

Long Reads

I stumbled across a huge Airbnb scam that's taking over London

The curious tale of a man called Christian, the Catholic church, David Schwimmer's wife, a secret hotel and an Airbnb scam running riot on the streets of London

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<https://www.wired.co.uk/article/airbnb-scam-london>



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It's November 2019 and I'm standing in an Airbnb in Battersea, south London. But this is not the Airbnb I booked. Everything is slightly, confusingly, off. All the rooms are the wrong sizes, all the furniture in the wrong places. There are hints everywhere that something is up: the apartment block, a barely finished newbuild sandwiched between Battersea Park station and a Catholic church, is teeming with cleaning staff. There are cleaners in the hallways, cleaners lobbing bin bags of rubbish out of the front door, cleaners grabbing armfuls of bed linen in the elevator. It's like a hotel – except there's no front desk, and the allegedly clean duvet on my bed has a human-sized, yellow sweat stain running down its centre.

“And for checking out...?” I ask the cleaner who has let me in, gesturing at the open door of my sparsely decorated apartment. “Just leave the key on the table and close the door,” she replies. “And it will lock behind me?” I ask. “No, you don't need to lock it.” I raise an eyebrow, and she explains that one of the cleaning staff will come and collect the key straight after I leave. “So nobody lives here?” I say as she steps out of the open door. “No I don't think so,” she replies, half-laughing.

I close the door, look around the apartment again and open the Airbnb app on my phone. “I'm a little confused,” I write to my host, who goes by the name Robert & Team. “The apartment I'm in right now isn't the one I booked.” Within minutes, a reply: “Hi

James, Hope all is well. Rest assured that you are at the apartment that you have booked through Airbnb.” I reply, explaining that this can’t be the case. In the photos on Airbnb, the kitchen had countertops on both sides. The kitchen I’m standing in has a countertop on one side only. There’s a hallway where there should be a solid wall. Heck, the whole lounge is completely the wrong shape. “Rest assured that you are at the correct property,” my host replies, before going silent.

That night, I knock on the doors of the other apartments in the building. At one, three men who have just arrived are trying to work out why there are only two beds when they had booked an apartment with three. As we speak, the cleaner who checked me into my apartment rushes past, her arms filled with fresh linen. At the door of the penthouse, a couple from Newcastle complain about the complete lack of pots and pans in their kitchen. Standing at the open door, I notice something: the artwork on the walls is the same as in my apartment, so are the sofas, table and chairs. At the door of the apartment I had actually booked through Airbnb, the woman staying there explains she is also in the wrong listing. I return to my apartment, open my laptop and click on my host’s Airbnb profile. I count seven listings for the building I’m staying in, all with identical furniture, all with the same bottle of Veuve Clicquot champagne. I flick back and forth between the listings on Airbnb, the bottle of champagne following me, mockingly. Who or what, I wonder, is Robert & Team?

On Airbnb, it turns out, scams aren’t just the preserve of lone chancers. As the short-term rental goldrush gathers pace, Airbnb empires are being rapidly scaled and monetised, with professional operators creating scores of fake accounts, fake listings and fake reviews to run rings around Airbnb, local law enforcement and the guests who place their trust in the platform.

Reviews from guests paint a grim picture of people who have been tricked into staying in accommodation with blocked drains, broken fixtures and fittings, filthy floors, dirty bed linen – or, in some cases, accommodation that they simply did not book.

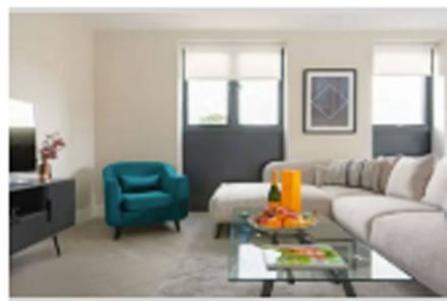
To squeeze every penny out of these inner-city goldmines, scammers have started outsourcing property management to ill-equipped call centres in the Philippines. The scammers call it “systemising”, a process of grabbing as many apartments as possible, filling them with identikit furniture, taking professional-looking photographs and then using every trick in the book to turn them into lucrative investments. Some of these tricks, though morally dubious, are perfectly legal. But others breach both Airbnb’s policies and local planning laws, while also putting the safety of guests at risk. [As Vice found in October 2019](#), Airbnb is littered with fake and downright dodgy listings. But in London, where Airbnb enforces an annual 90-day limit on all “entire homes” listed on its platform, scammers have made a mockery of lax enforcement both by regulators and Airbnb itself, by turning entire new-build apartment blocks into de facto hotels designed for the short-term rental market. And the problem is far worse than anyone realises.



