved in ‘defined roles… it’s easier for people to have a role. It’s less cliquey… with CATU, it’s less like – not that like we would call ourselves this, but there’s people would see me involved in this stuff as like oh this is like the group of housing activists, when CATU, we’re trying to move away from this’. For interviewees, a key feature of CATU’s organisational structures was a conversion from activist as subject position to member, in which ‘the whole idea of a union is it’s the power in numbers obviously but there’s no one leader, particularly… everybody feels empowered to be involved, everybody is equal, they’re all members… it’s, like, ordinary people’ (M06).

Importantly, while interviewees described CATU’s efforts to ‘deprioritise the digital’, in reality the subject position of CATU membership is digitally/materially experienced through a number of scales and processes that range from the spectacular to the mundane. Digital technologies play an important organisational role in how the union functions as a collective, with a need for finance and ‘admin’ work to process member payments (the majority of which are collected digitally) and support the connection between individual members, local groups, and the union as an overarching national body. Digital platforms and technologies accordingly play a background role in the union’s organising infrastructure, which uses email, video conferencing, and WhatsApp groups to connect members, groups, and the
union. The extent to which the union can ‘deprioritise’ the digital also is and will be constrained by the digital/material nature of contemporary life. Local groups and the union as national organisation echo earlier forms of housing activist collectives in that their continuous public existence unfolds mainly through digital technologies, and particularly social media, as I discussed at the start of the chapter. Being a CATU ‘member’ means individual participation in a digital/material collective which turns around an active membership and organising model, but this is publicised, organised, and mediated through digital technologies and tools on a range of scales and timeframes, from M02’s image of the continuous work of ‘putting down roots’ that I described at the end of chapter seven to the more immediate, heightened, and urgent calls to ‘direct action’ that the union makes for individual and collective actions.

The tenant union’s member model accordingly envisages an alternative form of individual and collective subjectivation to those outlined by McAlevey, Dean, and Gerbaudo. Crucially, CATU’s members are unionised tenants, and while CATU membership is open to homeowners and anyone who is not profiting from housing or property, the union privileges community and tenants as the site and subject position from which political subjectivation unfolds, although as noted this subject position also raises specific challenges (see Byrne, 2019). Rather than the economic and political framings that McAlevey, Dean, and Gerbaudo offer, CATU takes housing and social reproduction as the means of constructing subjectivation as an emplaced mediation between the individual member and the collective local group and union. In doing so, the tenant union offers a more formal organisational structure than earlier types of post-crash housing activism, and this formal structure has comradely disciplining and expectant effects for union members, with an emphasis on organising, recruitment, and direct action. Despite the union and its founders’ wariness of digital technologies and social media in particular, the union is a simultaneously digital/material mediation between the individual and the collective, with specific organisational functions, publicising characteristics, and an on-going and everyday mediation that centres around local groups and their constituent members. However, the positioning of community and the local is more
formal and differs from the earlier time-spaces of post-crash housing activism, which tended to turn around occupations as flashpoints of collective contentious organising.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed how, through the establishment of the Community Action Tenants Union, housing activist community groups have sought to change the mediation between theory and practice in post-crash housing struggle. Mediation has been used in two main ways here. Firstly, the chapter addressed CATU as a mediation between theory and practice that has been narrated as part of a broader shift from mobilising to organising in the wake of TBTC. I contextualised the tenant union and its mediation between theory and practice within a wider return to ‘the organisation question’ in Left political theory, which has seen a renewed interest in the traditional Left political forms of trade union and political party. I situated the tenant union within this wider organisation question by analysing how CATU has drawn inspiration from Jane McAlevey’s work on trade union organising but can also be compared with Jodi Dean and Paolo Gerbaudo’s recent writings on, respectively, communist and digital political parties. While the former has directly influenced CATU’s mediation between theory and practice, I highlighted how the union differs from McAlevey’s unions in a number of key respects and argued that the digital/material mediation between theory and practice is central to these mediating forms. Secondly, the chapter considered the digital/material mediation between individual and collective subjects in post-crash housing activism, comparing CATU’s tenant union ‘member’ subjects to the workers, comrades, and digital political party members who are prioritised in McAlevey, Dean, and Gerbaudo’s works. I traced the digital/material production of each of these subject positions as combining both spectacular and mundane enrolments of digital technologies. Overall, the chapter has highlighted the role of the digital/material in contemporary individual and collective subjectivation. In the next chapter, I connect this mediation of subjects to the mediation of urban space and the everyday political potential for ‘becoming democratic’ that this creates.
Chapter 9 – Mediated counter-spaces: The social production of contentious digital/material urban democracies

‘Social space… contains potentialities - of works and of reappropriation - existing to begin with in the artistic sphere but responding above all to the demands of a body 'transported' outside itself in space, a body which by putting up resistance inaugurates the project of a different space (either the space of a counter-culture, or a counter-space in the sense of an initially utopian alternative to actually existing “real” space)’ – Henri Lefebvre (1991, p. 349).

‘The inferno of the living is not something that will be. If there is one, it is that which is already here, the inferno that we inhabit every day, that we create by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for most: accept the inferno and become such a complete part of it that you no longer know it is there. The second is risky and requires vigilance and continuous attention: seek and learn to recognise who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, and help them endure, give them space’ – Italo Calvino (2009, p. 148, but as translated by Purcell (2013, p. 21)).

9.1 Introduction

In this chapter, which concludes the empirics of the thesis, I position CATU’s efforts at organising mundane and on-going contentious mediations of space and the more sporadic or spectacular forms of digital/material contention in earlier phases of post-crash housing activism. I connect Lefebvre’s work on the production of space, the right to the city, and its elaboration by Marcuse (2009), Merrifield (2011b) and others in the early/mid-2010s to what Mark Purcell (2013) describes as ‘the down-deep delight of democracy’ to assess how housing activists’ contentious mediations of urban space have been essential to housing’s politicisation in the post-crash city. Here, Purcell’s work is useful for understanding the importance of urban spaces that contribute to and inspire individual and collective desires to act and impact. The chapter focuses on digital/material contention and the social production of space to suggest that urban contentious practices that are emplaced, embodied, and everyday are essential for housing’s politicisation. My argument has three points, and uses post-crash Dublin to speak to the broader dimensions of contemporary urban struggle. Firstly, I argue that housing activists’ digital/material practices have claimed and produced ‘counter-spaces’, whose spatial and temporal dimensions unfold in ‘always-already
mediated’ urban space (Leszczynski, 2015). Secondly, I argue that the digital/material characteristics of ‘counter-spaces’ and their spatio-temporal mediation through digital technologies have had immediate and long-term impacts on how contention unfolds and what its outcomes can be. Mediated ‘counter-spaces’ have created both high- and low-profile digital/material interstices within the wider neoliberal and depoliticised dimensions of contemporary urban space. Drawing from work on independent and autonomous urban spaces in Dublin (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015; McArdle, 2022), I argue that these interstices are politically productive, providing in-the-moment sites of political encounter and use that challenge the dominant mediation and exchange of urban space (Merrifield, 2012). Thirdly, I suggest that these sites or moments of encounter have been subject to longer-term and more everyday mediations, which contributed to material and immaterial contentious infrastructures that persist beyond the ‘pop-up’ or ‘nomadic’ (Watt, 2016) punctuations of urban space-times that digital/material contention has created.

