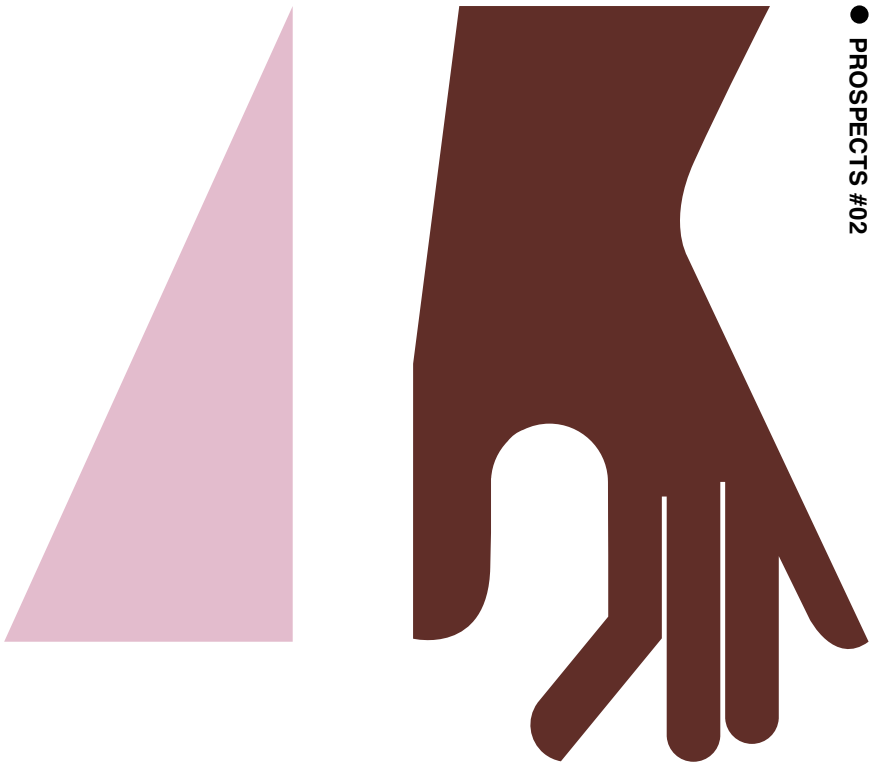


PEOPLE POWERED PLACES

● PROSPECTS #02



Welcome to Prospects #02 — People Powered Places

Introduction

Metropolitan Workshop has committed to a programme of practice-based research aimed at capturing and communicating our practice expertise and reflecting on it with a variety of voices to promote innovation and enhance our creative endeavour.

We will select a major research theme annually, driven by our practice imperatives and our collaborators. Like everything else we do as a studio, our research process will be tailored to the specific issues at hand and encourage collaboration.

Each research project will begin with an issue of Prospects, a set of proposition papers that will constructively challenge our thinking, and planned events to capture debate within practice and refine our analysis.

Our research projects will end with an addendum Prospects, which will capture new knowledge from participating -practitioners, present new reflection and analysis on our past and current practice, and critically propose new ways of thinking that will enrich our future practice with collaborators.

This edition, Prospects II: People Powered Places, is special. Conducted during a worldwide pandemic, it is our second research paper, and aims to re-focus on the people at the heart of our developments through our chosen topic of community engagement.

Editorial team

Ava Lynam Researcher, Technische Universität Berlin (Researcher in Residence)
Dhruv Sookhoo Head of Research and Practice Innovation, Metropolitan Workshop
Lee Mallett Founder, Urbik
Neil Deely Co-founder and Partner, Metropolitan Workshop

Coordination and communication

Kruti Patel Associate, Metropolitan Workshop
Pia Berg Senior Architect, Metropolitan Workshop
Richard Robinson Studio Manager, Metropolitan Workshop

Contributors

Metropolitan Workshop with

Catherine Greig Founder and Director, make:good
Ciron Edwards Director of Engagement, Icení Projects
Dick Gleeson Dublin City Planner 2004-14
Helen Dowling Co-founder, Ansuz Action
Keith Brown Community Organiser, Nationwide Building Society
Lesley Johnson Director of Property and New Business, Phoenix Community Housing
Lev Kerimol Project Director, Community Led Housing London
Michael LaFond Community developer, Spreefeld Cooperative and Statbodenstiftung
Naomi Murphy Co-founder, Connect the Dots
Nick Woodford Co-founder, Mesh Workshop and Peckham Coal Line
Nicola Bacon Co-founder, Social Life
Stephen Hill Founding Director, C20 futureplanners

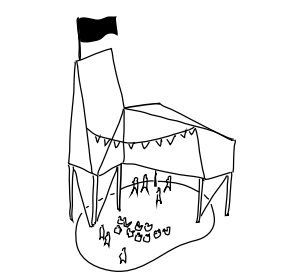
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● FOREWORD

Community engagement: why, what, how?

People Powered Places is the second topic for Metropolitan Workshop’s practice-based research programme. During this difficult period induced by the current pandemic, it is more critical than ever to understand, critically analyse, and rethink community engagement. Choosing this topic affirms the widely-perceived need to ensure productive, positive engagement with people as the foundation of future sustainability in our cities and neighbourhoods, and to avoid repeating previous mistakes in planning, design, and development.



Neil Deely, Co-founder
and Partner, Metropolitan
Workshop

In the UK, community engagement is a primary civic and social principle enshrined in planning law. The latest version of the National Planning Policy Framework has called for early, meaningful, and proactive engagement of local people throughout the planning process.¹ Even more recently, the Government White Paper of August 2020, Planning for the Future, has proposed the democratisation and digitalisation of the current planning system through radical reform that places planning at the “fingertips of people.”² The idea of community engagement has evolved over several decades and continues manifest in varying forms – from the notion of the Big Society and the 2012 Localism Act’s re-introduction of ‘neighbourhood planning’, to the GLA’s 2018 requirement for estate ballots, and CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) and Section 106 requirements which aim to ensure that communities benefit from investment through taxes on land value uplift.

These developments demonstrate the recognition that over-centralised, top-down government, or professional diktat can be democratically debilitating, or simply fail, and that a devolution of decision-making would lead to a more dynamic, self-reliant democratic society. There is also growing acknowledgment that the best physical and social solutions come from effective engagement with the local people who know their neighbourhoods and their needs better than anyone else. From the client’s point of view, the management of risk during the planning phase, as well as development’s future management, can best

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In reality, meaningfully co-designing our cities can be an arduous process that can generate a multitude of obstacles, alongside the endless opportunities for co-creating much better places and richer outcomes.
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be achieved through an early and effective process of engagement which can reduce conflict and foster a local sense of ownership over a development.

However, despite the lip service paid to community engagement, it remains an ambiguous concept that exists on a continuum. There has been prevalent criticism of processes being too tokenistic, too romanticised, and not questioned nearly enough. Furthermore, the notion of community engagement has all too often been instrumentalised to serve economic interests while local people are left behind. In reality, meaningfully co-designing our cities can be an arduous process that can generate a multitude of obstacles, alongside the endless opportunities for co-creating much better places and richer outcomes. A commitment to developing new skills and practices is needed to guide this process and sensitively mediate the varying vested interests on all sides, but doing so will open up new perspectives and untapped knowledge that is essential in the path toward achieving more inclusive cities.

But when we say ‘community engagement’, what do we mean exactly? Are we talking about a planning requirement or something more? More concretely, what can we actually achieve through such a process, and what is it that so often stops us from getting there?

To attempt to grapple with these guiding questions, this research project considered community engagement in its broadest terms. Taking a content-driven approach helped us put aside our own assumptions and remain open to new subjective perceptions. We began with an exploratory investigation into

the varying understandings of the term through an academic literature and policy review, focusing on the UK context, but also presents approaches from Ireland, as well as Berlin.

The project aims to productively contribute to the conversation by bringing together the voices of innovative practitioners working across the spectrum of community engagement, from policy to the ground. Architects, urban planners, engagement facilitators, community organisers, initiators of grassroots projects, academics, and public and private sector clients were selected with the aim of capturing a broad range of perspectives, drawing from their particular experience. Alongside articles, exemplary case studies, and ‘engagement stories’, these reflections were primarily captured through semi-structured interviews to mirror the publication’s topic, allowing ideas to be expressed in the contributors’ own words.

Policies

The first section, **Policies**, sets the scene for the historical, political, and planning context for community engagement. Drawing on academic and theoretical debates from disciplines such as planning, architecture, political theory, and sociology, it maps key discourses and policies that have shaped the community engagement landscape, and new visions that are emerging.

In this section, Catherine Greig, founder of make:good, maps the key developments in the history of participatory planning in the context of the UK over the last

100 years, while urban researcher Ava Lynam introduces some of the key critical reflections on the topic of community engagement that contemplate more productive ways forward, beyond the notion of consensus. The interview with Ciron Edwards of Icení Projects picks up on this thread in his calls for a more realistic view of engagement in which ‘points of difference’ become productive seeds of change for better solutions. Finally, Dublin City Council planner Dick Gleeson reflects on his experience in developing the Naas Local Area Plan with local stakeholders, providing insights that could help preserve the rich history of other Irish towns.

Interfaces

The second section, **Interfaces**, looks at the roles of the multitude of actors in the planning process (councils, architects, planners, engagement consultants) and their interface with the community. Looking at the processes of mediation between the policy level and residents experiencing change on the ground, this section seeks to understand how this network works together, what tools and strategies are being used, and what new approaches are being tested.

Here, Nicola Bacon discusses Social Life’s approach of facilitating meaningful change through robust observational ethnographic research. Naomi Murphy, of Dublin and US based Connect the Dots, then presents us with some practical insights to effective stakeholder engagement and ideas for adapting to the challenges introduced by Covid-19. Lev Kerimol, of Community-led Housing’s London Hub, calls for the housing sector to move beyond paternalistic approaches, and instead work to empower communities to play a role in developing their own housing that responds to their particular needs. In her interview, Catherine Greig discusses the importance of agency and shared authorship in placemaking, for which there needs to be a letting go of fear and control from the top-down. This section is also interspersed with several Metropolitan Workshop projects, where practice members reflect on their experience working with local stakeholders in different projects across the UK and Ireland.

Practices

The third section, **Practices**, looks at what is happening on the ground, focusing in on self-organised approaches and experimentations by residents and community members. It looks at how they navigate the planning system from the grassroots level, what tactics they employ, and what barriers and constraints they face, seeking to reveal the changes that are being called for at this level.

We start this section with an in-depth case study of Peckham Coal Line, in which its founder Nick Woodford walks us through his experience of securing a spot for a citizen-led elevated park in Southwark’s Local Plan. By telling us about his work alongside the London

liveaboard boater community, Keith Brown explains what empowerment means to him as a community organiser, and how it can spark further self-initiated projects. Metropolitan Workshop’s Denise Murray then talks to us about her work with Open Heart City, a volunteer-led project aimed at collectively reimagining historical sites of institutional trauma in Dublin. Case studies of successful British collective housing schemes are then presented: Sanford Housing Co-op in South London is the oldest in the UK, while Marmalade Lane, is Cambridge’s first cohousing community and the country’s largest. In our interview with co-housing expert and activist Dr.Michael LaFond, we get a critical insight into the specific history of community engagement in the context of Berlin, and hear about his personal experience of living at Spreefeld Cooperative. Drawing on her extensive experience as a community organiser, and training other community organisers, Helen Wallis-Dowling explains why a process of co-learning between local people and built environment professionals is so important, and how it can be achieved. Dick Gleeson gives an illustrative account of McAuley Place in Naas, a project realised by a group of residents with an innovative vision for a collective and creative model of living for older people. In her interview, Lesley Johnson brings us back to London as she draws on her experience with Phoenix Community Housing to discuss the importance of building trust with communities through a continued commitment to honesty. Finally, we end with historic case studies of worker-led mechanics and miner’s institutes in 19th century industrial Britain.

Emerging themes

To interpret these varying perceptions, a continuous thematic review of the collated research – including interview transcripts and submitted text contributions – involved reading the content multiple times while adding layers of descriptive notes. This process helped us to identify interesting or recurring words and statements which were subsequently categorised into interconnected themes. Throughout an iterative process, these themes were continuously added to and adapted, which helped us to identify gaps or further lines of inquiry to address. This publication reveals the emerging conclusions from the first stages of this thematic review, revealing some possible answers to the above guiding questions, and raising many more:

- **Distribution of power:** How much agency and control do citizens really have in shaping their everyday spaces? How much of this distribution of power remains tokenistic? Are we simply ‘educating’ communities to come round to predetermined decisions? Which actors and forces in the process are fearful of engagement and the idea of relinquishing control, and why?
- **Questioning the notion of consensus:** Does the incessant focus on the ideal of consensus really help to create spaces which serve the needs of all members of a community? How might conflict

- be recognised and channelled into a productive force?
- **The evolving role of ‘experts’:** Does engagement diminish the role of experts in the planning process? How can we re-imagine the role of the expert and expand the sphere of the architect? How can architects become more self-reflective and let go of preconceived assumptions?
 - **Generating new types of knowledge in action:** Why do architects and planners need the input of local people, and how can engagement stimulate a process of co-learning? What different types of knowledge can local people bring to the table, and how can it enrich design?
 - **Heterogenous communities:** When we talk about ‘community’, who or what do we mean? How can we move beyond romantic notions of a monolithic and harmonious community, or all-encompassing ‘public good’? Instead, how can we work effectively with diverse and heterogenous communities with diverging needs, motivations, and visions?
 - **Building agency:** What does empowerment really mean in the context of community engagement? What constraints do people face in shaping their local areas, and what inventive strategies do they employ to get around them? What methodologies can help us move from mere consulting of predetermined decisions to empowering communities to play a more active role in the development of their local areas? How do we keep up momentum and sustain engagement processes over extended planning timeframes?
 - **Effective translation of insights into designs:** How can citizen’s ideas and desires be fulfilled and translated into designs in a meaningful way? How can insights gained from community engagement be integrated in the architectural design process in a way that does not compromise other parameters such as construction budgets or planning regulations? At which stages should the process be opened up to engagement and how can the expert effectively and sensitively navigate degrees of transparency within the design process?
 - **Reconciling economic and social value:** What different types of value can community engagement bring to the planning process and development projects? How can clients be incentivised by social value? At the same time, how can we also ensure the protection of communities when grassroots initiatives or concepts are at risk of being co-opted insincerely in profit-driven developments? How can community engagement play a role in the long-term sustainability and resilience of local areas?

• **Developing new methodologies and tools:**
• **o Communication:** What tools might allow for productive and balanced communication between different actors in the planning process? How can the planning system be made more accessible to local people? What mechanisms can communities employ to gain leverage in the planning process? Can we develop a shared language for community engagement?
• **o Observation:** How can observation be incorporated in the design process to develop more effective and inclusive projects? How can we use ethnographic approaches to better understand a neighbourhood’s existing fabric and social networks, and how can this inform design?
• **o Mediation:** How can we reconcile or work with different vested interests in planning processes? Who should mediate these processes, and how can we ensure all voices are heard? What platforms for conflict resolution can we develop?

These emerging themes and associated questions will form the basis of an upcoming roundtable discussion that will bring together this issue’s contributors, Metropolitan Workshop practice members, and other outside voices to continue the conversation. Following this, we will continue our thematic review and collate our findings and recommendations in a subsequent Addendum document.

We hope that our research project will help to shed light on the drivers and obstacles for citizens in shaping their built environment and those of the practitioners who navigate engagement processes in different ways. In this way, we hope it might help to guide further critical dialogue and more meaningful models to translate this into practice for more genuinely people powered places.

Text:
1 Department for Communities and Local Government (2019): The National Policy Planning Framework. The Stationery Office, London.

2 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2020): Planning for the Future. White Paper August 2020. available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907647/MHCLG-Planning-Consultation.pdf

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Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.

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— Jane Jacobs



Policies

100 years of participatory planning in the UK

While true participatory design and planning is not necessarily common practice around the UK, the system has nevertheless come a long way over the last century. As the culture hopefully shifts to more comprehensive, inclusive, and meaningful participation in change, Catherine guides us through the history of co-designing places in the UK over the last 100 years.

1910s

In the early 20th century, at a time when urban planning had more to do with the top-down 'utopian' visions of Ebenezer Howard than the feedback of citizens, the pioneering town planner Patrick Geddes broke with tradition in his 1915 book *Cities in evolution* by advocating for planning that would consider the needs and ideas of local people¹. However, it would be a long time until these proposals trickled down into the planning system.

1930s

In the 1930s, the field of public opinion formalised as an academic and professional discipline. Public opinion polls became more common as companies and governments began to understand the value of listening to people. This was built upon in a remarkable way in the early 1940s, when planners in London began to think about post-war reconstruction following the impact of bomb-wrought destruction. At this unique moment in reshaping the urban landscape, government planners decided to use the need for reconstruction as a way to engage the public and expand the role and appreciation of town planning as a tool for recovery and improving lives.

Social mapping, public exhibitions, social surveys, and public opinion polls were used to better understand the needs and desires of the people they planned for, specifically in the task of designing better housing for the working classes, and the public were consulted about planning ideas and policies. The importance of the social survey was emphasised by Patrick Abercrombie, Britain's most influential planner at the time².

The UK Government's Ministry of Information hired Mass Observation, a group of social science researchers, to draw up surveys for the public about people's hopes for post-war life, as well as their needs and wants for housing³. Questions on the mass surveys included: "Do you know what town planning is?"; "What do you think should be done about post-war housing?"

1940s

Mass Observation weren't the only group engaging people in planning their future neighbourhoods. In 1942, the Women's Advisory Housing Committee (WHAC) conducted an extensive survey of working class women about their housing needs and

preferences⁴, including questions such as: "Do you think it is necessary to be near schools/ bus routes/big shops/stations?"; "Do you have any views on the way London should be rebuilt after the war?"; "Would you like an open air market/a community centre/a recreation ground in your housing estate?"

In 1943-4 the Stepney Reconstruction Group in London surveyed neighbours about their housing and infrastructure needs, noting that "the more the views of the people are expressed, the more likelihood of their getting the kind of neighbourhood they want." This is an idea that drives much of the public engagement we see in Britain today.



Catherine Greig & Francesca Perry

Catherine is the founder of make:good, a London-based architecture and design studio. Born out of Catherine's passion for people-centred design, make:good uses meaningful processes -of participation to involve people in shaping neighbourhood change. This piece was researched and written with make:good friend and one time colleague Francesca Perry.

But while the 1940s seemed to be a period of progress in empowering people to engage in the planning process, civic influence remained restricted by legal and professional structures that prioritised technical experts. What's more, after years of multiple social surveys, 'consultation fatigue' set in among the British public, especially as people did not clearly see their feedback actioned. And so, participatory techniques faded into disuse.

1960s

But by the 1960s, the general public had grown critical of modernist planners' lack of attention to democratic principles and the unilateral planning decisions made by government. Amid rent strikes and slum clearance protests across the UK, the call for public participation in planning was renewed.

Meanwhile, the US and France also spoke out against the undemocratic approach of planners. In France, insincere planning consultation practices were criticised – one poster made by art school students Atelier Populaires read "I participate, you participate ... they profit." ⁵ This increasing awareness of the difference between lip-service consultation and meaningful engagement was articulated by political writer and US Housing department employee Sherry Arnstein with her 'ladder of participation' from 1969⁶.

Back in Britain, the government responded to mounting anger by organising the Skeffington Committee to restructure their planning process to accommodate public consultation and engagement⁷. The consequent Planning Act of 1969 attempted to increase the consultation requirements of local planning agencies.

1970s

In 1971, Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) President Jim Amos called for the profession to provide planning aid: "It would do much to make the planning process more democratic and more sensitive to its effects if a free planning advice service could be made available to those in need."⁸ Two years later, Planning Aid services began, facilitated by the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), with partial funding from the government. This involved – and still does to this day – free, independent, and professional planning advice to communities to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to engage in the planning process.

2000s

Fast forward to the turn of the millennium and 2004, when the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act established the requirement for Statements of Community Involvement to be produced by local authorities, explaining to the public how they will be involved in the preparation of local development documents.

Statements of Community Involvement (SCI) are meant to ensure that consultation with the public begins at the earliest stages of development so that communities are given the fullest opportunity to participate in plan-making. But, as we've seen, these SCIs can end up being one-pagers which describe a grand total of two afternoon-long exhibitions informing the public of plans but not meaningfully engaging them. What's more, the 2008 Planning Act set out that SCIs do not have to undergo independent examination.

2010s

At the start of this decade, in 2010, we saw the rise of the 'Big Society' idea, promoted by the Conservative Party as a way to 'devolve power' to communities. In reality, what this often ended up meaning was local authority budget cuts. In fact, since 2010, local authority planning departments have seen budget cuts of 46%.

The Localism Act was passed in 2011, introducing 'neighbourhood planning', which, in principle, gives communities direct power to develop a neighbourhood plan and sits alongside the local authority's Local Plan to shape the development and growth of a local area. The initiative also enables communities to grant planning permission through Neighbourhood Development Orders and Community Right to Build Orders for specific developments.

The preparation of neighbourhood plans is requested to be 'inclusive and open', but as the criteria only requires a minimum group of 21 people to spearhead its development, and receive 51% of approval from local residents who turn up to vote on it, there is a lot of space for people to be left out of shaping it⁹. Although a neighbourhood plan indicates where new homes, shops, and offices should be built and what infrastructure should be provided, its contents must align with the existing



Text:

- 1 Geddes, P. (1915): Cities in evolution: An introduction to the town planning movement and to the study of civics. Williams & Norgate, London.
- 2 Dehaene, M. (2004): Urban Lessons for the Modern Planner: Patrick Abercrombie and the Study of Urban Development. The Town Planning Review, 75(1), pp.1-30.
- 3 Sheridan D. (2005): Researching Ourselves? The Mass-Observation Project. Participating in the Knowledge Society. Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- 4 Mass Observation (2015): The Mass Observation Archive. available at: <http://www.massobs.org.uk/>
- 5 Arnstein, S. R. (1969): A Ladder Of Citizen Participation. Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 35(4), pp. 216-224.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Shapely, P. (2014): People and Planning: Report of the Committee on Public Participation in Planning (The Skeffington Committee Report). Routledge, New York.
- 8 Allmendinger, P. (2002): Planning Theory. Palgrave Macmillian, London, p.161
- 9 Derounian, J. (2011): Neighbourhood Plans – democracy in action or just a sham? The Guardian. available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/local-government-network/2011/nov/28/neighbourhood-plans-democracy-action-sham>
- 10 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2014): Guidance. Neighbourhood Planning. GOV. UK. available at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/neighbourhood-planning-2>
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2020): Planning for the Future. White Paper August 2020. available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907647/MHCLG-Planning-Consultation.pdf

Images:

- Opposite: The Mass Observation Wheel showing some of the subjects studied by Mass Observation, a social research organisation that has been recording the experiences and opinions of ordinary people in the UK since 1937.
- The Keep (2020): The Mass Observation Archive. available at: <https://www.thekeep.info/collections/mass-observation-archive/>
- Left: Poster by French students Atelier Populaires protesting against insincere planning approaches: "I participate, you participate, he participates, we participate, you participate, they profit"
- Arnstein, S. R. (1969): A Ladder Of Citizen Participation. Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 35(4), pp. 216-224.

Critical reflections : engagement beyond consensus

By tracing key discourses on community engagement since the sixties, Ava synthesises the ongoing theoretical literature review within our research project. She extracts the concepts and criticisms that remain so relevant for practice today, and highlights some of the more recent ideas that aim to move beyond idealism and ambiguity.



Ava Lynam
Ava is the current Researcher in Residence at Metropolitan Workshop. She works as a research assistant within the Urban Rural Assembly project at Habitat Unit, Technische Universität Berlin, looking at urban-rural transformation in the context of China. Her research interests focus on the fields of urban sociology, co-productive planning, land dynamics, and urban-rural linkages. Prior to this, she worked as an urban designer at Metropolitan Workshop on urban strategy, public realm, and large-scale housing projects.

There are many words used to describe 'community engagement', ranging from participation and public consultation to co-design and community-led architecture – the list goes on. But there remains little critical discussion about what we actually mean by these terms and how they are applied in practice. With notions of inclusivity, co-production, and civic engagement enshrined in global policy frameworks such as the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, community engagement is taken for granted as a purely positive concept, eagerly adopted everywhere. But by neglecting its complexities, we are left with a generic and diluted understanding of it.

This text is a synthesis of the ongoing theoretical literature review undertaken as part of our research project, unpicking key critical reflections on the topic from the fields of politics, sociology, planning, and architecture. It aims to position the practitioner perspectives captured in this issue within this ongoing conversation. After giving an overview of theory around engagement since the sixties, I highlight ideas that, in my experience, are especially relevant to practice, but are often not questioned enough – the problematic

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The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights ⁴⁰

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David Harvey

nature of some architectural modes of communication, the shying away from the political nature of engagement, and the unrealistic attempts to achieve consensus.

By situating this theoretical input together with perspectives from practitioners working in the field, this research project aims to go some way towards addressing the large gap between research, policy and practice - something which, as a researcher with a design background, I have a particular interest in. While this project may well remain

within a specific circle, it may stir some critical reflection on the processes we are involved in, to open up new perspectives, think about how they might be adapted on the ground, and expand the sphere of architects, planners, and other built environment experts.



