

# The Housing Question Reimagined

by Matthew Thompson

Matthew Thompson is a research fellow at the University of Liverpool, where he is currently digging into the hidden history of municipalism and cooperative development in Plymouth, Preston and London.

IN *THE HOUSING QUESTION*, Karl Marx's comrade Friedrich Engels famously derided Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and his anarchist followers as mere 'bourgeois reformists' – utopian dreamers working in vain to improve the lot of the working class through self-help experiments but failing to take account of the structural dynamics of capitalism. Thus the housing question was framed by Engels as a debate torn between, on the one hand, a Marxist argument claiming "the solution lies in the abolition of the capitalist mode of production and the appropriation of all the means of life and labour by the working class itself" and, on the other, an anarchist perspective ascribed to Proudhon contending that small-scale co-operative initiatives in which new forms of social organisation are tested out through grassroots experimentation can reform capitalist-state structures from within.

An age-old debate commenced between radical-revolutionary and utopian-socialist solutions to the housing question – that is, how to resolve the scarcity, inequality, deprivation, exploitation, and alienation of life under capitalism. This is the question I seek to address in my new book *Reconstructing Public Housing*.

It explores contemporary and historical examples of precisely the kind of collective housing experiments that Engels would have dismissed as naively 'utopian'.

Utopia is, of course, a concept coined by Thomas More in his 1516 work of the same name to denote a 'good place' but whose Greek roots also connote 'no place', suggesting *Utopia* was a satire about the impossibility of materialising any utopian vision. As a stubborn utopian, I wager that the ultimate solution to the housing question is not to sit back and wait for the Revolution in some distant future but instead to seek multiple, partial, incremental solutions that prefigure – and thereby potentially bring about – a different society in the here and now. Such a utopian perspective – so alien to old-school Marxists' all-or-nothing logic – is shared by a range of anarchist, feminist, and 'commonist' thinkers.

## Seeds beneath the snow

Small-scale experiments in co-operative living based on quotidian practices of mutual aid are, the 'anarchist planner' Colin Ward memorably described in *Anarchy in Action*, "like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state and its bureaucracy, capitalism and its waste." If carefully cultivated and given the nutrition to grow, such seeds hidden within the 'cracks' of the dominant power structure might eventually break open this structure from within.

In analysing capitalism we can all too easily fall into the trap of what the feminist political economists JK Gibson-Graham critique as 'strong theorising' – a negative, paranoid, conspiratorial perspective reducing all phenomena to expressions of some fundamental threatening 'thing', these days usually neoliberalism. Such 'reading



Playful expressions of utopian urbanism in Granby, 2017



**Left** Houses on Cairns Street renovated by Granby Four Streets CLT, 2019

**Right** The Granby Street Market on Ducie Street, 2015

for dominance’ blinds us to diversity and ironically reinforces the status quo, dampening and discouraging non-capitalist or post-capitalist possibilities. Gibson-Graham put a post-structuralist spin on Marx’s dictum ‘to understand the world in order to change it’: “To change our understanding is to change the world, in small and sometimes major ways.” They call for ‘weak theorising’ that can ‘read for difference’, more attuned to emergence, possibility, and creativity.

With Gibson-Graham as our spirit-guide, we get a clearer view of the institutional plasticity of capitalism – performed into being through everyday practices as much as it appears to us as enduring structures. We can also bring to light all those diverse alternatives other than class-based wage labour that remain invisible to strong theorising: non-market relations such as gift circulation, mutual aid and volunteering; and alternative market relations such as co-operatives, municipal enterprise and social enterprise. In terms of housing, various alternatives have been pursued by squatters, homesteaders, self-builders, and co-operators – as Colin Ward has revealed in *Cotters and Squatters: The Hidden History of Housing*.

