

Housing, gentrification and socio-spatial dynamics

Reach Homes - A Critical Extension of Dwelling

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Abstract: This paper formalises a nine month engagement with REACH Homes, a small startup that is testing decommodified modes of construction, non-monetary forms of tenure, reusing construction waste, and alternative methods of land acquisition to critique and ultimately overcome the housing problem in the UK - from within. The purpose of this paper is twofold, firstly I will situate REACH within the housing crisis through a brief history of UK policies, whilst setting REACH apart from other solutions that call for a rejuvenation of public housing. Secondly I will demonstrate REACH's praxis through a selection of working examples that I have either been actively involved in or visited. These points allow me to argue that REACH reveals a holistic method for combatting the housing crisis which stops profit being extracted further up, or down, the supply chain; this holistic method is rarely being explored within housing activism.

Keywords: Decommodification; Affordable Housing; Alternative Modes of Construction

Introduction

Although autonomous spaces that occur simultaneously within and against capitalism were studied prior to 2008 (see Chatterton & Pickerill, 2006; Gibson-Graham, 2006), the 2008 crisis has been understood as a tipping point for these radical spaces, which have multiplied since in the global north (Berlant, 2016). On the one hand, austerity programmes decimated what was left of the social contract and, on the other, solidarity networks and living alternatives to austerity have manifested to fill this gap (Thompson, 2015; Arampatzi, 2016; Dalakoglou, 2016).

Despite the emergence of these experiments, a resistance to the financialisation of housing - the cause of the market crash (Marcuse in Brenner *et al.*, 2012; Harvey, 2013) - has been largely absent in the UK. Although there are examples, such as cooperative housing and eco-housing, these occur on a small scale and are generally considered one off projects. Although they still have a tendency to connect to other autonomous spaces and communicate their ideas to a wider society (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2006) they don't challenge the wider structures of housing. Also gaining traction in the UK is the community land trust movement (CLT) they strive for community ownership to fight against speculation and gentrification (Thompson, 2015). Powerful though they may be in their respective struggles, these movements rarely engage in a resistance to the financialisation of housing holistically; this means profit can simply be extracted further up, or down, the supply chain.

REACH Homes is a start-up Community Interest Company (CIC) on the outskirts of Sheffield. REACH aims to create the future in the present; from first glance it is clear that REACH is aiming to use new construction methods to provide affordable housing, but to see REACH as only a not-for-profit housing provider is to miss the wider point. For REACH, the construction of houses is a means to an end of undermining the whole system of housing provision. Construction should be seen as one action (albeit made of many others), it is the everyday reality that leads to a wider change.

Working from a one bedroomed house-cum-prototype (to date REACH's only built structure), REACH's existence provides a working example for alternative forms of land acquisition, design, construction, and dwelling; and we have ideas for ownership, dwelling past first occupancy, and end of life that we are keen to

make reality.

My research supports and explores REACH's critique to the financialisation of housing by understanding their actions as a critical extension of dwelling, in other words to critique housing in its current state we must explore not just how it is consumed but produced and reproduced as well. The purpose of this paper is twofold, firstly I will situate REACH within the housing crisis through a brief history of UK policies, whilst setting REACH apart from other solutions that call for a rejuvenation of public housing. Secondly I will demonstrate REACH's praxis through a selection of working examples. This paper will allow for a deeper understanding into how a grassroots solution to the housing crisis emerges, survives, adapts, and negotiates between market and non-market forces through trial and error, whilst advocating for a holistic approach to solutions to the housing crisis. Housing is a critical fighting ground, the site of social reproduction (Madden & Marcuse, 2016), a housing producer therefore plays a critical role in the production and reproduction of values. Removing the profit motive from this role enables new visions of the urban to emerge.

Dwelling on the UK

REACH's vision for housing echoes those of Turner (2017) and Ward's (1987) that evolved from their critiques of the 1970's onwards - alternatives to a dependency on capitalism and the state, in housing and society, must be sought. Autonomous housing enables dwellers to establish social connections, have control over their built environment, and undermine fundamental values in both state and privately owned housing (Ward in Turner, 2017).