£120 ⚡ Exquisite 2bed Apt next to Chelsea Bridge 9873



£105 ⚡ Spacious 2bed Apartment next to Battersea 9865



£105 ⚡ Contemporary 2bed 2bath Apartment in Battersea 9864





£105 ⚡ Mesmerizing 2bed Apartment in Battersea 9879



£120 ⚡ Premium 2bed 2bath Apartment next to Chelsea 9868



£105 ⚡ Fabulous 2bed Apartment next to Battersea Park 9877

A number of the Airbnb listings in Battersea, complete with identical furniture. In reviews, guests complain of being put in apartments they did not book

Credit **Airbnb/WIRED**

My Airbnb host, Robert & Team, started out life on another Airbnb account, currently using the name Leon. Today, Leon claims to be a 30-year-old dancer living in London, but in August 2012 he was a man called Christian living in Munich. “My girlfriend and I stayed in Christian’s room for quite a few weeks,” reads a review from a man called Gary. “Christian was a great host and even though he was staying elsewhere (since the room you stay in was his own), he still came back to check we were OK.” Christian was equally pleased with his choice of guest. “Gary and his girlfriend were wonderful guests,” he wrote. “They took great care of my apartment, have always stayed in good contact with me and looked after my cat very well when I did not have time.” The story of my host, I would come to realise, was also the story of Airbnb. From sharing economy dream to scam economy nightmare. From renting out his own room in Munich, to turning a south London apartment block into a hotel, hiding in plain sight on Airbnb.

It was in November 2016 that Christian suddenly became Leon. And then things started getting weird. A month later a man called Peter from Horsham left Leon a glowing review. “I had an amazing experience, the flat is in immaculate conditions,” Peter wrote. A reverse image search of Peter’s Airbnb profile picture shows that it is, in fact, a misappropriated photo of Pietro

Labriola, chief executive of Brazilian wireless carrier TIM Participacoes. And Peter has left a lot of very nice reviews of Leon's Airbnb listings. In January 2017, Peter was back, this time praising one of Leon's listings in London for being "very nice", adding that the "hosts was very nice and responsive to all request".

It wasn't just Leon's listings that Peter loved. In November 2017, he reviewed a listing from my Airbnb host, Robert & Team, near London's Borough Market. "Magnificent!" he wrote. "I enjoyed the stay and it was excellent positioned for my points of interest," he enthused. Peter's Airbnb profile has since been deleted. Earlier that month, an Airbnb user called Elaine was equally impressed: "I am 150% satisfied! this place is even better than i expected!" Unlike Peter, Elaine's Airbnb profile is still active and shows that she has been reviewed by just two Airbnb hosts: Robert & Team and Leon. Both left exactly the same review: "A perfetc guest, very reliable and nice. Highly recomend! Would be happy to host again!!" That exact same review was also left by Leon for an Airbnb user called Alex, who back in 2017 was known as Elena.

Alex Cosmin also loves one of Leon's listings. "I highly recommend Leon's place," he wrote in October 2018. His Airbnb profile shows that he has also stayed at another listing run by Leon, two run by Robert & Team and one run by a host called Elaine & Team. All these host profiles have a few things in common: they all use stock photography as their profile pictures, and they all use similar text in their bios. Before long, a network of connected host accounts emerges. As well as Robert & Team, Leon and Elaine & Team, there's also Eveline, Natalia, Felly, Robert Lusso Management and Alex. Airbnb listings hosted by these accounts are littered with fake reviews. As well as Peter, Elaine and Alex Cosmin (whose profile picture has actually been misappropriated from the casting page of a model called

[Alexandru Mitrache](#), and who also appears on LinkedIn as a “Guest Service Agent” at a company called CB Platinum Apartments), there’s Florica (who appears on LinkedIn as “General Operations Manager” at CB Platinum), Igor, Anton, Нина and Julliana. These accounts have only booked themselves into listings from the network of host accounts I had uncovered, and they all left glowing reviews. Between them, they have received over 2,100 reviews on 200 listings, most of them in London.

All of these accounts are essentially one person, or at least one company. And yet they have all passed Airbnb’s account verification and safety processes, with most supplying government identification, selfies, email addresses and phone numbers. Two of these accounts, though, are more closely connected than the rest: Leon and Robert Lusso Management. And that’s because they both used to be called Christian.

Robert Lusso Management (lusso being Italian for luxury) joined Airbnb in 2016. His first review from an Airbnb host was in September of that year. “Christian was a great guest. I would recommend him to all hosts,” reads the review from Elaine & Team. A month later, Robert Lusso Management, né Christian, stayed at another of Elaine’s listings (“Great guest. I would fully recommend christian to stay!”). He then stayed with a lady called Karen (“Charming couple a pleasure to host. Even my dogs loved them.”), before staying with Robert & Team (“Christian was a great guest. All easy and smooth.”) and then Leon (“I HIGHLY recommend Christian as a guest for airbnb.”). Then, in February 2017, Christian becomes Robert. “Rob is an amazing guest,” reads a review from Elaine & Team, which is followed by three reviews from Robert & Team. The first review for a listing hosted by Robert & Team is also from Robert Lusso Management. “To be honest it was hard to leave the house today. I would like to stay there! I will come back - for sure!” Robert Lusso Management

wrote in October 2016 about his stay in a now-deleted Airbnb listing.

