

Action Report for Alternative Housing Conference 2004

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The Alternative Housing Conference 2004 hosted a variety of speakers from a variety of agencies and perspectives, offered insights into the current challenges and situation in UK housing. The subjects included empties, land-value taxes, Limited Liability Partnerships, squatted and co-operative social centres, countryside planning among others. I encourage everyone to listen to the uncut audio to get to grips with many of the ideas and concepts suggested, and form your own opinions and ideas. However, the following report has been drafted from those speeches; looking at incorporating those ideas into a unified overview of where Alternative Housing should consider heading.

The Report has been divided into the following sections and sub-sections:

Empties

Sustainable Development

Independence

Financing:

Limited Liability Partnership

Loanstock

Pool of Capital

Storm's Executive Agency

Networks:

Urban and Country

Co-ops and Squats

Co-op and Co-op

Alternative Housing and Other Agencies

Conclusion

Empties

Toby Lloyd mentioned that there was not a housing shortage in the UK, considering the amount of derelict properties and 2nd homes. EHA put the figure of derelict properties at over 700,000, mainly situated in Low Demand Areas in the North of England.

This is an opportunity for expansion by bringing these properties back into use through Private Sector Leasing (PSL), just as many temporary co-ops and Registered Social Landlords (RSL) currently do. Temporary co-ops are an ideal training ground for new co-operators and co-op groups. They allow time for co-operative groups to form, build up community bonds and effective working practices. If the group works, then they can then look for more permanent site for a co-op or look at the possibility of purchasing their "temporary" co-op.

Co-ops need to think about working with Empty Homes Agency (EHA) to encourage Council's to use their enforcement powers to enable co-ops to buy up derelict property in the pursuit of increasing co-op stock for development. Building new co-ops, using co-

operative building firms, utilising social finance (loanstock, credit unions), with sustainable, low-impact features, is an opportunity to create a vibrant co-operative sector.

If the idea of paying landlords for derelict, poorly maintained houses galls you, then the other way to bring houses back into use is squatting them. This provides housing, stops degeneration of buildings and, in many cases, positive squatting enlivens surrounding communities. Mark's suggestion of creating a database of empties, available on the internet, and Action Milano's email "hotline" to report empties (a squat version of EHA's Hotline in London) are both ideas that should be developed here in the UK.

Sustainable Development

Sanford Housing Co-op's Carbon 60 project is an example and trial of what could be done to transform existing housing stock into energy-efficient dwellings. Sustainable Development is a key feature that will make Alternative Housing (AH) progressive, relevant and interesting (ie that is the provision of sustainable housing solutions for low income groups, with a strong community focus). Sustainable development is the provision/ evolving of facilities to enable energy efficiency, recycling, composting, urban gardening (remember Kropotkin), car-free, bicycle friendly living.

This ties in with Simon Fairlie's discussion of PPG7 and new legislation which allows sustainable building on non-designated building areas in the countryside, which offer low land prices outside planning monopolies. The Alternative Housing sector must be in a unique position to take advantage of this new legislation by having the experience and capacity to build sustainable developments, if it wishes to stop the countryside becoming either one big agri-business or gentrified toyland. Innovative building methods such as those employed by the Earthship projects can encompass exciting architecture, recycling and low-impact building.

Independence

John Lynn spoke about Clays Lane Housing Co-op's (CLHC) current situation regarding the Housing Corporation. It raises the dangers of accepting grants and loans from government bodies and the issue of secure land tenancy (ie freeholds). CLHC's problem has its roots in the 1970's explosion in housing co-op development and the grants (with strings attached) given out to set them up; they have come back to haunt the independence and principles of these co-operatives. Learning from this, if we intend to finance future development, it needs to guarantee a level of independence.

Financing

The following financing options should be developed and utilised for Alternative Housing expansion projects.

Limited Liability Partnerships

Chris Cook spoke about the Limited Liability Partnership as a tool for community land development. The basis of the theory is that all stakeholders have an "equity share" in a housing development. This share is a share of the revenue stream coming out of the rental income charged. The partners in the scheme (examples of partners include finance

partners (banks, trade unions), land partners (eg council)) do not have power in accordance with their number of shares, but the power lies with the active elements (in this case tenants, who are also partners) of the business, who manage the housing development and pay “rent” for the service. The idea is hard to fathom with our culture of credit and debt. I advise that you listen to Chris’s speech and read his theory to understand the concept a little better. The only way to find out the weaknesses of the theory is to put it into practise and see what follows. However, the potential for this idea is massive.