In the late 1960s to the early 1970s there was a growing discontent with modernism within architecture (Aureli, 2013). Day (2010:219) believes that social housing was the key battleground that revealed the broken promise "*between the initial visions and the progeny of cheap developments that followed*" which "*provided a powerful image for a wider crisis in social confidence*". Above all it was a critique within the left of those who sought to reform capitalism by those who opposed capitalism altogether (Aureli, 2008; Deamer, 2015; Kaminer, 2016). Central to this argument was the notion of the plan, which was denounced by the radicals who opposed capitalism as embodying the alienation and social-control of the urban environment - which served only to create a hegemony of capitalist growth (Stickells, 2011; Kaminer, 2016). Accompanying this critique of modernism was a neoliberal market driven attack that appropriated the critique of the plan to call for a "*freeing of urban development from the constraints of planned society and a return to land and property speculation.*" (Kaminer, 2016:50). This attack succeeded in the destruction of the reformist; modernist middle ground, however the left critique was short of popular momentum, leading to a neoliberal hegemony of deregulated markets, and the reclus of the left to knowledge production (Aureli, 2008; Kaminer, 2016). The shift towards neoliberalism was accompanied by a fundamental change of logic towards the welfare system, the once progressive calls for 'autonomy' and 'self-reliance' which were originally used to critique the Keynesian welfare state from becoming too authoritarian were co-opted by neoliberalism to justify privatisation and competition (Brenner, Marcuse & Mayer, 2012). This enabled a succession of Thatcherite housing policies, including diminishing public housing stock, abolishing rent controls, deregulating the private rented sector, introducing buy to let, and giving housing benefits to subsidise private rented tenants (Bowie, 2017; Minton 2017).

Since then a series of subsequent UK governments have, either through neglect or by design, continued this trend. Housing policy since the 1980s has been focussed on public services being provided by the private sector and a retreat of government through an austerity agenda (Bowie, 2017). this trend can be demonstrated by comparing the years leading up to the Thatcher government which witnessed roughly 100,000 houses built by the state and 150,000 built by the private sector, and the years post the 1979 election in which although the private sector has remained largely the same, the state has barely built any (Minton, 2017).

Reflective housing policy

Turner (2017) argues against the notion that housing is an outcome of political assumption, housing policy including and succeeding the Thatcher government has been a vehicle to justify an austerity agenda (Bowie, 2017), demonstrating a far more Reflective relationship. The Housing Act of 1980 forced councils to diminish their stock by selling to tenants at a reduced rate; this policy was used not only for the state to gain support from the working class but also to cut a main funding stream from city councils - many of which were in open revolt (Holden, 2016).

The policies of the Thatcher and Major governments were supported through the Blair government (Bowie, 2017). The decent homes programme enabled the transfer of 200,000 council homes a year to housing associations which cut direct public investments into the social housing stock, causing commodification (Minton, 2017) as housing associations do not receive tax income.

The 2012 Localism act of Cameron's coalition created uneven geographical development by forcing families to accept the housing offered to them, often miles away from their social networks; If they refused the council was discharged of their duty to house them (Minton, 2017). The government also introduced the growth and infrastructure Act 2013 which allowed house builders to oppose planning obligations for affordable housing. The government's position was that deregulating the planning system was the best way to stimulate the housing market after the housing crisis (Bowie, 2017), which had seen a drop in construction of 68% in 2012 (Dorling, 2014). Instead this led to underhand ways for house builders to bypass most affordable housing production through viability assessments which have stipulations that for a development to be viable it must make a return of 20%. Even when affordable housing is constructed the definition for affordable housing was, and is, 80% of market rate, meaning an affordable house in London would cost £450,000 and £250,000 outside of London (Bowie, 2017; Minton, 2017).

These outcomes demonstrate housing has legitimised neoliberal policies where private businesses and landlords flourish in a climate of speculation and land banking whilst tenant's wellbeing is placed second to profit (Dorling, 2014) and this is legitimised through councils who have such little budget that they are competing against each other to woo private capital (Brenner, 2016). In the present, the linking of housing benefit to private rent simply means landlords can put prices up as the government has to pay, 40% of former council homes are now owned by private landlords, and between 2010 and 2015 the 5 biggest house builder companies saw a 480% rise in profit but they are still using viability assessments to claim that affordable housing isn't viable (Minton, 2017). Yet for tenants, due to the lack of social housing the current government's Housing and Planning Act 2016 marked the end of lifetime tenancies, meaning that social housing renters have to move to private accommodation within 2 to 5 years (Dorling, 2014; Minton, 2017).