I build on ‘counter-space’ (hereafter without quotes) from Henri Lefebvre (1991), whose work on the production of space offers a powerful way of understanding the neoliberal, governmental, and strategic abstract space of late-stage capitalism. Counter-space is the term that Lefebvre uses to describe the tactical and political appropriation of space as part of the wider dynamic of at-times chaotic struggle of ‘the articulations between the market in space and the spaces of the market, between spatial planning and development and the productive forces occupying space, and between political projects and the obstacles they run into - that is to say, those forces that run counter to a given strategy and occasionally succeed in establishing a “counter-space” within a particular space’ (ibid, p. 367). Counter-space is a relatively minor component of Lefebvre’s broader work on the production of space, and his work on ‘the right to the city’ as ‘cry and demand’ (cf. Lefebvre, 1970, 1996) is more commonly engaged with by critical urban scholarship on resistance (e.g. Attoh, 2011; Harvey, 2008; Marcuse, 2014; Merrifield, 2011b). In the next section, I discuss the importance of urban counter-spaces for a longer-term and on-going struggle to ‘become active’ (Purcell, 2013) that is digitally/materially mediated in contemporary
societies. Rather than theorising whether/how this should, or could, be pursued without digital technologies, the second section of the chapter highlights how post-crash housing activism has necessarily involved claiming and producing mediated counter-spaces. These have ranged from temporary political occupations to more institional appropriations of urban space and CATU’s digital/material emphasis on the local neighbourhood, or what Athina Arampatzi (2017a) describes as ‘struggle communities’ in the context of austerity Athens. In this chapter’s final section, I argue that housing’s politicisation calls for the production of a range of mediated counter-spaces, but that these function best when space is approached as always-already mediated and politicised using digital/material tactics that can range from the spectacular to the mundane. The extent to which post-crash housing activism has captured this tactical range is being impacted by the ongoing restructuring of housing organising (through CATU) and urban space (through further post-crash commodification). I conclude the chapter by highlighting the pressing need for balanced, everyday, and collective housing activism that can be both spectacular and mundane, but only when its digital/material characteristics are understood as integral.

**9.2 ‘Help them endure, give them space’: Digital/material democratic practices and the everyday politicisation of housing struggles**

‘Sure, it's not by our past that our future will be measured
It's by the very moment that we're slumping in, dishevelled
Six hours into some TV show that tastes like the feeling of pizza

‘The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day... I know that this stuff probably doesn't sound fun and breezy or grandly inspirational. What it is, so far as I can see, is the truth with a whole lot of rhetorical bullshit pared away... None of this is about morality, or religion, or dogma, or big fancy questions of life after death. The capital-T Truth is about life before death. It is about making it to 30, or maybe 50, without wanting to shoot yourself in the head. It is about simple awareness — awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, that we have to keep reminding ourselves, over and over: “This is water, this is water.” It is unimaginably hard to do this, to stay conscious and alive, day in and day out’ – David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water* (2005).
The thesis’ empirical sections have turned and returned to related questions about the public, individual and collective subjectivation, and the labour and organisation of struggle in post-crash cities. These post-crash struggles have been a particular focus for activists, academics, and the activist-scholar spectrum from 2011 onwards, with an initial emphasis on the supposed spontaneity, horizontalism, and leaderlessness that digital technologies created giving way to more nuanced reflection on the place-based, hierarchical, and unstable subject positions that post-crash urban politics have drawn upon (e.g. Boler et al., 2014; Gerbaudo, 2017a; Merrifield, 2013a). Here, I begin my discussion of counter-spaces by starting from Nunes’ (2021, p. 12) point that the problem of organisation can never be ‘solved once and for all’, and that revolution requires a politics ‘that does not dissolve itself into a higher unity, be that an ethereal “process” or a universal subject-to-come, but assumes the limitedness and partiality of its own perspective as a necessary condition, while striving to overcome it not in thought but in practice’ (ibid, p. 157). Crucially, Nunes’ emphasis on organising as ongoing, limited, partial, and practical ‘striving’ calls for attention to what practices are best suited to, or most appropriate for, revolutionary politics. Returning to Nunes’ framing of left melancholia, Jodi Dean’s work on democracy as ideal is important for understanding the ambivalent positioning of the digital in this wider process of repoliticisation. Per Dean, revolutionary desires are sublimated as ‘incessant activity’ (Dean, 2013, p. 87) under communicative capitalism through ‘repetitious practices offered up as democracy (whether representative, deliberative, or radical)’ (ibid, pp. 87-8). Digital technologies facilitate an illusion of participation, which operates as ‘a deeper, underlying fantasy wherein technology covers over our impotence and supports a vision of ourselves as active political participants’ (Dean, 2009, p. 36).

Mark Purcell’s (2013) analysis of democracy and its ‘down-deep delight’ is a useful theoretical framing to put in dialogue with Dean’s discussion of democracy as neoliberal fantasy. Where Dean (2012, 2013) calls for a radical politics of collective desire for collectivity that she frames as ‘communist desire’, Purcell draws from a similar set of key scholarship on political theory (including Gramsci, Nietzsche, Lefèbvre, Rancière, Hardt &
Negri, and Deleuze & Guattari) to frame a collective desire for collectivity as a profound desire for democracy. Where Dean (2012) argues for a collective movement toward a communist horizon, Purcell (2013, p. 145) calls for a collective embrace of democracy, which ‘means committing ourselves to the struggle for democracy… continually fighting off oligarchy as we move down the path toward democracy’. Crucially, this means that ‘we can never be democratic, we can only ever be in the process of becoming democratic’ (ibid, p. 146). Like Dean’s communist horizon, Purcell (ibid, p. 145) frames this as continual motion through which ‘we cannot arrive at the end, but we can move in its direction. We cannot be led by oligarchs toward democracy. We must walk that road ourselves. All of us together’. Purcell is critical of what he variously describes as vanguardist or oligarchic presumptions, in which he includes Dean’s emphasis on the party form, and he critiques what he describes as how ‘this way of thinking imagines political success to mean gaining institutionalised state power, and so when it encounters democratic movements that aim at something more, it judges them to be failures’ (ibid, p. 144).

Purcell reads Lefebvre’s work to argue for transduction as an affirming method of attuning to emergent but already-existing democratic practices and ‘then augmenting them in thought, extrapolating them into their full-blown form, into a virtual object’ (ibid, p. 147). Here, Purcell uses virtual to draw the Deleuzeoguattarian-influenced philosophical distinction between the actual and the virtual (see Shields, 2003), with transduction being the main way to make sense of the necessarily heterogeneous, disordered, and cacophonous assertions of the need for ‘real democracy now’ in post-crash urban struggles. These struggles and their emergent and experimental practices are what Purcell describes in his translation of Italo Calvino, with which I began this chapter. For Purcell (2013, p. 151), the urban struggles of those-who-are-not-inferno ‘are active and alive’, ‘already going about the work of becoming-democratic’, and, repurposing Dean’s description of democracy as fantasy, ‘the path the virtual object of democracy urges us down’ is one which involves ‘everyone struggling together to become democratic and active’. The need to ‘give it space’ is both literal, in that ‘we need to create physical space for democracy’, but also an internal, connective,
and tinkering struggle, in which ‘we need techniques to nurture our desires for democracy, autonomy, and activity’ through experimentation ‘with new practices, new concrete modes of connection and common action’ (ibid, pp. 151-’5). Purcell highlights how these practices call for a collective and affective assessment of becoming democratic, in which democracy’s ‘down-deep delight’ cannot rely on a vertiginous and high-intensity happiness that ignores the difficult, boring, ‘low-level despair and anxiety that life can cause’ (ibid, p. 109). The ‘down-deep’ of delight reflects how what must be done, individually and collectively, requires an acceptance of discomfort, boredom, and the ordinary within the extraordinary, echoing David Foster Wallace’s foregrounding of the need to be ‘able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day’.

Notably, Purcell highlights the importance of literal space for urban democracy. This discussion of ‘becoming democratic’ can be augmented through a digital/material reading, which attunes to the ways in which activists appropriate digital technologies, tools, and logics as a core component of their democratic practices and a focus for their individual and collective labour. In post-crash Dublin, successive phases of housing struggles have used digital technologies in general, and social media in particular, to effect both spectacular and mundane mediations of urban space, which aim to politicise housing, property, and governance. In the next section of the chapter, I outline these politicisations and the mediated counter-spaces that they have produced.