Among a sea of Airbnb profiles, one thing seems clear: whoever is behind this is probably called Christian. Or Robert. I scroll through my inbox, remembering that when I booked my Airbnb I had been spammed with emails from a management company. That company, Continental Apartments, had offered to upsell me, among other things, a portable air conditioner (from £15), an additional set of linen (from £35), a highchair (from £16.67), an airbed (from £127.78) and a London Cheese Experience (from £25). A company number listed on the website of Continental Apartments (which is embellished with reviews from [delighted clients](#) – Lance K, Annie G, Joel S, Marcellus N – the profile pictures of whom have all been taken from stock photo libraries) leads to a firm called Lusso Management, which was founded in May 2018 by a German man called Christian Robert Baumann.

I had, finally, found my Christian. And my Robert. But I'd also found something else. A scam, co-ordinated across a number of Airbnb accounts, encompassing hundreds of listings and thousands of reviews. Many of the reviews and host profiles are fake or misleading, and, in some cases, the properties listed don't exist. In one instance, pictures on a listing in London Bridge are mirrored versions of the pictures used on another. The bottle of wine on the counter, the microwave and the washing machine are all, curiously, backwards. Two other listings, which appear to be from the same building, again use the mirroring trick to flip the lounge, bedroom and kitchen.

And, at its centre, is the scam's crowning glory: what has materialised into a secret hotel built for short-term rentals. That building, planning documents reveal, has 24 units. When I look on Airbnb, I find 28 listings, each a confusing hodgepodge of all the

others – the pictures, descriptions and property names (Ideal Penthouse+Private Terrace next2 Chelsea9859, Luxurious&Spacious 2bed Penthouse in Battersea9858, Mesmerizing 2bed Apartment in Battersea 9879) blending into one. Some of these apartments don't exist. When I had booked my night in Battersea I had simply been chucked in any available apartment, likely to help the hosts max out the building's occupancy rate and dodge around London's [90-day law](#).

Continental Apartments also lists its properties on other short-term rental sites. The entire building in Battersea appears twice on Booking.com (though one of these listings is no longer active), once on Expedia, and a single apartment is listed on Vrbo. In total, Continental Apartments has 61 properties on Booking.com and dozens on Expedia. Many of the company's listings on Booking.com and Expedia are the same as those listed on Airbnb. London's 90-day rule applies across all platforms, but there's little to stop hosts from listing the same properties multiple times.

Duplicate listings are not allowed on Airbnb. Nor are fake listings for apartments that don't exist. Airbnb hosts are also not allowed to delete and re-list properties after they attract too many negative reviews. Nor are individual accounts or groups of accounts allowed to engage in potentially fraudulent activity. The accounts I had uncovered were seemingly in breach of all of these Airbnb terms and had been for a number of years. But, as I dug deeper, things got stranger still.

Two Airbnb listings use the same images but mirror them so they appear different. Here, the kitchen on the right is backwards

Credit **Airbnb/WIRED**

On LinkedIn, Christian Baumann describes himself as an “incredible driven individual”. In November 2014, he founded London CBP, which, according to the company’s website and LinkedIn page, worked with investors and local councils to “provide short term, long term and emergency accommodation to Councils and Housing Associations in the UK”. In April 2018, Baumann shifted his attention to the far more lucrative Airbnb short-term rental market. His LinkedIn page boasts “up to 300%” better return on investment from listing on Airbnb compared with long-term lettings. Records held by Companies House give Baumann’s address – and the address of Continental Apartments – as a Regus virtual office near London Bridge. On other entries, Baumann’s address is listed as a flat near Farringdon. A Google search for the address brings up a short-term rental listing. The photos bear a striking resemblance to one of the Airbnb listings hosted by Elaine & Team, with the layout of the flat, the artwork on the walls and the decor matching almost perfectly.

In an attempt to find out more about my Airbnb booking, I call up a London number listed on the Continental Apartments website, which redirects me to a call centre where a distant-sounding voice with a nondescript North American accent asks how they can help. I hang up and call the UK mobile phone number listed on my Airbnb booking. I get through to the same call centre. The same operative picks up. I ask where they are from. “I’m not

allowed to disclose that information,” the operative, who gives her name as Lovely, tells me. Lovely, though, is able to read the Airbnb messages I exchanged with Robert & Team. I ask to speak to Robert, saying I have a complaint about the Airbnb listing I stayed in recently. Lovely says she can message “the team” and let them know we’ve spoken. “I’ll tell them that you called so Robert can speak to you,” she says, before hanging up on me mid-sentence.