Right: Participatory housing: Walter Segal's method for self-build housing put into action in 1988

Opposite: The eight levels of Sherry Arnstein's influential 'Ladder of Citizen Participation'

The 'golden era'

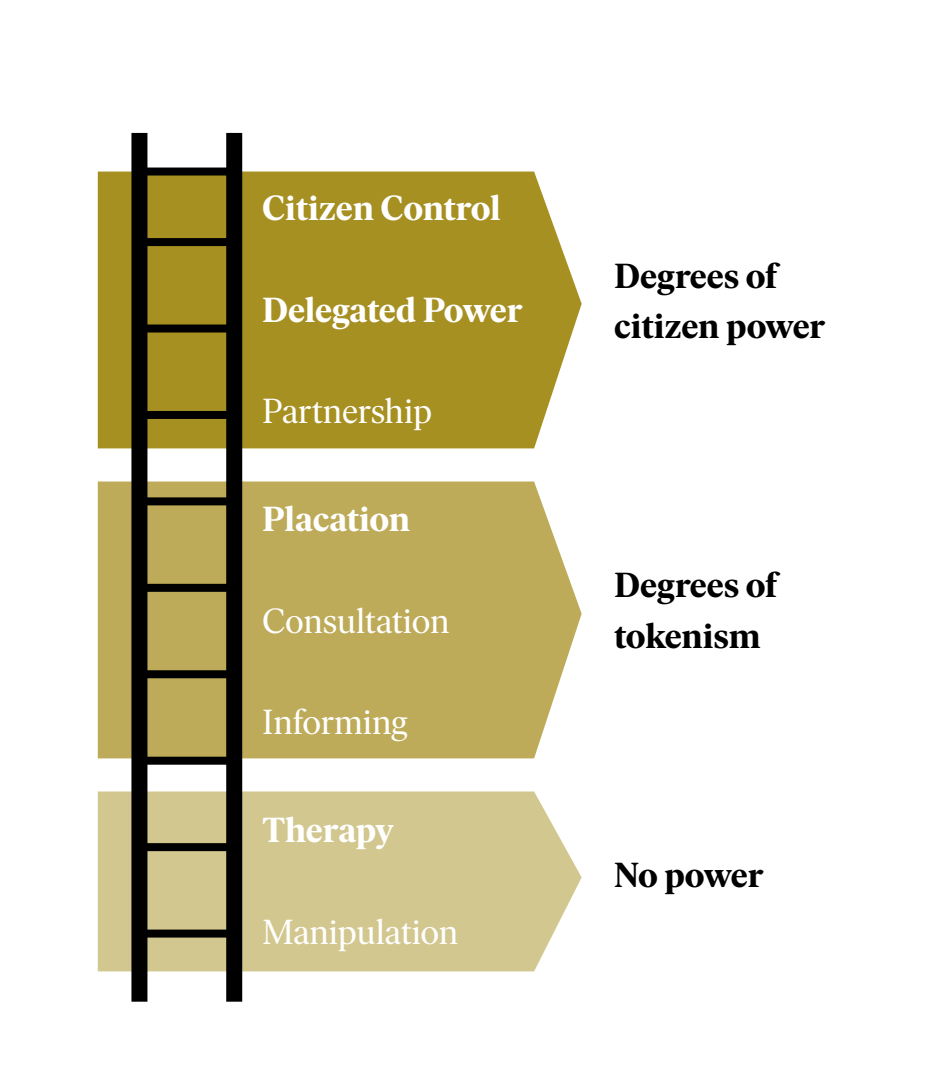
The sixties and seventies are often perceived as the most significant period in the movement toward more inclusive cities. In particular, urban activists in Western countries protested against the limited opportunities for participation in the design of their cities and the authoritarian nature of Modernist urbanism. These ideas were at the heart of the co-design approaches of architect Giancarlo di Carlo in Urbino,¹ of urbanist Jane Jacob's notion of the 'diverse city',² and of philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre's emancipatory 'right to the city' movement.³ The latter was elaborated by geographer David Harvey, who highlighted that this 'right' was not reducible to the mere access to existing urban resources, but rather, the ability of citizens to participate in decision-making processes to creatively change, occupy, and produce urban space to meet their needs.⁴ In her comparisons of classical and contemporary democratic theory, political theorist Carole Pateman described the complex power structures embedded in participation, highlighting that it is deemed acceptable depending on whether it maintains or challenges the state's stability and underlying values.⁵

During this period, British and German architects in particular were experimenting with new ideas around user empowerment through the development of design methods that were accessible to ordinary people, such as architect Walter Segal's self-build housing method⁶ and the Non-Plan project by Cedric Price, Peter Hall, Reyner Banham and Paul Barker, which proposed to abolish overbearing planning regulations and allow people freedom in the design of their

environments.⁷ Community activists called for the inversion of power relations between experts and 'non experts', envisioning a new role for architects as technical facilitators that delivered the wishes of a community – an idea embraced by California's Design Methods Movement, which aimed to open up the planning process through the use of computers. In research laboratory Architecture Machine Group's radical interpretation of this concept, users were in complete control over the design of their environment within computer-generated schemes, and the architect was discarded with entirely.⁸

The participatory (re)turn

To some extent, various principles from the sixties and seventies have since been incorporated at an institutional level through policy, and have certainly demanded increasing attention in recent years. In the last two decades, a 'participatory turn' has been further expanding the traditional field of politics into urban planning and architecture, marking a renewed focus on the concepts developed by the original radical movements.⁹ Throughout the nineties, participatory planning theorists such as Patsy Healey, Judith Innes, and John Forester endeavoured to move beyond rational and technical perspectives by applying deliberative democratic theory to the sphere of planning. Their influential communicative and collaborative frameworks aimed to first recognise and then challenge the institutional reality of the planning process, and through dismantling power imbalances, employ it as a tool to promote wider social justice and environmental sustainability.¹⁰ Especially over the last ten years, technology-mediated participatory



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The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you. Participation of the governed in their government is, in theory, the cornerstone of democracy—a revered idea that is vigorously applauded by virtually everyone. The applause is reduced to polite handclaps, however, when this principle is advocated by the [have-nots] ⁴¹

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Sherry Arnstein

practices have represented an increasing promise of providing opportunities for citizens to engage with the planning system – through information dissemination and social networking, increasing transparency of the planning process, creating virtual platforms to facilitate discussion, and developing new methodologies such as crowdsourced smartphone data collection and mapping. While there is a worrying risk of some members of society being left behind by such technological innovation, digital engagement has also never been more relevant as in the current Covid-19 pandemic where social distancing has become paramount.

In this contemporary urban context defined by widening socio-economic inequalities, increasingly fragmented neighbourhoods, and rapid urban expansion and displacement, the central role of community engagement in fostering a sense of place, social capital, and long-term sustainable uses seems more important than ever. However, it remains questionable whether any progress has been made in challenging fundamental structural power relations in the manner in which Pateman or Lefebvre were calling for, particularly around notion of agency in the built environment. While there are countless examples of projects in which local people have been, in some way or another, involved in the planning process, it remains rare that they go beyond requirements of consulting the community with predefined schemes through tokenistic gestures. As such, they largely remain a missed opportunity in addressing a neighbourhood's real needs, improving social relations, and creating a genuine sense of belonging. Leaving the obvious social value aside, current proponents of community engagement also highlight economic arguments against insincere processes.¹¹ Without the inclusion of future users, they largely remain ineffective in generating highly relevant and productive uses, or a sense of ownership and care over shared space, which would result in less maintenance costs. Instead, these projects often remain embroiled in costly disputes and

protests, which could have been avoided with early efforts to develop meaningful relationships with existing communities.

Ambiguity, authenticity, and appropriation
Despite the rhetoric within the architectural field, there remains a gap between the idealistic notion of all-inclusive participation and democracy that is lauded by almost everyone, and the reality playing out on the ground. Thus far, the ambiguous definition of community engagement has meant that “where, when, by whom, for whom, for what (and whether) [processes] are implemented is rather arbitrary”.¹² Particularly in North America and Western Europe, we have seen radical participatory ideologies and calls for empowerment from decades ago misappropriated; diluted by planning departments into ineffective institutionalised processes of 'public consultation' or mutated by market forces to foster gentrification.¹³ Particularly during times of economic crisis, low-cost and grassroots solutions are advocated by local governments who retreat from their arenas of responsibility, while concepts of social sustainability are often co-opted insincerely in profit-driven developments.¹⁴ With such conflicting motivations in a process driven by economic factors, it is “far from rare to find that the same community that made a project possible in the first place is later excluded from it”.¹⁵

Over the years, this issue of authenticity has been addressed repeatedly, such as in Sherry Arnstein's widely referenced essay *Ladder of Participation* of 1969,¹⁶ in Johann Albrecht's 1988 text *Toward a Theory of Participation in Architecture*,¹⁷ and more recently, in the multi-authored *Architecture and Participation* published in 2005¹⁸ – all of which bemoan the lack of effective models for 'real' participation, despite its long history. As conceptualised in Arnstein's ladder, in reality there are multiple degrees in the spectrum of engagement, with manipulation at the bottom rung and citizen control at the top. Reflecting the 'placation' rung of the ladder, it is not uncommon to see instrumentalised models of engagement that claim to be “founded on romantic notions of inclusion, negotiation and democratic decision-making”¹⁹ used as a vehicle by architects, planners, and politicians to fulfil obligations and merely persuade users to agree to predetermined decisions. In such a process, experts take the authority in decision-making, using the 'feeling' of participation to charm passive citizens. Pateman calls this 'pseudo-participation', which stands in contrast to her view of 'full participation' in which individuals have equal power in decision-making processes.²⁰

Participation politics
Thus, while there are many barriers to achieving meaningful engagement, perhaps the most crucial of all is the structural power imbalance in a profession in which the knowledge of built environment experts sits at a different position to the

tacit knowledge embodied by citizens. A more realistic view would admit that power in decision-making processes ultimately lies with those who possess this expert knowledge and thus control the process on their own terms – deciding who is involved, determining access to information, and tending to resist attempts from local people to assert their own ideas.²¹ Furthermore, while engagement “has the potential to challenge patterns of dominance, [it] may also be the means through which existing power relations are entrenched and reproduced”.²² Forester’s work has drawn attention to such ethical considerations, describing how built environment professionals exert their power through distorted communication, selectively informing and misinforming citizens.²³ Conventional architectural visual language which stirs the imagination of designers often remains incomprehensible to ordinary people who may also contend with untransparent “lines of communication [that] are compromised by codes, conventions and authority”.²⁴ Such a situation is hardly aspirational if empowerment is the genuine aim of the engagement process. Furthermore, built environment

professionals have been criticised for indulging too much in idealistic architectural principles and remaining too detached from the social realities experienced by the users of their designs.²⁵ In reality, engagement is inherently political as citizens introduce their everyday lives and personal beliefs into the process. Bringing in a wider group of stakeholders and their potentially conflicting needs, values, and desires confronts architects with challenges that they might otherwise overlook, and as a result, is often perceived as too time consuming, complicated, uncertain, expensive, or disruptive. Furthermore, the new modes of spatial production and aesthetics generated by introducing new voices might also stand at odds with the client if their focus is on economy and efficiency. In his impactful text *The Negotiation of Hope*, British architect and writer Jeremy Till discussed the encroachment of the demands of users into the ‘comfort zone’ of experts, stating that, “participation presents a threat to many of the central tenets of architecture and the profession does what it can (either knowingly or by default) to resist that threat. The denial of the political realm is one such mechanism by which that threat is suppressed”.²⁶

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In reality, architecture has become too important to be left to architects. A real metamorphosis is necessary to develop new characteristics in the practice of architecture and new behaviour patterns in its authors: therefore all barriers between builders and users must be abolished, so that building and using become two different parts of the same planning process¹²

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Giancarlo di Carlo

Below: The Baupiloten Method employed at the Haus am Quellmoor education centre project in Hamburg - Baupiloten architects have published a book (*Architecture is Participation*) on their approach to community engagement, which shows how architects can act as a facilitator for collaborative design processes made up of stories, collages, films, and games.

Expanding the role of the architect

Discussions on role of the architect have constantly resurfaced in discourse around engagement. The notion explored in the sixties and seventies of architects as mere technical facilitators leads to several issues and contradictions, however. If architects were to fully surrender their creative knowledge and know-how, citizens are left without guidance in articulating their spatial visions in a sophisticated manner. Such a situation was described by philosopher Gillian Rose: “the architect [...] is demoted; the people do not accede to power”.²⁷ It can thus be argued that achieving meaningful engagement is not effective through the rejection of expert knowledge, nor is it about merely increasing transparency if it remains beyond the citizens’ reach.²⁸ Instead, critically questioning architectural norms and professional structures allows us to reimagine engagement processes based on their potential to initiate conversations as catalysts for exploring new ways of placemaking.

While architect Susanne Hofmann, founder of Berlin-based Baupiloten, argued that “user participation should be understood

as part of the foundation of a design proposal, not as an irritation or ‘dilution’ of the ‘pure’ idea.”²⁹ Till has described a two-way ‘transformative’ process, in which the everyday experiences of citizens actively influence expert knowledge and the architect develops the capacity to move back and forth between the two worlds.³⁰ For such productive processes to be possible, the distant and technical perspective of the expert needs to be reconciled with and developed from within the often unruly reality of the specific social and spatial context it is intervening in. Bringing us back to the notion of communicative planning, the architect’s sphere of activity needs to be expanded with effective modes of communication and founded on trust-based relationships in order to access users’ experiential and intrinsic knowledge of their local spatial environments.³¹ This critical untapped resource enables citizens to be experts in imagining the spaces and uses they desire or need – knowledge that will only strengthen the scheme drawn up by the architect.

Modes of communication that take ordinary conversation as a starting point can bring the architect from detached observer to engaged participant, and by introducing the social sphere, open up unexpected outcomes that go beyond physical form and may have not arisen through logic alone. To achieve this, Till’s method of ‘urban storytelling’ uses language grounded in everyday experience, and in this way, avoids being too idealistic while retaining an imaginative quality.³² The architect’s role is then to understand and draw out the spatial implications of this collective storytelling, based on shared knowledge and imagination. This reflects the model proposed by architect and writer Markus Miessen, in which, “the spatial practitioner acts as an enabler, a facilitator of interaction who stimulates alternative debates and speculations”.³³ Having gone through several rounds of evaluation with

future users, the shared vision and more robust architectural concept that can arise out of such a sensitive and constructive dialogue would also inform a stronger sense of identification with the completed project.

Beyond consensus

Committing to a genuine process of community engagement inevitably welcomes even more uncertainty, complexity and contestation, as it “brings forward the moment when the political nature of space has to be dealt with; in so doing it disturbs the comfort zone (which architects so often revert to) of a world stripped bare of the messy, complex, lives of users”.³⁴ It is therefore important to move past unachievable notions of fluid mutual cooperation, completely dissolved power structures, and the futile attempt to remain neutral or apolitical. In his 2011 book, *The Nightmare of Participation*, Miessen calls for a more critical and proactive view of engagement processes that go beyond the idealistic notion of consensus.³⁵ Instead, conflict and antagonism are celebrated as a productive and enabling force which generates the richest outcomes in processes of knowledge generation. This critique draws on the theory of ‘agonism’ of Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe, who argued that the overarching aim of reaching rational consensus in the dominant deliberative model of democratic political theory may not ever be achieved, and when it does, gives rise to stasis.³⁶ Rather than seeking to avoid conflict, her model acknowledges the role of power, embraces difference, and creates space for the emotional expression of tension between contesting values that are inevitable in modern democracy.

Rather than speaking of ‘solving problems’, both Healy and Forester argued it is more productive to engage with the micropolitics of planning, and instead think of it as a collaborative learning process that ‘makes sense’ of clashing views and social identities.³⁷ Leaving behind the unrealistic idea of community engagement as a move towards ‘common sense’, sense-making is most promising when understood in terms of making ‘best sense’ – a view which acknowledges that other voices are included in the process, that there is no perfect solution, and that the process is uncertain by nature.³⁸ The aim, therefore, is not to attempt to find common ground over many conflicting positions and desires, but to use the architect’s expert judgement to make the best possible sense of them through finding moments of ‘equilibrium’. On one hand, it is easier to deal with contestations earlier rather than when they inevitably appear at later stages in a project’s development. On the other hand, the issues that are brought forth present an opportunity to generate more empowered and relevant architecture in an “ultimately positive process, both alert to the realities and positing a better future”.³⁹ This shared negotiation of urban space thus can only expand the possibilities of architecture, rather than limit them.

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If participation means that the voiceless gain a voice, we should expect this to bring some conflict. It will challenge power relations, both within any individual project and in wider society. The absence of conflict in many supposedly ‘participatory’ programmes is something that should raise our suspicions. Change hurts⁴³

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Sarah C White

Agreeing to disagree

We spoke to Ciron about how to move beyond ‘tick box’ engagement exercises through reconsidering disagreement as a necessary constructive process that can arrive at more robust solutions. He discusses how effective storytelling and open dialogue can enable clearer parameters to be defined, specific issues to be tackled productively, and all voices to be heard, even if they differ from the majority.

Lee Mallett (LM) Tell us a bit about how you got into community engagement.

Ciron Edwards (CE) In the first year of my post-grad Diploma architecture studies, we worked on the Tollington Single Regeneration Bid, just behind Finsbury Park [North London], where the twenty of us in the studio engaged with residents to come up with ideas. I was coming from a more traditional approach to architecture, but this sparked my interest in how you work in really challenging areas and develop briefs partnership with local residents.

When I graduated in 1999, there was a general movement towards engaging with people to create much richer design responses, which was in line with the government’s ‘putting residents first’ initiatives like the resident-led New Deal for Communities, and to a lesser extent, ‘Housing Market Renewal’.

I found I was good at being at the front end, engaging with stakeholders, whether they were residents or the client, listening to their input, and then formulating that into a design brief. I’m a believer in participatory and co-design processes, but I’m not a complete slave to them. I also believe that the value and role of the architect is to bring creativity. There are reasons why there are professionals in the industry. What I try to do is open that process up to allow more voices to play an active role, and then mediate it.

The more constraints you have on an architecture project, the better the project is, because you have more opportunity to respond. A project with a blank piece of paper is not only hard to conceive, but it can become just an object. I do admire architects who are really about creating objects. But that’s not my form of architecture.

Although I trained as an architect and I am passionate about the subject, I like to understand places and buildings as systems. Throughout my career I’ve found that the best buildings are those you don’t need to build! Through engagement you often find a solution that doesn’t involve building. That to me is more valuable and sustainable. Obviously.

LM Do you think that this role is understood within the industry, or when you encounter communities? How has that understanding changed?

CE Well, the world has changed in the last ten years: the increase in awareness around development, the positives and negatives of estate regeneration, the role that social media plays in connecting people to share information and knowledge outside of traditional circles...There was more hope in the noughties when people felt they had an opportunity to be part of development. Now there is a feeling that development is being ‘done to them’ and my role is often regarded with suspicion.

The first half of my career was all focused on public sector initiatives, while the second



Ciron Edwards
Interviewed by Lee Mallett, before the Covid-19 pandemic
Ciron is director of engagement at multi-disciplinary consultancy IcenI Projects. He delivers the stakeholder engagement of some of London’s largest projects, and has had long-term involvement with New Deal for Communities and Housing Market Renewal initiatives across the UK. With a background in architecture, Ciron has extensive experience delivering urban regeneration and public realm projects, and has previously worked for Fluid and Soundings where he played a critical role in design and engagement projects for both private and public sector clients.

half has been all private sector. When you’re working in the private sector, you’re trying to demonstrate value. First of all, to the client, in order to move beyond a box-ticking exercise. I have some clients that truly believe in community engagement and the value it can bring by enriching design. I have others who consider it an annoyance and all they are attempting to do is de-risk their application to win an approval. And then I have others who are somewhere within that spectrum.

If a client can see a value for them, they will invest in it and elevate its importance. If they can’t identify that value, it is going to be cursory. It’s very much about perceived risk and what’s driving the client and their knowledge of community engagement and design.

For example, I’m working on a couple of estate regeneration schemes for local councils and for a housing association and we are now heading towards a ballot – compulsory if you are looking for a GLA grant. Obviously, the clients want a ‘yes’ vote, and the quality of the engagement is vital for that. They are going above and beyond to ensure things are the best they can be because it is a huge risk for them.

LM Some clients are incentivised to make the best of the process. I imagine many are not as keen about being upfront in the room where the engagement is happening, though.



Left: The Illuminated River project is the longest public art commission in the world.

CE A lot are averse to confrontation, and they can’t see what it’s going to achieve for them. I often tell my clients that there will be fundamental issues that produce some heated debate. You always have the big difficult ideas which are hard to resolve because they are ideological.

Let’s take car parking. We have a local policy, we have GLA policy. Sometimes they are not in alignment. And then we have diverging local perceptions around parking and whether cars are good or bad. Council policy says a development needs to be car-free, but there is a local disbelief that it is possible, and a worry that people will park on their estate or their street. You have a complete dislocation in what people perceive and what policy is saying. How do you unpick all of that?

If we look back at the Heygate Estate, the ultimate reason it is controversial is because of the amount of affordable housing. But if you present the narrative correctly about the way the architect or masterplanner has approached a site, and if they’ve done a good job with a series of clear logical steps, nobody will have those issues. The actual requests from the community are fairly modest and deliverable: will there be cycle parking outside the shop, will there be a tree here?

LM The council can develop a policy, but people don’t buy into it?

CE At times a council does everything right, but people don’t believe in the policy. I fully understand this from a resident’s point of view.

I’m working on an East London site that has an emerging housing allocation, for example. The council has done everything right in terms of notifying their residents and have had few comments. All the professionals in the area are aware of the council’s vision for the site. Yet not a single resident knew anything about what the vision was, even though they’ve gone through an extensive process.

If you happen to spot a council advert in the local paper, you might bother to read it, then ask yourself, “is this something I can genuinely engage with?” You lose some people at that point and eventually you’re left with a couple of usual suspects, which creates a real vacuum.

LM You’ve identified another difficult area – the communication of complex ideas in the built environment. Is that a big issue?

CE Making it relevant to people is. It’s not necessarily communication. I’ll give you an example: so many times, I have been in a drop-in exhibition, and somebody comes, quite irate, waving an event flyer and says, “You didn’t tell me about this. I didn’t get notified.”

And they are standing in a venue surrounded by the information, with the event flyer that you put through their door. But the thing is, it might not be until one of their neighbours has said something that the penny has dropped about how it’s going to impact on their lives, which suddenly made it real.

The problem we face as an industry is that the things we talk about – timescales, values, money – are alien to most people. Area strategies may be ten or twenty years long,

but most people don’t think in decades. They can’t project the future implications of getting involved today, or how it might affect them in ten years’ time.

LM So what’s the answer?

CE I don’t know! We’ve somehow got to have a debate on it. First, we’ve got to gain trust.

I am working on the political and community engagement for the Illuminated River project [a public art project to illuminate central London bridges], and what’s really interesting about it is the way it has changed the conversation within some of the boroughs around the night time environment. It’s a public art project, a ‘nice-to-have’, but it has prompted the City of London to commission Spiers & Major to do the first public realm lighting strategy for a borough. It has elevated the conversation and is starting to get boroughs to think about light in the urban environment.

We need to apply those lessons to the wider industry, and it needs to be done in a way that is genuine and believable, and has all partners honestly contributing to it.

LM In terms of estate renewal, is there is an absence of a clear, engaging strategy for doing that? Are housing policies they expressed in a way people can understand?

CE There needs to be a wider London conversation saying, “We are growing as a city. We need to accommodate people”. We need to have acceptance from the public to the parameters we are working with, and we have to debate how we will do it.

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I believe that the value and the role of the architect is to bring creativity – there are reasons why there are professionals in the industry. What I try to do is to open that process up, to allow more voices to play an active role. And then mediate it.

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LM You’ve highlighted a fundamental issue of the engagement process – the absence of, or an insufficiently developed expression of the story, so that you can identify those areas where you agree or disagree.

CE Quite often, I say to clients at the beginning of the process that we know the group we are going to engage with is going to oppose this application. And we can’t stop that. What I hope is that when the objection comes in, it will say, “we like this, but we disagree with that particular element.”

I’ve worked on some very contentious projects, on the Isle of Dogs for example, before the new ballot process. Tower Hamlets’ Mayor John Biggs said, “sometimes democracy doesn’t work”.

Say we’ve got a hundred households on an estate and 99% agree to knock it down but one resident says no, and their reason is absolutely cast iron. We need to listen and maybe the 99% have to consider whether that person’s reason is more important than their reasons. Sometimes those situations occur. A binary of ‘yes and no’ doesn’t always work. Everything is nuanced, and all you can do is hope that an informed decision that balances benefits and disbenefits emerges.

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If we are carrying out a tick box exercise, we talk around the points of consensus. If we are genuinely trying to come to a good solution, we talk around the points of difference.

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Below: The engagement programme included workshops with children who produced glowing lanterns for riverside walks.

LM It is essentially a reductive process. You’re trying to take away those redundant issues so you are left with the ones that you do really need to discuss. There are often powerful forces on both sides. How do you manage that?

CE Sometimes inclusion goes wrong and you’ve got certain people that just dominate the process, to the exclusion of others. You will always get the people who shout the loudest, or who are the most opinionated. It can be challenging because it can skew things against the vocal minority. Sometimes they are right. It is difficult, but it can be managed through effective engagement processes.

At Fluid, I worked on a New Deal for Communities project in EC1, Kings Square. They had embarked on a good, traditional approach to community engagement. They flyered everybody on the estate, and created a residents-led steering group to work with professionals to identify, develop, and deliver social and physical interventions. At one estate, a few strong individuals dominated this process because they felt the project was being imposed on them and that the estate that had seen no investment.

We got sent in to lead a wider framework for interventions and deliver a selection of projects. After six months of standing in front of these three residents shouting, we handed

over power entirely on a couple of physical intervention projects. It was a genuine co-design process. We offered up detailed options they could choose from, and gave them full decision-making powers for signage and the shared circulation elements of their blocks. They felt empowered, and we developed an element of trust with them.

We then worked on some of the more challenging aspects of the proposals where our clients wanted a solution that was not only based on the lowest common denominator of security. We professionals talk about connectivity as a positive thing, but most residents see it as a negative; they want to know the person that’s walking through their estate. What residents wanted was initially something defensible to stop groups hanging out under their blocks on summer evenings, while we wanted something of beauty. They wanted it built in brick, creating this quite harsh environment, but it ended up being built in glass and lit up, full of colour.

It was a really long process. But because we’d gone through those other projects at the beginning and had developed rapport, they had confidence that we were listening. After they let us do it, they saw the impact of it and fell in love with it.



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Sometimes inclusion goes wrong and you’ve got certain people that just dominate the process, to the exclusion of others.

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LM Over the last 30 years, taking London as an example, the need for more housing has been obvious to everyone – and yet we are unable to deliver what we need using the planning system as it is. Community engagement may be essential but there is also this growing need to deliver even faster. How do you square that?

CE The funding model now is that everything is privately financed, and that’s how we deliver change. So, if investors can’t see the value in it, community engagement has no chance of being successful.

We have to accept certain things and everything needs to become more transparent. Some developers are crystal clear. I really enjoy when we’re at an engagement event and someone walks up to the development manager and asks, “why are you doing this?”. And they respond, “to make money”. It totally neutralises the conversation. It’s out there in the open and you may see that person say, “ok, I get that”. You need to have the parameters set: you know I’m in it for money, and I know you want something out of it too. Let’s have a conversation about what I can do while I’m delivering both my end and what you actually want.

LM If there were more clearly defined areas that people could comply with, would it take a lot of the heat out of the process?

CE I think we need to think hard about how we set policy frameworks. We need to remove some of the politics out of development as well.

People’s concerns are usually about smaller, more tangible matters – the real benefits to them. Can I walk my dog in this part? Do I like the appearance of that? Are you providing the kind of shop I want? A lot of clients and their architects are interested in hearing people’s opinions on those things.

I’ve had some very good engagement with private developers where we’ve managed to encourage the planning officers to be there so that we are able to offer people a conversation to discuss issues in proposals. If clients can figure out how to stop being shouted at over big issues which are generally outside of their remit, then it becomes a much more worthwhile process for them. There would be a lot more willingness to do it and they can see there is something that is actually enjoyable in the process.

One of my favourite things has been seeing people grow within the process; connecting an 80-year-old to an 11-year-old, and something new emerging that is genuinely

going to improve their lives regardless of what happens with the wider regeneration, because they have just formed that bond.

Below: The extensive stakeholder engagement included 18 drop in exhibitions, over 60 stakeholder meetings, and a varied programme of events in the seven London Boroughs that the project spans.

Images provided by Icen Projects



● STORIES OF ENGAGEMENT

NAAS TALKS



Dick Gleeson
Dick was Dublin City Planner 2004-14 and had overall responsibility for strategic/forward planning and development management in the city. A committed urbanist, Dick championed the development of the “6 themes”, a systems-type framework, embedded in the City Plan. Dick managed the International Urban Advisory Panel for Dublin for almost a decade. He sat on several major juries for architectural competitions including the competition for Dublin’s “spire”. He is an Honorary member of RIAI.

The Irish town constitutes a remarkably rich urban legacy. While the sense of place in every town is unique, underpinned by its own vernacular blueprint, there is also a surprising consistency in their particular model of development. Their urban legacy is now being eroded and undermined by changing economic forces, lifestyle preferences, and a destructive development model which has been re-shaping Irish towns over recent decades. Sitting within the footprint of the greater Dublin area, Naas in County Kildare is just one of many towns across Leinster – and a town I have called home for many years.

