



# Protecting the Right to the City in the UK:

## Urban Development through Community Land Trusts

Supplement July 2014 by Jez Hall

Original report April 2014 by Owen Dowsett and  
Jez Hall

Prepared on Behalf of Shared Future CIC

For the UN-HABITAT World Urban Forum 7

April 2014, Medellin, Columbia

### 1) A SMALL OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

In this supplementary paper I seek to add some context to our main paper on Community Land Trusts. Hopefully placing it in a wider context, and bringing in some new voices and experiences. Much is anecdotal, or rather linked to my own story, and exploring the evolution of social action in urban settings. It finishes with more personal perspectives on the wider topic of our right to act in certain ways in our city.

The United Kingdom has a population of around £64million citizens, and is made up of the countries of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The UK is known as a centre for the world banking system and its market led economy has seen it remain a globally significant ex-colonial powerhouse. The UK remains on the fringes of Europe, a close ally of the US and a proponent of free market growth based economics. This did not make it immune to the banking crisis of 2008, which led to a rapid shrinking in public spending. Alongside, counter-intuitively, increased focus on the virtues of public austerity and free market economic models.

The UK is also a highly centralized state with weak local government and a dominant national public sector. Housing, Welfare, Education, Transport, Policing and Health are all fundamentally driven by policy set in London. This means rapid disinvestments in frontline services. Local councils have few powers to raise and spend locally and carry statutory responsibilities beyond their ability to deliver. Meaning many state owned buildings and services are being either privatized or closed. Especially within the regions, which rely to a greater degree on economic redistribution yet have seen their funding decrease disproportionately. There are some minor success stories in public assets passing into the 'quasi private' hands of co-operatives, social enterprises and community land trusts. Yet the UK remains split by three big divides;

Especially relevant for me, as a non London resident, is the **north/south divide**: that has seen the London metropolitan region grow significantly in the last 50 years, arguably at the expense of the rest of the UK. A real world divide in terms of income, employment, life expectancy and property ownership is reflected politically; in the strength of the Conservative party in the south of England. Whereas the Labour party is doing better in the north, in Scotland and in Wales. In 2014 Scotland will be voting on whether to formally split and become a separate country, outside the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland has its own unique political culture driven by the history of the 'Troubles'; bitter legacy of marching bands, street-fighting, military re-occupation and armed rebellion, enacted between loyalist, republican and nationalist forces over most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with lots of added religious conflict in the mix.

Second is the **property divide**, which sees a bloated property bubble, most extreme in the South East. Those on good incomes have few ways to enter the property market, particularly if younger first time buyers. Rents follow the high prices and property ownership has become a speculative investment. A situation made worse by perverse housing benefit rules that inflate private and thereby social rents. Landlords inevitably seek

to maximize income from their tenants and this has created a 'lost generation' living with their parents into their 30s and beyond. Or as one of the up to 400,000 mostly young people who have no registered address, instead 'sofa surfing' around their friends and acquaintances.

Third is a growing **income divide**, with a widening gap between rich and poor. Many recipients of welfare are working families but trapped in the cycle of low wages and high housing costs. There is a cost of living crisis, with weak growth in wages in retail or manufacturing trades. The service industry has bounced back from years of economic stagnation, but this has been often through creating poorly paid and part time zero hour contracts. Further reducing people's ability to make ends meet. This process is long term and few solutions to inequality exist in a market led economy where privatization is the predominant answer. Demographic shifts towards a more elderly population puts further pressures on the public sector, so it seems almost at breaking point. The next 10 years will see irreversible changes in society, in services and in local governance and it's not certain we are asking the right questions, let alone finding the best answers.

In this context, and under pressure, activists seek new forms of collective housing, new ways to create real grassroots, accessible, sustainable solutions that make cities work for people. They pop up everywhere. They go under many labels. They rarely directly but often implicitly refer back to ideas that are articulated by Lefebvre. It has to be acknowledged there are few examples in the last decade where the political debate refers to the specific concept of "the Right to the City". It is mainly in the academic world where the references to Henri Lefebvre's work exist.