I call another number, this one listed on the website of CB Platinum (the CB presumably standing for Christian Baumann), another name used for Continental Apartments but actually the same company. A slightly different automated message plays and, once again, Lovely picks up the phone. I say hello, and she immediately hangs up. I call another number listed for CB Platinum. Again I get through to Lovely. Before she can hang up I ask, again, to speak to Robert. “You’ll have to wait ten minutes because he’s not here yet,” she says, brusquely. I’m put on hold, and after ten minutes she hangs up on me again. I call again. Lovely picks up again. When I suggest that, perhaps, Robert doesn’t exist, Lovely gets angry. “He does exist! How could you suggest he doesn’t exist?!” she says. “I’m looking for someone to speak to you since Robert isn’t here.” She puts me on hold for ten minutes and then tells me to hang up so someone can call me back.

Seconds later, much to my surprise, my mobile phone rings. I had called Lovely from a different line and had never given her my mobile number. When I ask who I’m speaking to, the man, who also has a nondescript North American accent, gives his name as Russell. “So you’re not Robert?” I ask. There is a long pause. “I don’t think we have anybody by that name,” Russell replies, before explaining that he’s a senior customer relations manager and that he’d like to help me. I explain that I was put in a listing

that I did not book. “But it’s the same location,” Russell says after checking the details of my booking. “There are a lot of apartments that we have in Battersea,” he adds.

Russell explains that the company I booked through has a call centre in the Philippines. When I ask where he is, he tells me he’s from “the London team”. When I ask him if he’s actually in London, he dodges the question. When I ask him what the time is in London, there’s a long, awkward pause. “You are speaking to someone who is part of our team,” he says. He offers me a five per cent discount on any future booking made with the company – a tactic I’ve seen used countless times in responses to negative reviews for Airbnb listings from Continental Apartments. I ask him, if Robert doesn’t exist, who I was exchanging messages with on Airbnb. “Based on what I’m seeing, you were speaking to two different people,” he explains. I ask him, again, if he’s actually in London. We’ve been on the phone for almost an hour, and Russell, though patient, is starting to sound annoyed. “I’m not going to do that because now I don’t know if you are who you say you are,” he says.

Some days later, I phone Continental Apartments again and explain that I am a journalist and need to speak to Baumann. The Filipino operative hangs up on me and blocks my number. I try again from a different line and the same happens. I try a third time and am blocked again. I send an email to CB Platinum asking to speak to Baumann and never receive a reply. I add Baumann on Facebook and LinkedIn – he either doesn’t see my requests or ignores them.

Leon's profile as it appeared on Airbnb. Until November 2016 the account used the name Christian

Credit **Airbnb/WIRED**

It's at this point that I discover a link to the Catholic Church. In July 2015, the Southwark Roman Catholic Diocesan Corporation sold a 250-year lease for a sliver of land to PE Mount Carmel, a partnership between property developer Portchester Estates and Glyn Watkin Jones, the chairman of one of Britain's largest construction firms. In late 2017, planning permission was approved for the construction of 24 residential units – a mix of one-and two-bed apartments in a yellow-brick building with a distinctive, steep-pitched roof. A local residents group protested about the lack of affordable housing in the development, but these complaints were dismissed by planning officers because of the building's location. The church saw the project as a great boon. "A new development on parish land will fund much needed facilities for our parish," read an update posted on its website.

During construction, a hoarding outside the site teased, "Coming Soon Luxury Apartments". [An artist's impression](#) of the building shows it brimming with life, with people relaxing on its sun-

drenched balconies and walking through its [wisteria-draped grounds](#). Work was completed in the spring of 2019, after which PE Mount Carmel leased all 24 units in the building to Urban Stay, a serviced accommodation company. And Urban Stay handed over the management of these units to Christian Baumann. Could it be that the building in Battersea that I booked through Airbnb was being used for a single, rather more dubious purpose – to make a killing off short-term rentals?

When I phone the Archdiocese of Southwark, which runs the church that owns the land on which apartments were built, I'm put through to Chris Millington, the church's property manager. He explains that the diocese hoped to have transferred the freehold to the developer some time ago. This, he explains, would have removed the church from documents relating to the land. But delays in the construction process, and other problems, meant the church still owned the land. Millington described the church's continued presence on the land registry documents as "quite annoying". When I explain that the building is being run as a de facto Airbnb hotel, he says my findings are "interesting". But, he says, with the impending transfer of the freehold, the church will soon be out of the picture. "Making sure that planning is at it should be is not our responsibility," he adds. Nevertheless, he refers to the situation as "a very complicated story".

That story is further complicated when I speak to James Swift, co-founder of Urban Stay, the firm that has a five-year lease on the 24 apartments in Battersea. Swift explains that his company has "zero involvement" in the building, and that management of it has been assigned to "another company", which he refuses to name. When I ask if the apartments in the building should be listed on Airbnb, he sounds confused. "We don't list anything on Airbnb or anything like that. We have direct relationships with companies and relocation companies. Those are our clients." (I

would later find an Airbnb profile for Urban Stay, which has 28 listings. Swift did not respond to subsequent questions about his Airbnb profile.)