In strategic terms, Naas town-centre has suffered economically with a loss of multiple functions, while powerful clusters of new retail, commercial, and office development have been located peripherally along the arc of the adjacent motorway. In parallel with this hollowing out of the town centre, there has been a large increase in car-dependent, spatially introverted housing estates with little diversity in typology or tenure, and cul-de sacs and impermeable boundary conditions that undermine any cohesive, legible, and interconnected urban structure.

In 2017, Kildare County Council (KCC) advertised for support in the preparation of the Naas Local Area Plan (LAP). I was part of a small inter-disciplinary team, the Naas Planning Advisory Group (NPAG), appointed to identify the town’s major planning and urbanism challenges, while drawing in best practice.

The first plenary session, titled ‘Your Town, Your Place, Your Naas’, was attended by over 100 participants, and was followed by 7 workshops which focused on achievements, identified critical challenges, and reflected on what future success might look like for Naas. This was followed by 6 weeks of public engagement with stakeholder groups, which revealed the multiple challenges facing the town centre, the need for community infrastructure at neighbourhood level, and the opportunity provided by neglected heritage buildings. There was also wide reflection on leadership, and on the role of Naas as a County Town – a view that Naas does not know what kind of town it wants to be, and that it has a locked-up potential to be amazing. Another workshop with developers indicated an openness to wider housing typologies, and a welcome for more clarity on fixed and flexible infrastructure at neighbourhood scale.

The second plenary presented the outputs from the engagement process, and outlined the emerging strategic focus of NPAG thinking and recommendations. In addition to resolving the rift between the town centre and the peripheral arc, four strategic focus areas were outlined: a town centre regeneration strategy, an urban structure/public realm strategy to engender spatial unity, a movement strategy to radically rebalance modal split, and a hinterland strategy to connect Naas to its beautiful surrounding landscapes.

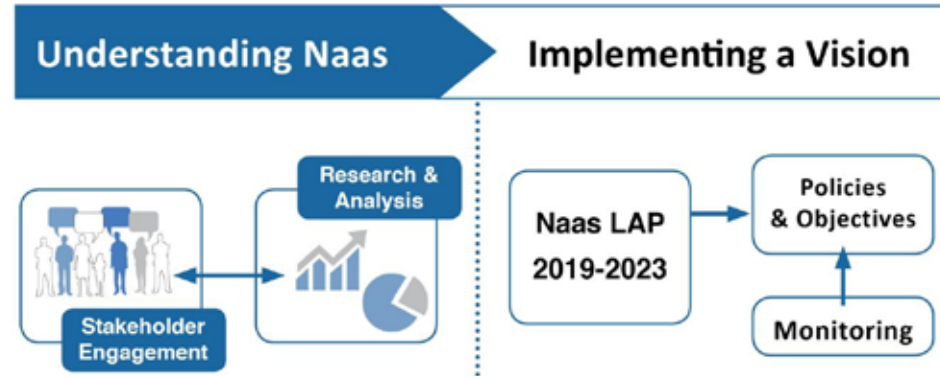
The engagement process revealed multiple challenges of connecting with a wide spectrum of stakeholders. Building trust takes time and the process was compressed into a short time-frame. The debate was often issue-based with a tendency towards polarization, which militated against envisaging the long-term and the ability to think strategically. Expectation was tempered by a degree of cynicism about the engagement process and plan fatigue. While citizens had many good ideas, it wasn’t clear how the institutional status quo could forge the kind of town that people aspired to. In response, we drew on urbanism and systems thinking, presenting major town challenges from a holistic perspective and drafting a set of high-level themes which would have to be debated within a unified framework. Exemplars from other towns and cities helped communicate integrated thinking, and the power of a good map was crucial in discussing development patterns and urban structure.

This experience made clear that an inclusive process and a shared vision are critical in generating momentum and harnessing the creative capacity of townspeople. Look at good practice anywhere, and an inspirational unity of purpose is embedded in the narrative. A culture of collaborative engagement is also fundamental to sustainable practice, underpinned by UN and EU policy. Enabling this to happen, however, requires new mindsets and innovation in the institutional relations between top-down and bottom-up.

- Steps towards achieving this include:
- Facilitating a ‘Big Conversation’ about your town
 - Continuous citizen engagement – think ‘citizen evidence base’. Consider an Urban Observatory
 - Willingness from the top-down to concede some power, and stay visible
 - Drawing inspiration from other places, and how visions are realised
 - Acknowledging complexity. Being creative with maps and building them alongside citizens
 - Being brave, drawing up a charter to underpin collaboration and inspiring citizens to shape their urban future

Top: Stakeholder engagement is highlighted as the basis of the development of Naas’ Local Area Plan
Source: Kildare County Council Planning Department (2019): Draft Naas Local Area Plan 2019-2023, p.2.

Bottom: View of Main Street South – a part of the Naas Architecture Conservation Area.
Source: Kildare County Council Planning Department(2019): Draft Naas Local Area Plan 2019-2023, p.67



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If there’s going to be another movement, another direction in architecture, it has to engage people differently. Other than saying, here, look at this, isn’t this amazing? It has to interactively involve them other than as spectators ... it has to engage them as creators.

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— Lebbeus Woods

Interfaces



Quote: Finoki, B. (2007): Subtopia Meets Lebbeus Woods. Subtopia. available at: <http://subtopia.blogspot.com/2007/06/subtopia-meets-lebbeus-woods.html>

Engagement ethnographies

We spoke with Nicola about Social Life’s approach to placemaking, which is founded on a combination of community engagement and robust observational and ethnographic research. Challenging professionals to self-reflect and put aside their preconceived assumptions, she discusses the methods used to build up in-depth portraits of neighbourhoods and unpick their intricate social fabric.



Nicola Bacon
Interviewed by Lee Mallett, before the Covid-19 pandemic
Nicola co-founded Social Life in 2012, a centre for expertise in innovative placemaking and social sustainability. She advises central and local governments, foundations and third sector agencies, embedding fresh approaches to public policy and service delivery tackling inequality and disadvantage. Nicola has worked across sectors for the Home Office and homelessness charities, and until July 2012, was the Young Foundation’s Director of Local and Advisory Projects. She is an Academy of Urbanism fellow, a Design Council BEE, a Brent Design Advice Panel member, and a mentor for Bethnal Green Ventures.

Lee Mallett (LM) Do you describe what you do as community engagement?

Nicola Bacon (NB) Not often, but sometimes we do.

When we started, we were interested in bridging gaps between people and the professionals who are trying to change the areas in which those people live. Some of that was research, and some was engagement projects, but we were always interested in projects that were fundamentally aimed at involving people and thinking about how you make residents’ perceptions part of the design.

There is always a balance in understanding what residents say to you as a response to engagement and what might really be going on in the community. It involves a lot of observation, interpretation and analysis. There’s a participatory angle to our work, but there is also a substantial research angle where we are observing and reporting.

At Social Life, we have a mix between built environment and social research backgrounds. Some of us are architects, some of us are researchers; we have planners and ethnographers. I have a research and policy background; I used to run a homelessness charity and I worked for the Home Office. Design-led participatory work is great and we do use it. But you also need to be “real people”, so we’re not too removed.

LM How did you start out?

NB We worked with local resident’s body Brixton Green on the first Somerleyton Road engagement process with Metropolitan Workshop. We did a series of deliberative workshops – a health service technique – based on the idea that all of us make better decisions when we have good information, and when we discuss it with people who we think of as our equals. The idea is that you give people access to information and experts, and the decision they will make at the end of that process will be very different to what they started with.

Off the back of that, we started doing work for Lambeth. That became really difficult with the realities of their estate regeneration programme, so more of the work we do now is research. In the context of London, and particularly with housing development, the parameters to have genuine engagement are quite small because there are so many pressures on cost and planning assumptions. When you’re doing engagement, you are often talking about a particular scheme or plan, while research is a bit broader, and has a more open agenda.

LM Do these parameters tend to drive a solution before it has been examined?

NB Very much so. As an agency like ourselves, it’s very easy to say, “we really want to know what you think of this”, and then later you find yourself saying, “well, the residents want that, but it can’t be done”. There is more opportunity now because councils are developing more for themselves. There is more of a focus on figuring out how to get

social housing to really work, and how to deal with issues around regeneration schemes. Often, what we pick up on is not to do with a particular scheme, but about people’s life experience. People are terrified of anything that threatens their home because they feel very vulnerable. They know that in London, if you lose your home, you may not be able to afford another one, and then there are all the other issues like benefit cuts. You are dealing with this big issue of uncertainty and how difficult people’s lives are. Often people feel really under threat.

LM Does working with public and private sector organisations give you an understanding of the pressures from both sides?

NB Yes. We’ve done work with Grosvenor, British Land, and Countryside in the past. One of our first big pieces of work in 2012 was with Berkeley Group who wanted us to provide a social sustainability measurement framework. They were very data-driven.

It was canny public affairs thinking: How do we get ahead of the game? How do we impress the planning committees? We ended up working with a group of development directors. They do want to make money, but they want it to be a decent scheme. They were very brand driven and aware of reputation. All those things came together.

LM What proportion of your work is community engagement?

NB It comes and goes. At the moment we are doing many different in-depth research and baseline studies and talking to a lot of

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We do really in-depth portraits of areas – we could end up doing a lot of street interviews and detailed ethnography. We use a lot of different methods to understand how an area is in terms of how people feel about it.
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Above and below: Face to face street interviews and in-depth ethnographies on the Aylesbury Estate. We’ve altered how we work to adapt to the Covid-19 pandemic, and have found many people were happy to speak to us as long as they felt safe.

residents. We do really in-depth portraits of areas – we could end up doing a lot of street interviews and detailed ethnography. We use a lot of different methods to understand how an area is in terms of how people feel about it.

A large part of our work is asking, “how do you feel about the area you live in?”. People generally think about areas in terms of deprivation – the physicality of it or the problems in it. They don’t often think about it in terms of what they like, if they feel they belong, if they feel safe, or if they like their neighbours. A lot of our work is about capturing those intangible things.

Typically, this work would be for someone developing a site. For Grosvenor in Bermondsey, or Notting Hill Genesis, research is our starting point and we want to be able to track change over time so we can see what the interventions have done in five or ten years. We’re also working with Countryside and L&Q in South Acton, and we are about to do our third round of research there to see how the estate is changing.

LM Are you generating an evidence-base for social value?

NB That’s one side of it. The other side of it, which I think is more relevant to the community engagement question, is if you want to masterplan or change a place, you really need to understand the detail. What is valued? What do people like? What’s the nuance of it? Often the things that people like aren’t the things that architects look at.

The Elephant & Castle shopping centre is a great example of an ‘ugly’ building that had a lot of social value. It was really well used by the Latin American community. It has shut and will be demolished soon, but three years ago, it was super busy. We did a little project, and found people were making a lot of money there and providing help within

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they tell us three years on what they have and haven’t done.

One of the insights from the first piece of work, for example, was that people in the new homes were not feeling as comfortable with their neighbours as people living in the old estate. So, the recommendation was that Acton Gardens could explore how they could make people in the new homes feel a bit more like they were a part of the area. They organised events and other community development initiatives, and by the time we went back, it had evened out.

It’s about using and finding the balance between insight and engagement. Sometimes engagement can get very skewed towards just knowing about a narrow thing, or about things that are actually undeliverable in practice. How you interpret that information is really important. It can be challenging to other professionals.

LM In terms of deciding whether you take on a job or not, do you have to feel it has integrity to do what you do?

NB We’ve become more selective because it is unpleasant ending up in the wrong place with this, with difficult conversations and lots of social media attention. You can end up very vulnerable in those kinds of processes and it’s difficult for the people working with you. It’s quite stressful and it can get quite personalised – horrible phone calls and all the rest of it.

I do think boroughs are getting a bit better because there have been so many protests. There has been a real groundswell of rage about regeneration generally. And because there is now a requirement from the Mayor of London to have a ballot, you now actually have to get the residents onside.

LM Do you have to get your story straight before you engage?

NB Totally – you have to be clear about what you are doing. There are always community activists out there who are watching every detail and will pounce on anything inconsistent. These are people who put an enormous amount of effort into their communities. It is all very essential. It is easy to dismiss them as unreasonable,



over-suspicious or paranoid. But they are people who are doing a huge amount of community engagement and really hold things together. Things go well when you can work with some of those suspicions. It can work out.

LM What are the main challenges and changes you are perceiving at the moment?

NB There are now a lot more people living in poverty and vulnerability, and that does change people's relationship to the issues. There are more people who want to be invisible. There are a lot of people juggling various jobs, or maybe subletting a room in their flat. There are people who, for various reasons, don't wish to be engaged with and they are 'uncounted'. We're not talking about unemployed people, but people who are just struggling to keep it together. On all these estate regeneration projects there are big populations of vulnerable people. There are more extremes now. You also have people who are doing really well. Southwark is an area that's very socially mixed, for example, so there are people who have really different interests.

We did some work for Notting Hill Genesis on the Aylesbury Estate four years ago, and then again last year, and it was really interesting what had changed in that time. Just talking to the GPs was quite informative. They said, "We are out of control here and we cannot meet these needs". It felt like things had become a lot more difficult in those four years.

LM That's probably a metric that architects don't know about. Who else do you talk to that architects and developers might not?

NB There are always less obvious community groups to talk to. On the Aylesbury Estate, there were some great supportive social networks that were often invisible to people not directly involved in them. There was one corner shop on that runs a kind of informal advice and loans service. People go to him about their lives. You wouldn't find him straight away. There was also a sewing group, for example.

They were not formally funded services, but these informal groups were really important. There were a lot of people helping each other out, with local childcare, and all sorts of things that Southwark didn't think were there. The assumption was that the estate was really 'difficult', but it seemed there were a lot of people living really interdependent lives which was working quite well. There were many things about living there that were better than other parts of London, even though it was physically in a real state. People are very good at getting by. There are good things in every neighbourhood and working with the things that are already in place is really important.

There's something about just observing and having really good eyes – and not just going along with assumptions. Sometimes we use ethnography and observation. But if you are



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There's something about just observing and having really good eyes – and not just going along with assumptions.
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an agency working for someone and you've got deadlines and planning applications, then there is a limit to resources. It can be quite difficult to justify that extra cost for things like chatting to people.

The engagement we would really like to do would be more end-to-end. It would start really early, at the pre-design stages, and then we'd feed people's ideas and responses in as designs as the masterplan progressed.

LM What would be the conclusion you'd draw from that process to put into the design ideas?

NB Some of it is policy stuff, some of it is about how to rehouse people. If a community is looking after each other's kids, it would be really good to reflect that somehow in the design, for example. Aylesbury Estate has these really big deck-access balconies, which works well if you are looking after lots of children. People can be nostalgic. The kids talk about, "when there were lots of walkways", because that was fantastic if you were eight years old, even though it probably terrified their mothers.

Including lots of spaces for social interaction is very important – really good public areas or communal spaces for people to meet that don't necessarily cost lots of money.

Above: Elephant & Castle - a psycho geographic project to explore how we can understand our emotional reactions to places. This is a group walk; engagement with residents living behind our office.

LM What about the people who are on the receiving end of engagement processes? How do they feel about it?

NB There is a lot of community engagement going on where I live in South London, for example. You wander round and can see there is local design-led consultation going on in Peckham, especially in regeneration areas. Things can go incredibly slowly, and people say, "you asked me this four years ago, nothing has changed." Why should people believe the things they are told are going to happen when they don't?

I had a great conversation with a nineteen-year-old on the South Acton Estate while we were doing some work for the government – a review of people who live in areas of change, talking to them about whether they've been involved or not.

He was talking in a loud, teenage way, but what he was essentially saying was, "I don't feel part of this change. I don't know if I like it, or if it is for me. I'm worried about my Mum. What I really feel is that no one has made themselves available for me or my mother to talk to. I don't feel that any of the engagement has actually involved us. I'm not stupid; I'm realistic about what is going on in London. If I felt that I could actually make my points known or visible somehow, I would be so much happier. All I want is to feel I have a voice in this, and I understand that certain things can't be done."

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You've got this one little snippet into people's lives and if they feel so disempowered in every other aspects of their lives, it is very difficult to make them feel they have much control over what's going to happen in their neighbourhood.
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It was SO reasonable – it was painfully reasonable.

You've got this one little snippet into people's lives and if they feel so disempowered in every other aspects of their lives, it is very difficult to make them feel they have much control over what's going to happen in their neighbourhood. It's about empowerment.

LM Do you think politicians have any greater understanding of this than they used to?

NB Some local councillors certainly get it. But, national politicians? I don't know. There hasn't been that much policy on these sorts of things. Policy is so hands-off now, compared to what it used to be. If you go to Scotland, for example, intervention is everywhere. It's much more like how it used to be down here. It's much more market-led here now.

I was thinking about Labour's announcement in late November 2019, before the December election, about building hundreds of thousands of more council homes. The practicalities of doing that in terms of skills and delivery would be a fascinating challenge. But there is a lot of potential for getting it wrong. At that speed, how would you do the planning, how would you get the process right, how would you design it well? It's a really good ambition but local authorities would probably do it much better if they had more thinking space.

There is a squeeze on every job in local government, because of austerity and the amount of time involved. You just do not have the time, whatever role you're in, to think about the softer things – and this is one of the softer things.

Local authorities used to have good engagement teams – I used to work in Southwark for a community organisation and there were resident engagement officers – but those have all gone.

LM What needs to happen to make community engagement more effective?

The current planning process makes you engage in such a rigid way. The basic thing that people need to do in order to get through planning in terms of community involvement isn't particularly difficult. You employ someone, get an agency, to do X amount of work, and gather X number of opinions. Write it up in a nice report. Get it into the design. Tick.

It needs that longer-term thinking and there needs to be a spectrum of things coming together, not just something one-off. Good engagement works well when there are existing community organisations you can work with. It works well when you understand where all the networks are and when it builds on what's there already. If what's there is very fragile, then that is difficult.

It also works when professionals listen and are willing to be challenged and willing to bend. I think a lot of architects and built environment professionals are incredibly bad at self-reflecting about these things, and have very fixed ideas of what is going on and what is good.

LM Is that also true of their clients – the developers and the local authorities?

NB Yes! So, it's very difficult for the person doing the planning to be really sensitive about these things because the response might be, "What!? Why are you doing that?"

LM And do communities have fixed ideas too?

NB People do have fixed ideas; there's a two-way going on there. But often that's to do with lack of knowledge, time, and expertise, and the history of things that have gone wrong in the past that they don't want repeated.

Below: Woodberry Down Estate - Social Life worked with the council, tenants and residents organisations to develop a framework for monitoring social value. This event presents the research to residents. Images provided by Social Life



● STORIES OF ENGAGEMENT

HOW CAN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AFFECT THE PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESS, AND HOW CAN IT BE DONE UNDER THE CURRENT COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS?



Naomi Murphy
Naomi is co-founder of stakeholder engagement practice Connect the Dots. Based in both Dublin and Philadelphia, Connect the Dots develops tailored strategies and expert insights to help build cities, regions, and entities focused on the health and happiness of all citizens.

Portrait image provided by Alex Foster

Since Connect the Dots' inception five years ago, we've looked at how to create a process that can be adapted and applied to any subject and any project in any part of the world. Below is a very brief distillation of some of our findings and ideas for anyone looking to engage during this time. From working with local/central government and semi-state bodies, we have seen all forms of briefs around public and stakeholder engagement. With this experience in mind, we present the pitfalls of when things go wrong and the solutions when aiming for good practice.



The key tenets within effective engagement image provided by Connect the Dots

When done well, community engagement can ensure the sustainability of a development; it can increase buy in and ownership in the local area and ensure a smoother overall process through planning permission stages and beyond. When community engagement is done poorly or not at all, it can create unnecessary delays, mistrust, and stop a project completely. It's important to tailor the approach and set parameters depending on the type of project. Some of our projects are in housing developments and public realm improvements – working with Councils and various design teams. Generally speaking, the elements that can be influenced and adapted through community engagement tend to be the parks, playgrounds, amenities, community centres, greening, transportation and permeability. It is

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When community engagement is done poorly or not at all, it can create unnecessary delays, mistrust, and stop a project completely.

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important that the experts in engineering or architecture are familiar with the opportunities for input, and equally as familiar with what the compromises are and to display them clearly.

Other project examples are around mobility in suburban areas, country towns and villages. From a policy perspective, we have done work with the National Disability Authority and Department of Justice focused on enabling mobility and access to public space nationally. Knowing what's happening at a policy level as well as local level infrastructure projects is helpful in understanding the context and benefits of such schemes. The main elements that need to be communicated and influenced are usually around safety concerns, public realm, local knowledge of routes and highlighting the benefits for an area as to how this amenity will improve the quality of life. In almost all projects, but particularly sustainability projects, environmental psychology and behavioural change should be incorporated in some way to the process.

The key pitfalls of poor engagement include:

- Disjointed/unclear communications
- Misinterpreting the insights from the community
- Only hearing from the usual suspects
- Assuming the loudest voice represents the majority
- Not leaving enough time for community input to feed into the next steps and decisions

Barriers people face to consider when devising an engagement strategy involve:

- Poor internet connection
- Not tech native
- Physical disabilities
- Language barriers
- Literacy issues

With the restrictions on face to face contact, the Covid-19 crisis has introduced countless challenges for stakeholder engagement and collaborative working. At the same time, listening carefully and engaging thoughtfully has become more critical than ever to develop an understanding of how citizen' feel as this new reality unfolds. In response, we've put together some of our ideas for working in the context of this 'New Normal', which translate

traditional in-person, end-to-end processes into something robust and remote:

- Online Surveys: We have developed a survey tool that is more accessible and rewarding than your average survey, as we aim to make you feel like you're not alone in responding and that your answers are being addressed. You can also use Survey Monkey, Jotform, Typeform or Google Forms.
- Online Workshops: We have developed a beta version of our Conversation Kit which is a hybrid of presentation slides and images with questions included, and a way to see collective answering and real time results. You can also use Zoom and Mural or Miro.
- Virtual rooms: They are not the only solution, but one in a suite of tools you need to employ in order to ensure you reach everybody. You can also use a really well-designed website.
- Webinar or video updates on a project to communicate key milestones and maintain transparency
- Window displays and a post box for submissions
- Door to door flyer
- Working closely with the existing representative groups within a community and getting their ideas for engagement methods

Lastly, here are some important questions to ask yourself when working with a community:

- What is undecided within our approach?
- Do we have time and budget to allow for people to consider what we are doing and give feedback in time for us to improve our plans?
- If we lived here would we be happy with this process?

● STORIES OF ENGAGEMENT

OAKFIELD VILLAGE, SWINDON



Local residents attend a coffee morning during early stage design image provided by Metropolitan Workshop

Consultation processes can often feel like a tick box exercise, but for Oakfield, the client wanted to take a different approach. There was an aspiration to create a sense of community, and a neighbourhood where local people would want to live. Community engagement is extremely valuable and is a way for the design team and client to gain true insight into a place. It is also a relatively simple tool to show people you want to sell the homes, so these are valuable points for all sides to discuss while plans are still developing. It enables the community to come on the journey of the design development to ensure it is fit for purpose and relevant.

At Oakfield, the team ran approximately 6 community events, some of which included tea and cake, and often had family entertainment. They were also run at different times (weekends/ evenings) to offer flexibility and widen the event's appeal. The aim was to ensure that irrespective of circumstances, all were able to attend if they chose to.

At the first event, held very early on in the project timeline, we didn't have a design proposal, but instead presented wider site analysis and feasibility studies for the site. This was a 'listening event' to hear the thoughts and opinions of the local community. We had drawing boards and residents had an opportunity to give feedback as to whether they wanted a development, and if so, what they wanted from it. The designs became more detailed

throughout the events programme, from talking about how many homes would be on site, to what types of homes these would be, to then showing plans and visuals. Post-it notes were used as a tool to allow residents to vote for the style of home they liked the most which enabled us to ensure that the provision was adequate for the need, and that the site served an intergenerational community. At the end of the day, the client will want to sell the homes, so these are valuable points for all sides to discuss while plans are still developing.

Oakfield was rare in that the client employed a dedicated community officer, Keith Brown, who worked solely with the local community throughout the project. Keith reached out to the neighbourhood by knocking on doors to get to know the residents personally, and also meeting them for tea, coffee and cake. Before community events, flyers were distributed to a broader catchment area than usual, considering that residents in other areas might want to move to this development in the future.

It took a while for residents to become comfortable with the team, and at first, there was some scepticism about whether the engagement was genuine. Over time, however, trust was built and lessons were learnt. Sometimes the feedback received at the events were beyond the client's control. At these points in the project, it was important to set out expectations of what can be delivered, whilst explaining why we could not progress certain feedback. This communication

ultimately reduced the likelihood of resident frustration about the development once the planning application was submitted, as they knew what to expect.

All feedback following events was collated and included within designs wherever possible. I believe that this style of community engagement worked particularly well for Oakfield, because the client understood the benefits of involving the community in the process, rather than solely focusing on making a particular profit. For those developments that are more profit driven, this collaborative approach is generally more challenging.

The current circumstance we find ourselves in – Covid-19 – has highlighted the need to consider digital forms of community engagement, while also ensuring it remains inclusive to those that may not necessarily have access to the Internet. If some individuals' voices are not heard, it will be detrimental to the sustainability of the project. Ultimately, I believe that productive community engagement leads to a better understanding of a place, and that being transparent early on in the process is crucial to allow local residents to meaningfully influence the development of the neighbourhoods in which they live.



Kruti Patel Metropolitan Workshop

Kruti has been involved with Oakfield for more than three years, initially as Project Architect. The masterplan layout and architecture was developed with the design team, Oakfield team and the local community.

Metropolitan Workshop's role now is to act as Design Guardians, ensuring the development is built to the quality the original design intended and protect the overall integrity of the scheme. It goes without saying but it's the most exciting and interesting project Kruti has worked on!

● INTERVIEW

Community-led housing: beyond paternalism, towards empowerment

We sat down with Lev to hear about his work supporting London-based community-led housing projects and his insights into how these models of housing can meet a multitude of needs – from affordability, lifestyle choices, or those of particular demographic groups – by rethinking paternalistic approaches and instead putting empowered residents at the centre of mainstream housing provision.

Ava Lynam (AL) How did you get into this field? What led you to work with community-led housing?

Lev Kerimol (LK) I've had a personal interest in this for a while. Whilst studying architecture, my brother suggested I read Colin Ward. I became interested in self-build in my diploma work, and then ended up working in the public sector. After a while, I started looking into cohousing, initially as somewhere to live in myself, but then started to advise others. I did some work with Gallions Housing Association and worked part time for Lewisham council helping them with the Rural Urban Synthesis Society (RUSS) project, making the arguments for it, explaining and managing the technical side. While I didn't end up in a cohousing group myself, by chance, I later moved into Segal Close – one the first Lewisham group self-build projects.

When people look around Segal Close and say how unique it is, I think, "well, this could happen a lot more". Obviously, it might not take the same timber frame form, but it is the idea that people can have more of a say over their housing in a direct sense. This is one step beyond consultation, this is putting the future residents or community in the driving seat, in whatever form that takes.

AL How would you define community-led housing?

LK There are several more well-known approaches, such as 'housing co-operatives', 'community land trusts', and 'co-housing'. 'Community-led housing' is a bit of an umbrella term that tries to capture them all. That definition talks about the community being involved in the development process,

but they don't necessarily have to initiate it or do all of the day to day work – groups should be in control of the decisions that matter to them. Secondly, the long-term ownership, and the management or stewardship, is up to the community organisation to decide. Thirdly, any benefits are legally protected in perpetuity. Where its affordable housing, it's about protecting affordability; where its market-value housing, it might be about protecting benefits to do with the particular social set up or community lifestyle.