### Liverpool’s hidden history of co-operative housing

Inspired by Ward, I set out to unearth Liverpool’s hidden history of collective alternatives. I was astonished to discover that, in the 1970s, fuelled by tenant protests over poor housing conditions and the violent displacement entailed by the council’s ‘slum clearance programme’, the city gave birth to one of the largest and most imaginative housing co-operative movements in Britain if not Europe – Liverpool’s so-called ‘Co-op Spring’ or ‘Co-operative Revolution.’ And

Colin Ward’s ideas, a seed planted in fertile ground, proved vital to its flourishing.

Ward’s radical manifesto for ‘collective dweller control’ influenced the development of Britain’s first new-build co-op to be designed, developed, owned, and managed by its working class residents. In an interview with David Goodway in *Talking Anarchy*, Ward recounts the impact of his 1974 book *Tenants Take Over*:

“The proudest moment of my housing advocacy was when the Weller Street Co-op chairman, Billy Floyd, introduced me at a meeting by waving a tattered copy of *Tenants Take Over* and saying: “Here’s the man who wrote the Old Testament... But we built the New Jerusalem!”

Weller Street led the way in a new kind of co-op development with unprecedented levels of resident-led democratic decision-making in all aspects of housing – replicated across Merseyside to produce some 50 co-ops mostly still functioning today. In being generously funded by state subsidies, supported by professional development agencies, and rehousing public tenants in need, the new-build co-op movement was heralded at the time as a possible (but ultimately unworkable, thanks to Thatcher) paradigm shift towards Public Housing 2.0. This represents a prototypical example of the ‘public-common partnerships’ now on the new economy agenda.

### Riding the waves of history

In reconstructing Liverpool’s housing history, it struck me that such movements came in waves whose force was heightened by the swell created by the last. Historical waves deposited resources for activists of the future to salvage from the beached wreckage of past struggles and use afresh. Local cultural practices of co-operation



Assemble's Granby Workshop, 2015

and community organising developed by the co-op movement provided just such a depository of stored energy and practical wisdom for Liverpool's contemporary Community Land Trust (CLT) campaigns. Collective memory of co-operative campaigning implanted in place the seeds that would eventually flower when the climatic conditions were once again favourable.

After a long dormancy, from the 1980s to the 2000s, collective housing activism was reactivated in 2011, the year of Occupy and global 'protests of the squares' – and when Granby Four Streets and Homebaked CLTs were established. These are amongst the UK's first projects to utilise the CLT model for urban regeneration and local economy revitalisation. As a form of collective ownership of land and assets innovated in the American Civil Rights movement for black empowerment, the CLT model has proven brilliantly transferable to contexts of urban decline and disinvestment, where residents are facing threats of displacement from large-scale state-led redevelopment. In both Granby and Homebaked, anti-demolition campaigns have evolved into positive visions for CLT alternatives to rehabilitate derelict buildings as permanently affordable, community-owned co-operative housing and incubation space for a new democratic economy.

The housing question debate has also resurfaced down the decades. The next round of this boxing match, in the 1970s, pitted Marxist Rod Burgess in the ring against Proudhon's successor, the 'anarchist architect' John FC Turner. Turner's advocacy of 'user

autonomy' – derived from the self-organised 'autoconstruction' of informal settlements in South America that he'd witnessed in the 1960s – were deeply influential on Colin Ward's 'collective dweller control', which of course inspired Liverpool's co-op movement. Turner's central insight was that the means are just as important as the ends; that housing should be seen as a social activity, a process of dwelling – *housing as a verb* – as well as an object or material commodity.

#### From NoWhere to NowHere

In Homebaked and Granby, co-operators and commoners, guerrilla gardeners, and community homesteaders are transforming urban space and local economies through immersive methods that are *intensely* – not future tense – utopian; embodying precisely this holistic, dynamic sense of dwelling as a verb.

Building on Weller Street and the 1970s co-ops, Homebaked have employed radically participatory methods of democratic design; and Granby is being regenerated by the architectural collective Assemble through a 'do-it-together' process they call 'community homesteading'. While Homebaked emerged of a Liverpool Biennial public arts project to reimagine the terraced house, called 2Up2Down; and Granby Four Streets grew out of 'guerrilla gardening' activism that transformed a derelict neighbourhood into a horticultural commons – together, they articulate a common vision to rehabilitate not just housing and public space but the entire local economy.