Proposals

The Free market answer to this is for the further deregulation of the planning system - the argument being that loosening regulations allows developers to build smaller homes which will bring prices down, unfortunately this is stupidly simple. The UK housing market is primarily an Investor market which is different to a user market - investors attracted to the Extra supply which feeds inflation and speculation and excludes users (Minton, 2017), the extent to which it is an investor market is staggering, with Dorling (2014) noting that housing equity represents 61% of the UK's net worth. Reformists, such as Bowie (2017:39), call for:

“Expanding the programme of social housing, building houses as well as flats, and building in mixed tenure and mixed-income areas would enable access to social housing to be widened again to include more working households and reduce the stigmatisation of both the tenure and its occupants.”

But how is this different from what came before which was critiqued for being too centralised, alienating, and controlling rather than liberating (Ward, 1983; Turner, 2017)? This solution is not realisable in the UK at present which is still under increasing pressures from austerity measures. To cut this Gordian knot is to

acknowledge both the state's and private sector's failings, REACH Homes provides one proposal to this - constructing not-for-profit housing that is locally owned and managed; in this way critiquing both the private and public sector of housing delivery. This does not entail self-build communes that are cut off from society at large, Ward (in Turner, 2017) states that in order for social wellbeing within communities to flourish they require a degree of self-control, whether that be in management, construction or otherwise - autonomy is a way to stimulate social network development outside the project.

What I have learnt from REACH, and REACH has developed since my engagement, is that the key to undermining private development is to stop any attempts at commodification within the housing delivery system. If REACH was to just produce not-for-profit houses and sell them at a much lower price (owing to no profit being derived from the sale) the consumers could simply put them on the market at many times the price they paid. Conversely, if REACH was a decommodified home ownership scheme, akin to a CLT, then the people who built the houses would derive a profit from the buyers, and so REACH would have to charge more to residents to make up for the high price of construction. This is not to say that all of these functions need to be contained within REACH itself; engaging with groups such as CLT's can be a valuable way to build solidarity networks, enable reflective debate, and safeguard against any link of the chain from becoming dominant.

Within this paper I will explain how REACH undermines both state and private sector housing delivery through working examples as opposed to ideological statements; this praxis is key because it responds to a critique from reformists who claim that people who use slogans such as the right to the city don't provide working solutions (see Bowie, 2017). In the next section however I will briefly explain my engagement within REACH to differentiate the research undertaken in the PhD from the goals of REACH.

Methodologies

Since August 2018 I have been collaborating with REACH on a journey to at once understand and further their mission through an action research (AR) methodology that has seen me integrate into the team. My research is no less valid because I am a dedicated member of the team, it creates a different layer of legitimacy. I hold no notions of objectivity and am confident in vocalising my critiques of REACH precisely because I want them to succeed and it is only through a reflective praxis that this can happen. This section exists as a reflexive piece on my work with REACH, and to differentiate the future aims of REACH from the outcome of the research.

What we have collectively discovered through our actions is that solutions to the housing crisis need to be created holistically from proof of concept experiments that build into larger schemes. Although this is not something we intended to do, it is something that members of REACH have helped each other to understand. For example, Jon made it clear to me that maximising the use of recycled or upcycled materials in the construction allows us to undercut for-profit construction and critique waste in the industry, and I have raised the necessity of exploring protective covenants on the housing to stop it being sold for profit post first occupancy.

