Towards the Future: Building 'Neighbourhoods in Trust'

Reflections by the D&D editorial group and other contributors on the future of cohousing in Britain.

My boy was born today, where will he play?
Will he play in doors on his own, all alone?
Will he play in the road, with the cars?
Will he play in the park, far away?
Let us get rid of the cars.
Let us know our neighbours.
Let us build a community together.
Let us talk in the streets, with no cars.
Let the children play.
Let the adults play.
Let the old people play.
Let the children play.

[Richard Delorenzi,
Community Land Trusts conference, 2010]

T he contributions in this publication detail the manner in which the sentiments and aspirations noted above have been informing progress within the UK's cohousing scene – its innovations, its international context and its feedback from 'cohousers' on living the vision in practice!

To form a cohousing community is to create an essentially local setting where neighbourliness is consciously sought after, with all that this means in terms of day to day casual interaction, mutual support and countless small acts of reciprocity between people who live in close proximity. The

connecting theme of this book is that, in modern Western societies, this 'social capital' of neighbourliness has become harder to find and purposive action is therefore required to re-create it for the wellbeing of individuals and families and for the wider benefit of society, [...particularly] for older people, more tied to and dependent on locality...

[Maria Brenton]

Cohousing is very, very clearly such a *purposive action* – carving out a local balance for households to thrive in 'closeness' and privacy, each finding their own level of ease with what they find has been deliberately placed on their doorsteps. And it works! – in a host of different countries, and through many kinds of patronage, it delivers superb places in which people want to live, where children are safe to grow, and where 'caring' and 'sharing' are bywords for what has been built into the neighbourhood fabric. Even in the UK, where successful projects are only slowly coming into being, schemes are gaining awards, are being held up as 'exemplars' of sustainability, and are setting their mark for creating innovative and inclusive developments.
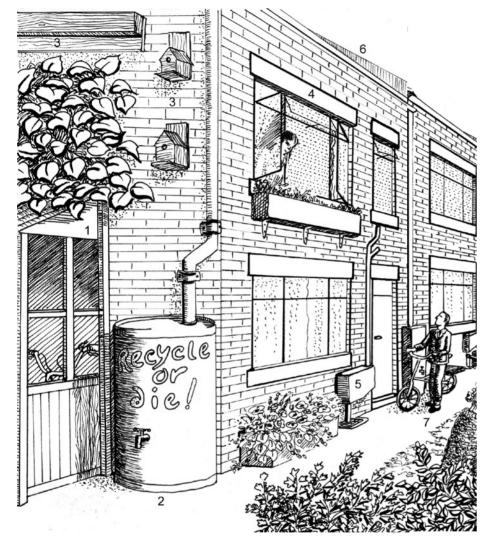
But it is not all unlimited success – all kinds of 'build' projects can come to grief and that has certainly been an outcome for some aspiring cohousing projects. Some groups have not achieved what they had hoped, even after years of hard efforts to find a site and bring in more members. And they disband when their frustration becomes unsustainable, and they see their vision being steadily suffocated. And if it has been difficult to carry some of these cohousing ambitions forward in the past, will there be aspects of the wider economic situation that impose even greater obstacles? It may be the intrinsic nature of 'free markets' that, besides their ups and downs, they contain a constantly changing set of '*opportunities*'. If so, the challenge to cohousing is to get to grips with what motivates policy-makers and opinion-formers, and to demonstrate its credibility for what it can offer to future plans for community and residential developments.

There is a major task to restore confidence in housing markets, change the current assessment of housing as a high risk investment, for both development finance and retail mortgages, and promote housing for its social and utility value rather than short-term speculation [….] an explicit aim of both

the previous and current governments is to enable the emergence of a significant 'self-organised' and mixed-tenure housing sector that can unlock social, environmental and economic capital, at the least possible direct public cost […] restoring confidence to the market to provide openings for complimentary models of subsidised or affordable housing based on cooperative and mutual principles, either in joint ventures or standalone developments.

[Stephen Hill]

The UK's current political and economic climate represents one of those occasions when Governmental concerns overlap with the concerns of economic markets and mainstream industry to stimulate viable business opportunities, along with local grassroots interests for what might happen in the future. In this case, these are all concerns about the fragile manner in which much recent housing and property investment has been undertaken, and the lack of 'sustainable' outcomes that seems to have been produced. At least for a while, there is a genuine readiness at senior levels to consider how local communities can be more centrally involved in shaping new developments, including an invigorated support for the mutual and communal route to local community development that intentional community groups have been quietly promoting over many years.

For over two decades Diggers & Dreamers has extolled the virtues of communal living. But this has largely been through the eyes of hard core communards who are prepared to share many facilities and live very closely with their fellow co-operators on a day-to-day basis. Sometimes this has been within big old houses in the country, sometimes within shared terraced buildings in cities. There has always been a realisation that this degree of communality is something of an acquired taste. The likelihood of a large proportion of the population suddenly – or even gradually – choosing to live in this way has always seemed very small indeed. But the baby should never be thrown out with the bathwater. The cohousing model – with its considerable degree of privacy as well as access to many shared facilities – supplies a way of living in intentional community which would be very acceptable to many, many more people. At the same time – when compared with the average new

Green Terrace – car free, converted terraced housing, illustration by Catriona Stamp.