When I explain that I have stayed in the building for one night and booked my stay through Airbnb, there is a long pause. “Really?” Swift replies. “The understanding I have with them is that this is not allowed. I need to find out what’s going on. I’m a little bit surprised,” he says. I again ask him to share the name of the management company running the building, and again he refuses. When I explain the full scope of the scam – the duplicate listings, the fake reviews, the call centre customer service – Swift says he is “absolutely shocked”, adding that this would likely be a breach of his agreement with the management company. When I ask if the names Christian Baumann, CB Platinum or Continental Apartments ring a bell, Swift sighs. “Yes,” he says, before reluctantly confirming that the management company is CB Platinum, and the man he has been dealing with is Baumann. In a follow-up email, I send Swift links to the 28 Airbnb listings created by Baumann’s company. I also ask him to share any contact details he has for Baumann. Swift never replies, and the listings are not deleted.

Another Airbnb listing managed by CB Platinum that uses the mirrored-image trick. Such tactics can be used to make short-term London rentals available for longer than the 90-day limit

Credit **Airbnb/WIRED**

When Baumann founded Lusso Management in May 2018 he wasn't working alone. In fact, Baumann resigned as director in September of that year and was replaced by a man called Alex Milburn, who had previously been company secretary. (The pair also founded a company called [World Short Stay](#) in February 2018, which has a number of listings that have since been rebranded under the name Continental Apartments. Records held by Companies House show that accounts for World Short Stay are overdue and that the company may soon be struck off the register.) Milburn, like Baumann, is behind a smattering of property investment firms. But unlike Baumann, who has next to no online profile, Milburn sees himself as something of a property investment celebrity. [He stars](#) in [YouTube videos](#) where he explains how, “with very little, or none of your own money, you can create a six figure income” using his genius property investment strategy.

His strategy is this: take out a small loan, or use your own money, to negotiate deals with landlords that guarantee them market rent for, say, three years. Then, rather than renting properties out to long-term tenants, you kit them out with “hotel-like amenities”, list them on Airbnb and Booking.com “and charge a higher nightly rate”. The profit, Milburn explains, is yours to keep. According to some estimates, the yield someone can make from listing a property on Airbnb is between three and five times what they would receive from a long-term tenant.

Milburn is also behind the Serviced Accommodation Specialist Club, where he offers one-on-one mentorship classes priced at

£1,100 per day, or two-day group courses for £1,598. The courses, according to the company's website, reveal how to "outsource, systemise and automate every aspect" of running a serviced accommodation, or short-term rental, business. When I speak to Milburn on the phone, posing as a potential client for his mentorship scheme, he explains that barriers such as London's 90-day rule are of little concern. "These big, multi-billion pound companies, they just ignore this [London] 90-day rule because it's basically impossible for the authorities to police," he says. "Think about it - without standing outside an apartment and ticking off each day that someone's stayed, it's impossible for the authorities to police the rule. That's why everyone just ignores it, basically."

And the process of getting around any enforcement, Milburn explains, is laughably easy. "You get three months through Booking.com, three months through Airbnb, three months through Expedia, and three months through direct bookings," Milburn says. In London, it is against the law to rent out homes on a short-term basis for more than 90 days a year, regardless of the platform they are listed on. On Airbnb, once a London listing reaches 90 days it cannot be booked. But Milburn explains the law - and Airbnb's systems - are easy to dodge if you know how.

"There are certain ways round it, but that comes down to industry knowledge and tricks of the trade," he teases. "You've just got to know how and when to get around it." I ask what one of those tricks might be. "Some people have two Airbnb accounts," Milburn explains. Or, in the case of the scam I'm following, more than a dozen. Milburn tells me that he has "quite a lot of units in London".

But some of what Milburn details is simply sharp practice, rather than a breach of the law. He describes the serviced accommodation business as "fast paced" and "sexy" and says that he has never set foot in many of the properties in his portfolio,

with their management handled by a team of contractors based in the Philippines who work full-time and are paid £100 a week. “Once it’s all set up and in place – and you know where to find these Filipino workers, how to train them, all this sort of stuff – that’s when you can set things in motion and step back.” One Airbnb listing managed by Elaine & Team, an account used by Baumann’s company, includes images watermarked with Lusso Management’s logo. The listing is also in Sheffield, where Milburn is based. Two listings on Milburn’s own Airbnb host profile are co-hosted by Felly and Leon, two of the profiles with links to Baumann.