This discovery was not my specific aim when heading into the fieldwork, nor was it an agreed upon idea with REACH, it was something that emerged naturally. As Fals Borda (in McTaggart, 1997:109) explains, this research belongs to a different type of science "that of the common people's knowledge (popular or folk science) based on practical reason and communicative sociability"; I contend that it is difficult for 'popular science' to fit within the framework of a three year PhD (even then it was only possible through me being a, relatively, familiar face within the Sheffield activist scene). In order to make the fieldwork more productive therefore, I entered the field having loosely identified which groups I would be engaged with but without a defined research design. Action researchers could argue that as the research design was not co-produced then the project is not true AR (see Gaffney, 2008), however I have joined REACH in their struggle, designed a building, led meetings, created social connections, and much more. Rather than following a traditional AR approach - undertaking a proscribed intervention, measuring the outcomes, and implementing improvements (see McTaggart, 1997; Gaffney, 2008), I have applied my experience in design and architecture firstly to create a

less exploitative research project, then to become a part of REACH (an externality which has given me greater access into REACH), and finally to collectively critique REACH in order to ultimately improve it.

As such, although I may call it my research I am merely one collaborator, the person writing it up and connecting it to wider theories. I use the singular therefore to differentiate the outcome of the research from the future goals of reach, which I will refer to in the plural (for instance: I am revealing how REACH critiques housing production holistically, whereas REACH, or we, are attempting to provide non-profit construction methods to critique current housing provision).

REACH Homes

“What I’m proposing is something that’s just not happening at the moment. Everybody’s just throwing their hands up and saying ‘we need a solution to affordable housing’. The government’s best efforts are just not... y’know, there’s a lot of rhetoric and then I think there’s a lot of actual wanting to do something about it or acknowledging that they’ve got to do something about it. But they just don’t know how to do it. And because of the pound signs they’re just completely focussed on the money. The whole industry is unfortunately...”

- Jon, founder and resident of REACH Homes, 18/08/2018.

It is 2015. Jon, a retired police officer of 30 years, is sitting at the kitchen table with his partner assessing a model LEGO home, of their own design. They had been looking to move but couldn’t afford anything on the housing market when, watching an episode of Grand Designs on shipping containers, Jon decided to build his own.

“I costed this idea up with containers and was like ‘that’s less than ‘undred grand [£] for a 3,500 square foot house with atriums and a garage for Barry’s Ferrari’ he was 12 at the time, he still wants a Ferrari, he knows it’s got to be an electric one though.”

Realising his exclusion from the housing market was not isolated, Jon used the principles of the project as a method to critique traditional modes of production and residence. Thus REACH Homes was born. Operating out of Jon’s house-cum-prototype REACH ground’s its work through everyday praxis. Housing and austerity policies are why REACH started, not as an idealistic goal but because Jon, a retired police officer of 30 years, couldn’t afford a home on his pension. This section will explore two projects that REACH undertake and how these are representative of how they understand the future, namely:

1. The material supply chains for the prototype and how they critique waste in the construction industry.
2. The land agreement between REACH and Heeley City Farm as an example of non-monetary tenure.

Materials

“This is 84% [upcycled] were not gonna be able to do that at scale, well not to start with at least, ‘cos those logistic supply chains and getting all those kinds of stuff sorted out... it’s not gonna happen straight away. So we’ve costed up buying new and as environmentally friendly as possible, I wanna get away from using - ‘cos there’s a lot of recovered Kingspan sheeting on this - but anything petrochemical I want to try and stay away from; so we’re looking at developing a straw bale panel system that bolts onto the wall”

We look round the room and Jon speaks candidly about different objects and their origins, salvaged from the excess of consumer society. All the wood is reclaimed, the bedheads are old pianos, the panelling in the shower is from the counter of an Indian takeaway, and the Kingspan came from the roof of the Madina Masjid when they were redoing the dome.

- Jon and I discussing the prototype, 18/08/2018.

Materiality for REACH is a key issue, we have to use materials that are simultaneously cheap or free, recycled/upcycled or as environmentally friendly as possible, and easy to work with - all whilst looking as aesthetically pleasing as possible to legitimise our work. All this allows us to critique waste in the construction industry, question who has the right and knowledge to build, and undercut commercial builders.

- **Who's right?** - Once inside, the house - through its act of simply being - raises the absurdity of professionalised and abstracted labour in the construction industry. Small though it is, it is perfectly homely and designed to a far higher, and infinitely more personalised, standard than houses found on the glossy pages of estate agent brochures. The space resembles a studio apartment, I am greeted by a stylish kitchen of what look like reclaimed wood cupboards, with a lounge over to my right - laying claim to the glass facade, and a copper curtain rail with desk and raised bed behind. An alcove behind the kitchen hints at a bathroom. The high ceilings, large windows, and hardwood floor erases from my mind visions of dank shipping containers and is more reminiscent of a Nordic chalet.
- first visit, REACH Homes, 18/08/2018.