A lot of people see it as being affordable housing. Particularly in London, that is a big motivation and driver. But for me, the key thing that differentiates it from anything else is the empowerment of future residents and wider communities. Empowerment can mean lots of different things to different people, and people might have lots of different motivations. Some people might really care about design and might want a lot of control over the development process. Some are more interested in the long-term ownership or management, or who gets to live there and how the allocations work. Some are particularly interested in thinking about affordability in different ways. Lots of projects are innovating in different ways based on what the needs of that community are.

We find that groups fall into two categories: there are groups that are looking to provide housing primarily for themselves as a community, what we might call a fully mutual arrangement where only residents are part of that organisation; and those that are looking to provide housing for their wider local community, such as community land trusts where you can be a member of the organisation and vote for the board, but not be a resident. In those cases, we usually try to get an equal balance in power in the

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This is one step beyond consultation, this is putting the future residents or community in the driving seat, in whatever form that takes.

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If people are faced with normal people wanting to build housing themselves rather than a developer or a council, I think it changes the conversation.

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Lev Kerimol
Interviewed by Lee Mallett and Ava Lynam
Lev is project director at the Community Led Housing London Hub. He previously worked at the Greater London Authority where he was involved in establishing the Small Sites x Small Builders program and contributed to the London Plan, among other projects. He also previously worked with the London Borough of Lewisham on the early stages of the RUSS (Rural Urban Synthesis Society) community land trust project. Lev has a background studying architecture and real estate, and has taught Design and Planning at London Metropolitan University.

organisation between residents and non-residents. Those kinds of organisations tend to want to do more projects, because there is an unmet demand within the membership of the organisation. On the other hand, once a cohousing or co-op project have housed themselves, they are typically less motivated to do more projects themselves.

Usually, when you are doing engagement, you are only speaking to the existing surrounding residents, but community-led housing brings in prospective residents who might have a completely different motivation for housing. If people are faced with normal people wanting to build housing themselves rather than a developer or a council, I think it changes the conversation. Even if they might not be in housing need themselves, maybe their kids want to live somewhere locally and not have to move, or they have friends or neighbours who want to live locally, and they can understand the motivations.

Lee Mallett (LM) Can you describe what your organisation does, and how long it has been going?

LK About two and a half years. We have a core team of four or five of us now, hosted by a small housing association called CDS Cooperatives. They were initially founded in 1975 as the Cooperative Development Society, and have a history of promoting community-led housing and setting up housing co-ops. Nowadays, they mostly manage and maintain rather than working on new developments.

There is a pipeline of approximately 1,500 community-led homes across about 80-100 groups or projects across London. We are actively working on about 40-50 projects.

Our core remit is guiding groups from an initial idea, working out what their concept is, and incorporating an organisation, if that's what they need to do. We help them to identify sites, do feasibility, due diligence and viability, engage with the landowner, and get to a point where their site is secured. The GLA takes over the funding to get them to planning.

The GLA wanted to support a community-led housing, and were talking to the main national bodies – the National Community Land Trust Network, the UK Cohousing Network, Confederation of Co-operative Housing. Part of their national strategy has been to set up regional enabling hubs which had been effective in rural areas. This aligned with CDS' aim of promoting to community-led housing and they stepped up to host a London hub.

LM Could you tell us more about the funding for community-led housing groups? Do people do it without grants as well?

LK Yes, but it is obviously harder without grants.

There was a brief national government Community Housing Fund, introduced around 2018. London had a bit more flexibility, and the GLA stretched it to 2023, and channelled early stage revenue funding through us.

The unique thing about it compared to most housing funding is that it has this revenue element. There is £38 million in total; the £30 million in capital acts a lot like the normal affordable housing grants, while the £8 million in revenue is for project development – like mentoring and predevelopment costs. That is really important because most of these groups are start-up organisations, so usually they don't have a record or asset base. Having that revenue grant is pretty essential.

Before that grant came along, there were a couple of social investors, such as CAF Venturesome, who funded projects such as RUSS with pre-development loans with a high interest rate. These would be paid back once planning was permitted or work is started on site, although loans would be written off if this wasn't achieved. There were also other small grants around through various foundations.

AL How do groups come together for a project? What are their motivations?

LK There are a lot of different directions and starting points. Some groups are already working on something together. Usually, it's a case of building up an open membership organisation. Whoever has got time or skills to contribute can join, so it will vary. Sometimes, there are existing community organisations that want to do housing, and they may currently run a community centre or do some other similar work. In most other cases, they are groups of people that

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We have various different demographically-defined communities, as well as geographic communities. Their needs might be to do with more than just affordability, such as a specific need or way of living.

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Below, top left and right: RUSS, residents group engaged in self build in Lewisham
Below, bottom left: Older women's co-housing

want to get together and build housing for themselves or for their wider local community.

In London the need for affordable housing is a big motivator, but it is not exclusively this. Some are in the private rental sector, or maybe they are just short of being able to buy or being able to afford things like shared ownership. Some of them are not in any real housing need or they might already be in secure council housing, but want to do it because they see there is a crisis and see it as a charitable thing to do. They might be involved in the church or other voluntary organisations and activities, or they might be social activists.

We have various different demographically-defined communities, as well as geographic communities. Their needs might be to do with more than just affordability, such as a specific need or way of living. One of the well-known examples is the Older Women's Co-housing project. They wanted to live in a way where they would look out for each other as they got older, and some of them had homes to sell and put into it. There is another similar group we are working with now called the London Older Lesbian Co-housing are rethinking care homes. Another one has been set up by single parents that came together motivated to share things like child care. There are some projects which are purely about lifestyle. They want to live in a more ecological or environmentally friendly way. They might either already own



a house, but want to live a more communal lifestyle and share amenities or tasks.

AL How does this collective form of living impact the design?

LK We have some groups who are interested in different forms of shared living. On the more extreme end, there is a group called Sun Housing Co-op who want to have very small individual private spaces, but a massive open area where you can do anything you want, whether its workshops or a ‘free for all’ open living space. This might sound similar to the “co-living” brand initially, but the fundamental difference is how it is owned and managed – you are your own landlord in that context. In other projects, the level of sharing is more modest. It might be that they just have a large shared kitchen or garden, or some sort of common facility. There are also boat cooperatives that are aiming to have cooperative moorings. There are all sorts of interesting typologies emerging.

Authorities may view shared housing differently, and think, “well, no one would want to share their bathrooms.” But in these cases, the community controls it and makes that decision. They are not being forced into ‘unsatisfactory accommodation’ by a private landlord or a co-living operator.

AL Is there an increase in demand for these models of living in recent years? I think a lot of people would be interested in this kind of housing but they simply don’t know about

it, or don’t know how to get involved in such a project. One of the main barriers is that people don’t even know where to start.

LK I would say it’s increasing, but it is difficult. There is a lot of latent demand. Either people don’t know that it is even an option, and once you mention it, they say, “That sounds really good - when can I move in?” But the reality is that there are only a handful that actually exist. It has taken years to get some projects off the ground, and can be really hard work. The Older Woman’s Co-housing often say it took them 16 years, probably counting from the first time they met and had an idea. As we know, all development projects take time, but here there is the added complexity of having start-up organisations, usually with not much capital, trying to do something different – all at the same time.

Lots of groups want to do things differently, which means a lot of complexity. They often want to do design in a very collaborative way, and a number of projects have been innovating with how they describe affordability, for example. There is the London Citizens Community Land Trust, who have a particular model of linking house prices to median incomes in perpetuity, rather than percentages of market value. To keep it affordable, they have a lease that means that you can only sell it on at the increase of incomes, rather than a percentage of market value. That can mean all sorts of headaches, on one hand with mortgage lenders, but also because it is not a recognised affordable housing tenure, which means you

have problems with planning – but the aim is to detach the homes from the speculative property market.

We have some thoughts about how that could be aided. Going back to the definition, community-led housing doesn’t mean you have to do everything yourself, and there is scope for some sort of enabling developer or housing association to do the more of the heavy lifting, depending on what the group really wants to achieve. If you are at the receiving end of a housing association project, where you are the tenant and they are the landlord, it is very paternalistic. In many cases, community-led housing is trying to flip that around or make it more mutual. The residents are also the clients. Most community land trusts have open membership, the residents vote for the board, and you have a democratic feedback. It’s a bit of a mindset shift for a lot of organisations.

The Older Women’s Co-housing persuaded the housing association to work for them in some ways. The housing association bought the site and financed the construction on the basis that the group would purchase the completed units, and that the housing association would manage a proportion of the rented units. The tension there was making sure that the housing association acknowledged this ‘client relationship’ and allowed for empowerment when building a non-standard product.

LM Are local authorities open to this approach?

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If you are at the receiving end of a housing association project, where you are the tenant and they are the landlord, it is very paternalistic. In many cases, community-led housing is trying to flip that around or make it more mutual. The residents are also the clients.

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Opposite: Public engagement event for an affordable self-build project in Tower Hamlets
Below: Older women’s co-housing
Images provided by Community Led Housing London Hub



LK It’s fair to say that local authorities are used to a more paternalistic approach – they have housing waiting lists and the bureaucracy around that. This is where our advice and guidance come in. We help groups shape their ask, how to be clear about what they really want, what is realistic, and what they can and can’t do. Many things are possible, and local authorities perhaps don’t have the culture of working in that way. So, it is about working out how you might address that and also offer something for the council. It’s about getting that dialogue right.

In our role in the hub, we also offer our support to councils to create opportunities. I think councils don’t know how best to do community-led housing, even when they want to. While you have self-build being a big part of the National Planning Policy Framework, you are in a very competitive environment for securing sites. We’ve worked with councils releasing sites specifically for community-led housing. I would love to get to a point where site specific allocations designate sites for a community-led form of development. Bristol City Council have got some policies along these lines and there are a few others saying that 10% of plots in a development over a certain size have to be for self-build.

LM I imagine that one of your biggest obstacles is simply the lack of supply of housing in London, which forces councils, housing associations, and developers, to do the norm everywhere that they can.

LK Yes, it is definitely difficult. The value of land is a big challenge in London. Any

site that can be developed is likely to be developed. There are a couple of examples where groups have found a niche – because it’s a community-led project, they are able to do something that no one else can, or they might persevere with a site in a way that others might not.

There is a site owned by TFL on Christchurch Road that is just sitting there and has a big fence around it; but in the planning policy, it has an open space designation. TFL have put it out to a couple of developers in the past and it has not been given planning permission. They can’t easily sell the site to anyone else, and in a way, it has no other value because of the designation. The community saw that it was not being used for anything, have gathered a lot of local support and are proposing a housing scheme there. The group have campaigned and lobbied so much, that the councillors will hopefully give them permission, which would be very unusual for a developer.

There are a couple of examples where the full ownership of an estate has historically been transferred to a resident-led organisation. The Walerton and Elgin estates in the north of Westminster had a big campaign in the 90s, and they are now building on top of existing blocks, and doing that while everyone is still living there. And because they own the estate and are doing that project themselves, and they know who they can talk to, it feels that they’ve managed to get it to happen without the usual aggravation.

LM What would be your ideal scenario for community-led housing in London?

LK We’d like to see it forming a mainstream option. It might only be 5-10% of housing output; it is not necessarily for everyone, because it is still going to be hard work to some extent. But those that are interested in gaining greater control of their housing should be able to do that a little easier than it taking 16 years. Hopefully it will become a more commonly known and understood thing. I think that is happening to some extent.

It has been a case of demanding and insisting and campaigning for sites. I think we are starting to see more partnerships with councils, and councils putting forward more realistic sites. It is something they do in Berlin, where a number of sites, or a proportion of a larger site, is specifically set aside for community-led housing.

We have been talking to a lot of councils. Community land trusts get mentioned a lot, and cohousing a bit. Some are starting to put sites out specifically for community-led housing, such as through the GLA’s Small Sites Small Builders program. Tower Hamlets Council have a target of building around 2,000 council homes on infill sites across the borough, and another target of 50 community-led self-build homes. They will take the medium-size infill on estates, and the very small sites that are resource intensive for the council can be put out to small groups of self-builders, cohousing or co-ops.

Working with groups, maybe things don’t go as fast. But how long does it really take to do other development projects? I think the point we would make is that community-led housing adds something different and it can do great things on the right site, with the right context, for a particular group of people. It is not the solution to everything, but it should be an easier mainstream option to diversify London’s housing.



● STORIES OF ENGAGEMENT

BOOSTING BALHAM



Our project at Balham was won in a competition staged by Wandsworth Borough Council and The Balham Partnership with funding coming from the Mayor's Outer London Fund. The scheme comprises four distinct projects:

- Enhancing the railway bridge environment to increase footfall and unlock the potential of the adjacent areas
- Public realm improvements to Hildreth Street to make it a vibrant market and café strip
- Public realm improvements to Balham Community Space
- A creative solution to the 'Ugly Wall' - a prominent but unattractive gable wall

Collectively, the project helps link together Balham's public spaces, promote its identity and encourage visitors to explore the area. To achieve this, intensive community engagement activities were carried out with Balham businesses, market traders, residents, Councillors, Council officers, the town centre partnership, landowners, and other key stakeholders. These include:

- A public consultation event attended by over 600 visitors, including performance artists and the construction of a hot air balloon basket to help the project "lift off"
- A design workshop with Balham Partnership members (which includes representative businesses, Councillors and community/ resident groups), Council officers and other key stakeholders

- Presentations to Balham Partnership Board, Balham Partnership Townscape Group, Council Officer Working Group, Councillor briefings and Hildreth Street Traders Association
- Meetings with landowners including Network Rail, Waitrose, Sainsbury's, and Languard Investments
- Interviews with businesses and market traders

The real test of these processes is how they shape and influence the scheme. In this case, the feedback informed the public art element and integrated it with the proposals in a place-specific and purposeful way. The resultant design strategy aimed to unite the projects in the initiative through a common approach to materiality and public art. We worked with artist Tod Hanson to develop a unique visual language drawing on architectural motifs and elements of Balham's historical identity, which was holistically integrated with the public realm design and cast into green faience tiles.

Early on, we established a good relationship with the Balham Partnership, a collective of local business owners in the area. They were very supportive of the scheme and helped reinforce the notion that there might be some short term pain for long term gain, as schemes that need to be delivered in the middle of a busy town centre environment are often subject to disruption. Wandsworth Council were very proactive in keeping residents and shopkeepers informed of what was programmed to happen and when, so that any servicing of the street could be properly coordinated. This was mostly successful, however there was a recognition that there

should be higher levels of revenue spend on banners and/or business liaison officers, to lessen the impact of large capital projects.

As a result of the collective process, the project has been effective at solving several long-standing issues in the town centre and has promoted an improved image of Balham. It has been successful at integrating the existing community space within Balham, improving the public realm adjoining two supermarkets in the town centre, and improving usage of previously peripheral areas. The improvements to Hildreth Street in particular have significantly enhanced the image of the area, attracting new shops and increasing footfall. Businesses appear positive regarding the improvements to the area, and early indications suggest it has improved shopper's perceptions of the town centre. Overall, the project at Balham demonstrated the potential for a collaborative process to culminate in an innovative design response which is unique and meaningful to a local area.

A post occupancy evaluation by Wandsworth Borough Council revealed

- 58 new jobs created
- 30% increase in footfall
- 34% Increase in visitor satisfaction
- Decrease in vacancy rates
- Increase in of local residents using the town centre daily from 40% to 65%. Balham Town Centre Manager attributes this to the increase in cafes and coffee shops which is used as meeting places by mothers and self-employed freelancers

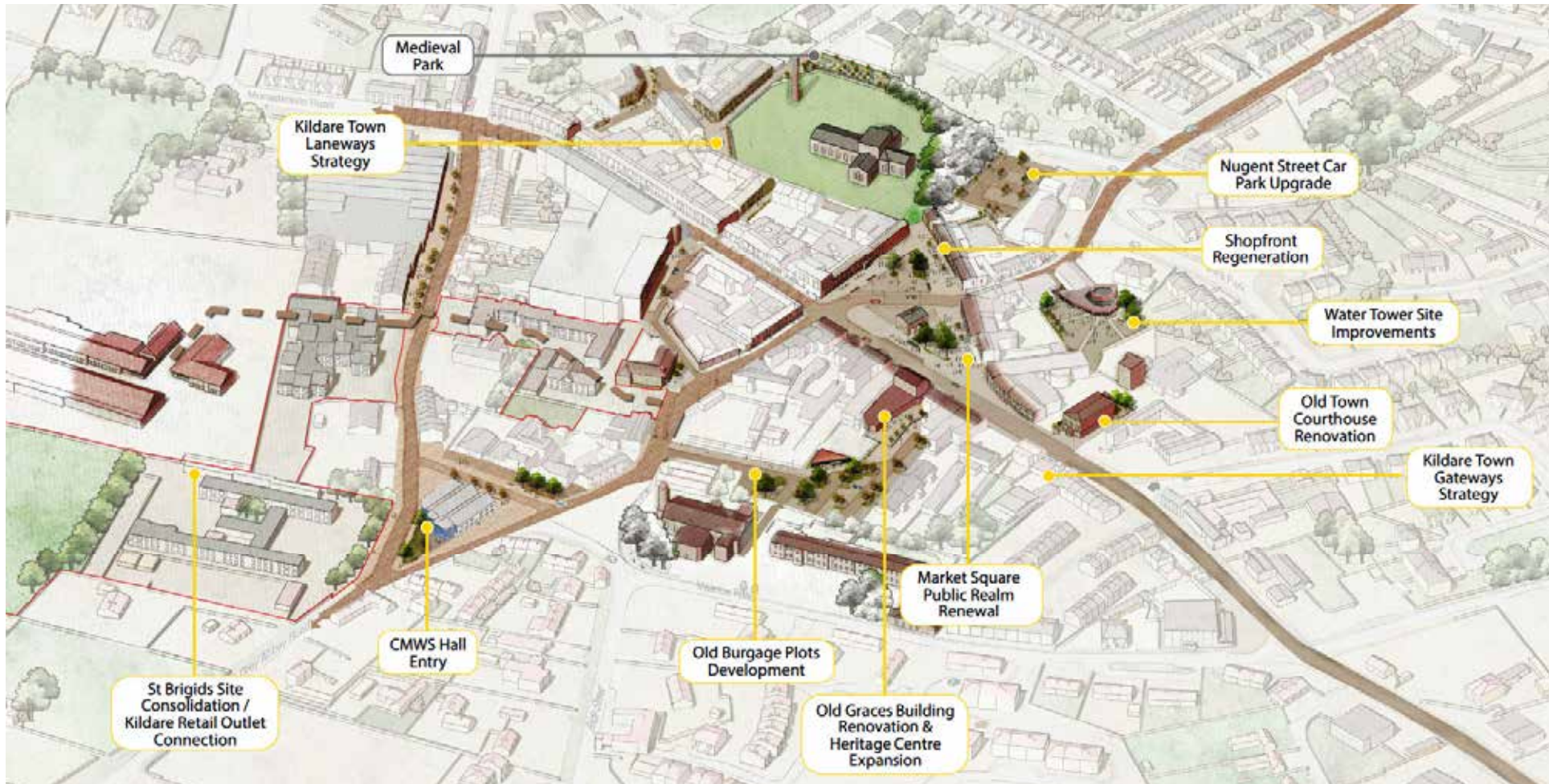
Above: Performance artists helped to engage the public
Image provided by Metropolitan Workshop



Jonny McKenna
Metropolitan Workshop

Jonny joined Metropolitan Workshop in 2006, becoming Director of the Dublin studio in 2017. As an architect and urban designer, he has played a leading role in co-ordinating large-scale multidisciplinary teams to deliver masterplans in sensitive urban and suburban contexts such as Dun Laoghaire Harbour Masterplan and the Swindon Town Delivery Plan.

● STORIES OF ENGAGEMENT



KNITTING KILDARE TOGETHER

Community engagement is integral to the redevelopment of the public realm if the aim is to increase a community's adaptive resilience – allowing individuals, towns, and cities to adapt to, be involved in, and respond to change. Tying any project back to its community provides a certain realism, agency, and ownership over developments in both future and current contexts. As we started work to develop the Kildare Town Renewal Plan, we understood the necessity to relate our research, and later our proposals, back to the people who use the town; learning from them, rather than giving something to them.

For generations, Kildare Town has been a focal point for commerce, governance, and social interaction, serving locals, tourists, and the surrounding rural hinterland. It is a busy rural town with a rapidly growing population, and reflects the experience of many old Irish market towns – where a significant cultural offer has been neglected due to unintegrated and uncoordinated development.

From the outset we – and most importantly, the client – deemed it critical to engage with the local community in an open and transparent way, ensuring a clarity of understanding about our process. Far too often, we see strategies in which communities are presented with answers rather than being part of a collaborative process. We knew that to deliver a more sustainable approach to town renewal, we

had to have a genuine willingness to learn from the people who knew their town better than we ever could, even through extensive research.

Instigated by Kildare County Council, our work started with a stakeholder engagement workshop with a wide variety of community parties, ranging from the principal of the national school, a town heritage officer, local councillors and a representative from the Kildare Village – a large retail development which attracts significant numbers of visitors to the area. It was encouraging to see the passion of the group, but a clear frustration soon became apparent: 'consultation fatigue'. This is a common theme throughout Ireland where a number of formalities need to be ticked off before projects can proceed which results in little meaningful action, especially in rural areas. Statutory consultation on public sector works is often seen as costly and time-consuming, rather than as an opportunity to learn from communities to create more inclusive environments for all ages and backgrounds. However, with a client both willing and understanding of the necessity for such engagement, feasible action became possible.

There was an energy and positivity to our engagement sessions, with a general consensus that this was a crucial time in the growth and development of Kildare Town and not just another consultation. A day long engagement event in the town alongside street performers and a local radio station

drew considerable response. Using an online survey that was live for two weeks, we were able to capture a diverse range of perspectives from all age groups, including the younger generations who are often overlooked. The Town Renewal Plan then identified fifteen distinct and achievable projects to improve and connect the town's heritage, retail, and tourism offers, and to enhance the already strong sense of community which became evident during the engagement process.

Our proposed strategies came as a response to the issues highlighted by the community and stakeholders, and have been commended in the Urban Design category at the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland Awards in 2020. These were not flashy, snazzy interventions to sustain a designer's ego, but rather, an attempt to create a sense of agency in the town's renewal. Overcoming hurdles such as public funding becomes more achievable with the knowledge that these proposals are genuinely what the town needs and wants. With the renewal of the market square the first project being implemented, we hope that sustained collective action will be seen in Kildare Town. As designers, we can go a long way by learning from others first rather than thinking we have all the answers

Above: The fifteen interventions identified for the town's renewal all directly respond to the issues and needs highlighted during the engagement process
Image by Metropolitan Workshop



Ozan Balcik
Metropolitan Workshop

Ozan joined Metropolitan Workshop in 2018 after graduating from University College Dublin with a first class Honours. His thesis investigated community engagement and empowerment in terms of 'Playful Resilience'. Ozan was part of the team delivering the Kildare Town Renewal Plan while also working on the town renewal plans for neighbouring Newbridge, which successfully received funding from the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund for further research and development in 2019.

● INTERVIEW

The power of agency: towards shared authorship

Catherine speaks to us about how to move engagement processes beyond simply communicating predetermined solutions. She explains how relinquishing control allows us to become part of a new conversation, which is centred around principles of shared authorship, holding emotional space, and building agency over the spaces in which people live.



Catherine Greig
Interviewed by Lee Mallett, before the Covid-19 pandemic
Catherine is the founder of make:good, a London-based architecture and design studio. Born out of her passion for people-centred design, make:good uses meaningful processes of participation to involve people in shaping neighbourhood change.

Lee Mallett Tell us how you got into community engagement?

Catherine Greig I'm an architect by background – but I accidentally became an architect. In my first year of studying engineering, we worked alongside the architects. I was really interested in what they were doing, and at the end of the year, I switched to architecture. I really enjoyed it, but I realised it was not really enough about people.

While doing my Part II, I felt even more that there was a disconnect between designers and the people who are going to experience the stuff that we're designing. I realised that understanding the power of place, and its unique qualities, means that you can design projects that are genuinely going to reflect and benefit that place and its people. I left thinking that I really want to work alongside communities in all their diversity, and all their complexity. When I finished Part II, I knew I wanted to set up make:good. I did my Part III while working for myself, and here we are.

I started in 2005, but didn't have much work until 2009. I had lots of different jobs; I worked part-time and ran a charity part-time. It is very difficult to enter this industry. I was at a point where I saw there weren't any practices doing what I wanted to do, so I couldn't go and learn under someone else's umbrella. Plus, I wanted to do my own thing.

LM Is architecture is a pretty exclusive club?

CG It's a really exclusive club, even all these years on. In 2009, I finally won a project,

but I'd spent five years trying to get work. Just me. I'm tenacious! I knew what I wanted to do. A lot of people would say to me, "Why would you do that? We don't need your services. We already do consultation; we go out and talk to people". I still hear that now.

There's a difference between what community engagement really is, and putting some boards up and asking people questions that are incredibly closed. The exclusivity that I perceived in the industry permeated through everything – the invitations to people to comment, the language on the boards, the way that people speak, the general demeanour.

LM What made people interested in what you were doing?

CG It's still hard going; I have to be careful about who we will and won't pitch with. This sounds negative, but we knocked on enough doors and I stuck around long enough. When you haven't got any work, you've got all the time in the world to write a careful pitch. Eventually we won something and have since gone from strength-to-strength. Once you've delivered the job really well, that shifts something. It makes it easier when you've got some track record.

At the same time, the industry has shifted. You see briefs in which community engagement is written as a requirement. Local authorities started to think about it and the expectation of what it will be has completely changed. On public procurement projects,

you now have mention of social value – it makes you think, what if everything we did was about benefit and value locally?

Do I believe it is the thing that makes or breaks a bid? Probably not, but increasingly I think it can. If we are pitching on a team for a project, the client will now want to see at the interview the person who is going to do the engagement. The role has been elevated; it has gone from being cursory to being integral to a project's success. I can certainly remember moments sitting at my desk searching for some work to pitch for, even when no one was ever going to mention the word 'engagement' in the brief. Well, now it is an expectation.



People are much more aware of how to use their voice. You can get online and noise around a project can be created very easily. Getting to the point where we are genuinely building relationships and understanding what the local dynamics are doesn't happen if we're shouting at each other over the internet. But it is driving a shift in how people see engagement.

LM Back in 2005, what were you doing that was different from what others were doing?

CG My experience was that what was happening was mostly about presenting information to people. Are we understanding a place from a local perspective, or are we just going in and showing people a selection of designs? There was quite a lot of that type of work, and there probably still is.

That kind of approach plays into the hands of people who are best able to absorb information presented in a particular way, who have time, and who genuinely think they've got agency. You can do that work brilliantly with a certain audience, but loads of other people don't get involved at all, for a myriad of reasons. For me, it was about democratising that process and thinking about how we can get those other people involved. And saying, "you should be involved".

LM Why do you think that was a useful or good thing to do?

CG I think it's about fairness. The genesis of make:good was thinking, "what if our experience of the public realm or buildings was just easier to figure out?" It impacts on us positively and negatively, and yet we just absorb; I wanted to change this.

The most vulnerable people in society feel they have the least agency over the spaces in which they live and occupy. If you go out and ask people, "what would you change about this neighbourhood?". People might say, "I don't know, it's Ok as it is. Nothing needs to change", because their experience of the world is that nobody cares what they think. It is our mission to shift that belief that they can influence things.