9.3 The ‘archaeology of housing campaigns’: Digital/material counter-spaces and the contentious mediation of urban space

‘Take the camera to get some photos of TBTC buildings on the weekend, clear and bright weather. All are wrecks, new “security” with plywood and metal type structures to bar the doors at Belvedere and Frederick Street, windows stuffed with “Shame on you this could be a home” IHN leaflets in a health-and-safety type waspy yellow and black. Buildings like after Glastonbury with the sense that something has happened – banners and placard detritus wedged down at the basement level of weedy overgrowth by Belvedere’ – field notes, January 2019, see also Figure 45.
The counter-spaces that I discuss have varied in their intensity and duration – temporary political occupations were both highly intense and relatively short-lived, while interstitial and locally-rooted digital/material contention has emphasised lower-profile or on-going appropriations of urban space. However, each of these types of counter-space are interrelated as part of a wider contentious mediation of urban space within which housing activists, organisers, and the ‘ordinary people’ that CATU has sought to collectivise interact and build a meaningful narrative of power and its contestation in the post-crash city. My connection of what are accordingly quite different types of counter-spaces reflects Lefebvre’s (1991, p. 383) conviction that ‘the quest for a “counter-space” overwhelms the supposedly ironclad distinction between “reform” and “revolution”’. For Lefebvre, counter-spaces appropriate urban space for use and the production of collectivity, and ‘any proposal along these lines, even the most seemingly insignificant, shakes existing space to its foundations, along with its strategies and aims - namely, the imposition of homogeneity and transparency everywhere within the purview of power and its established order’ (ibid). I argue that counter-spaces are now digitally/materially produced and that this dual character challenges and politicises both the ‘abstract space’ of the neoliberal urban and the extractive and accelerative digital (Kitchin and Fraser, 2020). I conclude the
chapter by reflecting on the broader mediation of digital/material counter-spaces and, echoing Purcell, the everyday ‘becoming democratic’ that housing activism and organising calls for in the post-crash city-to-come.

9.3.1 Independent spaces
After ‘the crash’, the relationship between vacant urban spaces, the collapse of the property market, and a social/cultural desire to experiment with solidarity and commoning led to a temporary flourishing of independent spaces. These spaces were described by Bresnihan and Byrne (2015, p. 36) as arising through a dynamic in a post-crash Dublin where ‘there are many needs and desires which are not met, or excluded, by the pattern of high rent, the commodification of social/cultural life, and the regulation of public space’. The independent spaces Bresnihan and Byrne discuss and their emergence was shaped by the politics of ‘temporary urbanism’, which Mara Ferreri (2021, p. 11) describes as reflecting how temporary use, ‘as a form of doing urbanism through ephemeral and short-lived projects’, was mainstreamed ‘as an answer to the effects of a global recession and… has since become a celebrated while also problematic urban practice at a time of austerity’.

In post-crash Dublin, independent spaces and the temporary emergence of squatted social centres like Squat City and the Barricade Inn played an important role both in the planning and initial practices of temporary political occupations and the wider constellation of urban contention. Interviewees tended to narrate the temporarily visible politics of squatting in ways that echoed McArdle’s (2022) description of a temporary landscape of autonomous politics in post-crash Dublin. Interestingly, one independent space, Jigsaw, was a recurring site throughout the research and its digital/material turns. Jigsaw had previously existed as ‘Seomra Spraoi’ (which Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015 studied), a self-managed social centre that ran from 2004 to 2015 at Ormond Quay, then Mary’s Abbey, and then 10 Belvedere Court. ‘Jigsaw’ was launched at 10 Belvedere Court following Seomra Spraoi’s closure on fire safety grounds (O’Callaghan and Lawton, 2015). Jigsaw operated as what McArdle (2019) terms a ‘provisional place’ that produced ‘autonomous urbanism’, which was run by an anti-capitalist
collective who ‘wanted to show what an anarchist social space looked like in practice, and aimed to practice autonomy, mutual aid, and non-hierarchal organisation’, wherein ‘the collective provided cheap or free space to activist groups, which they felt was lacking in Dublin’s cultural landscape’ (ibid, p. 50). In early 2018, prior to and after TBTC, I attended a number of different housing activist events in this space, ranging from a workshop on using the internet to research landlords, IHN meetings for a planned ‘national tour’, two community dinners, a film night, and an ‘admin sprint’ to process volunteers’ Google Form submissions from TBTC.

Jigsaw was mentioned by interviewees in two main ways. Firstly, while conducting interviews during the Covid-19 pandemic, Jigsaw was the only space that interviewees consistently mentioned as a place that they would have liked to have been interviewed that was not accessible, with M01’s casual note that ‘I suppose Jigsaw would have been an option’ being repeated over email, text, and phone when arranging interviews. Interviewees mentioned other commercial and non- or less-commercial places as part of the wider constellation of contentious organising, which included ‘upstairs in the Lord Edward’, ‘Connolly Books’, ‘the Teacher’s Club’, ‘Liberty Hall’, ‘Hill Street Community Centre’, and ‘the Dublin Adult Learners Centre’. However, Jigsaw was the only place that recurred across interviews as a relatively fixed address from which housing struggles and other types of contention were being organised. Secondly and relatedly, Jigsaw’s importance as a contact point between different types of activism and contention was often mentioned. This was described as particularly important in the run-up to TBTC in the summer of 2018, when office space in Jigsaw was being shared by the student, queer, migrant, and reproductive rights groups, and housing activists (including the IHN and DCHA). M05 described his transitioning from student to housing activism at this time as arising from a collaboration between Take Back Trinity, a student activist group campaigning against fee and rent increases, and DCHA on a specific case involving Brazilian student tenants. For M05, involvement in housing activism came from how ‘we [Take Back Trinity] went back to Jigsaw and we went to a DCHA meeting to debrief… we ended up in Jigsaw, and I guess we just kept ending up back in Jigsaw’. This spatial overlapping of activist
groups was ultimately a key factor in how TBTC functioned as a coalition that aimed for a wider, more inclusive, and intersectional approach that moved beyond the focus on homelessness that characterised second phase housing activism.

Digital ethnographic data also highlighted the space’s importance, with ‘10 Belvedere Court’ recurring as an address/‘where’ point on many of the events and meetings that I documented while observing housing activists’ social media accounts. As a more tangible record, CATU’s formal incorporation papers carried on the connection between the space and housing contention, using Jigsaw’s address as their business address and, in doing so, connecting the fledging tenant union to this somewhat decrepit building in the north inner city, which was the last of Dublin’s post-crash independent spaces to close. Jigsaw’s closure in April 2021 (see Figure 46) in this sense marked a closure of the ‘new urban commons’ that Bresnihan and Byrne (2015) documented in the post-crash city.

![Figure 46 - Tweet from CATU Phibsboro-Glasnevin in April 2021, sharing Dublin Digital Radio's statement on the closure of Jigsaw.](image-url)
McArdle (2019) has traced the temporalities of autonomous and anarchist politics and the longer-term influences of these temporary practical appropriations of urban space. Importantly, McArdle’s (2022) work has offered a sensitive framing of the politics of space, time, and visibility in radical projects, in which ‘even when individual squats or autonomous social centres close, they still impact future projects… squatters often know the spaces they are in are going to be closed and see the squat as an opportunity to create an alternative, even if the space is not a permanent one. Squat City shows how the temporality of a space can be just as important, if not more important, than its spatiality”. Building from work on temporary use (e.g. O’Callaghan and Lawton, 2015), McArdle’s work highlights how the politics of counter-spaces are often an on-going and improvisational interplay between use and exchange (Till and McArdle, 2015). This echoes what Lefebvre would contrast as everyday vs abstract space. Jigsaw’s closure does not negate the impact that the independent space had and its important role in the material and immaterial infrastructures and mediated sociality of Dublin’s post-crash urban politics. However, the space’s closure is a depressing end to what Bresnihan and Byrne (2015, p. 51) described as ‘the question of power relations between the urban commons and its outside’, which points ‘towards our limited ability to become a visible presence in the city and to be sustainable on our own terms, a limited ability to impact on health and safety regulations and rent prices, and a wider inability to transform power relations’.