At base principles, REACH's prototype is a shipping container insulated with kingspan sheeting and rendered on the outside, spray foam and board on the inside - it is worth noting that spray foam is being ruled out from future builds and we will instead be using a blown wood cellulose product. Although the use of shipping containers may illicit condescension from the architectural community, Jon's lack of exposure to this snobbery has served him well in finding a material that works. For him shipping containers do not represent uncomfortable memories of first year projects, but instead are a cheap; upcycled building material, that require minimal techno-popular knowledge to work with, and that are not labour intensive to convert. All these points make the construction process easier for builders with no previous experience and REACH is one of those, having constructed the prototype with the closest relevant qualification being an NVQ level 2 in carpentry. The future of REACH, which is currently being tested through our first external project, is offsite production. Working with several modular factory partners the offsite construction technique means we can estimate a 2-3 week lead time on the houses. This is not as a method to flood the market with cheap housing that can simply be commodified but to build housing to a high standard, for minimal cost, that can remain affordable through working with CLT's; this method was only able to be explored through our simple construction method that proved the concept.

- **Waste** - The UK sends 100m tonnes of building waste to landfill every year - 25% of all materials on a building site - REACH wants to cut down on this through an environmentally conscious lifecycle. In the prototype we achieved 84% upcycled or recycled materials with panelling coming from a local restaurant and Kingspan insulation coming from the local mosque. Although insulation from the rooves of mosques is not a long term supply chain, we have reliable sources for upcycled wood, containers, and window frames and we believe many more streams will be discovered. For example, with the UPVC windows Jon told me how end of life recycling is an energy intensive process; as such manufacturers recycle the glass and keep the frames in their yards. REACH paid a nominal fee to acquire the frames, which are perfectly usable but second hand, and it has freed up space in the manufacturer's yard. This critique extends to not just waste in the construction industry but also regulations such as Passivhaus, which only measures the environmental benefits of a building from the moment of residence, not from construction meaning, for example, that although a

house may be environmentally friendly to live in it still could be using petrochemical insulation.

This critique of waste initially emerged from Jon's other business, the social enterprise, Strip the Willow which is a wood upcycling workshop and handily provides us with donated wood from myriad sources. From Strip's initial materials REACH's prototype was able to be created and now from the prototype REACH is looking to expand at scale. With a long term vision to undercut other waste management companies as a way to gain both materials and income. The issue we may face is the use of potentially variable environmentally friendly and upcycled materials needs to be reconciled with a standardised; modular construction process.

- **Undercutting** - The construction process, through upcycled materials and not-for-profit delivery, means that REACH has costed, not including the price of land, a one bedroom house for ~£35,000 and a two bed for ~£65,000 - a fraction of the market rate. The not-for-profit model means REACH's costs are the sum of labour + materials, with a contingency fund and any surplus being used to subsidise people who wouldn't be able to afford a home under REACH's scheme. As Jon bemoans, the big house builders have used their lobbying powers to remove both the Zero Carbon Hub in 2015 and the Code for Sustainable Homes, but REACH demonstrates that these goals can be achieved for a fraction of the price. Affordable housing doesn't, and shouldn't, be an excuse for bad design and construction, nor should it be only for people who are excluded from the housing market.

When I first visited the prototype I saw its quaint charm but was blinded by my own visions of architecture faux pas and assumed that because REACH used shipping containers that it wasn't about the glorification of the aesthetics of the material, but about a good material that will do its job. This idea has changed within me Jon has made it explicit that creating these beautiful communities with resident control instils a sense of ownership and pride that is currently missing from most UK housing projects - unless you include the jealous pride and gloating over the newest; unnecessary extension.

By looking at the role of materiality within REACH holistically a series of critiques emerge around construction waste, cost, and knowledge. Externalities that we did not expect include a critique of fuel poverty - the prototype has not paid a fuel bill due to its solar panels and insulation. We have also provided a critique of a series of policy decisions on housing and, as Jon reminds me, the prototype would be Passivhaus rated if only REACH could have afforded triple glazing in the initial build.