Loanstock

Al Jack and John Hall sang the praises of Loanstock, a great way of tapping into the potential of dormant/ under-utilised capital that lies with individuals, small businesses, churches, etc. Local groups and individuals can get involved in the financing of facilities in their communities, its an attractive saving scheme (up to 6% interest!), and gets those wishing to get something started mixing with and stimulating their communities.

Pool of Capital

Al Jack spoke about Rootstock attempt to persuade larger, more established co-ops to invest their Financial Reserves in Loanstock. This money would be a useful tool for new co-op setups, buying property and facilitating infrastructure development. However, Al admitted that Rootstock needs to professionalise in order to attract this type of finance and to fall into line with new Financial Services Authority (FSA) rulings. Al admits that we need to “make a stand”, instead of continually looking for loopholes in the FSA structure.

Storm’s Executive Agency

Storm Poorun spoke of an executive agency that would concern itself with a strategic overview for AH, promoting AH in the mainstream and helping secure property for community partnerships. There are organisations already in the field doing much of this work (and who needs another “agency” trying to pull things together?), but Storm’s view has validity in that there does need to be an idea powerhouse, facilitating (not mediating) networks, providing infrastructure for AH development (communications, internet), providing a front to attract investment, negotiating with larger organisations, identifying and lobbying issues that are directly related to AH’s future (land tax). The agency would not be a secondary co-op but an executive “trust” made up of stakeholders (Storm states that: “democracy is overrated”), but its only chance of survival would be to listen to those it was working with, make itself relevant, maintain trust and produce results.

There are of course debates on either side for top-down versus bottom-up development. Storm’s proposal is similar to the Student Co-operative Dwellings (SCD) of the 1970’s co-op development era. Although it had its failings (even by its own reckoning), it developed several co-ops that have housed several hundred people and still do (eg Sanford, Clays Lane). The weakness in the top-down approach is the lack of foundation onto which it sets the infrastructure of housing upon, namely the lack of social cohesion, understanding of mutual aid and grassroot activism that are stronger in the bottom-up approach. In Streets Ahead, a 1977 survey of “new building scheme” co-operatives,

found that “the impression gained from many tenants of ...Sanford and other co-ops is that they have not gained a feeling of ownership.” (Hayhow, David; Streets Ahead; Dame Colet House; 1977).

The answer lies in a compromise of sorts and a dynamic opposition of the top-down and bottom up approaches, working together to materialise their common aims (community empowerment) and finding creative ways around their opposing stances.

Networks

Networks are always a keyword in any of talk of development, but we will look at particular links that need to be made.

Urban and Country

When Simon asked “How many of you (the audience) think you will move to the countryside in the future?”, a good many of the audience raised their hands. City dwellers appreciate that living in the country has benefits (health, family, etc). We need to find creative ways to de-urbanise our cities without turning the countryside into a Barrett legoland.

One of these creative solutions was suggested by Simon, when he spoke about affordable, low-impact housing developments on agricultural land. Al Jack spoke very briefly about Radical Roots pamphlets on Agricultural Co-ops. Chapter 7 News (Issue No. 13)) has an excellent article on the futuristic Village of 2025, which is a vision of community-orientated, sustainable regeneration. These ideas inspire and are a blueprint for what could be.

The lack of interaction between town and country dwellers means that they seldom share the same issues and ideals. But essentially, the two areas are connected and there is a lot of scope for mutual projects, especially with a new migration to the countryside.

Co-op and Squats

Confederation of Co-operative Housing (CCH) has been developing closer links with Tenant Management Organisations (TMO); but there needs to be a return to the source of much of housing activism, the squat movement. In the 1970's, the squatting and co-operative movements were closely linked and saw many squatted buildings convert to co-operatives (eg Rectory House, Sumner Gardens and most of the east London co-ops). These two movements share an anarchist ideology of mutual aid and self-organisation.