On his Facebook and LinkedIn pages, Milburn evangelises about his property investment strategy and posts photos of himself [driving luxury cars](#) and working topless beside [sun-drenched swimming pools](#). Referring to the use of duplicate listings to get around London’s 90-day rule, I ask him if he’s worried about getting caught by either Airbnb or local councils. “The councils have tried,” he says. “But I think there are 54,000 serviced apartments in Greater London. Even if there were [only] 5,000 they wouldn’t have the resources to be able to manage it, so that’s not a big worry for me,” he says. “Serviced accommodation is completely unregulated, almost. It’s unbelievably unregulated.”

My experience backs that up. After I spent the night in the de facto Airbnb hotel in Battersea I reported the building to Edward Appah, a senior planning enforcement officer at Wandsworth Council. An investigation was launched, but, after seeing tenancy agreements for the flats, all of which exceeded six months, the council ruled that all the units remained “in lawful use” and that “no breach of planning control [had] occurred”. I sent Appah links to several Airbnb listings for apartments in the building – many of which had several recent guest reviews – and asked him how the units could have both long-term tenants and be advertised as

available to rent on Airbnb. “The management agents have informed me that they have not placed the advertisement and were not aware of it until I brought it to their attention,” Appah wrote in an emailed reply. “I have suggested to them to investigate it and ensure that they are removed in order to prevent any confusion in future.” Many of the listings were deleted only to appear again a short while later on different Airbnb accounts, complete with different titles, descriptions and photos.

Claire Fallows, a partner at legal firm Charles Russell Speechlys, specialises in planning law and describes this decision as “interesting”. While not wishing to comment in detail on a specific case, Fallows tells me that any planning enforcement decision is down to an “interpretation” of the evidence available. “It sounds like there are flagrant breaches of planning control going on and so the question is getting the authorities to do something about it,” she says. “There is the 90-day letting limit, which does provide some degree of clarity in London, but if it’s not being enforced, then clearly that does give cause for concern where there have been flagrant breaches of it.” When I ask, based on the details I have given her, how serious such a breach might be, Fallows says it “does seem extreme”.

A review left by Zoë Buckman, an artist and photographer married to *Friends* star David Schwimmer. “This place is unsafe!” she wrote in January of this year

Credit **Airbnb/WIRED**

Then, out of nowhere, David Schwimmer’s wife gets involved. Zoë Buckman, the British artist and photographer who has been married to the *Friends* star since 2010, stayed in one of Robert & Team’s listings in London in January of this year. “This place is unsafe!” Buckman, who confirmed via email that the Airbnb account was hers, wrote in her review of a two-bedroom apartment near London’s Liverpool Street. “Me and my 8 year old daughter experienced violence and harassment from a man on the ground floor, and the hosts did nothing to help protect us. We fled because of the threats and they refused to refund us,” the review continues. “The apartment smells horrible and the common areas are a total mess, but ultimately it’s a dangerous environment and women and children should not go anywhere near it. Do not expect any understanding or care from the hosts.” Buckman did not respond to a request to comment further on her review. But her poor experience is just one of many.

While a lot of reviews for Airbnb listings managed by Continental Apartments and CB Platinum are positive – guests are often delighted by the locations of such apartments, many of which are right in the centre of London – there’s a drip feed of concerningly negative reviews. A review of a listing managed by Robert & Team left by Claire in February 2017 is fairly typical. She complains that

the windows in the apartment did not close, that the electricity went off for a whole day because nobody had paid the bills, and that one of the toilets was blocked. But none of these comments relate to the Airbnb Claire actually booked. “As we couldn’t stay in the place chosen initially, we stayed in Islington,” she writes. “We had agreed on a discount for the disagreement. The team accused us of blocking the toilet and refused to refund any money. I just think this team cannot be trusted.”

Other guests of Robert & Team claim that they were asked to lie to anyone in the building who asked who they were. Others say they were sent messages encouraging them to leave five-star reviews in exchange for a 15 per cent discount on future bookings. Others complain of convoluted check-in processes, non-existent blinds at bedroom windows, broken furniture, terrible smells and non-responsive hosts. One review of Robert & Team, left by Ahmed in October 2019, claims that the host subjected their guests to racist abuse. “Said we had knives with us because of our race,” he wrote. A response from Robert & Team claims Ahmed “partied inside the listing”, adding that “every host should be aware of this guest and think a lot of times before allowing him to stay at your place”.

Lea, who stayed in a Robert & Team Airbnb listing in August 2019, opens her review by explaining she is rating it “one star only because zero stars isn’t an option”. She complains of a filthy apartment, with “dog hair and human hair everywhere, dirty bathrooms, dirty floors, and three bales of stinking wet towels and linens from previous tenants stuffed under the couch where we were supposed to be sleeping.” Lea also writes that the kitchen sink wouldn’t drain and that one of the showers was broken. “We waited around all afternoon on our first day in London for maintenance, but no one ever came despite my repeated inquiries. Each day of our stay we were told that

maintenance would come, but they never did.” Towards the end of their stay, the other shower broke.