9.3.2 Temporary political occupations

Bresnihan and Byrne’s independent spaces (ibid, p. 43), which they interpreted as largely ‘characterised by neither an ideological nor countercultural identity’, were in some sense the pre-cursor of a template that temporary political occupations radicalised. Temporary political occupations disrupted the status quo of the neoliberal post-crash city and its governance, with O’Callaghan et al. (2018, p. 878) noting how housing activists appropriations of vacant buildings highlighted ‘the contradictions/failures of the property market’ and ‘the paradox of vacancy/housing unaffordability’. The digital/material mediation of temporary political occupations as counter-
spaces impacted how occupations were experienced as mediated both in real
time and in what has remained or endured after the occupations themselves
ended. In contrast to the DIY archives that Burgum (2020) traces in a number
of urban and squatting movements, these digital remains, while shaped by the
platforms that host them, offer another possible means of piecing together the
radical counter-narratives of the city and its becoming. The digital
ethnographic data collection pursued in this project is an initial attempt at
doing this, highlighting how mediation influences the ways in which
temporary political occupations have played with time and space. In ‘real
time’, occupations were interstitial incursions contesting the forces of
globalised financial capital and its vagaries, ‘popping up’ to hold ground for
a time (Watt 2016) and confront the structures and beneficiaries of power.
These have ranged from the occupation of Local Authority (Bolt Hostel) and
State-owned (Apollo House) buildings to critique the failure to provide for
the city’s homeless, to private property owners and landlords (Take Back The
City) profiting from speculative and exploitative private rental sector
dynamics. Crucially, while the specific buildings being occupied and the
ways in which these occupations were narrated were important, the majority
of the people who ‘encountered’ temporary political occupations did so
through one form of media or another, particularly the mediation that digital
technologies afford contemporary contention as it unfolds. The digital was
central to the functioning of occupations as code/space, because digital
technologies are central to the ways in which the occupation existed or was
experienced, and sought to produce an alternative city to come (on code/space
and its queer production see Cockayne and Richardson, 2017; Kitchin and
Dodge, 2011). In real time, the use of mobile phones to share images, videos,
and ‘livestream’ protest events and visually document activism was a
recurrent theme in contemporary housing activism in Dublin. This
construction of occupation as mediated event had become a common part of
the labour of contention, with activists and participants directly engaged in
producing the mediated occupation and the social media ‘buzz’ around it as
digital/material practice.

More enduringly, the materially occupied building as site of
contention was digitally mediated, produced, and reproduced as a reference
point (see Figure 47), reflecting how the mediations of the temporary occupation are what endure when the occupation of these counter-spaces ends. Digital technologies are central to how occupations have been researched, documented, and visualised in this project and existing literature more broadly. Overall, the mediation of occupation through digital technologies can be understood as mediating urban space in ways which also signify the importance of the material sites of contestation. Occupied buildings were indelibly connected to these counter-spaces of temporary rupture and contestation that are subject to further digital and news mediation (Figure 48). In this regard, the digital/material traces of occupation could abide and persist in the production of urban space after the event of the occupation itself, preserving its legacy and digitally producing and reproducing the material site of contestation. In turn, digital mediation or augmentation cemented the importance of the material to urban imaginaries of protest. Here, we can interpret the enduring legacies of occupation in the production of space as a contentious counter-imaginary. While the physical appropriation of urban space and emphasis on its use is temporary (McArdle, 2022), the digital/material can be used to signify and preserve the material site and moment of rupture, with recurrent, inspirational, and experimental resonance for future contestation being identified by interviewees in their discussion of occupations.
Figure 47 - 34 North Frederick Street, TBTC-occupied building, and its on-going signification for resistance and speculation.
9.3.3 Interstitial counter-spaces: Stickers, graffiti, and eviction defence

Beyond temporary political occupations as high-profile mediated moments of rupture, the ‘archaeology of housing campaigns’ and its digital/material presence has included a more interstitial landscape of contestation. The
‘archaeological’ framing that titles this section, which I borrow from Figure 49, is useful for understanding digital/material contention as produced through a wider and longer-term spatial and material culture of activist appropriations of urban space. These include the material existence of leaflets/stickers, graffiti, ‘pop-up’ events, and eviction defences, and their mediation through digital technologies that are used to plan, produce, and disseminate these interstitial sites and objects of resistance.

Contentious urban inscriptions, though often temporary, are part of the broader material and visual culture of resistance that has used tools like stickers, posters, and graffiti to mark and contest the city, and to attempt to produce and share meaningful symbols of protest (Awad and Wagoner, 2020). Hannah Awcock’s (2021, p. 528) work is a useful entry point for understanding the visual analysis of protest stickers and their production and circulation, which draws from Gillian Rose’s (2016) visual methodologies to
analyse protest stickers as ‘a ubiquitous but overlooked method of political participation in urban space’. For Awcock (2021, p. 527), the circulation and location of protest stickers are significant for research on politics and public space, with varying processes of circulation in which stickers ‘can be carried by an activist, sent by post, or the design can be emailed or downloaded from a website and the stickers printed in the new location’ but ‘regardless of how stickers circulate, they all have to be stuck somewhere’. Adding to Awcock’s focus by taking a digital/material approach highlights both the role that digital technologies play in the design, production, mediation, and re-circulation of protest stickers, but also how researchers, activists, and the public often engage with this visual and material culture through subsequent digital mediation. These subsequent mediations, particularly through social media, connect and frame these ‘sometimes satirical, often humorous, and frequently angry… creative interventions in public space’ (ibid, p. 528) as part of a broader campaign, narrative, or collective digital/material struggle (see Figure 50 and Figure 51).

Figure 50 - CATU Dún Laoghaire tweet from 4th September 2021 sharing images from the 'stickering campaign'.

Some photos from our stickering campaign. CATU stickers are now spread all over Dun Laoghaire seafront.
Figure 51 - CATU Mountjoy/Dorset tweet from 31st March 2021 sharing image of removed 'Say no to co-living' campaign sticker.

Figure 52 - DCHA Facebook post in July 2018 sharing images of poster campaign targeting vacant buildings, which is referenced in Figure 49.
Awcock distinguishes stickers from graffiti, in that stickers are quick/cheap to produce, easy to disseminate, and comparatively less risky. In this sense, graffiti can also be understood as contributing to interstitial mediated counter-spaces and is arguably a more politically confrontational act of inscribing dissent in the urban landscape (e.g. Alexandrakis, 2016; Evered, 2019). As a parting gesture that was posted by the IHN in January/February 2017, for example, Figure 53 captures how graffiti has been used as a way of contentiously marking urban space by housing activists during and after temporary political occupations.

Over the course of the research, I spent hours wandering the length and breadth of Dublin, mulling over the digital/material and driving even the most patient companions insane by pausing or doubling-back to photograph the urban landscape and its contentious daubing. Graffiti ranged from two mantras on the residential rent relation in Dublin’s north inner city that I saw repeatedly painted over and then lovingly redone (Figure 54) to more campaign-specific tagging of vacant buildings in the city centre, with the digital/material melding of #TakeBackTheCity a bright blue enjoinder from the summer/autumn of 2018 on (Figure 55).
Notably, the ‘Empty? Occupy!’ mural by graffiti collective Subset on the gable of 34 Frederick Street (pictured Figure 21, p. 148) during TBTC underwent three rounds of inscription and mediation. After the eviction of occupiers, the property owner painted the ‘Empty? Occupy!’ mural black on 29th September, with this freshly-painted wall being used as a canvas for a quicker but similarly pointed critique (Figure 56). This was again painted black by the property owner and reinscribed once more, in June 2019, with street art that was common in some parts of the city at the time which was contesting the inclusion of members of An Garda Síochána in the 2019 Gay Pride parade and highlighting trans rights (Figure 57). These contentious inscriptions and the wall’s recurring role as a temporary counter-space, which derived from the building’s significance as a site of temporary political occupation, is one example in a wider debate that is currently on-going about graffiti, public art, and urban governance in Dublin (see McCullagh, 2022). Importantly, these successive rounds of graffiti on the Frederick Street gable
and the campaign-specific slogans or ‘tags’ in Figure 53 and Figure 55 were documented and mediated through housing activist social media accounts, with photographs making a digital/material afterlife possible for contentious street art (see O’Hara, 2019 and Zebracki, 2017 for more on graffiti as 'digitally networked' public art).

Figure 56 - Gable wall of North Frederick Street - 'abstractified' and reinscribed as a mediated counter-space. Images shared online by Bodger (2018).

Figure 57 - Reinscribing and queering a mediated counter-space - LGBTQIA+ graffiti on Frederick Street building's gable wall, summer 2019.