Land

Jon's proposal, to consider the social value of land over its financial value is simple enough, but we are so weighed down in the existing system of profit that it will take a big leap to get there. He puts the crisis of land ownership into clear terms, it's not just the "undeserving poor" anymore:

"35% of people, that the New Resolution Foundation Report the other month said, are never going to aspire to home ownership. Which is good if you're a landlord, cos you've got an income forever" Jon laments. "it's basically 12th century feudalism dressed up in 21st century clothing, with the veneer of democracy to make people think they've got a say, which they then don't listen to anyway, and even if, y'know, even if another government does get elected it still has to work on the same civil service and the same investors and the same lobbying groups, the petrochemical industry, the big builders."

- Jon and I discussing land ownership, 18/08/2018.



With little start-up capital, lack of access to developable land has been the key barrier for REACH. A Catch-22 has emerged whereby major funding that has been granted to REACH has been contingent on a piece of land to work on and certain local authority's will not allow a transfer of their land without the funding being in REACH's bank account. This section will explore REACH's non-monetary tenure at Heeley City Farm and the barriers we are currently facing in our search for the site of our first housing project.

- **Heeley City Farm** - The prototype is located at Heeley City Farm, the farm was started in 1981 and was born out of the community's fight against a proposed bypass that would split the neighbourhood. It is a not-for-profit charity and community centre specialising in energy and environmental efficiency, and health and wellbeing. Being a not-for-profit start-up, REACH had little financial capital to rent or buy land in the traditional way. Instead they approached Heeley City Farm and made an agreement that rather than paying for the land in money they would provide energy through their roof-mounted solar panels. This tenure model has been well received as the prototype uses only 10% of the energy of a traditional house, meaning it hasn't paid a fuel bill and has produced a considerable surplus for the farm. Jon also mentioned his presence in the prototype has reduced anti-social behaviour on site, including drug consumption and graffiti - these externalities were unimagined by REACH when the prototype was constructed but because the land transaction is decommodified neither party is losing out - the farm is not having to pay reach extra for the security benefits and we wouldn't expect them to.

This transaction is leading to many different decommodified land acquisition strategies for REACH, from opening up further discussions with local interest groups (who have land but no capacity to build), to explorations into formalising alternative tenure models. This is something I steered REACH's decision on, originally they were not concerned if their houses were sold on for profit as they believed that their job was to provide immediate housing. I explained that if an investor could buy a house and then immediately either rent it or sell it on the market they would gain a profit many times higher than our cost of production and therefore would increase speculation. This would mean rather than us combatting the housing crisis we would be simply exacerbating it without gaining the profit. To combat this, REACH are researching different tenancy models and contracts, such as LILAC Co-operative's model which is a Mutual Home Ownership Scheme which allows democratic control of the housing community and fixes the land value. This discussion was enabled through the decommodified transaction between Heeley City Farm and REACH; it forms the foundations to REACH's goal of undermining existing land ownership.

- **Barriers** - whilst the construction of the prototype has been a tool for legitimising REACH, wading through the quagmire that is the bureaucracy of the state to acquire land has been, and continues to be, arduous. A key example was a meeting that had been cancelled 3 times over a 3 month period. The meeting was for a small site in an estate that would allow REACH to build around twelve houses; positive discussions had been going on for around 18 months. Despite the delays we felt sure the council was going to allow us to develop the land. Here is an extract from their email post 20 minute meeting (19/12/2018):

"the Council does not feel that this site is the best location for your proposal given the proposed mix. The site is located in an area of low cost, low value and therefore there are a range of affordable and low cost housing options in this area which people can access. The Council is keen to promote more mixed communities and therefore it is felt



that this site is better suited to more traditional housing.”

Unfortunately, as one REACH member pointed out, this Council’s policy for ‘mixed communities’ appears to be building luxury five beds in poorer areas to increase land value whilst keeping affordable housing options away *“from’ posh end ‘v town”*.