In September 2019, Brandi, whose Airbnb profile says she is from North Carolina, booked her and her husband into an Airbnb listing managed by Robert & Team as part of their honeymoon in London. “We were sorely dissatisfied,” her review reads. “The entire apartment looks as if someone had just vacated the unit and this property manager threw in some cheap furniture to rent it out.” She adds that the sheets were so filthy they were unable to sleep under them. When she complained, the host failed to provide clean linen. “Overall, this was a terrible experience, we canceled the rest of our trip and booked a new AirBnB.”

Other guests complain of being unable to find lockboxes to gain access to the apartment they booked, leaving them stranded on the streets of London in the middle of the night with a host who won't respond. Others claim they were cancelled on at the last minute. “They've cancelled the booking less than 24 hour prior arrival during the night. I woke up finding out we had to flight to London in few hours with not place where to stay. Outrageous,” reads a review left by Allesandra in September 2019. Last year, Robert & Team received 26 similarly negative reviews.

A bottle of champagne cropped up time and time again in Airbnb listings for the building in Battersea that had been turned into a de facto hotel

Credit **Airbnb/WIRED**

When I alert Airbnb to the scam, it suspends all listings and host accounts linked to Baumann and Continental Apartments. “We have zero tolerance for any attempt to evade our systems,” a spokesperson says, adding that such issues are “extremely rare”. But measuring the scale of this problem is impossible. Following the *Vice* exposé of scam listings in the United States, Airbnb said it would review every single listing and host on its platform. In an email titled [“In The Business Of Trust”](#) that was sent to employees and later published on its website, Airbnb co-founder and CEO Brian Chesky said that all listings and hosts would be verified for accuracy and quality standards. What’s left behind, given Airbnb’s pledge to take the matter seriously, may be a very different service indeed: more spare rooms and real homes, and fewer high-yield investment opportunities filled with identikit furniture.

It won’t be an easy task. Take London as an example. Research by London Councils, a body that represents local authorities in the capital, found that one in every 50 homes in the city are listed on platforms such as Airbnb. Across all 32 London boroughs and the City of London there were 73,549 entire homes listed on online platforms in December 2019 alone. Globally, Airbnb has more than seven million listings, a huge network built almost entirely on the flimsy notion of trust.

According to [Inside Airbnb](#), a service that scrapes Airbnb to shine a light on the platform's impact on cities around the world, there are an estimated 36,964 listings on Airbnb in London that are listed by a host with at least one other listing. While Airbnb presents itself as a sharing economy company, the business of hosting is becoming increasingly systemised and professionalised, with critics arguing that businesses are able to make huge sums of money at the expense of local residents who are unable to access properties locked away by the short-term rental gold rush.

So what, if anything, can be done about it? To date, attempts to adequately regulate and police Airbnb listings have been spasmodic at best, leading to a patchwork of confusing, siloed approaches. In December 2019, more concerted regulation efforts were dealt a blow when the European Court of Justice ruled that Airbnb was an “information society service”, not a real estate agency. Such rulings mean that cities must continue to act alone – with mixed success.

Darren Rodwell, London Councils' executive member for housing and planning, says the capital's short-term rental market is “utterly out of control” and that the situation is creating “drastic implications” for housing stock. “It's hugely concerning to hear about the scams taking place,” he says. Against the sheer number of rogue listings, he argues, officials are fighting a losing battle. Rodwell believes it is now essential that the government legislate to create a “mandatory registration scheme” for short-term rentals.

Academics and planning experts say that having access to this data would, at the very least, make it possible for officials to know what properties are being rented out short term, by whom and for how many days a year. At present, Rodwell says, the law in the UK

“isn’t fit for purpose”. As a result, the city’s councils are fighting an increasingly difficult battle with rapidly decreasing resources. Since 2010, they have had their budgets cut by 63 per cent. Against tens of thousands of short-term rental listings, London’s boroughs have just a handful of planning officers working on enforcement.

Airbnb

Airbnb has devoured London – and here’s the data that proves it

One academic specialising in urban planning, who does not want to be named, says that large-scale abuse of Airbnb’s policies – and local planning laws – is alarmingly common. “Entire buildings have been turned into de facto hotels,” the academic explains. “We’ve heard stories of local investors, sometimes foreign investors, coming in and buying an entire building, throwing out the remaining tenants, sometimes through intimidation, doing up properties and turning the whole building into holiday flats.” The academic says they have seen instances of this in Amsterdam, Barcelona and Lisbon. They describe the scam I have uncovered in London as among “the most elaborate” they have heard of.

The key issue for regulators, the academic explains, is Airbnb’s refusal to open up its platform to scrutiny. Echoing Rodwell’s call

for some form of short-term rental registration system, the academic says that without access to data nothing will change. And access to data will only come about, they argue, once we have better laws to govern companies like Airbnb. “It’s the data that you need to govern the city, to regulate, to do urban planning. And Airbnb refuses to give this data, which makes it impossible for policymakers to effectively measure and monitor the phenomenon, let alone regulate it.” An Airbnb spokesperson says the company has [previously backed calls](#) from the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, to create such a system.