While protest stickers, leaflets, and graffiti ‘stick to’ or ‘mark’ particular places for a time, ‘pop-up’ contentious appropriations of urban space are another form of interstitial counter-space that can impact and endure more broadly through digital mediation. I discussed ‘flash actions’ in chapter six in terms of activists’ publicising practices, but here I want to highlight how the digital mediation of these more temporary counter-spaces is useful for research tracing housing activists’ practices but also
understanding these practices as simultaneously digital/material contentious appropriations of urban space. Here, I draw from Paul Watt’s (2016) Deleuzeoguattarian work on London housing activists and their ‘pop-up’ nomadic spaces, which a) helps to frame the short-term and ‘nomadic’ characteristics of some types of counter-spaces as being their point, and b) can be augmented by a digital/material reading of these types of spaces. In Figure 58 and Figure 59, I give two examples of how CATU local groups have used Twitter and Instagram to digitally mediate time-specific counter-spaces that temporarily ‘held ground’ for contention in 2021. The first example shows CATU Belfast’s use of Twitter to mediate an on-going physical and telephone picket of an estate agent involved in a dispute with a local branch member – the Tweet mediates the local branch’s presence at the estate agent’s office and circulates information encouraging others to participate in the ‘phone picket’. The second example shows the temporary construction of a co-living unit by the CATU Phibsboro-Glasnevin branch as part of their longer term campaign to resist the planning approval for and speculative development of co-living in the local area (with #nocolivingind7 being used on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to narrate the on-going struggle). Beyond specific campaigns, CATU Ireland and local groups have also used digital technologies and social media platforms to mediate evictions and, crucially, eviction ‘member defences’ as a key form of emplaced and contentious digital/material organising.

Figure 58 - Tweet about CATU Belfast telephone and physical picket of a property management firm, 8th February 2021.
Here, digital mediation serves a publicising purpose but also captures and mediates the temporary material appropriation of space that the local group engaged in through building the co-living unit structure, which was erected for a few hours of the weekend on the canal bank opposite a site where planning permission had been sought for a co-living development. Through digital mediation, this temporary counter-space endures and is connected to a wider narrative of digital/material contention, echoing Lawton’s (2018) framing of the ‘revanchist’ practices of private rental sector evictions under housing financialisation, wherein evictions make the logic of financial capital clear in urban space, and challenging evictions accordingly means challenging these logics (see also Baker, 2021). Much of the union’s growth
during the pandemic has been connected to defensive organising before, during, and after high-profile digitally-mediated evictions. M04, for example, described a notorious eviction in Phibsborough in August 2020 as a driving force for CATU recruitment in the area, despite the lack of union involvement in the specific example, noting that ‘a lot of people joined us after the eviction on… Berkeley Road. A lot of people joined us around then as well, we got quite a diverse lot off around that, but again it did filter through social media… it also showed, like, the pros of having something like CATU on social media’. The union’s AGM materials also noted this connection between high-profile evictions, ‘member defences’ as mediated countercpaces, and membership numbers (Figure 60). The 2022 AGM booklet described membership growth from the end of 2020 to the end of 2021 as ‘exponential… jumping from 653 to 1491. The significant milestone of 1600 members was reached just before the 2022 AGM’ (CATU, 2022, p. 1). Growth in member numbers spiked in September/October, which the AGM booklet connected to ‘the high-profile attempted eviction of a social centre in Prussia Street, Dublin 7, which reignited a national conversation around dereliction and the conditions that lead to precarity in housing’ and a Cork-based ‘local campaign around dereliction and a day-long event on the issue’ (ibid). These temporary and interstitial counter-spaces, which range from the spectacular of occupations to the mundane of protest stickering, contribute to, and have most recently been codified by, CATU’s designation of local neighbourhoods as digitally/materially mediated sites of struggle. In the final section of this chapter, I outline how CATU’s mediation of contentious urban ‘struggle communities’ (Arampatzi, 2017a) can benefit from adopting a digital/material approach to becoming democratic in post-Covid Dublin’s neighbourhood.
9.4 Digital/material ‘becoming democratic’ in slow community struggles for the city-to-come

In the first part of this chapter, I outlined housing activists’ politicisations and the mediated counter-spaces that they have produced. Here, I want to reflect on the broader mediation of digital/material democratic practices and everyday repoliticisation that housing activists use digital tools and platforms to pursue. This process of politicisation and, borrowing from Purcell, the ‘becoming democratic’ that it engenders should be understood as necessarily digital/material and having evolved over time. Earlier phases of post-crash housing activist struggles were often structured by spectacular confrontations with the Local Authority, the state, and property owners, both in performative temporary political occupations and more functional eviction resistance work and its mediation. In the wake of TBTC, post-crash housing activism has seen a step change that can be read as the type of experimentation ‘with new practices, new concrete modes of connection and common action’ that Purcell (2013, p. 155) calls for. The establishment of CATU Ireland is a turn toward a more formal and everyday democratic practice in which the local community is the site through and from which contention is digitally/materially mediated. The tenant union as a necessarily on-going and incomplete answer to ‘the organisation question’ has shifted the individual and collective subjectivation through which housing struggle is produced, as
well as turning to the neighbourhood as the privileged counter-space for organising.

‘The local’ has a rich and storied tradition in social movement and geographies of resistance literature (e.g. Agnew, 1987; Martin, 2003), and the emplaced characteristics of the neighbourhood and the local have been a key feature in work on post-crash and austerity governance (e.g. Craddock, 2017; Di Feliciantonio, 2016; Hall, 2020; van Lanen, 2017). Here, CATU has attempted to systematise post-crash housing activism in Dublin. This aim at fostering emplaced but connected or networked housing struggle rooted in, and responsive to, local communities had been a feature of housing activism from the Bolt Hostel onwards. While the IHN, DCHA, and other ‘community groups’ have struggled to achieve this, with a particularly significant factor being the intermittent intensity and unsustainability of the recurring use of high-profile temporary political occupation tactics, CATU has formalised a framing of housing activism that centres on the local community. CATU’s individual and collective subjectivation of unionised tenants in local communities has aimed to mediate the neighbourhood as a productive and contentious counter-space centred on on-going, processual, and everyday politics. This transition, which interviewees narrated as a shift from mobilising to organising, is captured in Athina Arampatzi’s (2017a) conceptualisation of the ‘struggle communities’ that emerged following the movement away from mass mobilisation in/occupation of the squares to a dispersed and grounded democratic politics of everyday life in the neighbourhoods of austerity Athens. Arampatzi argues that, in the wake of the GFC and partly responding to the spatialised politics of austerity urbanism (see Tonkiss, 2013), place and community have operated as re-emergent sites of struggle. Drawing from Young’s (1990) deconstruction of community as ideal, Arampatzi (2017, pp. 48-9) positions community as ‘an affirmation of a sociality/social subject constituted through sets of relations and interactions that involve commonality, mutuality, bonding, sharing, reciprocity and solidarity’. Arampatzi (ibid) is here influenced by Young’s idealisation of ‘the immediacy of face-to-face, unmediated social relations, and direct democracy participation and control, based on transparent interactions secured through co-presence in space and time’.
However, Dublin’s post-crash housing activism highlights how the digital has been used to publicise, organise, and mediate post-crash housing struggles and the ‘struggle communities’ that these have given rise to. The prioritisation of the immediacy of face-to-face contact and its importance for democratic participation presupposes that social relations can unfold as ‘unmediated’, but this is not and has never been the case – space is ‘always-already mediated’ (Leszczynski, 2015). We experience the world as an amalgam of bodies, tools, and processes replete with context. However, the digital is an ambivalent gap between theory and practice in post-crash housing struggles and their democratic practices. In earlier phases of housing activism, per interviewees, social media and the pursuit of attention and engagement through mediated spectacle created problematic dynamics of hierarchy, unsustainable labour, and cliquishness, in which the public façade of the activist community group social media account belied the complex and unstable work and social relations that produced it. The conscious establishment of CATU, and the shift from mobilising to organising that interviewees narrated, tended to target social media in particular as something to be de-prioritised. This theoretical desire to disengage with or de-prioritise the digital, in practice, has been superseded by new and renewed digital/material dynamics that shape individual and collective subjectivation and counter-spaces within the tenant union. Rather than a de-prioritisation of the digital, CATU Ireland has reprioritised the digital as a more everyday, on-going, and, in some senses, bureaucratic mediation of local and national housing struggles. These mediations have included new and more sustainable types of mediated counter-spaces, ranging from episodic pickets or ‘pop-up’ actions to lower-profile and on-going individual and collective engagement in local communities across Dublin and further afield (notably Belfast, Limerick, and Cork). CATU’s mediated counter-spaces have been produced through digital/material labour that draws on local communities, but this labour has typically revolved around the ‘unsexy’ (M08) but ‘revolutionary admin’ (M06) of video conferencing, agendas, minutes, mail merges, and the prioritisation of paid administrative and organising roles within the union. The digital/material and its productive mediations accordingly can and should be understood as a component of how the contemporary work of
becoming democratic actually exists for CATU as union and its mediated counter-spaces which, echoing Purcell, can be used to observe and help these practices to endure, experiment, and evolve.