Whilst we understand the council is under immense pressure from austerity cuts and has been put in competition with other councils for private capital we are also aware that much of the current affordable housing stock is severely dilapidated and not meeting environmental targets. We also found out, through sympathetic dissidents in the council, that Jon’s vocal support of the Sheffield Tree Action Group had been a factor in their decision to not grant us development.

This is one example but highlights a continued problem we have been facing, the private sector is profit oriented and trying to avoid building affordable housing, the state is unwilling to provide the land and is looking to entice private capital. For REACH to infiltrate these institutions we need to provide credible alternatives and become a legitimising force for change.

Heading back to first principles we realised that, apart from providing the basis for alternative ownership models, the primary actors in the prototype land deal, REACH and Heeley City Farm, were both community projects. Since then, although we have been continuing engagement with local state actors, we are focussing on the community sector, specifically groups that have land granted from previous councils and state actors. We find they have a tendency of wanting to do ‘something’ but don’t have the capacity (either in knowledge, time, or confidence) to build. We propose a shared vision for their land to be productive, for community benefit, and without profit being derived. This land development proposal critiques not only the private sector’s ‘race to the bottom’ bids for land development, resulting in poor design, but also stands against state bureaucracy which is impeding sustainable, truly affordable housing. This direction for REACH, borne out of the prototype tenure, provides a workable alternative for infiltration into the market system.

The Critical Extension of Dwelling

Through my time at REACH I have discovered alternative material supply chains, decommodified tenures, the difficulties of land acquisition, participatory methods of construction, and the series of barriers that need to be broken to allow these processes to be reproduced. Yet although we have grand ideas being tested on the ground, REACH is still in its infancy - carving our niche in the housing construction industry that is monopolised by a small cartel of companies, who use their hegemony to artificially keep demand for houses high in order to bypass any notion of sustainability or truly affordable goals (see the forced the closure of the Zero Carbon Hub in 2015 and the demise of the Code for Sustainable Homes). As such, we are having to reflexively consider our position on taking jobs. Our first external project, rather than being a house, is a meeting room for an environmentally driven building society. The phrase we are accustomed to saying is *“it’s not a house, but”* followed by several differing explanations of how this next project will allow us to refine our offsite building technique, secure new supply chains, and build a relationship with the building society who have potential capital at their disposal. Perhaps more importantly it is a method of legitimising our work because, although it has been a catalyst for our next project, Jon is forever explaining *“This is just the badly torn up sheets version”*, when referring to our prototype. This build is critical as many actors are waiting to see our outcome, we have attracted interest extending to both the House of Commons and Lords, a series of charities, and leading offsite production companies. Although REACH doesn’t have a housing project yet, we are influencing other parts of the sector. REACH launched the National Federation of Affordable Builders (NFAB) in July 2018 to provide a voice to SME’s in the construction industry so we can work collaboratively to promote the building of homes that are financially, environmentally, and ethically sustainable. The founding of and work on defining NFAB’s terms of reference, has meant we are engaged with national policy in several meaningful ways; Jon has recently contributed to the government White Paper ‘Neighbourhoods of the Future’.



These activities, that may appear strange to traditional activists, are necessary for a change in the UK housing situation. Instead of waiting for full blown revolution to topple the government creating the change to housing requires negotiations between REACH and diverse actors. For instance we want to demonstrate to developers that we can build the affordable housing stipulated to them by the Planning Department for cheaper than paying a contribution to Section 106 would be. This isn't watering down our values but a means to an end, a method to produce within, and against, the housing market. These homes could have protective covenants to stop them being objects of market speculation and this would require a negotiation with Council's to create new policy. Thus by looking holistically at the problem we consider modes of production, consumption, and reproduction that critique the current housing model whilst working within it - creating workable alternatives and demonstrating to a range of actors that change is possible. Though perhaps Jon has always known that the housing problem must be looked at holistically, 18/08/2018:

“That’s why it’s so important that this works, because we can show a completely different model and a completely different way of making a success out of building houses that people actually want, where they want them, so community led, involving people in the design and the place where they’re gonna be living. That gets round some of your more outside the box things your builders don’t normally take account of like mental health and wellbeing, crime, antisocial behaviour. If you’re building the right houses in the right places with the right things around them... you can do all sorts.”

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