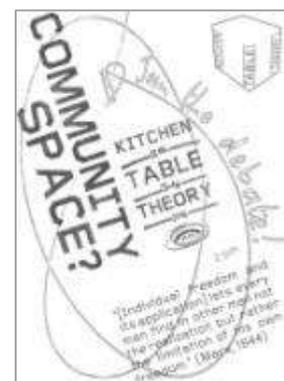


However by chance a few weeks ago as I walked to my local rail station through a dark underpass I found a chalked message. Using the active local social media in my community, it's strength and vibrancy honed in recent successful community campaigns to save the local swimming baths and library, I quickly found the 'artists' were from a local reading group, closely connected with the campaigners for community facilities, who had been reading Lefebvre's book.



They then followed up this action with a 'kitchen table' conversation asking 'what is community space'. An attempt to redefine the local community within a new framework of rights and social action.

This meeting took place at the weekly community led outdoor market, which had recently reclaimed a derelict parking lot as a vibrant local resource. A



project that was supporting local producers, making new friendships and raising the profile and confidence of the community. Where this particular 'Kitchen Table' conversation might lead is uncertain, but does show that things connect up in surprising ways.

Below I will take a personal view on how the strands to 'our right to our city' are embedded in our 'counter-culture'. Taken from partly from my own journey through living in the city as a social activist, and partly through the words of others (thanking here the input from Giovanni Allegretti and the views he gleaned.)

Before considering those I'd like to reflect that there are no national policies, programs or judicial decisions to resuscitate, diffuse or deepen the concept of 'rights' to the city. However there are some that focus on a watered down version. One that in a general way focuses on citizens 'responsibilities', that define the limits of power and promote the removal of 'entitlements'. These top down initiatives might be called by names such as localism, neighbourhood management, total place or community rights. Some make a nod to the importance of community assets, or a new approach to urban planning. But they are generally swamped by market inspired 'developments' and herald creeping privatisation of open space. The devil is always in the detail. But first some more anecdotes.



Yesterday I visited Subrosa, the Manchester Social Centre; a new autonomous, not for profit community café and meeting place that has recently opened in Manchester: You are encouraged to come and swap information, eat food, or browse the free library. I stayed for a chat.

Subrosa speaks specifically to a number of recurring themes from the 1960's, the 1980's and on into the 21st century social movements like UnCut and Occupy London. Squatting, travelers and migrant rights. Anti-capitalist protest, intentional cooperative living, self-build. And participatory protests like Reclaim the Night (marches advocating for safer streets for women) and Critical Mass (cyclists processing in large numbers to claim their rights as road users and present their more sustainable transport model). These mobilize all kinds of different people in activities that feel more like spontaneous political carnivals, without any obvious instigators. The strands of political countercultures are rich and complex, and throughout them runs a thread that unites them... a common concept of "our right to take action in our city."

Subrosa acknowledges its link to an earlier Manchester Social Centre, The Basement, (see <http://thebasement.clearerchannel.org/new>) that finally closed around 2008. The Basement was founded on radical cooperative principles, and being generally a squatted property moved sites over the years.

The Basement itself links back to squatter



communities of the inner city district of Hulme, that flourished in the 1970's and 80's before regeneration to hold in the 90's. Hulme has seen many transformations over the years.



The latest Hulme is now a modern urban 'mixed development' of affordable social housing, private developments, retail superstores and gentrification. Re-born on a failed 1960's council estate, itself built on the 19th century workers terraces of the original Hulme. The 60's Hulme of brutalist concrete blocks was later to become full of temporary lets, student overspill, squatted flats.

The underused parking spaces (few tenants had cars) became temporary home to rootless traveler communities that came and went with the season. When the developers eventually moved in their occupants were herded into ever tighter spaces.