Co-ops have access to resources such as finance, space, facilities, experience in more formal democratic management; while squats can once more demonstrate to co-ops the fundamental DIY, self-help and mutual aid culture, that many now lack. Both camps need to find creative methods to interact; form mutually beneficial projects and support and learn from one another. Hearing from both Grand Banks squatted social centred and the co-op run Cowley club, the similarities in aim and purpose and their differences in operation were very interesting (listen yourself to John Hall and Mark).

As in the 1970's, co-operatives can assist squats both in their eviction fights and assisting squats to purchase buildings should they wish. If there is a possibility of purchasing a building before eviction, squatters could either stay and convert to co-ops or move on to another building and so help create a chain transferring private, landlord property to community ownership. When a squatter became tired of being constantly moved on and wished to pursue a more stable lifestyle, they would have the option of joining one of the co-ops they had helped establish. This would mean that an exit from squatting would not be a "sell-out" but a transition from one form of activism to another.

In the "Squatter's Handbook" it states: "If squatting is to be meaningful these days, to more than just a marginalised community, and if it is to be more than just desperate measure for homeless people, to be escaped as soon as possible, it has to involve the needs and interests of others in our communities..." (Squatters Handbook 11th Edition; Advisory Service for Squatters; 2001)

Co-op and Co-op

One of the co-op principles states a need for co-operation amongst co-ops. But this needs to start happening again, between more traditional co-ops and Radical Routes co-ops, workers co-ops, food co-ops, co-op development agencies.

There needs to be a concerted effort of co-ops to mix, mingle and communicate; become informed about what is happening locally and regionally and consolidate it. Area co-op forums, networking, secondary co-ops need to be looked at again; more combined projects, priority to co-op businesses, creating creative relationships which are beneficial and make economic sense. It's a matter of reaching out and making vital contact, opening communication channels and keeping them open.

Alternative Housing and Other Agencies

The AH sector must make positive moves in working with agencies (eg EHA, Henry George Foundation), councils (even though they are crap), local government, small businesses and political parties. Alternative housing has a solution to sell, which is creating affordable, sustainable, grassroots housing; an aim which is similar to many other agencies, institutions and businesses.

AH can provide a comprehensive and well-thought out housing policy to pro-active left-wing political circles (eg Toby's land-value tax, Radical Routes' front-line experience, EHA's empty homes policies). Housing is one of our most important and basic needs, and an issue of current relevance. AH has the resources and vision to help establish a progressive, realistic, non-reactionary left-wing movement. Colin Ward bemoaned the fact that the Marxist and Fabian "...political left in this country invested all its fund of social inventiveness in the idea of the state, so that its traditions of self-help and mutual aid were stifled..." (Social Policy: an anarchist response; Freedom Press; 1996).

AH needs to attract investors such as trade unions, councils and local businesses to invest in such schemes as Limited Liability Partnerships, community finance pools, Loanstock for new projects. To expand we need to start working with groups not in the "activist

ghetto” and who we would once never have dealt with. This does not mean giving in to their demands but reaching a compromise, shrewdly negotiated, that is mutually beneficial and power balanced. The Worker’s Co-operative Handbook ends with the sentence “[Industrial Democracy] could hold the key to a new type of economic revival.” (Cockerton, Peter; The Workers Co-operative Handbook; ICOM Co-publications; 1986)

Conclusion

Looking around, one is confronted by the absolute lack of AH presence in the everyday world. There are new developments for a Barrats or Wimpy home, uninteresting and sterile architecture, office blocks without imagination or human touch, isolating, consumer malls and strips. One then asks, is there an alternative to this? Yes there is; but the alternative is tucked into niches and corners where it remains oblivious to the outside world. This situation will start to change; areas become gentrified, forcing affordable co-ops and squats out of their locations; co-ops will die out as the concept of mutualism fades; AH loses its relevance and is quashed by state and commerce, without a protest from the community.

If the AH sector would like to change the world or just provide a good quality of life without charging the earth, then it needs to wake up and start rethinking its strategy and ideas. Community action needs to develop and strengthen if it wishes to compete with the corporate enterprise in the provision of housing and services. It’s a lot harder to create the subtle, delicate fabric of community than the work-force of the hard master capital; but, as Mark said “a movement is about numbers”. Only by uniting in aim and purpose, consolidating our organisations and communities will AH flourish, attract interest, become a solution, diversify, develop, re-emerge and challenge.