Challenging Power and Proposing Community-led Plans

Pablo Sendra and Daniel Fitzpatrick highlight the importance of co-production in placemaking tools.

During the last two decades, many residents from social housing estates in London—owned either by local authorities or housing associations—have faced the demolition of their homes and, in many cases, displacement from their neighbourhoods and the breakdown of their social ties and networks of support. The bulldozing of the Heygate Estate in the London Borough of Southwark in 2011, the displacement of its residents, and the replacement of a housing estate with over 1,000 council homes with a private development scheme with very little social housing, illustrates the challenges that housing estates have gone through during the 2010s and which continue in the 2020s. We became interested in the strategies that residents are using to contest the demolition of their homes and propose alternative community-led plans, and developed a toolkit which we outlined in the book Community-Led Regeneration: A Toolkit for Residents and Planners.

In this article, we explain some of the lessons learnt from our work with communities, and how we expanded this knowledge through partnering up with community groups, namely Action Alton, and supported them in contesting the demolition of their homes.

LEARNING FROM CO-PRODUCING

Towards the end of the research project in 2019, we organised a workshop at West Kensington and Gibbs Green estates, where residents, the community’s organisation and a mix of strategies have saved the estate from the bulldozer. The workshop brought together many residents facing demolition across London, plus community groups, organisations and individuals.
supporting the residents. We organised breakout groups to produce evidence about several topics. One of these was community organising, which we had found to be one of the most effective tools in resisting demolition and proposing alternative plans.

We also realised that another important strategy was developing a community vision co-produced by residents. Some campaigns have called it a Community Plan while others have called it a People’s Plan. It is important to clarify that these are different from a Neighbourhood Plan. A People’s Plan or Community Plan is not an official planning document, but a community vision that residents put together, in many cases with the support of planners and other professionals. A People’s or Community Plan can influence the shaping and production of other formal planning schemes.

In some of the case studies, where residents had succeeded in influencing decision-making in their neighbourhoods, they had both a good community organising strategy and had elaborated a People’s Plan, as was the case with West Kensington and Gibbs Green estates. In our experience working with residents from Alton Estate, these two strategies have also been instrumental in their campaigns. The key lessons from working with them were understanding the existing power dynamics and social infrastructure used for effective community organising, and developing agency for shaping decisions and policy-making.

CO-DESIGNING THE ALTON ESTATE
PEOPLE’S PLAN

The Alton Estate is a council estate in Roehampton, London Borough of Wandsworth. Built in the 1950s by London County Council, it became one of the icons of British modernist architecture. A large part of the estate is Grade II* listed and it has been featured in films like Fahrenheit 451. However, the estate has been facing regeneration for the last 20 years. The most recent plan – now scrapped by the local authority – was to demolish around 300 homes and replace them with around 1,100 homes. This scheme did not involve listed buildings, but it did involve buildings of architectural significance, such as Allbrook House.

The masterplan for redeveloping this part of the Alton Estate was a joint venture between the London Borough of Wandsworth and the private developers Redrow. In August 2020 Redrow pulled out of the scheme due to the commercial uncertainties. The Conservative-led council at that time had planned to appoint another development partner but due to the change in the political majority following local elections, this never took place.

UNDERSTANDING POWER

A local group of residents under the name Alton Action, had been working for some time on sharing and addressing the concerns around the proposed regeneration, developing a campaign against the demolition and existing proposals. We met this group when they were considering the option of doing a People’s Plan. This seemed a useful step in developing a counter proposal and as an opportunity to understand existing power relationships at a local level, look at the sites that were considered important as social infrastructure, and examine the sorts of networks that existed.

Alton Action organised an early online workshop with a community organiser. This was useful to create a community generated map of organisations, networks, businesses and community groups in the area. The workshop developed a map with this information and was also a space for people to tell stories about the local area.
identify the different community groups that existed, and how they had evolved, flourished, or waned in influence. The stories allowed for an exploration into the fabric of community groups and networks that defined the Alton Estate. The map became a valuable resource for the Alton Action group to be able to carry out outreach and dissemination, and to invite a wider set of community actors to the next discussions.

This process of mapping and understanding existing social infrastructure included community organisations, their activities and their capacity to reach different sectors of the population, the spaces where the residents meet, as well as more generally the physical spaces where people gather and interact. These factors are often overlooked in the planning process.