LM What you are really doing is helping to build a brief, isn't it?

CG Yes. We do a lot at the beginning of the process; identifying priorities, creating a kind of checklist of things that people want to happen. It's owned by local people, and as the project goes on and things get increasingly complicated, you can always refer back to it.

So often, engagement starts in the middle of that process. I think the projects that get all the attention are the ones that build a community centre or a school. It becomes about building all these landmarks, as opposed to the stuff that knits it all together.

LM I suppose clients aren't very keen on revealing the engine of the whole thing; the



commercial elements that make it worthwhile for them to invest. Do you get involved in the explanation of that side of things as well?

CG It depends on what the project is and its scale. A local authority might have a pot of money to spend on a particular area. Then that is a parameter with which we can prioritise projects, and sometimes, how some of them are delivered through community engagement.

If the project is about exploring the visual identity of an area, through workshops we would end up with an output that we would get fabricated, and installed. It's different if it is a larger scale project where our role is solely focused on community engagement, rather than alongside design output, then we will talk about economic drivers because we sit on the design team. Parts of my job are about sifting through information produced by a design team, and saying it in the simplest terms.

If you say "I can't deliver that", or "we need to build more X to be able to fund this", people will ask why. Whatever the drivers are in that push and pull, you need to be as open and transparent as possible. That's the baseline condition for relationship building to work, and for the community to have agency over what happens. Those relationships allow you to genuinely understand what the needs and priorities are.

There are still some projects with buckets of imagery of people having a lovely, happy time at events and parties. But that might not be the full picture. For it to really offer meaning, those things need to be aligned.

LM Since 2005, do you think that the conversations you have, and the way you go

about them, have become more refined? Has the formula for doing it successfully become clearer?

CG Yes. There are multiple conversations that you need to have at the beginning. Because we have a lot of very visual ways of communicating with people and collecting information, people can get quite 'giddy' about ideas that are presented graphically, rather than starting with the parameters and thinking about who to build relationships with.

Our process always begins with asking, "Who is the audience for this?" You need to know that you are reaching a broad enough range of people. If we talk about trying to figure out what we agree and disagree on, this somehow implies we are all occupying the same space. But there's a whole lot of work that needs to be done first to get a diverse enough group of people in the same space – and do they even need to be in the same space? A lot of our work involves going to meet people in the places they feel most comfortable, rather than expecting them to come to us.

Before you can work out what you agree on, you need to define what the fixes are that define the project or site. You need to understand what's really important for people, the things that both you and they are holding onto really tightly – and what are the things you are prepared to compromise on.

LM Do you find yourself mostly affiliated with the development team? How do you mediate between them and the community?

CG Most of our work is local authority, almost exclusively. But we have projects at all different scales. One is in a school, which involves small scale design, and then we have things that are in the public realm, like public art. Then there are projects, with Metropolitan Workshop for example, where there is no design input at all.

Initially, people can be distrustful of our role, but eventually people do trust us because we do what we say we are going to, and are as transparently clear as possible, without hiding away. Some of those conversations are really difficult. It's not only the fun stuff.

Even if you wanted to be really clear at the beginning, there are always things that shift and change. Some projects are really long. Policy might shift, personnel or the duration might change. You're going to go through changes of government – things you can't predict. That might have an impact, but it's like any relationship. It's not easy and there is no one clear cut way of making it pain-free.

My role is a lot about holding the emotional space so that you can actually have good engagement. That scares some clients – the word 'emotion'. But it's really true.

Opposite: Dartmouth Park Neighbourhood Forum - Collaborative priority setting
Above: Kennington Park Estate Playscape - co-designed with children and young people

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Sometimes things go wrong or people are really angry. Engagement can be either a lovely, jolly fete with bunting and a free barbecue, or it is people in a public meeting shouting at each other.

Everyone needs to feel listened to, but it doesn't need to happen at a 'meeting'. There is that classic meeting where people are very angry, and I've seen how it acts as a massive barrier to engagement. People don't want to spend their free time in a room where everyone is shouting. What we'd normally do is invite people to a 'drop-in' event and have activities to collect opinions. Then we'll share them. We're not hiding them.

LM Can you say something about the current state of community engagement and how it ought to evolve? The market is coming to terms with it. Maybe there's some sort of gap there?

CG The market is wanting it, but we still get briefs that I tend not to accept, where the request is, "I want you to tell me what the final product is going to be and I also want you to have an engagement specialist that's going to engage local people about this scheme".

On one hand, we're part of a team with an architect coming up with a scheme. And then there's another part of that brief that talks about community engagement. That conflicting position just jars. How much are people holding onto a pre-defined solution?

How much, as a client group, are you choosing that solution? Did you choose your team because you want this solution? Are you really open to the fact that when we start doing engagement some people might not want it? It's not about trying to sell a scheme.

When you see that scenario in the brief, it's a challenge. The language around these things has shifted hugely, so people are writing things about benefitting the local area, using words like 'agency', and talking about how the project and the community engagement processes can instantly offer value locally.

LM They are acquiring the code, but not necessarily really believing in it? Is it possible

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to say to clients that you understand the brief, but want to do it a different way?

CG We lose work all the time when we respond to those briefs saying, "This is our process, we won't do a scheme your way". Sometimes we get that work, sometimes we don't. Seeing briefs presented in that way always makes me think that we've still got a lot of work to do to get people to understand what community engagement really is.

The earlier engagement happens in the process, the more interesting and meaningful it is. What is the story of this place, and what do people want this new piece of their neighbourhood do for them? There are many different ways it can be manifested, and still meet those priorities. A lot of it comes down to who is considered the expert, and the time available to really get to know a place and people. It is about the appetite for sharing authorship, for releasing a little bit of control, for risk.

LM It sounds as though community engagement is still in its infancy?

CG I think so. There are some great pockets of it, yet if I had to name the ten organisations that I'm pitching against all the time, there aren't so many 'usual suspects'! It could easily be a PR company, a planning consultant, or an architecture company doing it in-house. Some clients want to work with a PR company because it's about managing the process, others want some really great photographs of fabulous stuff happening and minimum negative noise. And the truth is, lots of those outcomes or photographs could easily slide into our own portfolio. But the way in which they've been executed, the meaning behind them, and how community influence was

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It is about people's appetite for sharing authorship, for releasing a little bit of control, for risk.

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leveraged, will be very different! The visual representation of something going on doesn't necessarily represent the rigor of a really good process, or the emotion that really holds the whole thing together.

Are clients really looking at what the outputs are? Is it just a few exhibitions, or workshops? There are also, for example, sole practitioners who facilitate really excellent community-led design workshops. And that might be a really good component of an engagement process, but that's not the full breadth of it. We're a small studio, so there's a limit to the scale of projects we're working on, but a very common thread I find in conversations with other consultants when we describe what we do is, "oh, we do that too" – but I don't really hear that broader conversation questioning what it is really about.

LM Do you mean everyone thinks they are doing it? In a way, are you a kind of cousin of the marketing industry?

CG Yes, but coming at it as a group of designers is different from taking an anthropologist's approach where you are not in that conversation with people. When we work at our best, we are in the



conversation and are using our skills and expertise to unpick it and offer extra information where we can see the gaps in knowledge and give a broader explanation.

There are arts organisations that could be a regular partner for engagement organisations. They might do some brilliant projects as part of engagement, through workshops, charrettes, exhibitions or a bit of marketing through awareness-building. We use really strong graphics to show what happening and say, "this is your opportunity to get involved". So, it does have that strand to it to some extent. It's not marketing a scheme, but it is marketing a process.

I feel the industry is broken into many different specialists. But to have a really good engagement process, it's got to be grounded in building relationships for the duration of that project, and beyond.

LM Does the necessary work involved ever match with the budget that you have available?

CG The longer the project, and the more specific the geographic area, the easier it is to match the budget. At the beginning, you can't jump straight into the project because you have to do the awareness-raising piece. When you get your audience with a good range of people involved, and feel that you really understand the neighbourhood, then you can think about the projects to deliver, and the partners you could use to deliver them.

You need that duration to do the 'marketing' piece and set up the projects, and determine

when and where you're going to punctuate the process with a pop-up event, workshop, or exhibition. If someone wants to do an engagement process in a four-week period – then they are barking up the wrong tree. Another thing two sometimes hear from clients is, "I want to reach 10,000 people", or "I want 1,000 pieces of feedback." You can get completely derailed chasing numbers, rather than quality, because it's very easy to invalidate work or deem it meaningless because only a hundred people told you something. That's the inherent risk in fixating on numbers.

Our work will instead look at a wide range of things – awareness raising, formal exhibitions, pop-ups in the street, workshops. Sometimes we engage smaller groups, and other times we go door-to-door to ensure we reach people. You can't simply do one aspect of it. For example, getting local people to use their skills to create and run an event is a really great relationship builder, and by talking to more people, you understand a lot more about what they need from the project. But the depth and quality of conversation that you're having about the project might not emerge from just that. They can be a catalyst for conversations, but they aren't all of the work that you really need to do.

LM Local authorities ask for engagement on individual schemes, but they haven't really engaged effectively in the development of policy. What's your view on that?

CG We have been doing some really interesting work recently on a town centre development plan; it will be a supplementary planning document. There will be the Local Plan above that, and the London Plan and

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I think there is a fear around what might happen if we really let people influence or choose things. But is it really about choice? It isn't about choosing what colour something is, it's about principles.

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Opposite: London Borough of Richmond – pop up exhibition
Above: Regents Canal – mobile pop up stall to go where people are
Below: Collecting feedback and gathering insight

Images provided by make:good

national policy above that – tiers of policy, trickling down. It is hard to get people to think about something much broader, but it's been a great experience refining our language and thinking, "Gosh, the planning system is really bad at explaining what is valuable".

Local Plans are really difficult to engage with. I can think of projects where something is set in the Local Plan, but there is a different conversation about what people want on the ground and we have to tell them that we cannot influence that policy. I think there is a fear around what might happen if we really let people influence or choose things. But is it really about choice? It isn't about choosing what colour something is, it's about principles.





DÚN LAOGHAIRE HARBOUR MASTERPLAN

Dún Laoghaire Harbour is a 200-year old heritage site containing 29 listed structures that is 12km south of Dublin City Centre, and a major port of entry for Ireland. It is the largest man-made harbour in Western Europe (125ha) and with a long history of vibrant activity, however this has recently diminished due to a reduction in passenger ferry operations and consequently a vital income stream to maintain the harbour. Our masterplan, a long-term vision carried out over a 15-20-year period and reviewed every five years, aims to ensure the long-term future of the harbour by encouraging economic development, securing the harbour's heritage and enabling people to enjoy its many amenities.

An iterative and extensive engagement process that was run over several months has been the backbone of the design development, starting with a call for ideas, harvesting of these ideas and analysis, and presentation of these ideas in the engagement masterplan. In addition, the team held more than 75 different meetings with individuals and organisations who might otherwise have been reluctant participants. The 6-day Public Exhibition of the masterplan attracted more than 1,500 attendees.

The client was keen that a fully collaborative approach was adopted for the plan and employed 15 separate consultants at the outset, including marine engineers, leisure and tourism experts, economic impact assessors, as well as more traditional consultant roles. The major principle to

making such collaborations successful is to ensure that all practices involved share a common vision and were allowed to feed into the process at the right time. Choreographing the work of the other consultants was complex and challenging but the process delivered a much richer outcome, essential in sustainable major urban environments.

At a time of economic austerity in Ireland the creation of long-term jobs beyond the 10-year construction period was key to gaining support for the scheme. In addition, we assessed that there will be a local 'multiplier' effect, as the workers who are employed in the new development spend some of their earnings in the locale, and this spending generates more jobs locally, mostly in retail and other services. This supported the vision that the economic wellbeing of the town and harbour were intrinsically linked and not in competition with each other.

These two elements of community engagement and local economic regeneration shaped the brief through the six key themes, that were successfully integrated into the plan:

A Harbour for . . . revealing the past and securing its future
The site contains the highest density of listed structures in the state so its long-term sustainability was reaching a critical juncture. A Heritage Management Plan for the harbour informed the proposals in terms of its cultural heritage, reinforced the unique sense of place, and acknowledged the local heritage significance of Dun Laoghaire Harbour.

A Harbour for . . . welcoming visitors by sea
The shared vision was to secure the harbour's future as a marine, leisure and tourism destination, through new cruise liner facilities that could bring an additional 100,000 visitors a year, a world class visitor attraction (the Diaspora Project), and a calendar of events and a public art programme.

A Harbour for . . . strengthening links with the town
The strengthening of economic links through complimentary attractions with employment opportunities was key to the collaborative plan. As well as improved physical links between the town and harbour, we devised a mix of uses (residential, commercial, leisure and tourism) to support, rather than compete with, the existing town centre.

A Harbour for . . . promoting investment and economic growth
It was vital that the masterplan took a holistic view and was confident in bringing economic uplift as well as improved amenity to the town. The proposed uses will provide direct and indirect employment for 1,400 FTE employees as well as a sustainable income stream for the harbour company ensuring the long-term future of the harbour.

A Harbour for . . . encouraging leisure and tourism
The collective proposals aimed to promote a range of community activities: family fun, sailing facilities and international events, an all year-round events programme, heritage trails with sheltered stops, and proposed cultural destinations

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During our community engagement process, it became apparent that there were concerns which, while frustrating, couldn't be resolved through the masterplanning process. The Harbour Company produced a "Harbour Management Plan" which picked up all the non-masterplanning issues. This gave stakeholders comfort that their views were being listened to and real action was being taken.

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Left: Aerial view of Dun Laoghaire Harbour
Image provided by Toni Yli-Suanto, Metropolitan Workshop

A Harbour for . . . maintaining and enhancing recreational amenity
The harbour and its environs are much loved by the people of Dublin and the team was aware from the beginning that a very diverse range of harbour users and stakeholders would need to be engaged in the process. Balancing the needs of the existing population with those of tourists and visitors was an important element. One major gain was the opening up of waterfront access (40% of the quayside had been in private operation) with walking trails and cycling routes, as well as expanded marine activities such as sailing / rowing / diving / boating.



Jonny McKenna
Metropolitan Workshop

Jonny joined Metropolitan Workshop in 2006, becoming Director of the Dublin studio in 2017. As an architect and urban designer, he has played a leading role in co-ordinating large-scale multidisciplinary teams to deliver masterplans in sensitive urban and suburban contexts such as Dun Laoghaire Harbour Masterplan and the Swindon Town Delivery Plan.

WESTBURY ESTATE, LAMBETH

engagement process at the right time, but also helped us to forge stronger bonds with them.

We then collaborated with residents to explore a huge variety of development options ranging from light-touch urban infill, right up to wholesale demolition and rebuild. Over the course of six months, we held fortnightly meetings to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each option with the residents in order to identify the three best iterations for each approach: infill, an infill/new build hybrid, and wholesale demolition and rebuild. Residents were then asked to vote for their preferred development option – and they selected wholesale demolition and rebuild. The favoured approach was signed off by Cabinet in October 2015.

In summer 2016, we were commissioned to develop the proposals with residents to RIBA stage 3, first submitting an outline application for the whole estate. A full design team was appointed by lead consultant Tibbalds, including engagement specialists Make:Good, and our team re-engaged with residents to develop the outline design. A programme of monthly Resident Engagement Panel (REP) meetings were established so that we could develop designs with residents, and agree enhanced strategies for massing, layout, landscape, materials, movement, refuse, cycles and services. This was also the forum to report feedback and implications of any external meetings with the Council and their Planning Department.

At this time, there still remained a small number of cynics amongst the engagement panel. Despite our reassurances, they didn't believe that the new homes would be an improvement on their existing homes, particularly with regard to space. To demonstrate the enhanced room areas, we

moved a wider public engagement session to the adjacent school hall. Using coloured masking tape, we laid out plans of the most common existing 3-bed duplex at 1:1. The residents instantly recognised their homes. Then, we revealed the new spaces residents could expect with a London Plan-compliant layout – and the difference was remarkable. You could sense a change in mood in the room as residents understood for the first time that their new homes would be significantly larger than their current homes. Cynicism was replaced by excitement, and this created the foundations for a very fruitful collaboration through RIBA stage 2.

We began preparing a Westbury Design Guide with the residents, which incorporated a Residents' Brief. This document also defined development parameters to ensure any detailed proposals would respect the architectural heritage of the area. It was at this stage that Lambeth revealed St. James would be designing and delivering the first phase of housing using S106, and that their detailed application would need to be developed in parallel to the outline application that we were preparing. This unexpected change unnerved residents. However, by inviting St. James to the monthly REP sessions and closely monitoring their progress through peer review, we were able to reassure residents that Phase One would uphold the design aspirations of the wider regeneration, and be of a coordinated, high quality appearance. By this stage, resident trust in the team had built to the extent that they saw us as guardians of their best interests.

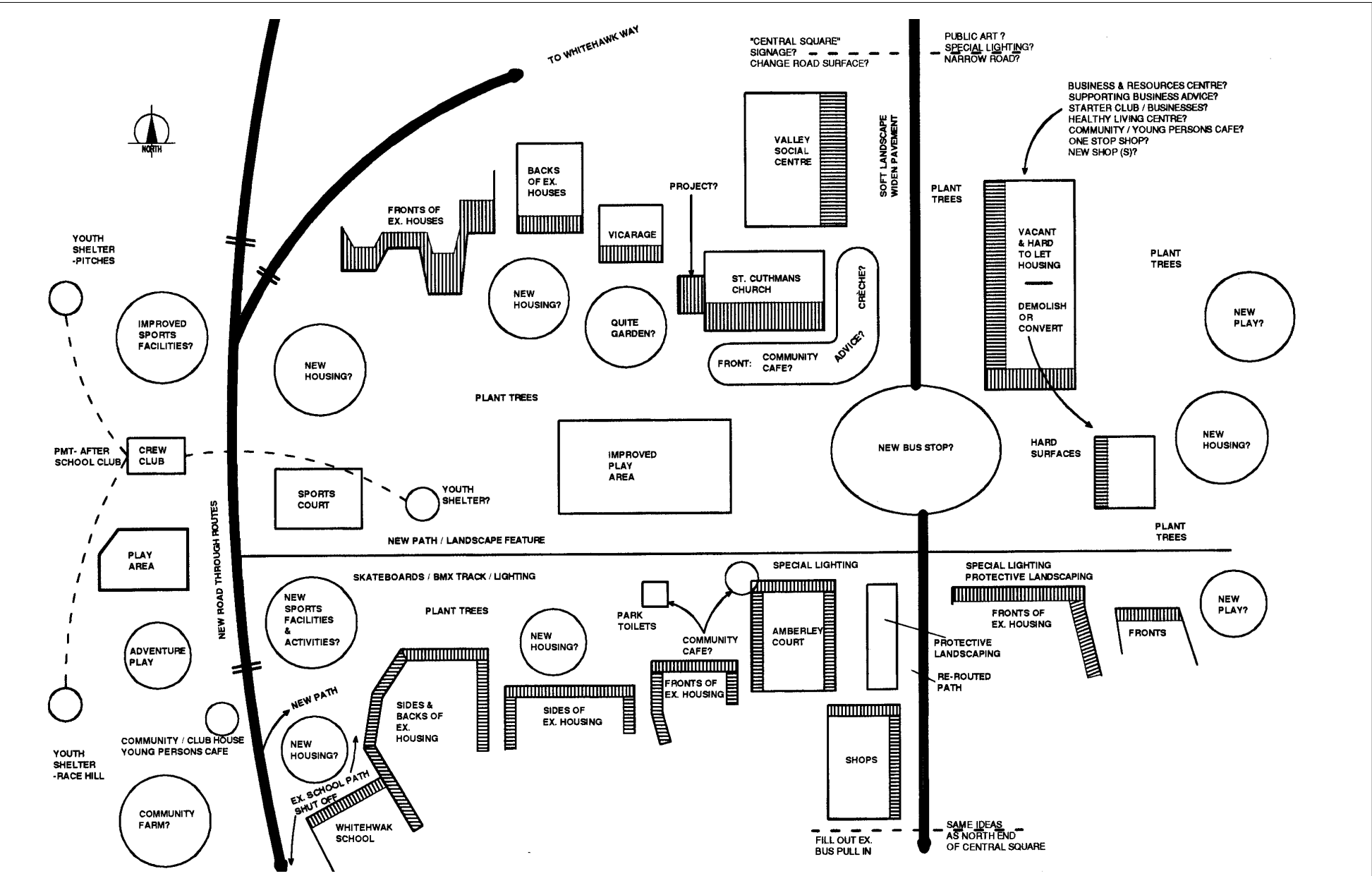
In parallel to the masterplan design development, consultant CPC were testing masterplan design and tenure iterations to ensure the development remained viable. However, in the middle of RIBA Stage 2, Lambeth imposed a more ambitious target for affordable housing. This meant we had to add one to two storeys to four of the masterplan blocks in phases two and three. We were concerned that this abrupt change might harm our excellent relationship with residents. At the next REP, we explained the context for the changes, and what the changes would be. We were delighted when the REP unanimously approved the changes without hesitation, as this demonstrated the success of the engagement process. The efficacy of the resident engagement at Westbury has also been recognised by Lambeth, who subsequently commissioned us to provide similar training for residents of the Central Hill Estate.

Working with residents on the Westbury Estate has been a hugely fulfilling process. We have witnessed the residents transition from outright cynicism to becoming advocates for – and having agency in – the regeneration of their estate.



Tom Mitchell
Metropolitan Workshop

Tom has been at Metropolitan Workshop, since its inception in 2005. He has contributed to the design and development of several suburban projects, including Roding Lane (London Borough of Redbridge), Sunleigh Road (London Borough of Brent) and Oakfield (Swindon). Tom was instrumental in the development of the successful Wates/RIBA Private Rented Sector Ideas Competition entry, which proposed a more socially purposeful allocation of land for communal gardens, allotments and recreation alongside retail and workspaces, as a new form of suburbia offering advantages for investors and residents alike.



● STORIES OF ENGAGEMENT

WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT CO-PRODUCING PLACE FROM WORKING WITH COMMUNITY-LED HOUSING GROUPS?

Drawing on his experience working with Tony Gibson while he was developing his Planning for Real methodology in the 1970s, Stephen demonstrates why a project like Marmalade Lane, Cambridge’s first cohousing community, has been so successful. He explains why storytelling as a mode of communication is so effective, how to capture local knowledge in co-productive processes, and how we must abandon our search for the ‘perfect moment’.



Stephen Hill
Stephen is a planning and development surveyor, and has been a long-time practitioner and advocate of co-production in the building of new settlements, the regeneration of urban housing estates and neighbourhoods, as well individual community-led housing developments. He is founder and director at C2O Futureplanners.



“...and the winner is...Marmalade Lane!”

Yes, as recently as November 2020, the Marmalade Lane cohousing project in Cambridge picked up yet another major award for design or social innovation; this time, the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors’ (RICS) first Social Impact Awards, both the national residential award and the Overall Winner for all building types. I was directly involved in the initiation and facilitation of this project for Cambridge City Council, and can recall warning the cohousing group’s first recruits that their homes would be much visited once finished, and would almost certainly win a design award or two. Even so, I do find myself saying: “Oh come on, it’s just a street! With neighbours who know each other! Another award????” But judging panels must know something...so what is it that they find so special, and what can we usefully learn about how this ‘place’ was made?

From Byker to Orchard Park via South Tottenham

For me, the Marmalade Lane story actually began in June 1976, and a visit to Byker in Newcastle: an area of Victorian Tyneside flats then undergoing total redevelopment by the City Council. The architects, Ralph Erskine and Vernon Gracie, set up office on-site and worked with each phase of

residents to design their new homes and neighbourhoods. The result was a quality of housing and place that has stood the test of time, with sufficient resilience to allow for patching in new or remade parts to accommodate change, or to fix designs that didn’t quite work. No need for the ‘demolish and start again’ approach that has been the fate of other council estates.

Inspired by that visit, Haringey Council, where I was working, embarked on a unique experiment for then and now: council housing tenants in South Tottenham were invited to volunteer to form a tenant management cooperative, and commission their own new-build scheme which they would then manage themselves. Tony Gibson, then an academic at Nottingham University, joined us to road-test his experimental The Game.

The Game was a large-scale map of the area, and small cards with hand-written words or pictures describing all the ingredients of the everyday life experience...dog mess, litter, local shop, park, beautiful tree, kids hanging around, nice neighbours, noisy neighbours, traffic noise and so on...with blanks for other things that participants liked or disliked about where they lived, and what they would like to see.

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Everyone can tell stories, and telling stories about your life and where you live provides rich material that binds future neighbours together with a shared story and vision of place.

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As the room was set up for the first get-together, you could see both future residents and professionals looking worried. A game? With childish picture cards? What had this to do with ‘design’? Yet it took hardly a moment for one resident to speak up and tell a story about something that had happened to her, and then another story followed. “Now put your card on the map, and see if anyone else has had a similar experience in that place”, instructed Gibson. In about five minutes, the room was full of noise and laughter, with cards piling up in hotspots where many had had a similar experience, and odd outliers with a unique story. These stories quickly built a comprehensive picture of all the ordinary and extraordinary things that happened in this place.

That, of course, was the trick, the neatest simplest trick about The Game...later becoming Planning for Real – now an international recognised community planning process based on a 3D model. Everyone can tell stories, and telling stories about your life and where you live provides rich material that binds future neighbours together with a shared story and vision of place. Stories also give designers insightful information about the context for their design, as well as a foundation for understanding their many clients. This marks out Planning for Real from the many other design tools for use with communities that have followed; mostly designed by and for designers. Planning for Real starts with the question, “How do and how shall we live?”

The co-op members did not need design training. Designers did not need to spend time on complex technical explanations. The telling of and listening to stories was the most effective form of communication; everyone is speaking and hearing the same language. Which is not to say that this language cannot also be challenging. “We don’t want this place to look like council housing” – this was a priority requirement for the brief.

Opposite and below: Outcomes of the Mass Planning for Real event for the East Brighton New Deal for Communities in 2000
Above left: Visit to the Byker Estate in Newcastle in 1976
Images provided by Stephen Hill



Describing what council houses did or didn't 'look like' proved elusive, so we agreed to leave it and just see what happened.

What became important to the group was not so much the interiors or appearance of their homes, but their relationship to each other, the connections between inside and outside social space, and the creation of urban spaces in which they felt 'in control'. In a noisy and bustling quarter of South Tottenham, they wanted to manage the tensions between parking cars, having safe places for children to play near their homes, and making plenty of opportunities to bump into and spend time with their neighbours casually in the street. They designed 'home zones' and 'shared surfaces' before they had been invented, and would have been well prepared for current Covid-19 induced lockdown.

Abandoning the search for the 'perfect moment'

The group and the architect discovered that design was not about achieving a resolution of all the residents' expectations and wants; satisfying the 'perfect moment' when all the design assumptions and compromises might improbably work 'as designed'. Design became the starting point for possibilities, for future adaptations in how the residents might want or have to live in the future. Later RIBA guidance to architects working on Neighbourhood Plans made this same point powerfully:

"The challenge for designers is not to design a finite scheme based on assumptions about future behaviour...but to provide a foundation from which residents carry on designing through living in the place as an intentional community."

The point of co-production is not to provide a platform for professionals to produce a 'better' or more informed design, it is the way into a quite different way of working. The physical and psychological occupation of space and attachment to place is the ongoing activity of 'design by living', which may start around the model or the drawing board, but is one in which most professional designers can rarely play any long-term role. This is a great loss for professional learning.