Importantly, while CATU’s mediation of housing struggle has re-centred and attempted to standardise a place-based community organising approach, this counter-space turns around a subject position that differs from earlier phases of post-crash housing activism. ‘Ordinary people’ and, crucially, ‘members’ of the Community Action Tenants Union are the subject positions that the union has prioritised in its digital/material contention. CATU as an organisation and my interviewees, many of whom played a prominent role in effecting the shift toward CATU, described the union’s development as a shift in both the subject and space of housing contention. While sympathetic to the union’s organising efforts and the repositioning that it has focused on carrying out, I felt that union and interviewee emphasis on this change in mediated subjects and spaces tended to describe this as a fait accompli that had broken with what were seen as problematic aspects of earlier phases of post-crash housing activism, rather than an on-going processual dynamic that had evolved from and carried at least three of the same digital/material frailties of earlier housing struggles. These included firstly a tendency toward uneven participation, with the same interviewees who described themselves as operating inside the cliques of earlier housing activism and politics playing a similarly active and prominent role within the tenant union. Secondly, despite interviewee and union emphasis on the ‘face-to-face’ and ‘door-knocking’ as transformative process of individual and collective subjectivation, these are by no means necessarily transferable across the union in its entirety. Many of the faces that I saw in the social media posts marking and celebrating door-knocking efforts or local demonstrations were the same faces that I had been encountering over and over in digital ethnography, participant observation, and interviews. Thirdly and relatedly, the union’s reliance on group chats, and particularly WhatsApp group chats has, if anything, expanded the dynamic that interviewees complained about in earlier digital/material contention. Involvement in national, local, campaign, sub-campaign, caucus, or sectoral CATU groups has mainly unfolded through WhatsApp groups and Zoom meetings, and,
perhaps reflecting the broader ‘Zoom-ification’ of everyday life that the Covid-19 pandemic generated, it is difficult to envision how CATU would function without these digital/material forms of sociality. Finally, and more broadly, the union has tended to rely on the digital as a form of ‘public space’, similar to earlier forms of housing activism. Arguably, the main difference in how CATU uses the digital/material is a move away from Facebook and public social media toward operating mainly behind user log-in credentials for the CATU website, registration for/invitation to Zoom meetings through email, and within private WhatsApp groups. Covid-19 and its impact on public gatherings has so far limited the extent to which CATU has dealt with the need to fulfil the intense political sociality that mediated counter-spaces like temporary political occupations or, in another way, Jigsaw fulfilled. M08 captured this in their description of taking part in TBTC’s occupation of Frederick Street as being a key part of their sense of belonging and collective identity, which ‘was something that kinda kept me going a bit… to sustain me through a lot of it without burning out… And that engagement with people… and that way of relating to, like, I am part of this thing that everyone can see’.

CATU’s emphasis on formality and local structure accordingly relies, in practice, on the digital/material to pursue its ‘becoming-democratic’ practices of individual and collective subjectivation. Rather than seeing the digital as something to be deprioritised, the union’s practices currently are and, I believe, will continue to be most effective when accepting of the necessarily mediated nature of the subjects and spaces that politicisation calls for. The digital offers an ambivalent but useful set of technologies, tools, and logics which cannot and should not be ceded to efforts to attain an idealised unmediated ‘properly political’ gesture that does not exist (see Beveridge and Koch, 2017). Instead, the union’s move toward a more emplaced and everyday form of politicised housing struggle should be celebrated, but also pushed to do the work of digital/material ‘becoming democratic’ in ways that echo Kitchin & Fraser’s (2020) call for balance in our individual and collective digital lives. Purcell’s (2013) framing of ‘becoming democratic’ can be furthered by attuning to the personal, collective, and societal strategies the living digital/material lives call for, described by Kitchin & Fraser (2020)
as an ethos of ‘slow computing’, which is intended to counteract the digital’s accelerative and extractive characteristics. Here, Kitchin and Fraser’s tempo and speed resonates with Grimwood et al.’s (2022) framing of policy temporalities and the need for a gradual pace that can mediate and be mediated by local context. On a personal level, slow computing means continuously and consciously reflecting on how we choose to spend our time, share our data, and capitalise on our limited agency in curating, stepping out of, obfuscating, and using open alternatives within our digital lives. As a collective, which Kitchin and Fraser (ibid) approach from the workplace but also society more broadly, slow computing means slowing down together in our workplaces, families, friendship groups, and civic society more generally, whilst agitating for state and supranational governance and regulation of the digital. Importantly, slow computing is an ethical and practical stance, which calls for deceleration, disconnection, asynchronicity, and an overarching ‘ethics of digital care’.

CATU’s emphasis on emplacement and the naturalistic comparisons to putting down roots capture how the tenant union has narrated its emplaced, everyday, and on-going organising. However, the union’s practical struggle for the city-to-come, which it is currently attempting to systematise and spread in communities across the island, is and will be digital/material. Acknowledging the practical and useful ways in which contemporary subjects and spaces are simultaneously digital/material, and the role that digital technologies play in publicising, organising, and mediating contention, allows for future struggle and politicisation of housing that is attuned to and capitalises on the digital’s ambivalent potentialities for individual and collective struggle. CATU has shifted the digital/material mediation of housing contention from the spectacular event or episode of temporary political occupation to a more mundane, boring, and on-going digital/material politicisation. This politicisation uses the local as the counter-space and the subject position of being a tenant to produce ‘community’, ‘action’, and ‘union’. Recognising the digital/material as a key component of the union’s on-going processes of ‘becoming democratic’ is the first step in a longer journey toward the virtual of a more democratic digital/material city-to-come that is being actualised in present struggles.
9.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the mediation of space in post-crash housing activism, building from Lefebvre’s formulation of ‘counter-spaces’ and their positioning in the broader social production of social space. I used Mark Purcell’s work on urban space and democracy to contextualise what I described as the ‘archaeology’ of mediated counter-spaces in post-crash Dublin. Using housing as a lens, I outlined the autonomous, temporary, and interstitial counter-spaces that have contributed to the broader landscape of urban dissent and struggle in the city. Finally, I put Purcell’s processual and emplaced reading of ‘becoming democratic’ in dialogue with the shift from mobilising to organising that I identified in earlier chapters as a characteristic of the latest phase of post-crash housing activism. I have suggested that the on-going politicisation of housing by CATU Ireland can and should be read as digital/material in its mediation of subjects and spaces. In reflecting on mediated counter-spaces and the ways in which the digital/material character of contemporary urban struggles can allow them to endure or persist, I do not intend to valorise the digital as unproblematic. Instead, understanding housing struggles as digitally/materially mediated is intended to be a productive conceptual and empirical engagement with the ambivalent politics and potential for becoming-democratic repoliticisation that urban space as always-already mediated affords for individual and collective contention. This is a necessarily on-going struggle, but using a digital/material lens allows for better attention to and awareness of how contemporary contention actually exists and what directions this may take in the becoming-democratic future as it unfolds.
Chapter 10 – Conclusions

‘I face off with the physical
My head’s ringing from the love of the stars
There is too much pretence here
Too much depends on the fragile wages
And extortionate rents here
We’re working every dread day that is given us
Feeling like the person people meet really isn't us
Like we're gonna buckle underneath the trouble
Like any minute now, the struggle's going to finish us
And then we smile at all our friends’ – Kae Tempest, ‘People’s Faces’ from The Book of Traps and Lessons (2019).

‘In a way, capitalism is an ongoing disaster anticapitalism alleviates, like a mother cleaning up after her child’s messes (or, to extend the analogy, sometimes disciplining that child to clean up after itself, through legislation or protest, or preventing some of the messes in the first place, and it might be worth adding that noncapitalist ways of doing things are much older than free-market economic arrangements). Activists often speak as though the solutions we need have not yet been launched or invented, as though we are starting from scratch, when often the real goal is to amplify the power and reach of existing alternatives. What we dream of is already present in the world’ – Rebecca Solnit (2016, p. xv).