Homebaked CLT's 'family' now includes the Homebaked bakery co-op and Homegrown, a food growing and craft brewing collective – with plans afoot for further community enterprise development. Assemble have capitalised on their 2015 Turner Prize victory for Granby Four Streets – the first architectural or housing project ever to win the national art award – to set up a social enterprise, Granby Workshop, employing local artists in architectural craft manufacture. The monthly pop-up street market that attracts hundreds of visitors from across Liverpool is now being given a permanent home on Granby Street, part of plans to revitalise this once-bustling shopping artery.

This is the realm of philosopher Henri Lefebvre's 'experimental utopias' – exploratory, grounded, prefigurative experiments that transform social relations in everyday life, not through some revolutionary event or visionary horizon. Lefebvre distinguished 'utopian' (concrete explorations of the possible) from 'utopist' (abstract, transcendental visions of an ideal city). Intriguingly, in answer to the question of whether he was an anarchist, Lefebvre is renowned to have replied "no, I'm a Marxist, of course, so that one day we can all become anarchists!"

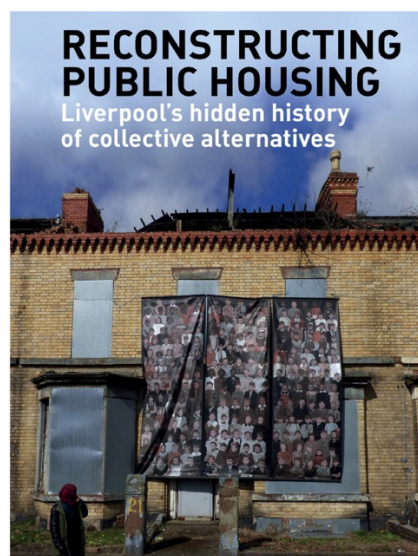
A playful temporary art installation now fronts Homebaked's terrace row whilst it awaits rehabilitation. On each of the first floor's boarded-up windows are stencilled big colourful letters that read: N-O-W-H-E-R-E. In a playful reference to Thomas More's coinage of utopia out of the Greek *ou-topos* – nowhere – the artist Daniel Simpkins invites its (mis) reading as NowHere. What better way of signifying utopian transformation in the here and now; the immanent (and imminent) sense of prefigurative change?

### Replicating experimental utopias?

Yet Granby and Homebaked are exemplary arts-led projects which have succeeded on the back of attracting significant state support and philanthropic funding – and because they are so extraordinarily creative. The question remains how to replicate and scale up such experimental utopias without having to reinvent the wheel every time, while also sustaining their democratic spirit and avoiding the trap of bureaucratic and capitalist co-optation.

In *Reconstructing Public Housing*, I explore these challenges and make practical suggestions for activists and practitioners. Amongst the most important enablers are technical support and knowledge sharing hubs at the city-regional scale – just as they were for the 1970s co-op movement. The Liverpool City Region Community-led Housing Hub has recently been set up with funding from Power to Change – hot on the heels of hubs in London and Leeds. Another exciting initiative is the newly-established Liverpool City Region Land Commission (of which I'm a member) tasked with coming up with radical recommendations for how publicly-owned land can be better used to generate commonwealth.

Such public-common partnerships – with the local state investing resources into common associations for the shared democratic governance and expansion of urban commons – are a promising innovation. Ultimately, if we are to make extraordinary experiments like Granby Four Streets and Homebaked more ordinary features of how we own and manage land under capitalism – to move us closer towards its transformation into postcapitalism – we need the support of the state as much as the creativity of commoners. In order to expand commoning, we need to radically prefigure new state institutions that are actually up to the task.



*Reconstructing Public Housing* is published by Liverpool University Press and is available as an open access title at the LUP site.