How do and how shall we live?

So, when we revisited the "Why don't these look like council houses?" question, as the scheme was ready to go for planning, the answer seemed very unsurprising: "Oh, haven't you worked that out yet? It's not what they look like; it's the fact that we (you and us) made them together. Anyway, it's how we use the spaces in-between that's important."

It's equally unsurprising, perhaps, that the layout typologies at Byker, South Tottenham and Marmalade Lane are strikingly similar — a socialised street or lane, where people take priority over cars, and with various types of shared internal and external spaces.

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The point of co-production is not to provide a platform for professionals to produce a 'better' or more informed design, it is the way into a quite different way of working.

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IS THAT IT???

Maybe what really appeals to 'design' award judges, and even seekers after beauty, is not what it 'looks like', but the connection between the design and how people have chosen to live, and how fully they seem to inhabit the place. Through their aspirations and experiences, Marmalade Lane and other cohousing groups proclaim themselves as almost the only 'housing producers' actively designing for the future. Groups are working out how to live in a future with diminished natural resources, less energy, less land for food, less help for age and infirmity, and more people.

Their experience shows us that sustainability and design codes, smart buildings and clever construction methods are irrelevant unless they can also relate to people's lived experience, behaviour and capacity to cooperate. It's hard to catch that in a brief or an award citation, but that's what we have to capture and bottle. We can't go on building homes that are obsolete before the designer has made the first mark. That's why Marmalade Lane is special.



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Sustainability and design codes, smart buildings and clever construction methods are irrelevant unless they can also relate to people's lived experience, behaviour and capacity to cooperate.

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Top: Marmalade Lane community garden 2019
Image by Loretta Gentilini

Bottom: Communal space at the heart of the Marmalade Lane co-housing development.
Image by David Butler. available at: <https://www.archdaily.com/918201/marmalade-lane-cohousing-development-mole-architects>

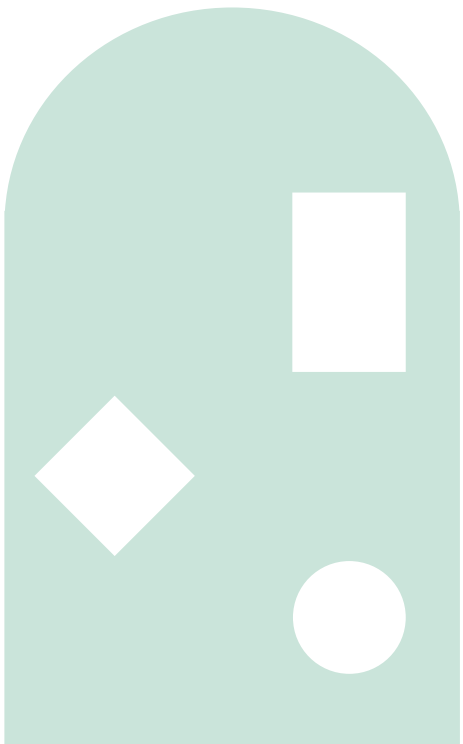


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First we shape the cities - then they shape us.

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— Jan Gehl



Quote::
Gehl, J. (2010); Cities for People. Island Press, Washington, Covelo, London.

Practices

● INTERVIEW

Peckham Coal Line - ‘a park to connect us’

Nick discusses the Peckham Coal Line’s vision for an elevated greenway for South London that reinvigorates parts of a disused railway track, connects both neighbourhoods and neighbours, and steers development from the bottom-up as an entirely citizen-led and crowd funded initiative.



Nick Woodford
Interviewed by Ava Lynam and Lee Mallett
While studying Architecture at Central Saint Martins, Nick launched the Peckham Coal Line, bringing local residents together to adopt and connect unused open spaces along a Peckham railway line to form a public linear park. Before his Diploma, Nick worked at Knox Bhavan Architects where he gained experience in residential and public park projects. Before working in Architecture, Nick was a travel writer and photographer. He contributed to several Rough Guides and Alistair Sawday’s, and in 2012 wrote a cycling guide to the capital entitled ‘Where to Ride London’.



Lee Mallett (LM): What sparked the initial idea for the Peckham Coal Line and how has the project evolved?

Nick Woodford (NW): It started with a Birch tree. I was a Part 1 Architecture student, and we were doing micro projects along Rye Lane in Peckham. I just noticed that there was this tree that looked like it was perched on the railway line. While investigating what it was doing up there, I realised there was quite a lot of space that should be opened up to allow people to walk through. Rye Lane is a really amazing, bustling town centre; it feels like you are almost in a different part of the world because it has so much energy. Yet right next to it, flying above it, there was this tranquil oasis.

I posted the idea on Facebook and it got a lot of attention. The project started to get traction with many people interested in offering their expertise to help. It very quickly became obvious that within the community there was a huge depth of talent and experience in a wide variety of different fields, and we wanted to harness that. There was a lot of energy then.

The next thing we knew, we were fundraising on Spacehive for one of the pioneer projects through the Mayor’s High Street Fund scheme, and we managed to exceed our funding targets in 2016. We then appointed Adams & Sunderland to deliver

the feasibility study for us. That took a couple of years to compile, with lots of engagement along the way.

After the feasibility study was published in 2018, it was decided that that we should break the approximately 1km route into eight sub-sites. Each site has different conditions – land owners, necessary funding, and difficulties – so it made sense to deliver them independently in phases.

Site 1 is at the Rye Lane end and was owned by Network Rail but has since been taken over by property developers Archco. Site 2 is the Old Coal Yard, which forms part of the ground level section of the route and is currently on site with a private developer. Site 3 is the deck and the bridge that link over Consort Road. Site 4 and 5 is the Stable Yard, from Consort Road up to Kirkwood Road. Stage 6 is the Kirkwood Nature Reserve. Site 7 and 8, Bidwell Street, is what we are focused on now. We have secured a little bit more funding to take it up to RIBA Stage 3. The aim is to connect an existing part of the route, the Kirkwood Nature Reserve, with Queens Road Peckham.

LM What is the history of the site, and how did it come to be subdivided in separate ownerships?

NW When there was heavy industry in Peckham, and all the homes were heated by coal fires, the coal would be brought into the

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It very quickly became obvious that within the community there was a huge depth of talent and experience in a wide variety of different fields, and we wanted to harness that.

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Opposite: Aerial impression of the Peckham Coal Line’s vision for an elevated greenway in South London
Left: Engaging local residents on the concept for the Coal Line at a street party
Bottom: Worked up plan of the Coal Line connecting Peckham Rye and Queens Road Peckham stations.

town centre and offloaded into the coal yard. They would use the main tracks and then move it onto sidings [a low-speed railway track section separated from main or branch running line] which are now dormant and empty. The sidings make up about half of the route, approximately 500–600 meters long, starting at Gordon Road and going up to Rye Lane.

As well as this, in the 1960s, large swathes of London were being demolished to create a circular route of motorways through the city, called the Southern Link Road. Construction started in various parts of the city, with plans to link up the Old Kent Road in Peckham up to Brixton, and beyond. The Kirkwood Nature Reserve was previously asphalt, for example. But the road was never connected up. Parts of the land were sold off, such as the Stable Yard site which was sold to a scaffolding firm and then a housing developer.

But by linking the pieces together, an opportunity to create a way through emerges. That is what the project is about – connecting the community around the idea, but also physically through connecting the spaces.

Ava Lynam (AL) How is the project set up?

NW We have set ourselves up as a charity with board of trustees, but we are constantly constrained by our capacity.



We've got kids and jobs, so to keep the motivation going and find the time is difficult. You have to become an expert in different fields, and keep the community up to date and constantly engaged, when they don't necessarily have the time. It is a challenge and the whole thing takes a huge amount of energy.

We are volunteers and don't have the capacity to work on the project very much, which is why it isn't moving forward as much as we want it to. At the moment we are being more reactive than proactive. While I was a student, I was able to marry the two things together and dedicate much more time to it, but I am incredibly busy with other work now.

AL How were you able to engage people in the project, and how did you keep up the momentum?

NW In terms of an idea, I think it was a relatively easy one to sell. Most people like the idea of having a green space on their doorstep and better connections through their neighbourhoods – and they like the idea of being involved in that as well.

A large part of my Architecture course was about making sure that projects are inclusive, and it is something that I fundamentally believe in. That became my challenge because Peckham is made up of multiple different communities. People talk a lot about community but it's a bit of a misnomer, because there is no one community. People live very separate lives within the same area, so we wanted this project to be a common ground for people to meet each other. We went into different communities, talked to them and listened to their ideas. Much more than having this fantastic park that could be an icon in the city, it was the community aspect that we felt was much more important for the real success and longevity of the project.



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A principal part of the project from the outset was trying to get people to shift their idea of value. If you are constantly striving for the conventional economic idea of value, you'll never have enough. If you can value the everyday achievements of a project like this, you allow people a little freedom from the current paradigm.

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A principal part of the project from the outset was trying to get people to shift their idea of value. If you are constantly striving for the conventional economic idea of value, you'll never have enough. If you can value the everyday achievements of a project like this, you allow people a little freedom from the current paradigm. When you are fortunate enough to have the capacity to give a little bit of time to a project like this, then you are privileged, aren't you? Of course, you don't get any financial reward, but you see other opportunities arising and experiences that can help you in other fields.

LM Do you regard getting the community to buy into the idea as the fundamental long-term driver of this scheme being achieved?

NW Yes. But, if you set your main goal as trying to bring the community together, you might not get people wanting to be involved. It is actually helpful to set your goal as something else, and allow the cohesion to emerge out of the shared ambitions of the project.

If you have something that has a clearer purpose, then suddenly you get a broader range of people that want to make it happen. They meet and talk, and people start to get to know each other. A lot of people who met through the project have sparked up companies, partnerships, and relationships, and they may have never met otherwise. That's not the intention of the project in the first instance, but it's a really nice side benefit from it.

LM To what extent were Southwark council already pursuing ideas for this piece of land? Has the engagement you have created stimulated political impetus for local politicians and the council to support the project?

NW I think it was overlooked. The spaces along it, places like Bidwell Street, were perceived as more of a liability than an asset. There was a lot of fly tipping, anti-social behaviour, drug dealing, and sex work. We saw the potential in these sites. The council have been very supportive, but the process is quite complex.

The councillors are very keen on seeing this project happen, but they are individuals like all of us, so at times they can only push it so far. The council themselves leverage a lot of funding for these developments through CIL [Community Infrastructure Levy] and Section 106. They also don't want to take ownership of it too much because they want to keep it community led.

We have a lot of tension with some of the developers along the route who want to get the maximum out of a neighbourhood

like Peckham. Developers often have little regard for the community or understanding the area, and little ambition, which is frustrating. It is hard to keep the pressure on the developers and I feel we don't leverage enough out of them. The council have supported these conversations but are often limited in what they can do.

LM It seems as if individual initiatives by the private sector or community-led organisations are expending the energy, rather than the local authorities taking ownership of the overall ideas. The project would clearly be a tremendous asset to the area, but I can imagine it is an incredibly difficult job to try to bring it all together and trying to mediate all these different interests.

NW Yes. Our Stable Yard site, for example, has certainly been fraught with challenges. We fought hard to secure certain things for the site, such as saving a Victorian building from demolition, which were given planning permission. But eventually the building ended up being demolished, and the council did not have any power to do anything because it was not a listed building or in a conservation area. So, the developer was in their rights to do it – it is just easier and more cost effective for them to demolish it and start again as a brownfield site. The buildings have already been re-erected and it's a replica of what was there before, but it's a pastiche, without the layers of history. They have a small budget for landscaping, but unfortunately our capacity and influence are now really minimal.

Splitting the project into individual sites makes things slightly easier. We are trying to achieve small wins where we can, step by step. You win some battles, you lose some. It's a steep learning curve, and we are learning as we go along.

AL How have you navigated these kinds of changes with the people that have been involved in the project from the beginning? Have there been any conflicts?

NW It's weird, but there has been very little conflict. I think it is because a big part of the project has been to be very loose with the authorship. We haven't held on to anything too tightly. That's something we said at the outset. It's a free platform for people – how much energy you put in determines the direction it will take.

You have lots and of different characters, and clashes of characters. Some people who are already involved in many community projects in their local area want things done in a certain way, and then there are the people who are seduced by the idea of a new park. There is a bit of conflict between those groups because at the beginning they have quite different aspirations. One is trying to prevent redevelopment, and the other has an ambition for the neighbourhood and wants to see investment and improvement.

The great thing is that this becomes a platform to find a middle ground. We are

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not against development, but we want to steer it, and the project is a mechanism for that. When you frame it like that you have more agency, and both groups can see the benefit.

AL Are people still very much involved in the project now or was it more at the conceptual stage?

NW There have been so many people involved through time. There are people who got involved in the first few weeks of the project and are still involved now, and others who have left, or have just joined now. Though we haven't been active in the press or social media in a long time, we get requests from people wanting to volunteer every week, but we don't have anything for people to do at the moment.

People often ask, "when is it going to start?" or, "when is it going to be finished?" But the reality is, it has already started and it will never be finished. It is constant and evolving, and therefore, while there are stages that we would like to get to and things we want to achieve, there is always more to do.



LM From this point on, what would be an ideal outcome for you? What would help you deliver it?

NW Securing funding to create a more formal structure with people being paid. It has been five years; people move away, people move in, have children, or change jobs. If there was a project manager and an assistant that were able to take the project on in a professional and consistent capacity, rather than having to earn money in other ways and concentrate on many things at the same time, that would really move the project forward.

Even though we are just this shell structure of local residents, we've achieved a lot of publicity and have been in most major national newspapers. Reactivating people takes a lot of energy, but if we want to get attention we can. But if the council think, "look what you can do with very little", then it never really reaches its potential.

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We've just secured £50,000 from the GLA to pay someone to develop the Bidwell Street site to the next phase, so there is investment going in and things are happening, but it could be much faster. We could also probably leverage a lot more money if there was someone working on it more permanently.

LM I was expecting you to say that you would like to see your ideas in some way embedded in a Local Plan.

NW That has actually happened. The Peckham Coal Line is secured as a route in the Southwark Local Plan, which was recently adopted, with the intention to create a connection between Rye Lane and Queens Road. It is now a consideration for developers along the route. The Peckham Coal Line talks a lot about connectivity which ties into the wider discussion of bringing areas together physically through things like cycle paths. We also bring in heritage, greening the city, innovation, and health and wellbeing. Those key benefits of the project will always tick the boxes for policy.

The Local Plan is very high level, though, and can be ambiguous. The council desperately needs better tools to influence developers. What's in place currently is not strong enough, as we saw with the Stable Yards site.

There might be an opportunity for something more concrete on the next iteration of the Peckham Town Centre Plan. But that plan only covers the town centre, and there is another one for Queens Road for example, so you get spaces in between that fall through the gaps. You really need mechanisms that are much more defined, like Article 4 directions on the specific sites along the route.

LM With Covid-19 there is a new emphasis on suburban or inner town centres like Peckham, so that people won't have to travel into the city centre. Have you detected any sense of that informing ideas about Peckham?

NW There is a lot of movement and investment in Peckham now, because the station and its square are going to be redeveloped, but that has been years in the making. Going forward, I wonder what the future of cities might be and where people will choose to reside. If people are going into offices less, we have to think collectively about what that might look like for a neighbourhood like Peckham.

Opposite, top: Model of the Coal Line at public engagement event and exhibition
Opposite, bottom: Impression of one of the new public spaces proposed on the Coal Line's elevated walkway
Left: Impression of the Bidwell Street entrance linking Kirkwood Nature Reserve to Queens Road
All images provided by Nick Woodford of Peckham Coal Line

● STORIES OF ENGAGEMENT

WHAT DOES EMPOWERMENT REALLY MEAN IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?



Keith Brown

Keith is Nationwide Building Society's first Community Organiser. Community Organisers reach out and listen, connect and motivate people to build their collective power. Keith supports the neighbourhoods surrounding the Oakfield project, a not for profit eco-friendly housing development located in Swindon. He has been a fully trained organiser for 9 years. Before training, he has had several careers, living in multiple towns and cities in the US and UK, with community organising as an untrained side-line gig.

Portrait image provided by John Boal

Community is a word that, as I understand it, references sharing or commonality; the sharing of space or location, the sharing of a duty or job (such as street cleaners or climate activists), the sharing an activity which brings joy (such as cyclists). Once a community is recognised, a community organiser just needs to go deeper. The organiser looks for unaddressed passions and concerns within the community, and brings the passionate members together to:

- Discover hidden strengths and talents within the community to support the emergence of undiscovered leadership potential.
- Illuminate the community's power through people collaborating, sharing diverse experience, and facilitate listening to all.

Both of these points focus on the idea of empowerment in a community. Power is not something given; I would never think that I could infuse another human being with power; but I can sometimes recognise a way to support individuals and groups to see their own greatness. Whenever potential is discovered, developed, and applied to benefit the community, it will only enhance the cohesion and resilience of the community. I believe the one true community asset is its members, so when contemplating change in an area or community, it is of the utmost importance to listen to as many diverse voices as possible. In my work in the neighbourhoods surrounding Oakfield, a new neighbourhood of 239 homes in Swindon, I listened while a visually impaired person shared their



Below: Keith listening to London's boating community
image provided by Keith Brown

experiences of trying to navigate around temporary construction detours using guide dogs, and what cues guide dogs use to help them navigate. This conversation led to some important changes to the walking infrastructure of the development. When the intention of a development is to listen and heed community knowledge rather than just meet statutory regulations, employing a community organising methodology is one of the best ways to accomplish it.

Another example to illustrate community empowerment is an initiative I worked on with the London liveaboard boating community. Listening to them, it became clear their greatest shared concern was the high number of burglaries in a few areas on the waterways. I facilitated conversations with the boaters to come up with possible solutions. The first approach was to get local Policy Community Support Officers (PCSOs) patrolling the towpath with greater frequency. Volunteer representatives began attending quarterly community meetings with police teams that covered hot spots on London's waterways, which increased the dialogue and support from the PCSOs.

A different set of boaters decided to go down a path of self-help. People came together and created 'Operation Whistle Blower' (OWB) – a community initiated, led, and financed safety solution, whereby boaters use whistles to alert each other to possible criminal activity on the towpath. The idea developed out of a conversation I had with a boater who had experienced an attempted break-in on his boat by three men, but had no way to call for help or alert his neighbours. In a forum of boaters, we brainstormed options for communicating danger to neighbours that would not rely on a power source. One boater decided to take on the initiative and purchased whistles out of his own pocket. A code of practice was formulated, and flyers were made. In October 2013, we delivered whistles to moored boats in areas of East London that reported the highest number of incidents, asking for donations of 50p to £1 to purchase additional whistles and print more flyers. We then delivered up the Lee Navigation, and within a few weeks, more volunteers came forth to expand the project to West London in several sections of the Grand Union Canal.

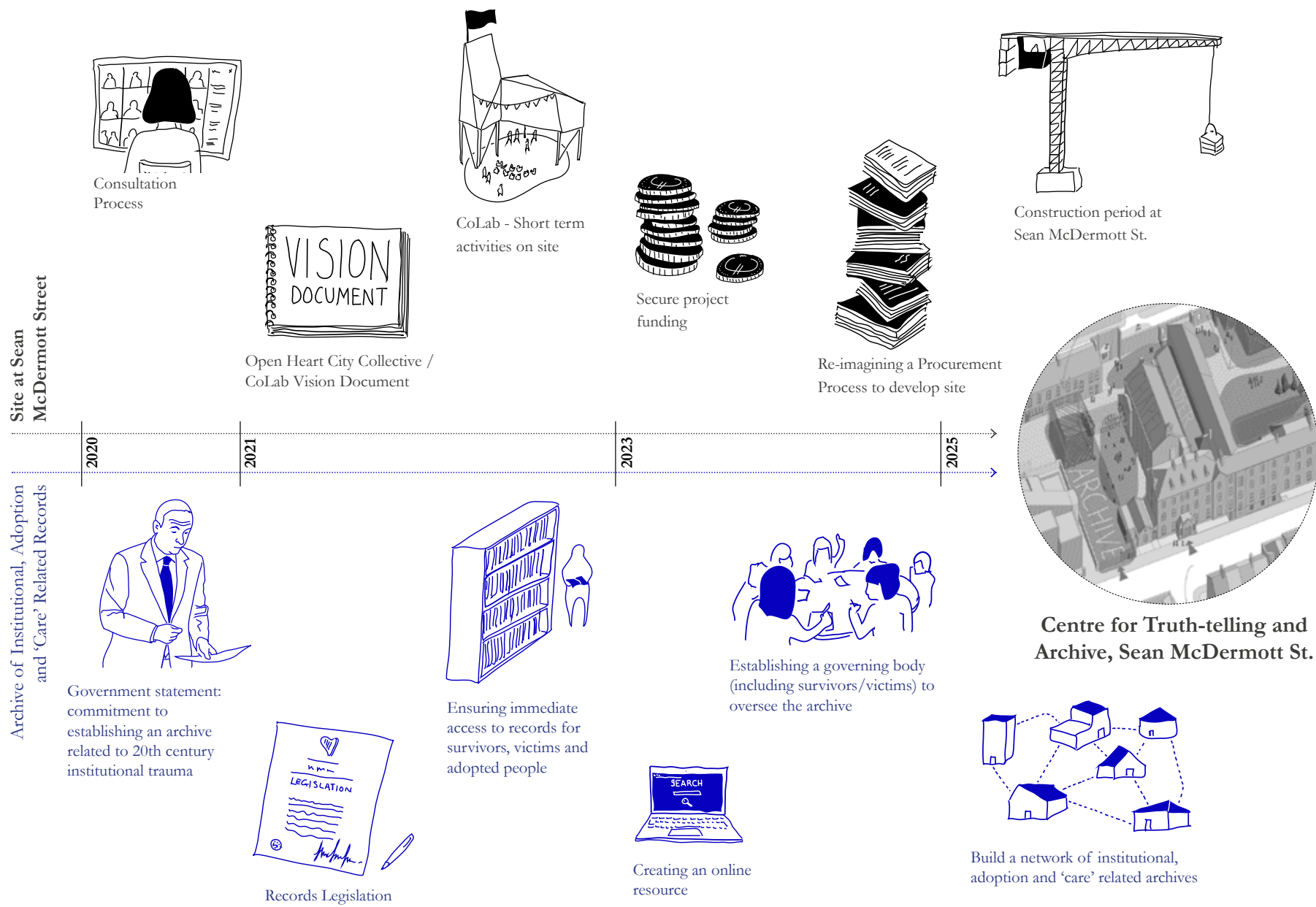
This was a great success story, not just because it was community organising in its

purest form, but because it empowered new local leaders to develop their own initiatives. The community leader of OWB has gone on to develop another community project and is a leading supporter of the anti-privatisation 'Keep Towpath Mooring Public' grassroots campaign. OWB reached 80% of the Greater London liveaboard boater community – no other completed project in that year had such a large footprint. It shows what a relatively small group of activated community members can achieve.

Thus, if the goal is thriving communities, there must be some groundwork laid for its members to see their true potential and to appreciate the potential of others. Partnering with a resilient, thriving community, and taking full advantage of the great variety of knowledge and talents contained within, can only ensure that the things that are treasured by the community will be valued by the changemakers looking to enhance an area. In the end, the communities of the future will be no different from the communities of the past and present – people will remain the most important element to success.

● STORIES OF ENGAGEMENT

OPEN HEART CITY : COLLECTIVELY REIMAGINING SITES OF INSTITUTIONAL TRAUMA



In Ireland, the Magdalene Laundries were institutions that operated from the 18th to the late 20th century to house and confine so-called “fallen women”, often run by Roman Catholic orders. Some of the buildings that hold this dark and difficult history still remain in the urban fabric today. Open Heart City is a volunteer-led response to the events of September 2018, when Dublin City Councillors backed a motion not to sell the 2-acre former Magdalene Laundry site on Sean McDermott Street to a Japanese budget hotel chain. The Councillors overwhelmingly recognised that taking the site out of public ownership would lose the opportunity to create an internationally recognised Site of Conscience (a global network of historic sites, museums, and memorials) at the heart of Ireland's capital city, in an area that has suffered much economic hardship and social marginalisation since the foundation of the Irish State in 1922.

CoLab architects came together as part of the Open Heart City movement as a group of four architects – Denise Murray, Jonathan Janssens, Jennifer O'Donnell and Catherine Blaney – who are all involved with teaching architecture at either Queens University Belfast or University College Dublin, and aim to develop alternative methods for practicing architecture and advancing architectural discourse in Ireland. Collectively, we have extensive experience of working on complex urban sites, collaborating with a range of actors to deliver long-term sustainable change; working with old building fabric; and using the architectural tools of workshops, exhibition and dissemination as a means through which to study, comprehend and communicate the complexities of the built environment.

For the Sean McDermott Street project, we aim to develop a collective vision for the Site of Conscience and Archive for Care-related Records through workshops and events with a range of stakeholders. While hampered by Covid-19, we have still carried out six virtual engagement events online, which have been

attended by survivors, community workers, local residents, politicians, senators and local councillors. We have also had workshops with groups of academics and archivists.

To conclude this exercise, we will produce a Vision Document which will summarise the proposals for Sean McDermott Street and the feedback from the engagement process. Within this document, we will make a series of recommendations for next steps in the process, and the work will be used to continue to campaign for the site to be designated as a Site of Conscience and the establishment of a national Archive for Care related records.

In parallel, we are developing a proposal to be built on site in Summer 2021 to allow the public to access the site for the first time in its history. We aim to create a space on site for survivors to tell their stories, and a place where discussions can take place around how we can best address the dark heritage of sites like these.

Above: Proposed collaborative process for the site at Sean McDermott Street
image by Plattenbau Studio and CoLab architects



Denise Murray Metropolitan Workshop

Denise is a senior associate and urban designer who joined Metropolitan Workshop's Dublin studio having previously worked at O'Donnell Tuomey Architects and Feilden Clegg Bradley Studios in London. She has 18 years' experience as an architect working in Ireland, France and the UK on all project stages with specialist knowledge of urban design, regeneration and housing.

Denise is on the RIAI Housing Committee, and a Design Fellow at UCD in the School of Architecture specialising in urban design, housing and community consultation.



● INTERVIEW

Lessons from Spreefeld: a history of self-organised housing in Berlin

We talked with Michael about his experience with the Spreefeld Cooperative, but also more broadly about Berlin’s specific history of community engagement, to understand what tools or mechanisms exist to allow for citizens to shape planning and design, how they are navigated from the ground, and how they these experiences might open up new or different perspectives for contexts such as London or Dublin.

Above: id22 tour of Spreefeld neighbourhood
Opposite: Aerial view of the cooperative development along the river Spree



Dr. Michael LaFond
Interviewed by Ava Lynam and Lee Mallett
Michael is a cohousing expert, activist, and professor of urban planning. Having lived in Berlin for over 20 years, he is deeply involved in local grassroots activities relating to alternative models of housing and land management. Michael is the founder of id22: Institute for Creative Sustainability, a non-profit civil society organisation of architects and planners, sociologists, artists, community developers, and gardeners which supports participatory initiatives in Berlin. As well as being on the advisory board of Berlin’s community land trust Stadtbodenstiftung, he now lives in a well-known housing cooperative called Spreefeld.

Lee Mallett (LM): Could you tell us a little about the context in which Spreefeld came about?