10.1 Overview

In the final phases of my research I would walk to work along the Liffey between the gradually unfurling office and apartments blocks of the northern quays that have been swallowing up the sky above, forcing myself not to peek through the windows of the modest redbrick homes I would pass by. Steady deep breaths. The day ahead of hours and hours of fifteen minute increments to get through. The months of research left, already overtime and not long remaining. And the subterranean sense that myself and the city were emerging from something. Though this sense of my research and time as bounded sometimes helped, at other times both seemed boundless and flat and terrifying, melding with the build-to-rent apartment complexes forming a smooth expanse of flat grey and murky glass as far as the eye could see, where time and distance expanded and collapsed around me as a taut knot at the centre, unable to go back or forward or to wait for time to wash me clean. Inadvertently, my project had captured a city that was reeling from crisis to crisis, with the homelessness and housing crises that I began with being rapidly overtaken by the onset of Covid-19, a punctuation of the urban-finance-property nexus from within which I charted the course of the thesis.
As I charted this course, I learned to ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016) and bear witness to escalating and overlapping personal and collective urban crises, and how the city’s inhabitants have attempted to navigate their own course within and beyond the post-crisis conjuncture.

This course has turned around the simultaneously digital/material character of activism and the post-crash city, whose trajectory I have traced through time and space. In the first section of the thesis, I set out the theoretical and methodological context for the work. Beginning from an intersection between critical digital and urban geographies, I argued for the need to approach contemporary contention as digital/material, attuning to the ambivalent potentialities of the digital, the political, and housing struggles in post-crisis cities. This point of departure meant tracing and emphasising the constitutive role that digital technologies, tools, and logics have played in post-crash housing struggles, a point that was often incidental or marginal in much of the existing work on urban housing activism. The thesis’ approach to contention as digital/material called for a diverse set of research methods that simultaneously complemented but were also at times in tension with each other. Chapter three set out the diffracting and assembling structure that the project has taken, in which different modes of data collection through digital ethnography, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews were used to make different ‘cuts’ into post-crash housing activism as the object of study. Each of these cuts unearthed a different type of knowledge, and I used a processual and emergent assembling approach to tease out what could be learned by framing diffractive analysis around activists’ practices of publicising, organising, and mediating contention.

The second part of the thesis set out two key pieces of the context that shaped and generated the contention that the empirical chapters in section three focused on. These were the political economy of housing and the digital/material labour of housing activism, which I outlined in chapters four and five. Drawing from secondary data and literature, chapter four built on Hearne et al.’s (2018) periodisation of post-crash housing and activism as a movement from crisis to crisis since the GFC in Dublin. In chapter five I highlighted the digital/material labour of housing activism and how this had evolved over time. This chapter established the processual and experimental
nature of activists’ labour practices and their outcomes, setting up the overall context that I subsequently deconstructed in the thesis’ third section.

This third section pulled together four empirical chapters which framed, in turn, housing activists’ publicising, organising, and mediating practices. In chapter six, I highlighted how publicising practices and the pursuit of attention and engagement through temporary political occupations as mediated spectacles created problematic dynamics of hierarchy, unsustainable labour, and cliquishness, in which the public façade of the housing activist social media account belied the complex and unstable work and social relations that produced it. In chapter seven, I focused on the organisational forms and forces that produced these dynamics and outlined how housing activists and groups had attempted to learn and evolve from earlier forms of housing contestation in the city. Drawing from digital ethnography and interview data, I described the most recent evolution of post-crash housing activism through the establishment of the Community Action Tenants Union, which interviewees and the union narrated as part of a wider shift from mobilising to organising. In chapters eight and nine I unpicked how the CATU’s establishment and the longer-term trajectory of post-crash housing activism could be understood through iterative efforts at mediating individual/collective subjects and urban space.

10.2 Contribution of the thesis

The thesis can be understood as a journey through and across the later stages of post-crash housing activism in Dublin city, which I have conceptualised as digital/material. The empirical reading of housing contention as digital/material contributes to existing literature on post-crash Dublin and urban housing struggles more broadly. Firstly, the thesis explicitly details how, why, and to what effect housing activists have used digital technologies and social media as part of contention, which is treated as a minor feature noted in passing in much of the existing work on housing activism in Dublin. The thesis documents activists’ digital/material labour and how this is used in active and on-going efforts to publicise, organise, and mediate housing struggles in the city, as well as how these practices have changed over time. In doing so, the thesis secondly adds to an emergent but small pool of
international literature on housing activists’ uses of digital technologies, which has tended to focus on a small number of relatively well-known American examples like the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project and InsideAirbnb (e.g. Akers et al., 2019; Fields, 2017; Fields in Porter et al., 2019). This work is an important counter-balance to the tendency to focus on the exploitative and extractive uses of digital technologies used as part of on-going housing financialisation and commodification (e.g. Fields, 2019; Sadowski, 2020b; Shaw, 2018). As I have argued, while this facet is important, it tends to cede the digital’s ambivalent potentialities to the forces of capital and hegemonic urban governance.

The digital/material approach that the thesis sets out also extends interdisciplinary work on contemporary activism and contention, which has tended to discuss ‘digital activism’ in a largely aspatial manner. Beginning from the intersection of critical digital and urban geographies research accordingly shows how more emplaced, everyday, and embodied understandings of contemporary contention can be attained by considering what Leszczynski (2015) describes as ‘the contingent, necessarily incomplete comings-together of technical presences, persons, and space/place’. In addition, the digital/material approach in the thesis demonstrates how contemporary contention can be better understood through what Uprichard and Dawney (2019) describe as ‘data diffraction’ in mixed methods research. A diffractive approach, which challenges the attainability or desirability of integration or triangulation, combines different qualitative and quantitative methods as a means of making agentic ‘cuts’ to the research object. This is a productive destabilising process that is particularly appropriate for understanding the different types of labour and at-times contradictory digital/material characteristics of contemporary contention. Contention is typically produced by savvy and reflexive people and groups who are critical of, but reliant on, digital technologies, tools, and logics, and they exercise creativity and agency in repurposing the digital in ways that often subvert, appropriate, and overspill built-in assumptions or technological affordances. A diffractive approach is better able to capture this destabilising or splintering effect because it sits with and thinks from the messy intersections of what people and technologies say, do, and can be adapted toward.
Finally, the thesis’ digital/material approach to post-crash housing struggles also contributes to existing work on digital geographies, the political, and housing movements. The thesis adds to the emphasis on moving ‘beyond the geotag’ (e.g. Crampton et al., 2013; Shelton, 2017) that has characterised digital geographies approaches. This is accomplished through the work’s empirical and conceptual appraisal of the space-times of housing activists’ digital/material contention, which, drawing from the attention to the everyday and embodied in feminist digital geographies and media studies research (e.g. Elwood, 2020; Fotopoulou, 2016), are traced from the spectacular of temporary political occupations to the mundane of group chats and protest stickers. By highlighting the ambivalent potentialities of the digital, which activists individually and collectively seize, make, and stretch, the thesis argues for an understanding of the political and the processual dynamics of de/repoliticisation that positions the digital/material as a site of struggle, rather than the uncontested terrain of hegemonic power. A digital/material reading pushes analysis to consider the quotidian and often unremarked upon role that digital technologies play in contemporary life. Rather than seeing this as utopic or dystopic, the thesis’ digital/material focus attends to how things currently are, which is a necessary starting point for thinking about how they could be improved. This has implications both for housing movements and research with/for/on them, which can benefit from assessing the general and specific applications, labour, and potential of digital/material tactics. Echoing Nunes (2021, p. 157), this means aiming for a practical politics which can assume ‘the limitedness and partiality of its own perspective as a necessary condition, while striving to overcome it not in thought but in practice’. Here, Purcell’s (2013, p. 21) work on ‘becoming democratic’ is essential reading for affirming the processual and active politicisation that housing movements enact and can contribute to, which calls for ‘vigilance and constant attention’ to ‘seek and learn to recognise who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, and help them endure, give them space’.

