

Finding Space to House Urban Communities.

In what way should we respond to a climate where housing owned by local councils is considered either a safety net for the worthy poor, to be managed on a shoestring budget, or an asset of high value ripe for sale? Funding housing association tenants right to buy schemes using local authority owned housing assets against a background of a dire housing shortage and ever rising prices seems discordant. I am seeking to explore other better solutions to housing need.

My research focusses on examining unconventional sites, owned by local councils, on housing estates in order to understand whether they could provide an opportunity for community self-building projects. The sites are currently garages, pram sheds, and market-stall stores which are invariably underused and forgotten spaces.

The area chosen for study is in Hoxton where modernist housing blocks are often laid out with highly rectilinear geometry which results in small surplus spaces with no clear use. The larger buildings are also surrounded by clusters of lower rise structures, often one storey high, which have the potential to be built up higher providing potential sites.

These sites present a number of challenges. It may be possible to build above a row of garages, a single storey community centre or a storage area for market-stalls. Inevitably there will be some discussion and possible resistance amongst existing residents about the consequences. Increasing the density of urban areas in inner London adds pressure to already crowded neighbourhoods. More people mean more demand. It is however generally accepted that higher density living eases the provision of services, provided they are increased to match the rising number of residents. In *Cities for a Small Planet*, Richard Rogers makes a strong case for the sustainability of high density urban neighbourhoods. 'If we want to reinforce our neighbourhoods and grow sustainably then London needs to create communities that offer and affordable and humane quality of life'.¹ This implies an urban diversity which can be reinforced through different types of housing activity within the monolithic, council-owned housing estate.

Buildings or sites whose uses are ambiguous, such as small vacant areas, are problematic. They may be locally valued and their ownership may be unclear. The cost of developing sites with existing uses is high and access to build is often difficult. Community self-building potentially helps to overcome some of these difficulties. I have assumed that the housing produced will remain in the hands of those who live nearby, whether they be the sons and daughters of existing residents or those in housing need in the neighbourhood. Additionally the production of the buildings is intended to provide learning opportunities as well as some form of sweat equity to the final users whether that is in reduced rents or a larger equity share in a shared ownership scenario.

To date site-finding has consisted of walking the area and identifying possible locations. On first inspection there are many such locations worthy of a more scholarly investigation. In considering the potential to develop a site there are a number of significant facts to record. Inevitably the size, or area of any plot is important as well as how high it is reasonable to build. Ownership is also key as sites which are privately owned may need to be compulsorily purchased. Sites owned by local councils may therefore be more straightforward. Neighbouring uses and rights to light provide further potential restrictions as well as those imposed by the planning system.

¹ Richard Rogers and Philip Gumuchdjian, *Cities for a Small Planet* (London Faber and Faber 1997), 118

My initial investigation into public reactions to a proposal anticipates discovering who is interested in community self-build and their likely skills. The appetite amongst potential builders and occupiers will need to be understood to make the project credible.

The current proposal for an initial pilot investigation consists of using a market stall to attempt to engage with future community self-builders. A large drawing showing a potential self-built development will be displayed in a tent like structure on a Saturday market pitch in Hoxton Street which is at the heart of the study area. The market has the added advantage of attracting 70% of its visitors from the local N1 postcode area.

The drawing will show a range of activities taking place which might be undertaken or learnt by those involved in the project. These will consist of manual skills like carpentry, plastering, plumbing, landscaping and electrics as well as more pastoral skills like childcare and the provision of refreshment for workers. Visitors will be encouraged to label the activities in which they might participate. The labels should then visually show the level of interest in each activity. Different colours or numbers on the labels should be used to determine demographics of the participants. Information about the participant including their postcode, occupation and age will need to be ascertained at the point of supplying the coloured label and the data subsequently collected from the drawing.



Potential 'vacant' sites in Hoxton, London (Bill Hodgson)

The stall will also be used to engage visitors in some construction activity around its built enclosure. A simple frame will be provided with a roof to keep the drawing and the visitors dry. The walls of the frame will be clad with timber, for example, during the course of the day, by visitors, to provide an interactive attraction and allow participants an introductory experience of a building task.

Any outcome of such an event will only be a beginning in what will be a complex series of investigations. Depending on results future public engagement events could be used to discuss the location of possible sites within the neighbourhood and to begin to understand what is required to undertake some potentially facilitated community self-building projects.

Ultimately the project aims to encourage the local authority, London Borough of Hackney, to consider seriously whether sites which are currently regarded as without value can be brought into viable housing use as a consequence of the additional value provided by community self-builders.