That lack of transparency is giving scammers a place to hide and prosper. Yet, for many, this is what Airbnb has become: a thin sharing-economy veneer hiding a vast slurry of unscrupulous profiteers. In Toronto, they call them [“ghost hotels”](#); in Prague, they are [“distributed hotels”](#); in the industry they are known as “systemised” Airbnb listings. But to Airbnb, they are homes – a chance to stay in “unique, authentic places” on a platform “powered by local hosts”. Airbnb claims that it “promotes people-to-people connection, community and trust”, but, after months of trying, the only people-to-people connection I’ve found involves being lied to and then hung up on by call centre workers in the Philippines.

Then, days before this story is due to be published, Baumann accepts my LinkedIn invitation. I send him a message, which he sees but doesn’t reply to. But being connected on LinkedIn lets you see the other person’s contact details. I send Baumann an email, telling him I would like to ask him some questions. He replies, saying he is currently traveling and will respond to my email as soon as he gets it. I send a long list of questions. Baumann doesn’t respond. In his email signature are two phone numbers. I call a London number and select an option to speak to property management. A man with a British accent picks up the

phone. I say my name and he hangs up immediately. I call a second number, Baumann's mobile, which goes straight to voicemail. Crackling down the phone line I, at last, hear his voice. "I'm sorry. I'm currently not available," the prerecorded message tells me. Still yearning for a people-to-people connection, I ask Baumann to get back in touch with me. I am still waiting for his reply.

James Temperton is WIRED's digital editor. He tweets from [@jtemperton](#)

Updated 12.02.20, 09:10 GMT: Additional comment from an Airbnb spokesperson has been added. A reference to GDPR has been removed.

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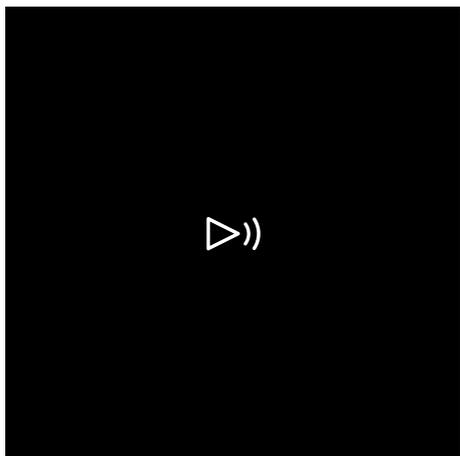
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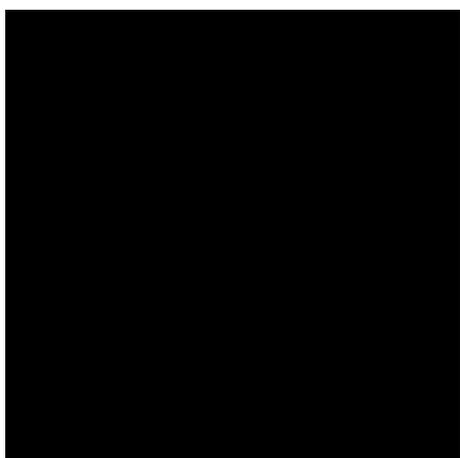
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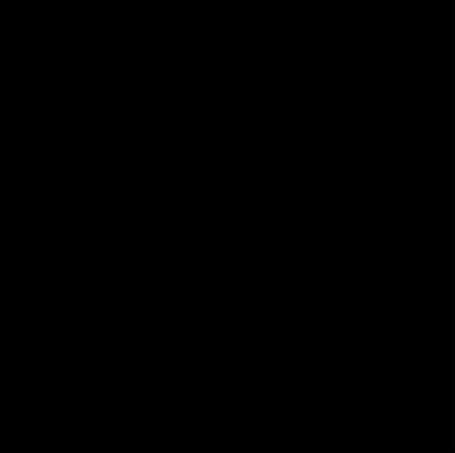
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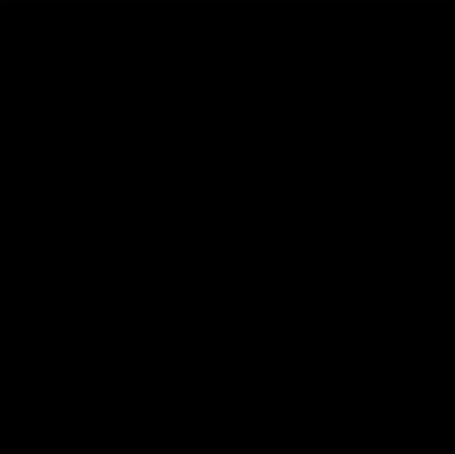
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