In post-crash Dublin, like elsewhere, this is often an exhausting and disheartening endeavour. As I sketched in chapter four, there are troubling signs that the post-pandemic city-to-come is being reshaped by new and
intensified financial circuits, with a worrying trend toward expensive build-to-rent developments and the remaking of the urban environment around the ‘viability narrative’ of investors (Waldron, 2019). Echoing Kae Tempest’s sense that ‘there is too much pretence here, too much depends on the fragile wages, and extortionate rents here’, the fight for the city-to-come that CATU Ireland has been organising around can feel as though ‘we're gonna buckle underneath the trouble, like any minute now, the struggle's going to finish us’. Here and elsewhere, I would argue, the digital/material approach that the thesis outlines is a useful starting point from which to better understand contemporary struggles as they actually are and to attend to the presences in our actually-existing, always-already mediated world from which to alleviate and more fundamentally challenge the disasters of housing financialisation and neoliberal capitalism that we face.

### 10.3 Areas for further research

There are three main areas for further research, building from these contributions to existing knowledge, that I hope to carry forward and share with others. Firstly, I highlighted the tendency to discuss digital technologies as tools for financialisation and extraction, a tendency which the thesis’ empirical and conceptual focus has sought to counter-balance. As an extension of this point, future research can and should explore the co-constitution of both housing financialisation and resistance to this process as simultaneously digital/material, a trend that I have begun to attend to (see Nic Lochlainn, 2021a) and hope to expand on in future work. While I have outlined a broad strokes account of this relationship, more work is needed in Ireland and internationally to unpick how urban spaces are being reshaped and struggled over using digital technologies, tools, and logics. An important focus for future scholar-activist work will be to understand and resource these struggles.

Secondly, the thesis unpicked some of the tensions between housing activism, housing organising, and electoral political politics, with a particular emphasis on how interviewees narrated the need to move away from activism or mobilising and toward organising as an everyday practice. The focus on digital/material contention and housing activism in the thesis provides a
starting point for a better understanding of what Nunes (2021) would describe as the wider ecosystem of housing organising, which intersects with other organisational forms like Irish trade unions, celebrities, and Left political parties that are discussed mainly in passing in the thesis as ‘the other stakeholders’ in housing coalitions. Richard Waldron’s (2021) recent work on housing, place, and populism is a useful entry point for this broader project that requires further research to understand the connection between housing discontent and the resurgence of Left political parties in Ireland and elsewhere, given the importance and widespread recognition of housing as a global and pressing political issue (see Rolnik, 2019).

Finally, the thesis’ focus on diffracting and assembling housing contention and activists’ uses of digital technologies and social media is a useful starting point for further research on the politics of knowledge production in housing and urban studies more broadly. Echoing Tom Slater’s (2016, 2021) work on agnotology, or the production of ignorance, the thesis’ focus on social media is an entry point to the wider contestation of knowledge and ignorance in contemporary cities. This is particularly important and has political potential for research on housing, which tends to turn around an implicit acceptance of ‘data’ and ‘modelling’ that can and should be unpicked. In a different project, chapter four, which narrated housing and housing activism using secondary data, could have been entirely rewritten with a focus on how numbers, software, and calculative logics are used to piece together a particular understanding of the housing ‘system’ with in-built assumptions around ‘development viability’ (Waldron, 2019), ‘valuation’ (Murphy, 2020), and what Dalton terms the ‘rhizomatic data assemblages’ (2020) of urban housing data. The practice and politics of measurement in housing data is particularly interesting in terms of the decisions of who or what counts or does not (e.g. the caveats on the ‘homeless figures’ in Figure 10, p. 126) and assumptions about the futures of people, property markets, and policy that are used to design housing policy like Rebuilding Ireland or Housing For All (e.g. the decisions underpinning the production of the most-recent Housing Need Demands Assessments). The thesis has foregrounded housing activists’ practices and productions through publicising, organising, and mediating frames – this is an important first step in balancing whose
sayings or doings are considered in housing politics, and future work could do useful further diffraction and assemblage-thinking by connecting housing activists’ knowledge production to political party, policymaker, legal, and other civic society sectors. I hope that this thesis both opens up and contributes to these wider projects.
Appendix 1 – Interview prompt examples

Geographies of digital contention:
Social media and anti-austerity activism in post-crash Ireland

Housing interview prompts
Some work this morning

Comrades out manning the stall today, and displaying our solidarity with Greece. We've gotten a lot of great support from the locals, many signatories collected and contacts made. The cops and council haven't shown up, so far.
HACKING airbnb

"Take Back the City - Dubline"

September 11, 2018

Private security teams of about 28 in total were at Frederick Street today, led by Gardaí and backed by the Guards.

After a stand-off with sledgehammers and solid force, four people have been hospitalised.

Thanks for everyone's support today. If you would like to get, please fill out our volunteer form to follow in next year.

'It had fantastic resonance': A year after taking over Dublin's vacant buildings, 'Take Back the City' disbands

The coalition of housing groups occupied buildings and offices in the capital last year.

TAKING THE City activists have formally announced the end of the housing movement, a year after they made headlines for occupying vacant buildings in Dublin.

Speaking to the journalist, former members of the movement confirmed that it had disbanded and that they would no longerを探す下院を議会の不正を示すために議会を議会을의 흥미로운 본문을 읽습니다. 이 문서는 'Home Sweet Home Girls', 'Hacking airbnb', 'Take Back the City - Dubline', 'It had fantastic resonance': A year after taking over Dublin’s vacant buildings, 'Take Back the City' disbands' 주제를 다룹니다.
Comparing activity during the TBTC Summer 2018 campaign
Appendix 2 – Interview descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>When</th>
<th>Where</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>He/him</td>
<td>Sep 2020</td>
<td>My home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M02</td>
<td>She/her</td>
<td>Sep 2020</td>
<td>Outside café</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M03</td>
<td>She/her</td>
<td>Oct 2020</td>
<td>Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M04</td>
<td>He/him</td>
<td>Dec 2020</td>
<td>Virtual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M05</td>
<td>He/him</td>
<td>Feb 2021</td>
<td>Virtual</td>
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<td>M06</td>
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<td>March 2021</td>
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<td>She/her</td>
<td>May 2021</td>
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<td>He/they</td>
<td>May 2021</td>
<td>University grounds</td>
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<td>M09</td>
<td>She/they</td>
<td>Aug 2021</td>
<td>Virtual</td>
</tr>
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<td>M10</td>
<td>He/him</td>
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Figure 47 - 34 North Frederick Street, TBTC-occupied building, and its on-going signification for resistance and speculation.
Figure 48 - Occupied buildings and their longer-term mediation as sites of contention and speculation in the urban fabric. Note how press coverage positions activist occupations within broader media narratives of use and exchange of urban space.

Figure 49 - Archaeological 'remnants' of contention that are digitally/materially mediated; Tweet,screenshotted on 18th December 2021.

Figure 50 - CATU Dún Laoghaire tweet from 4th September 2021 sharing images from the 'stickering campaign'.

Figure 51 - CATU Mountjoy/Dorset tweet from 31st March 2021 sharing image of removed 'Say no to co-living' campaign sticker.

Figure 52 - DCHA Facebook post in July 2018 sharing images of postering campaign targeting vacant buildings, which is referenced in Figure 49.

Figure 53 - Homes Not Hostels graffiti on the floor of Apollo House following HSH's withdrawal from the building, from IHN Facebook.

Figure 54 - Graffiti on the residential rent relation, both in north inner city Dublin in March 2019. The left lasted a number of weeks both times I encountered it, while the right lasted four days.

Figure 55 - Taking Back The City through graffiti as contentious inscription, highlighting urban vacancy. Left image taken in June 2019, right on Christmas Eve 2018.

Figure 56 - Gable wall of North Frederick Street - 'abstractified' and reinscribed as a mediated counter-space. Images shared online by Bodger (2018).

Figure 57 - Reinscribing and queering a mediated counter-space - LGBTQIA+ graffiti on Frederick Street building's gable wall, summer 2019.

Figure 58 - Tweet about CATU Belfast telephone and physical picket of a property management firm, 8th February 2021.

Figure 59 - CATU Phibsboro-Glasnevin Instagram of anti-co-living demonstration, 3rd April 2021.

Figure 60 - CATU (2021b, p. 3) summary of membership growth from November 2019 to February 2021.
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