1 Cycle store, built from recycled timber
2 Rain water catchment
3 Bat box and bird boxes
4 Upside –down living – kitchen/dining/living area upstairs, bedrooms downstairs
5 Grey-water collection

6 Solar water pre-heating
7 Commuter arriving home (via train and folding bike)
8 House with community facilities – office etc.
9 Wild-life-friendly garden, with pond, bird-feeders, shrubs for nectar and berries
10 Arbor cum climbing frame, with climbing plants, seating area and just-for-fun windmill.
11 Community compost bins
12 Fruiting hedge

build housing estate – it provides a huge step up in the base level of mutuality. With oil and other resources running out fast, the future for all of us is beginning to look very uncertain. It's clear that living within a supportive neighbourhood (where sharing is facilitated) could well turn an otherwise bleak existence into something quite pleasant. Cohousing communities will be streets ahead of everyone else on this and will have much to teach others.
So the sooner we have a larger number of examples in the UK the better. It is for this reason that Diggers & Dreamers is absolutely delighted at the current upsurge of interest in cohousing within this country and is very pleased to present this book of articles.

[Jonathan How]

Supporters of cohousing projects will be keen to point out that while ideas come and go for how UK society could undertake a sustainable 'placemaking' (such is the nature of different fashions in urban design), cohousing remains a solid set of practical and demonstrable principles for creating attractive and treasured local spaces. Even when the cohousing focus is upon creating a sustainable scale for neighbourhoods, this need not be seen as a draw-back to making contributions to larger-scale built environments, for larger areas can be laid out on a 'modular' format[1] where cohousing neighbourhoods are juxtaposed with other neighbourhood areas that could be designed on other sets of criteria – for example, as a traffic-calmed 'Home Zone', or as a setting for other 'eco-housing' units.

The potential fit together of cohousing designs and other kinds of neighbourhood design can also highlight the scope for cohousing projects to be used to generate confidence in wider proposals for residential development. Private sector developers in the US are already wise to seeing that members of cohousing projects collectively amount to pre-contractual customers with a clear stake in the property and design standards the developer wishes to be seen to promote – they are even using publicity about the cohousing neighbourhoods sited within the wider developments to help 'suggest' the quality of the other residential development being proposed next door!

The inclusive and egalitarian values of cohousing's approach to 'community-led' initiatives is not tied to

any particular tenure, nor reliant upon any one kind of finance: the UK's first schemes might have been led by 'private' funds but, as outlined in chapters above, its ability to establish mixed-tenure and mutually-owned projects can show how a group might now consider a variety of ways to secure 'inclusivity' and affordability:

Just as cohousing is defined to a large extent by conscious design and architecture, most schemes will remain unaffordable for many people until there is a financial architecture in place to allow rent, rent-to-buy, rent with equity or other schemes (like LILAC's pioneering model). Up until now, it has only been people who already own property who can join a cohousing scheme, but more diversity in financial systems will foster more diversity in the people who can participate in them.

[Bunk]

The 'self-organised' confidence and neighbourhood presence of UK cohousing projects has demonstrated sustained positive effects on local property valuations and a constant attraction to potential future residents, as well as demonstrating the ability to be accepted in time as an asset of the 'wider' local community, when social interactions organically and inevitably develop across adjoining neighbourhood and community boundaries.

While we find it very tempting to look towards chinks in official/Government policy that cohousing could slip into and neatly match itself with rhetoric about sustainable communities & the 'Big Society', we are very wary of government involvement in intentional community building. There seems to be very little evidence of any useful past constructive involvement from government departments in self-help-bottom-up-community-led initiatives, and plenty that ought to ring alarm bells for anyone contemplating engaging with the devilish intricacies of government bureaucracy.

From the bastardisation of the Garden Village movement through to the brief courting of community self-build as flavour of the month/year by the Housing Corporation and Housing Associations in the 1980's, the 'helping hand' of government has so often proved in the end to be the kiss-of-death. Why should we think cohousing would be any different?

It may well be an oxymoron that governments (national, regional or local), by their very nature cannot deliver anything that is genuinely community-led and bottom-up. If they want to see residents take control of their own housing they need to remove the obstacles that they themselves have put in the way and have the good sense to step back and let people get on with it. Please, please, please let's not end up with an official policy on what cohousing should be, could be or is.

So if the way forward is not into the arms of the officialdom – which way for cohousing? We need to build on the experience of the 'pioneer' cohousing communities; we perhaps need a group of alternative developers and architects who have specialist skills at delivering cohousing (both the hardware and the software); we need local planning authorities to be more creative when thinking about community engagement and planning; we need financial institutions to look at putting enabling packages together so that each new group doesn't need to renegotiate a deal with them; and perhaps most of all we need to realise that we really do have a tried and tested deliverable model of sustainable community and just get on with it.

[Chris Coates]

Advocates of the cohousing approach to neighbourhood-building will not be lost for what they can claim cohousing can deliver, given that there is much that can be paraded as success from a modest number of examples. If the incidence of such developments is slow in the UK, it is unlikely to be because cohousing is struggling to justify the benefits of planning and creating new homes in the collective context of the places in and around them, but more that this is still quite distinct from the predominant ethos of how most residential areas are being speculatively built and populated. Cohousing can in fact adopt a stance from the Community Land Trust movement to highlight what it always intends to create: '*neighbourhoods in trust, homes that last*'. It would be a fitting benchmark to carry forward as a challenge to those aspiring to high quality 'place-making' in the future.

Note

1 See presentation to Northampton Institute for Urban Affairs on "Integrated Sustainable Design Solutions for Modular Neighbourhoods", (2010)