Michael LaFond (ML): In the context of this discussion, we should first recognise Berlin’s particular history. Over the last twenty or thirty years, you could count a few hundred projects which, in some way, have been similar to Spreefeld – self-organised and democratic projects, everything from squats to middle class cohousing groups and new cooperatives. Spreefeld came out of that environment. It started off with a core group of people, along with the architect and a somewhat ‘alternative developer’, which was typical for this sort of Berlin project in those years.

Today it is much more difficult. Up until 2010 or 2015, these projects could simply be ‘wished’ by alternative people who would organise them and make them happen. It’s not quite like London, but land here is too expensive now to allow that anymore. It is interesting that there is enough momentum and inertia coming out of the last few decades that has kept all of these people in the city. The pressures and needs are still there so the projects are still happening, just not as much as they were a few years ago.

LM: Despite the practicalities becoming more difficult, is there still widespread support in Berlin for the concept of community organised housing?

ML: Yes, there is still quite a substantial understanding for these sorts of projects. There is a lot of experience and interest in community oriented, self-organised and cooperative initiatives. There has been some support from the government, but in the last few years, this hasn’t been enough to support many projects. That’s the situation now – we are at the policy level, arguing with the government and city housing companies to improve the policy and funding conditions.

New self-organised housing projects don’t happen without the support of the government or foundations. This is why myself and others are involved in things like the community land trust model, to come up with some type of structural assistance that takes the cost of land out of the project to generate and secure more self-organised and affordable housing.

LM: In the UK, for example, there is a requirement that local authorities make provisions in their local plans for supplying land for self-build housing. Is there any requirement in planning terms to support cohousing developments in Berlin?

ML: No. In terms of supporting things like housing cooperatives, cohousing, or community housing, there is no specific mandate or requirement at the national level, or in Berlin. This does exist in other cities like Hamburg or Munich, which require around 15 or 20% of these types of uses to be included in new housing construction. The reason it exists there is



that they have already experienced extreme gentrification and land pressures for quite a few years already. Berlin is only just catching up with them, or London.

There is a more informal promise from the government that in new housing development neighbourhoods – there are ten or fifteen of these, mostly around the edges of the city – anywhere from 20 to 30% should be committed to ‘common good oriented housing’. This includes things like housing cooperatives, as well as more alternative self-organised housing communities like Miethauser Syndikat [a cooperative and non-commercially organised investment company for the joint acquisition of houses transferred to common ownership]. So, there is a loose commitment to it, but it has not yet been formalised or made binding.

Ava Lynam (AL): Do you feel that there is a need for more formal mechanisms at this point?

ML: Definitely. There is not enough planning security. If you are a small housing cooperative or an even smaller self-organised cohousing group, you have to bring a five year or more planning horizon with you to participate in these new housing neighbourhoods. A big housing cooperative or city housing company may have the ability to plan for five or ten years, but not a group of people who want to create housing for themselves.

Every year, the city organises five to ten competitions and provides land at a fixed cost to the ‘best concept’. But it’s only a few pieces of land every year, and if you’ve got fifty groups competing for it, it becomes quite hysterical – there is a lot of frustration, wasted time and energy.

The government is not catering significantly to small cooperatives or cohousing, or meeting the need or interest. This administration is focused almost entirely on working with city housing companies. This is understandable to a certain extent – they want their city housing companies to produce large volumes of housing as cheaply

and quickly as possible. But they don’t seem to have the ability or interest to involve this cohousing landscape in a serious way for now.

AL: Are more people turning to these alternative housing models now that the rent has been rising so rapidly in Berlin, and there is so much demand for affordable housing?

ML: Yes, but that hasn’t really been the main driver. My impression over the last twenty years is lot of lower to middle class families have been going into these community projects because they can get something better and more affordable in the city centre – it is not really affordable, but for the middle class it is. But I think the most important thing is that people want neighbours; they don’t want to be lonely and they want the added value of a community garden, rooftop terrace or community space like a workshop.

There is a fair amount of demand. In the last few years, more and more groups have been leaving the city and going to the countryside because you can still find relatively affordable empty buildings. Maybe they are low quality East German office buildings, or maybe it’s an old barn or farm house. It is really a new thing for Berlin, that people are willing to move further and further away, sometimes even an hour away.

LM: Is there any difference between the demand for these kinds of cohousing models between East and West Berlin?

ML: Not anymore. Previously, people from the West tended to have more money to invest in housing projects, typically coming from their parents. A lot of people from the East were shut out of these sorts of building groups because they couldn’t invest in a significant way. Maybe in the early days there was also less interest in housing cooperatives in the East because people had had bad experiences with forced collectives. But this is thirty years ago, so the younger generation doesn’t know that anymore.

These types of projects have mostly been developed in the East over the last thirty years, mainly because that’s where the land

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and properties have been available and affordable – and that’s where fashionable, attractive neighbourhoods have developed that have drawn people like myself. If you go back five years or more, people were coming from the West to the East because it was more affordable and interesting to live there – although it seems to be shifting back now. Even today, you will still find empty buildings in the East if you go further out to areas that were previously undesirable, like former industrial areas or public housing estates.

LM: Could you tell us a bit about what happened with the Mediaspree proposal?

ML: We moved into Spreefeld in 2014, but we had first come along five or so years earlier, right when Mediaspree [one of the largest property campaigns in Berlin aiming to establish a communication and media cluster along the river Spree] was getting shut down.

Mediaspree was a big marketing initiative planned by the city government along with large property investors and developers focused on the abandoned property along the river. A citizen’s movement called Mediaspree Versenken [Sink Mediaspree] was developed, who collected signatures and votes to show that people in the area were against the project. The Mediaspree project was redirected and not stopped completely, but it was a strong recommendation to the government – and to projects which came after, like ours – to respect the needs and interests of the local neighbourhood.

People were afraid of being shut off from the river by exclusive projects, which was a real threat when large scale office headquarters and global companies were being invited to set up their headquarters on an exclusive piece of waterfront. Our project responded to that by doing everything we could to avoid being against the community. Although we have private property, there is guaranteed public access to the river on both sides. At Spreefeld, the public can

come and go day and night, walk through our property and enjoy the waterfront.

LM: Did that movement coincide with an increasingly strong belief in community involvement in urban planning?

ML: There have been a few successful citizens initiatives over the last twenty years that have come out of an already fairly well organised and active civil society. Meaning, they have either stopped the plans of the government or investors, such as in the case of Mediaspree Versenken or the 100% Tempelhofer Feld [the citizen's campaign that sparked the referendum to save an expansive green space on the former airport].

This has meant that lot of people are feeling even further motivated that they can get organised, or at least slow things down or change the path of development. In the last few years, we have seen a lot of initiatives dealing with rent policy and control, as well as the expropriation of private apartments. The city has got an amazing population of activists, almost professional activists, who spend a lot of their time, or even all of their time, organising.

LM: In schemes in the UK, there has often been opposition to what architects consider to be an appropriate response. Was that the case at Spreefeld or at other schemes in Berlin?

ML: If you look at Berlin in the last thirty or forty years, you had an amazingly strong squatter movement. This radical self-organisation helped inform projects like ours. One of the main motivations of the squatter movement was to stop the large-scale demolition of older buildings, especially in neighbourhoods such as Kreuzberg. There was this idea of stopping architects and planners from destroying the character or affordability of these neighbourhoods, and up until 2005, or even 2010, there wasn't much new construction for housing, and certainly not community housing – almost everything was reuse.

There were so many empty buildings – schools, airports, everything – so people were focused on that. It started to change in the last ten years or so, when people realised there was not so much more to be done with reuse. Architects also like new construction because they can express themselves even more and can draw more people to the project.

Activists still tend to be quite critical of new construction, because they immediately see it as gentrification. Around our neighbourhood, a lot of the new buildings have been attacked. Any new building that looked too nice, or had big windows at the ground level, had its windows broken or its construction site sabotaged. We got around that through a successful communication with the neighbourhood. We let people know that although we are middle class people, we were a cooperative and were

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going to include things like community spaces, gardens and a kindergarten. We didn't get attacked, but that was a challenge.

AL: Can you tell us more about that process of engagement with the local neighbourhood?

ML: A significant part of our process was what could be called 'activating' the landscape with pioneer projects or uses. Even before the construction started, a public competition was organised in which about ten initiatives were invited to participate. They were given three-year use agreements on the ground that would eventually surround the construction site and were always accessible to the public. These included gardening, and cultural and educational projects.

The gardening really managed to hang on after construction was finished in 2014, and ended up being one of my projects. After the cooperative was built, we created a formal non-profit association called Spreeacker which has continued to develop its approach of edible and productive landscapes. Since 2012, we have been working with people who live and work in the neighbourhood to develop and maintain the public gardens. I think for people really interested in community processes and the long-term view on these projects – what happens before, during, and after construction – it is



important to think about the interface with the neighbourhood or the city. Spreeacker is a significant part of that. People might say that it was strategic for us to avoid conflict. And yes, that was part of it because we had squatters around us. But looking at it positively, it was really an attempt to see how groups could be engaged with the buildings and the land around them.

LM: It seems that that kind of approach is being adopted by a lot of developers, local authorities, and housing companies in the UK. Local authorities need to get the project through politically and private developers have clear ambitions, so they often play lip service to an engagement process. Is that happening in Berlin, that grassroots approaches are being appropriated by powerful interests?

ML: In Berlin you have to go back more than five or ten years to see that kind of exploitation of artists, activists, or community gardeners. For developers and the government, this is not really necessary anymore because everything is already highly valued and gentrified. There is interest everywhere, so strategically, you don't need to take the time and effort to engage people.

Ten or twenty years ago, Berlin was probably one of the world capitals for temporary uses. There was a lot of empty space, and it was both fashionable and necessary to put some life into it, otherwise the windows would get broken and squatters would move in. It was either a defensive measure or to upgrade the property. These temporary uses are now something of the past. Where it does happen, it's a conscious effort on the part of alternative architects or activists.

A significant example in the last few years is the Haus der Statistik, a huge property right in the centre of Berlin. That's the largest project that has really tried to apply these strategies

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or implement a civil society-initiated development. They are involving pioneer uses, and opening up the ground level and outdoor spaces, but it's not to upgrade the property – it's a sincere attempt to involve people and get them excited.

LM: How does Spreefeld work as a scheme when there are as many as twelve different households sharing one big apartment? Outside of army barracks, this is almost inconceivable in the UK! It happens here, but not at that scale.

ML: To be honest, this was also difficult for Germans to conceive about ten years ago. The big influences have come either from Stockholm or Copenhagen where it has been done for a long time –they seem to be much more comfortable with things like cooking and eating together. Squatters in Berlin have also historically celebrated this collective idea, partially because of affordability and partially because of the political idea of sharing. Spreefeld has pushed the edges for Berlin, but it has really touched on an emerging architecture.

It is not unique anymore, but we have gotten a lot of attention for the size of our apartments. Typically, these schemes are not at this scale, more like five to ten people. But this is a significant part of the Spreefeld approach. We have the three buildings that make up a complete neighbourhood, but we also have sub-projects of shared flats or cluster apartments. About 20 to 30% percent of apartments are in these sub-projects.

I'm living in the largest of those and we've got twenty-two people and approximately twelve private spaces, and a shared community kitchen and living room. As a sub-project, we have our own organisation. We decided to concentrate the community spaces in one corner of the building. In the living room we can eat, children can play, and there is a screen and projector so we can watch films together. Almost everyone has their own shower, but there is also a community bathtub next to the living room.

One of the fundamental principles of cohousing is that people have smaller than average private spaces, and that saved space is put into community spaces such as the



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Squatters in Berlin have also historically celebrated this collective idea, partially because of affordability and partially because of the political idea of sharing.

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kitchen, living room, and hallways. Our community kitchen is more than seventy square meters large with six cooking surfaces, for example, so it is definitely dimensioned so that everyone who lives here can cook and eat at the same time, or have a party in the living room.

Obviously, it doesn't work so well if everyone is cooking for themselves next to each other, but what happens most of the time is that someone has agreed, either in advance or spontaneously, to take responsibility for an evening, and other people will support that. A little bit of coordination might be needed if people try to use the same cooking area or sink, or once in a while people want to do something for themselves, or their partners or their friends, but that's not the usual case.

LM: In the UK, values have sky rocketed,

there is a lack of land and anything affordable is incredibly scarce. Developers are actively exploring co-living options, mainly targeting students or older people. In Berlin, has the private sector shown any interest in the concept you've developed?

ML: I would differentiate between cohousing and co-living and say that co-living doesn't come from a self-organised group, but is a business model which gives people micro apartments and a community space. It is one way of making money out of the square meters. These are really important discussions and a big criticism of mine over the years is that the discussion has been all to simple and primitive. The terms are very soft, and it's easy to mix them up or abuse them.

From discussions I have had with SOA [Self Organised Architecture, a Dublin-based cohousing research collaborative], in Dublin, as well as in a number of other cities, there has been a strong move from local government to try to stop co-living for this reason. That has become a problem for cohousing projects because they want to stop anything with a community space. That's why we need to differentiate between the terms.

In Berlin, we don't see such a big backlash against co-living, although we do have it. It has a sophisticated marketing strategy to get young, tech people to pay a lot of money. Maybe they are working for Google or Amazon and they can pay a bit more to have a sense of community, because they work so much and don't have time to make friends,

so there is a bar onsite or a roof top terrace. But in Berlin, we have a really strong history with this self-organised housing which has not come from the developer's side. And that's been the driving force here until the last few years where property has gotten this high value, and developers and investors have started implementing this co-living concept – but that's still a relatively new thing here.

AL: How has Covid-19 affected the perceptions around cohousing?

ML: I would identify Covid-19 as a passing crisis; one of a number of them including climate change, Brexit and other things. I don't want to be negative, but we are entering into a time of crisis. And these kinds of projects – about community, shared spaces, self-organisation, decreasing isolation and loneliness and increasing environmental efficiency and affordability – will have an increasingly strong role to play because they are resilient and can cover quite a few bases in an intelligent way.

I think these projects deserve attention, and I'm not talking about idealistic or moral reasons. One of the main reasons that these projects have fared well during the pandemic is that there was less isolation and loneliness, and less fear and anxiety, because people can support each other and share information. We have small groups of people who can identify as a household, so they are in it together. And for people working at home or with children forced to stay at home, these community spaces are a really welcome

addition to private space. So, there are a few things about these projects that have now turned into added bonuses. And that is the sort of the discussion that I see emerging.

Opposite: Spreefeld community gardens - edible landscape
Above: Cooking and eating together at the Spree WG, Spreefeld
All images provided by Michael LaFond of Spreefeld Berlin eG

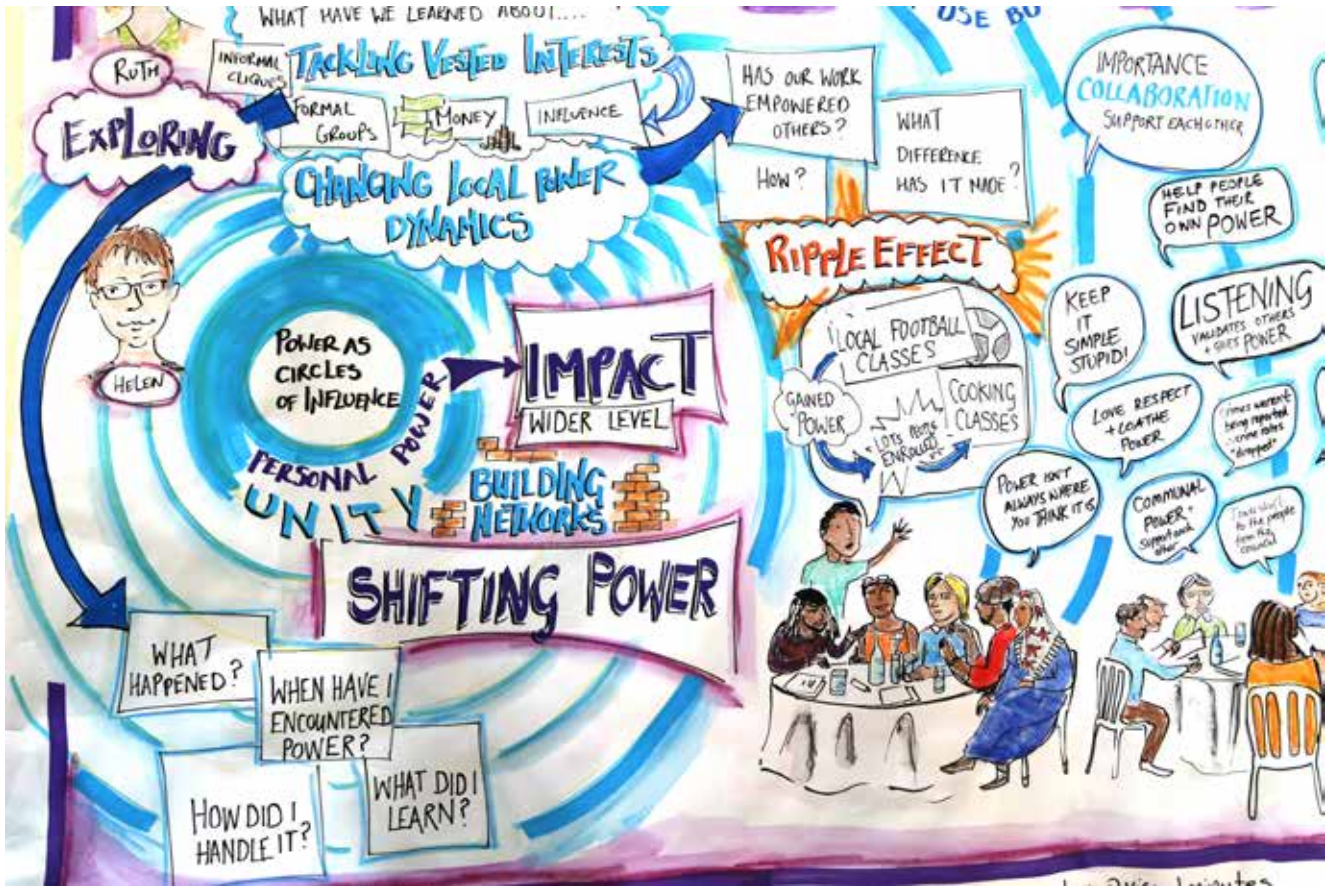
● STORIES OF ENGAGEMENT

WHY DO ARCHITECTS AND PLANNERS NEED THE INPUT OF LOCAL PEOPLE, AND HOW CAN ENGAGEMENT STIMULATE A PROCESS OF CO-LEARNING?



Helen Wallis-Dowling

Helen has over 25 years' experience working alongside communities, facilitating youth-led social action, and community organising projects. She has advised on the community organising approach in a housing development project led by Nationwide Building Society and has led the curriculum development and training for two national government funded community organising programmes. Helen is a director of Ansuz Action Ltd, who, based on their community organising ethos and methodology, provide training and consultancy to support organisations to make ultra-inclusive engagement the norm.



There are different approaches to engaging people in planning and development. Architects and planners can quickly and easily build a picture of a place by researching official data – its history, demography, land use, facilities, access, transport links, green spaces, protected sites, socio-economic factors, and the local economy. They can consult the community about their plans by sending surveys and questionnaires, and get input from established community groups and other representatives to tick the community engagement box.

But is that enough?

Development projects often make local people feel powerless and disenfranchised. If we are to create spaces that are great to live in, are sustainable and adaptable to change, and enable social justice, equality and collective wellbeing, an engagement approach is required that involves those affected by change to level the playing field with more equally distributed power and influence.

This is where community organising comes in.

Community organising is an ultra-inclusive approach to change, requiring skill and expertise in listening, questioning, collaborating, leadership and problem solving. It tackles the 'what', 'why' and 'how'

of change, and works well in situations that require a mindset change or a willingness to disrupt the status quo.

Community organisers go out into an area at different times to meet the people who live and work there. They knock on doors and go anywhere local folk gather, in order to make contact with a diverse range of people – from those rarely heard to those heard frequently. They create opportunities for as many people as possible to contribute, ensuring high levels of participation and inclusion.

Powerful, open questions are asked about the area: what is important or special, what they love, what concerns or challenges them. Stories of lived experience are gathered, of relationships and tensions, of treasured or wasted spaces, of how folks feel about where they live. People are challenged to reflect on why things are important, why they have concerns, or why there is tension. This deepens the emerging picture and stimulates an exploration of what is at the root, bringing clarity, focus, and new thinking. Through exploring how they can build on assets and be involved in or influence change, folk are encouraged to voice their hopes and ideas, which ignites their motivation and passion. Through this listening process, community organisers build respectful and trusting relationships by giving time and valuing the stories of those they meet.

Community organising is not just an exercise in data collection; it is about

identifying leaders, discovering untapped skills and talents and bringing local people together to improve the social, economic, and environmental wellbeing of everyone. Community organising connects people who have common values and concerns, to share stories and ideas, and to learn about local life from different perspectives and organise around shared interests. This is a powerful process that often stirs people to take collective action about the things matter to them.

Another essential element of community organising is facilitating the analysis of power structures within a strategy for change. This is part of levelling the playing field mentioned earlier. Open minded participation in this analysis by decision-makers alongside local people will demonstrate a willingness to collaborate, support and influence power and if necessary, disrupt the status quo in favour of local people. It becomes a mutual endeavour.

The benefits of this engagement approach to architects, planners, and local people are:

Architects and planners who are fully engaged in this process, and open to authentic dialogue with local people, will experience improved relationships and communication between themselves and the community. Genuine listening to understand the experience of local people will foster co-operation and solidarity around contentious issues.

Architects and planners will gain a richer understanding of what really matters to local people, which will lead not only to more informed and better-quality decision-making but also unlock greater resources as local people bring knowledge, skills and involvement in the project.

Architects, planners and local people will have a fuller, more empathic understanding of their respective roles, responsibilities and expectations. Sharing stories is a reciprocal learning process for all involved. Local people will gain an understanding of decision-making processes and procedures and how they can influence and shape decisions.

Local people will have developed knowledge, experience, and skills to organise for change in the future. They will have developed a deeper sense of connection and belonging which will spur them to take collective action to achieve other visions and goals.

As an approach to community engagement, community organising is not for the faint-hearted architect or planner – it's for those who genuinely do want to do it differently.

Above: Visual minutes of power analysis session, National Community Organisers annual event, 2014. Image provided by Helen Wallis-Dowling

● STORIES OF ENGAGEMENT

MCAULEY PLACE: OLDER PEOPLE AT THE URBAN CENTRE



Located in the heart of Naas, a town in the greater Dublin area, McAuley Place is a bustling, multi-layered, and innovative social and community project with a vision of placing older people at the heart of a thriving community. Set up originally as a Charitable Housing Body with the efforts of a group of local residents, the complex provides independent living for older people in its 53 customized apartments, which also houses an Arts Centre, Community Centre, café, and a rescued walled garden named 'Luisne'. McAuley Place is host to a wide range of residents, visitors, and volunteers who reside, play, eat, meet friends, and generally engage with life there. In the warm inviting foyer, which displays the work of town artists in rotation, there is a major clue to the value system driving this unconventional success story. It is a hand-drawn framed wall-hanging of the UN Principles for Older People, which states that as we get older, we should have access to the educational, cultural, spiritual, and recreational resources of society, and be able to pursue opportunities for the full potential of our development – principles that McAuley Place works to make operational daily.

The McAuley vision is to provide for 'naturally ageing' in the right community – a community of interest rather than age. At McAuley Place you are not instantly confronted with age but with a diverse ecology which embraces social interaction and cultural stimulation and bases the care of older people on non-medical grounds. McAuley Place is a response to the worrying trend they perceive in modern society which creates environments for older people that are safer and safer, removing all challenges and stress, and in the process, creating a living environment which is less robust and more 'fragile'. Instead, McAuley Place

links creativity to challenge, and provides a dynamic context where an intentionally mixed programme of activities is encouraged and allowed to collide – a place where a truly anti-fragile environment is sustained.

No project, especially one with social innovation at its heart, can afford to stand still. The Health Through Learning Centre (HTLC) emerged due to the belief that the existing model of McAuley Place had further potential for residents and Naas citizens. At its core is a very simple premise: the idea that learning, has a dynamic relationship to health. Housed in adapted mid-19th century original convent buildings, the HTLC consists of: the Town Living-room, a welcoming multi-purpose social space, open to all citizens; the Hands-On room, a tactile arts and crafts space; the Garden Studio, a large new room to facilitate larger projects; the Luisne Garden; and the artist's studio/apartment, a loft retreat occupied on a rotating basis by visiting artists. In the HTLC concept, learning will be guided by 4 pillars:

- Engagement – enabling and encouraging elders and citizens to participate, and pushing for co-production.
- Health – learning together how to be healthier.

- Infrastructure – learning to build supportive social infrastructure in Naas.
- Research – the potential for McAuley Place to build a platform for research and form a partnership with universities.

Covid-19 has brought health and well-being to centre-stage, and for a time, has dislodged what is usually a singular focus on economy, questioning the values underpinning our contemporary lifestyles. The public debate and focus on health contain the seeds for major institutional change – and McAuley Place has a role in influencing its direction. One would have to acknowledge that the HTLC is therefore a timely initiative that can draw many strands together by bridging citizens, local stakeholders, and the wider civil society through communication and collaboration.

When you visit McAuley Place, you get a glimpse of people sitting on its town-centre lawn, experience the warmth of the reception, enriched with baking smells and townspeople's artwork, and appreciate how it sits in a hub of schools, shops, pubs, and offices. You then begin to understand why this project is rather unique, and why this kind of initiative is needed. In Ireland, you don't often see the rich spectrum of physical spaces and



Dick Gleeson

Dick was Dublin City Planner 2004-14 and had overall responsibility for strategic/forward planning and development management in the city. A committed urbanist, Dick championed the development of the "6 themes", a systems-type framework, embedded in the City Plan. Dick managed the International Urban Advisory Panel for Dublin for almost a decade. He sat on several major juries for architectural competitions including the competition for Dublin's "spire". He is an Honorary member of RIAL.

collision of uses that you find in McAuley Place. This vision and concept required a new type of thinking and working together. It also needed a different funding model and a lot of networking to bring parties together who might not normally find themselves in the one project.

There are many lessons to be learned from the evolving model at McAuley Place. One of its key achievements is the manner in which it generates reflection on the role of older people in society, nurturing a value system which emphasizes integration. McAuley Place also creates new perspectives on the enabling role of infrastructure, and the contribution of institutional innovation, particularly in terms of collaboration between sectors. In seeking a town-centre campus, with a 'sense of place' which is complex and layered, McAuley Place mirrors the richness and diversity of a thriving urban community, and represents an 'Urban Lab' for new thinking and policy on the Irish town. Its evolving programme spans social, cultural, environmental and economic spheres, and encourages the juxtaposition of the complementary sub-themes of art, community, café, and nature to collide with each other – enabling the daily surprise that sustains mental health and human existence.

Above: Event in the Luisne Garden: local historian Paddy Behan from Naas History Group tells the history of McAuley Place

Source: Kildare.ie (2018): A History of McAuley Place. available at: <http://www.kildare.ie/community/events/details.asp?EventID=22200>

● INTERVIEW

Honouring place, building trust

Lesley speaks to us about her insights from Phoenix Community Housing, the first not-for-profit resident-led housing association in London, and sheds light on some of the key principles that are essential to safeguard when developing meaningful and long-term relationships with communities, arriving at more collaborative models of building homes and neighbourhoods.