AGENCY TO SHAPE DECISIONS

The workshops held after these initial meetings about community organising strategies and mapping were the main part of the co-production process of building and designing an alternative community-led proposal in the form of a People’s Plan. There were a total of nine workshops with residents of the Alton Estate, which explored different themes for co-creating the People’s Plan. These included understanding people’s experience of the neighbourhood, the condition of the existing housing, the existing social infrastructure, the biodiversity and open spaces, co-designing proposals, the heritage and history of the area, the planning context, and the possibilities of retrofitting for a better environmental performance in the buildings.

Each specific theme developed an aspect of the plan, but overall the process of co-production did more than develop a document and initiate a process. Through the discussions, what was also developed was a stronger sense of agency amongst the group of their role in being able to shape local decision-making as well as policy-making processes. The workshops were also a learning and knowledge exchange process. Just Space, an alliance of community groups, hosted a workshop to explain some of the London-wide policies related to estate regeneration and other relevant aspects; and the PhD researcher Sahar Nava organised workshops to discuss the environmental implications of different options for regeneration.

The process of co-designing the People’s Plan came in parallel with a community organising process developed by Alton Action, in which the group gained a sense of agency along with residents’ support. Originally, this was done online due to the pandemic, through connecting with other local organisations and getting involved in local activities. Once restrictions were lifted, Alton Action started hosting public events in person, including exhibitions of the People’s Plan, presentations and a petition. Following local elections and a change in local government majority, the council announced it was cancelling the demolition and instead was going to explore alternatives.

This change of approach demonstrates the value of campaigning. Although the decision was related to the change of the political party in office, the residents’ campaign also helped to visualise the problems with the demolition and redevelopment scheme and to show that other alternatives were possible.

Therefore, the Alton Estate People’s Plan is both a product and a process. It is a 155-page document which brings together co-produced evidence and proposals, looks at the impact of demolition and redevelopment, and proposes an alternative scheme based on retrofitting the existing homes and community spaces, as well as building new homes and social infrastructure through infill development. But it is also a process that started in summer 2020, and which is still ongoing, through which residents have managed to self-organise, create a new resident-led organisation and partnerships with other organisations, learn about planning and regeneration through knowledge exchanges, and influence decision-making about the place where they live. The elaboration of the People’s Plan is not intended to put forward a fully designed scheme, but to influence decision-making and for residents to come out with a collective vision of what they want for their neighbourhood.

THE TOOLKIT GROWS

In 2023, the situation is different from 15 years ago and it would be more difficult for redevelopment schemes like the Heygate Estate to take place. This is in part due to community campaigning in defence of social housing in London during the last decade, which has contributed to shaping policy at the metropolitan level. The London Plan 2020 includes specific policies on the need to replace social housing like-for-like in redevelopment schemes, and to consider other options before demolition.

The Mayor of London also introduced...
In July 2018 the condition of having a resident ballot to receive funding for building affordable housing.

Just Space, as a network, had a strong presence in the Examination in Public of the London Plan pushing for many of these changes. Local authorities and housing associations now have to consider other alternatives to demolition, but the default option is still demolition.

The Community-Led Regeneration book is not just about presenting alternative to the redevelopment of housing estates. The main objective is to enable genuine resident participation in the development of regeneration proposals. There can be proposals that do not involve demolition, but that can also be problematic if they are not explored in partnership with residents. New homes should not come without addressing the inadequate quality of existing stock and the need for refurbishment for current residents.

Genuine resident participation also requires the recognition of how to bring in the views of the community groups, as well as more widely those not involved in community groups. We need to go beyond the consultation processes of participation which place residents on the lower rungs of Arnstein’s 1969 eight Degrees of Participation ladder.

Residents should be able to shape the physical plans for regeneration, but also propose, own, use and help to run the infrastructures they use, as well as shape decisions about aspects of the local economy relevant to the scale of the estate.

We also explored ways to share and disseminate knowledge co-produced with communities. Distinct types of knowledge, such as the subjective and the local, have an important value. Finally, the growing concerns around the climate emergency led to discussions on the technical specifications and materials needed for a retrofit which could adapt existing housing for more efficient, lower energy use, and to cope with increased heatwaves.

These additional elements can be added to a growing toolkit, which can help in the development of stronger People’s Plans and contribute to residents gaining agency to contest imposed planning. As we emphasise, they help to build a stronger process where power relations are better understood, and the agency of residents to take more control is further developed. They can also help planners supporting community organisations and those working in local authorities to better understand the needs of communities and involve them in regeneration schemes from the design of a brief onwards.

Dr Pablo Sendra, architect, urban designer and Associate Professor, The Bartlett School of Planning, UCL

Dr Daniel Fitzpatrick, Lecturer, The Bartlett School of Planning, UCL with a PhD investigating mutual housing models in London and their governance.