Lesley Johnson
Interviewed by Lee Mallett, before the Covid-19 pandemic
Lesley has been director of property and new business at Phoenix Community Housing since 2017, after more than 30 years of experience working in housing with local authorities and housing associations. She has led on the set up of several successful stock transfers and delivered significant refurbishment and redevelopment programmes. Lesley previously acted as a Neighbourhood Renewal Advisor to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. She is a Built Environment Expert with the Design Council CABE, a masters tutor at the Bartlett School of Planning, and a member of the Cambridgeshire Quality Panel.

Lee Mallett (LM) How did you get involved in community engagement?

Lesley Johnson (LJ) It's always been there. I grew up in social housing. We moved to a new estate and there was nothing there for all those people. My Mum and some other people got together to build a hut for the community, and that was the start of a tenants' association and youth club.

Partly in honour of my Mum's activism, I've always worked in the public sector. And when I got into housing development, I found myself drawn to working where there was an existing community facing major change. I really like that mix of the technical project, both the people and the place. You can't do them separately.

LM The idea that you should engage more with the community has grown and grown over the last few decades.

LJ It has. The motives for it are worth examining though, ranging from the idea of the 'commons' [cultural and natural resources accessible to all, not owned privately] and community control, and at the other extreme, sharp business practices focused on consultation in order to get a planning approval or funding.

Fundamental questions often don't get asked in the process, or are not asked of the community that they most impact. I think you can engage in a way that is humane, responsive and involving, and there are useful models getting more attention now with much more community leadership and control.

LM Do you think that community engagement arose partly as a response to perceived failures of post-war development?

LJ It was the gradual withdrawal of government funding and the 'residualisation' of social housing that led to the decline we now attempt to resolve through regeneration. The root of engagement for me is the tradition of community organisation, particularly tenants' associations and networks of community groups, working with local authorities and housing organisations. The shift to market-led housing development has moved engagement to its own specialism which can have the effect of managing local opinion rather than working with the community as partner, and people are rightly questioning who this is really for.

It used to quite straightforward to move somebody from an old flat to a new one with the same rent, terms and conditions, and landlord. As local authority control receded, the rights of existing communities and genuine accountability have eroded. And with that, and a political understanding of gentrification, the campaigns against regeneration have grown.

I worked on stock transfers in the late 1980s. You could transfer council homes to a housing association, and in doing so, commit to do the things residents had been crying out for for years. People would be consulted on what they wanted and could usually rely on the promises made. That got tainted as the scale of redevelopment grew. The numbers went up and cross-subsidy for social housing became more important.

I'm really pleased to work at Phoenix Community Housing now. Phoenix is very much a local response to housing that was in poor condition. Tenants were fed up with poor services and a lack of control, so they fought to get that control and prove they could manage it themselves.

So, I'm both a complete advocate for community engagement and quite a cynic about why it is done.

LM But you fundamentally believe in it?

LJ Yes. There is a moral and political case. People should absolutely be part of what's going on, with real influence on what's being done to them, or with them. But there's also the harder business case for engagement, which I completely understand.



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One of the problems is that when you say things like, "you must involve the community", it can sound like platitudes. Obviously, you must. But to what degree can or can't they influence things? Can you set that out in a way they can rely on?

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That tension is one of the things I enjoy most about my work, between what works and how we get the best for the people with the least control.

I want great homes and places. I don't see that my role is to prevent development, but rather to make what's happening as good as it can be for the people most affected. That has to be based on talking with communities and being honest, by listening and doing something with what you've heard.

LM What's most difficult about doing that?

LJ On big regeneration schemes, the uncertainty is a big challenge. When you are trying to work with a community who've already heard their homes are going to be demolished, and you are saying, "we'll build you a new one" with design and viability still to be determined, it's really difficult. You absolutely need honesty. You need people who can keep promises, build trust and stay with it. And those schemes can take 10 plus years, so continuity is hard.

LM Everybody's got the same sort of problems wherever you go, and they are only multiplying as more boroughs look at more opportunities for more homes. The political

imperative is to do more and more, and the obstacles to doing it have become greater.

LJ I think so. One of the problems is that when you say things like, "you must involve the community", it can sound like platitudes. Obviously, you must. But to what degree can or can't they influence things? Can you set that out in a way they can rely on? And don't pretend that the consultation or engagement is going to make a difference if it is not.

You don't go into an engagement process and say, "what do you want?", because that would be naive. You have to be clear with people how much influence they've got. And they won't

always be satisfied with that. Engagement can push the project into a different place, or stimulate a fresh response.

LM It seems engagement has become part of the local culture and policy. It's kind of snuck up on everybody.

LJ It has. The need to include a statement of community involvement in planning applications was a big shift; and the need for community involvement in local plans.



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My main principle is honouring what's there. Everywhere is somewhere. You aren't arriving at 'a site'. I hate that word. You're arriving at a place where people live, work and do.

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Opposite and above: Resident engagement includes community events such as Community Links and 'Chat and Chips' evenings on Phoenix's estates.

Left: Resident shareholders voting at an Annual General Meeting. Phoenix has more than 3,500 resident shareholders all entitled to vote.

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I have seen architects being broken and put back together again by working with a community. They come in with ideas and assumptions that get chipped away. But then something new emerges. That is really exciting.

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My main principle is honouring what's there. Everywhere is somewhere. You aren't arriving at 'a site'. I hate that word. You're arriving at a place where people live, work and do. And you have to honour that in whatever you are thinking you want to do next. Engagement should reflect this and in doing so, you get a much better scheme. If an architect and team can work with that creatively, it allows for a much better outcome.

I have seen architects being broken and put back together again by working with a community. They come in with ideas and assumptions that get chipped away. But then something new emerges. That is really exciting.

I came to Phoenix because I was jaded with the constraints of housing regeneration schemes. I felt I had become so pragmatic. I worked on a housing project which involved moving homeowners in order to redevelop, but not all of them could remortgage and were moved away. An academic wrote a short angry piece about the project and equated the buybacks, which particularly impacted BAME homeowners, to imperialism. I was surprised at how much of it I agreed with.

At Phoenix, our approach to providing new homes is called Building Together. The idea is that, as far as possible, local people will benefit when we build new homes. It is about how we work with local people and deal with issues that concern them like 'anti-social' behaviour, refuse disposal, or parking. People who live nearby will also have the first opportunity to move into new homes. The approach describes how we will work, where we're going to develop, and the board (the majority of which are local residents) that governs how we will work.

LM To what extent is that approach reflected across local authorities and housing providers, and among private developers?

LJ I think you do see elements of it, but it's uneven; local lettings are rarely used and few housing developers are resident-led. I think because we are the developer and

have the long-term local stewardship role, we are able to do more of that.

We work with residents locally, but they are also represented on our board. For us at least, building homes can also be about building community, not about profit.

LM Should local authorities and developers be looking at organisations like yours to change what they do?

LJ What they certainly could do is put their relationships around the development in place as early as possible. Having people who will have a long-term relationship with the place have to be part of the team to start with.

When developers are asked what housing association they are working with, if they are mixing rent and sale homes, what their plan for the future is, and what the community facilities are, that is often the least developed part of their thinking. They will, however, already know how many homes and of what type they can get on the site.

But if they do it differently, they'll get their planning permission. There is a business case for doing it that way. You get a better outcome. You get less opposition and you have a way of dealing with it because you are being principled about your approach. And you are more credible with that longer-term point of view. Getting people properly involved early is key, and being principled about what the engagement is for and what it can do.

There's also something about the developer making the commitments face to face that is important, and not leaving that to the agency they've appointed to do the engagement. That can act as a real buffer.

Different developers will do it differently according to what they are made to do. If the local authority is clear that in order to get a difficult planning permission through, they must satisfy certain groups with this process, they will do it.

There was a scheme I worked on as a CABE enabler where the partnerships had fallen apart. The community, the developer, and the council had lost faith in each other. At one major redevelopment scheme, they had completely lost the residents. It was great helping to knit that back together again, because all it needed was for someone to decode the architects for the residents, and the residents for the architects! They just

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For us at least, building homes can also be about building community, not about profit.

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weren't talking to each other. It's amazing how much involvement in the process can lead to good engagement and design quality.

LM Are there any local authorities that know how to do community engagement? There did used to be community engagement officers, didn't there? Who does the engagement for the councils?

LJ Yes there are, but they may not be sitting in the housing department. They were usually nearer to policy or press and media communications. Or they may appoint someone to do it, like an agency.

I think that everybody involved should do it. Our development managers will generally do their own engagement, because why would you structure it differently? We recruit architects on the basis that they have this experience, and we require everyone else involved to understand that it is a function they would be part of.

LM Should councils really acquire the skills to do it themselves?

LJ Yes, because that's how you do it well. For example, I worked for a housing provider in Kent on a scheme just to do the engagement. It was their first regeneration scheme, about 100 new homes on an existing estate. They weren't sure they knew what to do, but we got them doing it. You coach the team into a place where they can be open and responsive rather than defensive, and realise that good ideas can come from this. It will make their life easier and be more rewarding.

At Phoenix, it is part of everybody's job, which reflects the kind of organisation that we are.

If the leadership of a project can have those kind of principles – honesty, listening – that really helps because it sets the tone for all of it. And people join the project with the understanding that that is how it is going to run.

LM How many homes does Phoenix control? How did it come about?

LJ About six and a half thousand. We're medium-sized, in housing terms. All are in three wards in Lewisham: Downham, Bellingham and Whitefoot.

It all started when the Decent Homes requirements came in. Lewisham was looking at its stock and decided to set up an ALMO [arm's length management organisation]. But tenants in our area had been to a TPAS [Tenant Participatory Advisory Service] conference and heard about a new 'community gateway' housing association that had been set up in Preston. They campaigned to get a similar resident-led housing association for south Lewisham on the transfer ballot and residents in the area voted for it. So that's what we still are thirteen years later – led by our residents.

LM Are council's increasingly handing over stock, or has it ended? Are there any more

Phoenixes being planned?

LJ More local authorities are developing themselves or entering into partnerships, and council tenants still have the right to apply for their homes to be transferred.

There is a current example where a council said it wanted to regenerate an estate and as part of the campaign opposing that, the residents made an application to the MHCLG [Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government] for a stock transfer. And that is now moving forward.

More widely in the sector there's a lot of talk about resident voice, much less about resident leadership. But we've seen a slight shift towards mutuality, for example at Soha housing association in Oxfordshire, and after a merger there's now quite a substantial community gateway in Essex called Eastlight Homes. But each of these models tend to take slightly different forms. We hope the new White Paper will stimulate more of a shift to communities wanting to take more control.

LM Given that housing is a fundamental commodity, and their access to capital and expertise in development and management, why hasn't the private sector been much more involved in the provision of social housing?

LJ Interestingly, some now are. Once the riskier development period has passed, they see it as an investment with a steady return.

Financially, social housing takes a lot of subsidy because the rents are low. In our existing stock, council nominees can rent a three-bedroom home for about £140 per week. And in our new build, you'd probably get that same home for around £200 per week. But the subsidy that needs to go into that to make it possible is significant, and it is rising as we try to meet more stringent safety and sustainability standards.

LM Some developers are on the case engaging at the earliest possible opportunity to find their way through. And the good ones do see it as a driver of value.

LJ Well it is. You can do things quicker if you do it that way. The business case for community influence and excellent quality is really clear. And ignore it at your peril.

Opposite : A community parade and celebrations to mark the reopening of the Fellowship and Star - an interwar public house in Bellingham restored by Phoenix through a £4.1m Heritage Lottery grant.

Images provided by Phoenix Community Housing



WORKER-LED DEVELOPMENTS

By the second half of the 19th century, there were around 1,200 Mechanics’ Institutions and more than a hundred Miners’ Institutes in the UK. Many of these purpose-built institutional buildings had been funded through public subscription of local workers and provided an important educational, cultural and social function for their village communities.

An early example of worker-led developments are Mechanics’ Institutes (also known as Literary & Scientific Institutes, Reading Rooms, Useful Knowledge Societies, Athenaeums and Lyceums). First emerging in the UK in the 1820s, they provided adult education facilities for workers through lending libraries, lecture theatres, classrooms, and laboratories¹. Some have since become notable colleges and universities. Later in the 19th century, Miners’ Institutions (also known as Working Men’s Institutes, Mine Workers’ Institutes, or Miners’ Welfare Halls) were built as meeting and educational venues in the coal mining areas of South Wales, England and Scotland. These buildings were owned by the workers who put a proportion of their wage into a communal fund to pay for the construction and running of the building, which would normally contain a library, reading room and meeting room².

Swindon Mechanics Institute

Paid for via subscription by Great Western Railway workers based at Swindon Railway Works, the Mechanics Institute was completed in 1855. As well as containing the UK’s first lending library and providing health services, the institute ran an extensive range of technical education classes and lectures for railway workers and apprentices³. The ground floor housed the reading room, a coffee room, committee room, dining room and a bathroom with eight baths, while the lecture hall was on the upper floor. At one end of the building was an octagonal covered market, selling fresh produce – difficult to find in industrial Swindon. The Mechanics Institute was enlarged in 1892-93 by architect Brightwen Binyon, after which its committee opened up its health services to other local workers. Nye Bevan (mastermind of the NHS), was quoted saying, “There was a complete health service in Swindon. All we had to do was expand it to the country.”⁴



Above: Luncheon at the Reading room, Swindon Mechanics Institute, 1908
Source: STEAM Museum of the GWR (2021): Poster Print of Mechanics Institute Luncheon, July 1908. available at: <https://www.steampicturelibrary.com/places/swindons-railway-village-gwr-mechanics-institute/mechanics-institute-luncheon-july-1908-510584.html#modalClose>

Tredegar Workmen’s Hall, Blaenau Gwent

Opened in 1861 in Blaenau Gwent, South Wales, the Tredegar Temperance Hall was one of the most well-known Miners’ Institutes in the South Eastern Industrial Valleys. Intended for “entertainment, instruction and the propagation of temperance”,⁵ it provided a public meeting space and had been constructed primarily through subscriptions of miners. The library and reading room were also supported by a halfpenny per week contribution from their wages.⁶ The management of the Hall was taken over by a worker committee in 1890, before they eventually purchased the building to establish the Tredegar Workmen’s Institute. In its early days, the Hall was leased out to a local film exhibitor. In the 1930s, a new extension included billiards halls, a bar and a dance hall, and later, a vast library and reading room. A subsequent internal reorganisation allowed for a luxurious cinema with a capacity of 800.⁷ Hosting live shows, concerts, lectures and political meetings, several notable artists and politicians appeared on stage. The Institute closed in 1982 and was finally demolished in the 1990s

Parc and Dare Workmen’s Institute and Hall,

In 1892, a library was constructed for the miners in the Welsh village of Treorchy, designed by architect Jacob Rees and funded by the workers of the Parc and Dare Collieries by donating a penny from each pound of their wages.⁸ The building also contained reading, smoking, guest and refreshment rooms as a place for the miners to meet and socialise. In 1912, a second adjoining building designed by T Owen Rees and Jacob Rees was opened as a theatre, as well as a cinema in 1913.⁹ Listed II* as the grandest Workmen’s Institute and Hall in the Rhondda Valley area, it is now run by the local authority as a cinema, concert and theatre venue that retains much of its original character.

Oakdale Workmen’s Institute

Built in 1917 in the South Wales town of Caerphilly, the Oakdale Workmen’s Institute was established as a space for social, educational and cultural life within the newly established coal mining community there¹⁰. The Tredegar Iron and Coal Company gave out a loan to the miners to fund its construction, which was repaid by over the following years. The ground floor contained a library, reading room, committee room, and two small offices, while a concert hall

66
“There was a complete health service in Swindon. All we had to do was expand it to the country.”

99
Aneurin (Nye) Bevan —
Labour minister who established the NHS
‘free at the point-of-need’ in 1946

that seated over 200 people filled the entire first floor. There was a billiards room in a building behind the Institute, on top of which a public hall was built in 1927, later adapted for use as a cinema¹¹. In 1987, the Institute was closed and subsequently dismantled to be rebuilt at St Fagans Museum.

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3. The New Mechanics’ Institution Preservation Trust (2021): *1850-1870*. Available at: <https://mechanics-trust.org.uk/history/1850-1870/>
4. The New Mechanics’ Institution Preservation Trust (2021): *Background*. available at: <https://mechanics-trust.org.uk/history/background/>
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9. British Listed Buildings. (n.d.): *Park and Dare Workmen’s Institute and Hall*. available at: <https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/300018064-park-and-dare-workmens-institute-and-hall-treorchy#YAsME-hKhPY>
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SANFORD HOUSING CO-OPERATIVE

Founded in 1973, Sanford Housing Co-operative is the oldest purpose-built housing co-op in the UK, with 120 tenant-members living in 14 houses and a block of flats.



Left: Sanford Walk
Top right: Sanford Mural
Bottom right: Communal seating over bicycle storage
source: Sanford Housing Co-operative (2020): *Home*. available at: <https://sanford.coop/>

A brief history of Sanford

In 1968, John Hands, author and previous Director of the Government’s Co-operative Housing Agency, and a group of students and housing activists, were exploring ways to take control of their housing situation and alleviate the isolation of urban life.¹ Together they founded Student Co-operative Dwellings (SCD), with a vision for housing co-ops designed and operated through mutual aid, that followed the seven principles of the 19th Century consumer co-operative Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers:²

- Voluntary and Open Membership
- Democratic Member Control
- Member Economic Participation
- Autonomy and Independence
- Education, Training and Information
- Co-operation Among Co-operatives
- Concern for Community

However, the group had no funding, and there was a lack of support organisations and legislative framework for housing co-operatives in the UK. The housing market was also dominated by feudal landlord-tenant relationships and individual ownership.³ Lobbying parliament and looking for land, SCD campaigned persistently for five years. In 1973, the government finally agreed to a pilot project on a former industrial site between two

railway lines on Sanford Street in Deptford, Southeast London.⁴ SCD registered Sanford Co-operative Dwellings as its own entity and media pressure led the Borough of Lewisham to officially give SCD the lease of the site shortly after. The Housing Corporation and another organisation provided the finance, and Sanford opened in 1974. A year later, SCD transferred collective ownership of the buildings to the members. By the time Sanford Housing Co-op held its first general meeting at Lewisham town hall, the co-op had made a significant surplus because the members had provided many of the services and management functions over the year.⁵

The co-op now makes up Sanford Walk – a self-contained street of fourteen houses, each occupied by between eight and ten tenants. It is intended for single people who are allocated their own bedroom and share a kitchen, living room and three bathrooms. There is also a block of six self-contained flats, including a bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. With the standard rent currently approximately £65 per week including bills and council tax, the co-op is popular with students, artists, musicians, writers, and architects.⁶

Sanford today: a model low-carbon housing community

In 2001, the Sanford community made the collective decision to switch to sustainable energy, and a group of residents did a crash course in environmental technology at the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales. A feasibility study for an eco-efficient retrofit was paid for by the Energy Savings Trust (EST) and the chosen scheme, costing approximately £900,000, included solar hot water systems, roof and wall insulation, biomass boilers, and new kitchens, ventilation systems and double glazing.⁷

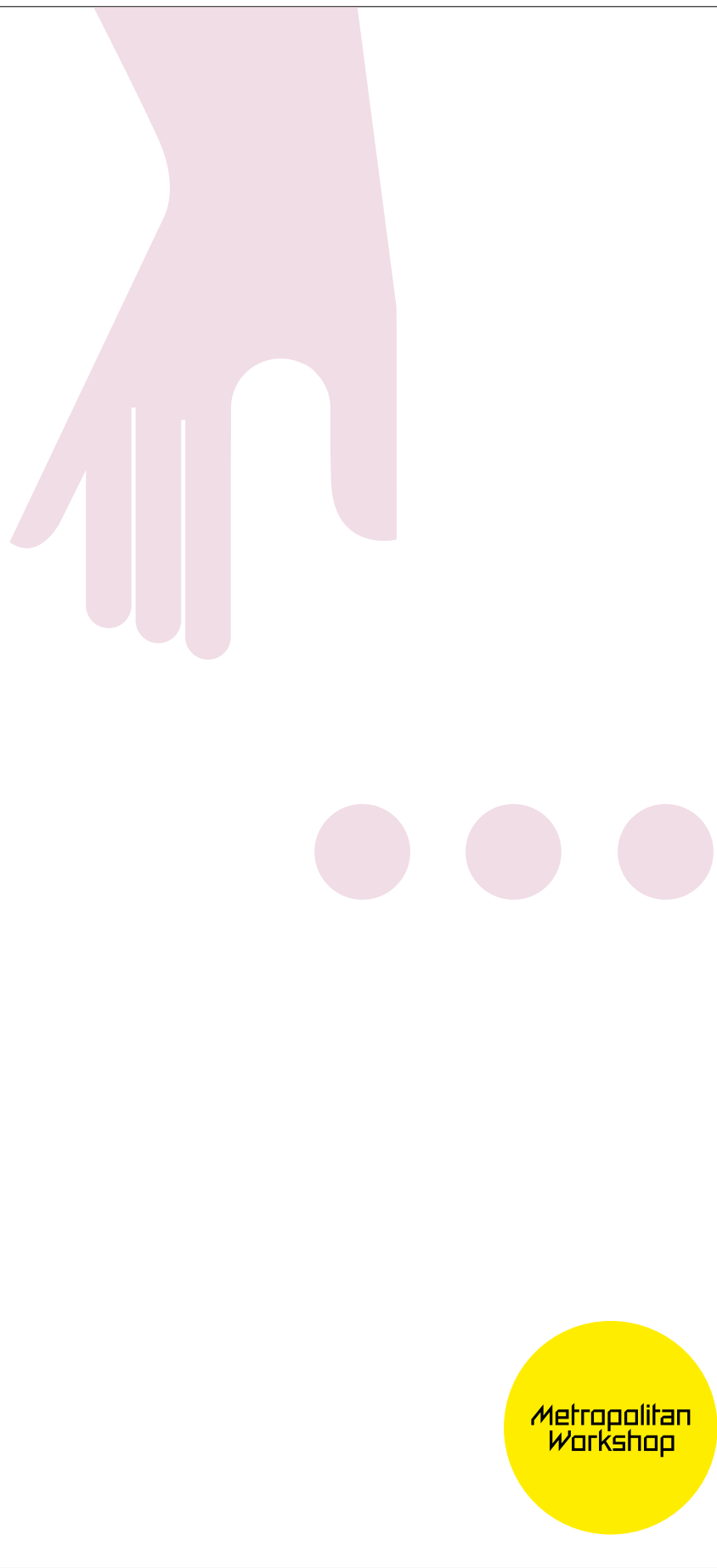
Under the C60 programme, the EST and EDF Energy contributed £125,000 in grants, while Lewisham council offered consultants. However, most of the money came from the co-op’s £600,000 cash reserve.⁸ Residents also decided to increase their weekly contributions by £5 to fund a new mortgage with a sustainable bank called Triodos. The result of the retrofit was that between 2003 and 2009, carbon emissions had reduced by 60%, and fuel bills lowered significantly.⁹

Further resident-initiated art and environmental projects have come about since, including a bike shed made from wooden railway sleepers which doubles up as a stage and organic roof garden.¹⁰ While the soil was previously too polluted to grow food, earth has been brought in to create vegetable

gardens, fruit trees, and a system of ponds. In this way, it has become an exemplary case of both socially and environmentally sustainable resident-led models of housing.

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5. Mcdonald, J. (2020): About Sanford.
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PEOPLE POWERED PLACES



Acknowledgements

This is Metropolitan Workshop's second issue of Prospects and it represents a renewed commitment in the studio to practice innovation through practice-based research, dissemination and collaboration between our studios in Dublin and London, and our collaborators beyond.

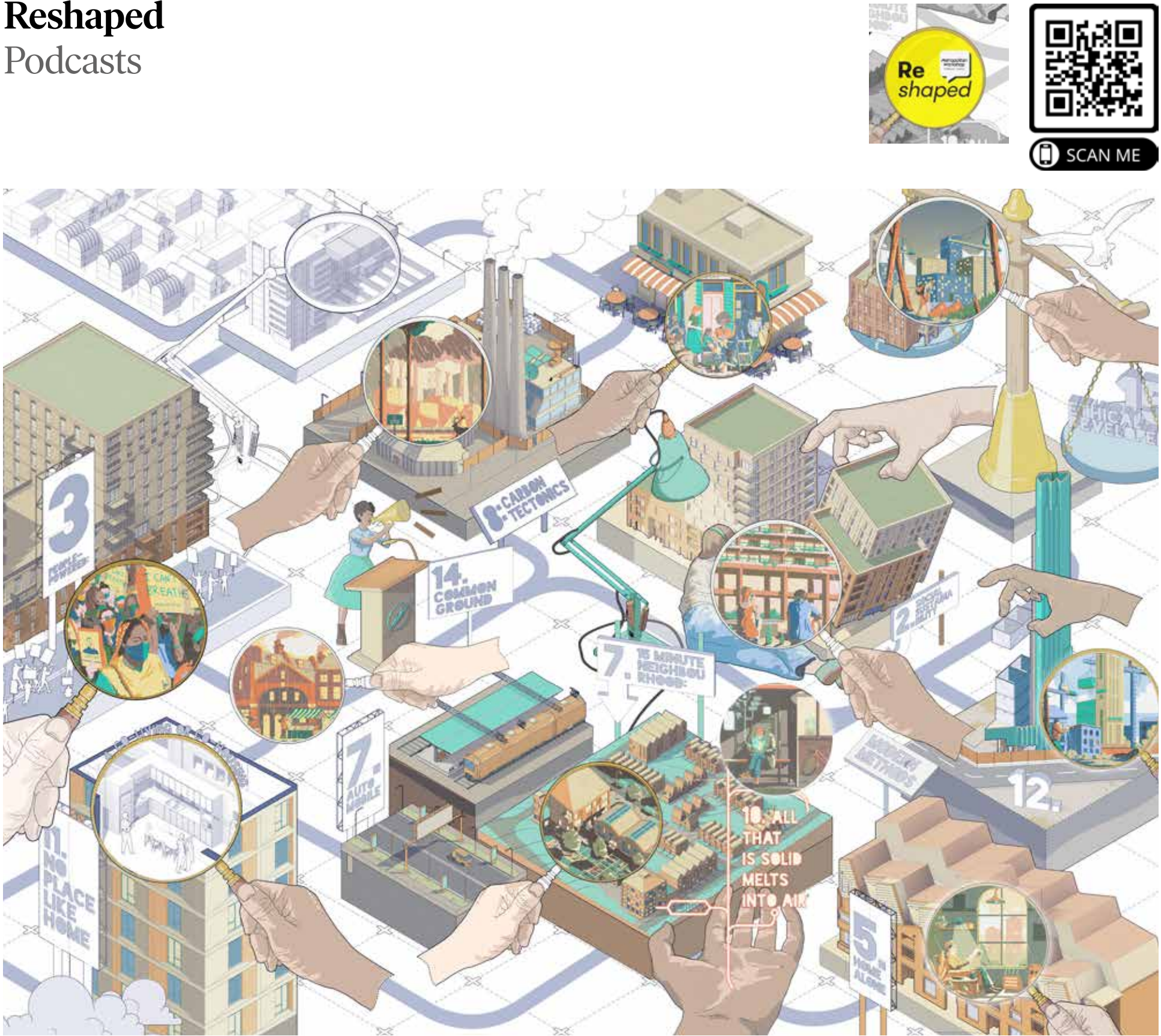
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Reshaped Podcasts



Metropolitan Workshop

14-16 Cowcross Street, Farringdon
London EC1M 6DG
t. 020 7566 0450

Tower Two, Fumbally Court
Fumbally Lane
Dublin D08 N2N8

info@metwork.co.uk
www.metwork.co.uk