Some residents worked together in the face of gentrification and built exciting new models of social housing like the cooperative managed yet publically funded "Homes for Change" (known as the yellow bricks). Below timber clad eco-homes the yellow bricks are workshops and café's, and the community that live in it remain the hub and an inspiration for other 'positive' developments. Like the nearby Hulme Community Garden. A project that reclaimed vacant land from the council and developers to create a green oasis in an otherwise heavily urbanized landscape.



Others went to live in the (one-time) tenant management-led Redbricks, with their edgier radicalism and nod towards more active resistance. The Redbricks spawned a new generation of overtly political initiatives and a host of imaginative projects. Some short lived and in response to specific issues like parking, rents, tenure or the closing of local services. Others built around new social innovations. New ways to live.

Redbricks tenants groups installed a pioneering open source broadband network, tapping into emerging 'hack-lab' skills, to create a digital community that enjoyed a higher service and bandwidth cheaper than those in neighbouring new developments. They set up new community gardens. Residents tried retrofitting grey water and



other environmental systems, and experimented with the best self installed insulation.

Others formed social enterprises, co-operatives and campaigns that now reach far beyond a few blocks of second generation housing, survivors of the latest redevelopment. Tackling issues as diverse as food, housing, waste, transport, green space, even linking mental health and climate change. All echoing the big 21<sup>st</sup> century globalised themes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century city. I suppose, though I didn't stay that long leaving before the big changes occurred I was one of them, a radicalized southerner, coming to Hulme as a student, and emerging with a changed attitude and a passion to act for social justice.

These may be some personal anecdotes from my own journey, but they seek to show the debt paid to successive generations of campaigners and the recurring tensions between people who seek to privatise or to collectivise the city. One of the more permanent sites within Hulme area was its military barracks. Hulme has always been on the edge of the city centre, and from Hulme barracks, one day in 1819, there rode out the soldiers that perpetrated the Peterloo massacre.

A peaceful demonstration for wider suffrage held on common land (ironically facing enclosure) ended in an attack on the innocent. Over 500 were injured and around 15 killed in the cavalry charges. The Peterloo massacre was a stepping stone towards the socialist and cooperative movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and thereby links into the counter culture student demonstrations and civil rights movements of the 1960's.

Jump to the late 1970s and 'race riots' set fire to much of the remaining old retail 'high streets of Hulme and adjoining Moss Side, and led to a sea change in the attitude of the local council. Its arguable these riots were a direct result of failings in public housing and urban development and in turn precipitated more change. The 'regeneration cycle' repeated with selective demolitions, the building of a big new police station, the proposed sale (and resistance to the sale) of key public assets, inevitable land grabs by developers. Then, onward into another full round of wholesale re-development, the inevitable shrinking of remaining public 'commons', and breaking up of only recently established families, cultures and communities. Ebbing and flowing, but ever a drift towards ever tighter, more private space.

So the story of our right to our city is not an easy one to tell. What happened in Manchester, and its counterparts in London, and elsewhere in the UK show much still needs to be done. This is reflected in the cautious comments of a political activist in London, veterans of similar urban struggles recently interviewed by Giovanni:

*"I am not sure if the "Right to the City" concept can have a future in the UK. First of all, in a tradition coming from the Common Law, the word "right" is not that appealing. Even the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) movement or other movements whose struggle is centred on the improvement of individual rights, do not use such a term ...Words like "fairness" or "equality" have definitely more impact on people.*

*The second problem is related to the world "City". Here, in London, the City is just a central part of a larger agglomeration. Nobody, when it comes to urban struggles in London, really*

*thinks about London. We fight against speculative developments [on our home patch] in Hammersmith or against flagship projects which lead to gentrification. But we barely concentrate on a London-wide struggle... London is a city of cities too different in terms of cultures and the economy to deserve a common unitary fight...So "city" is not a very communicative and attractive flag.*

*Movements in Britain are very concrete and realistic. They promote deep and long struggles on their living environments, but usually their goals and the places where their actions concentrate are limited...We want to be effective and see the outputs of our action soon; we go straight to the point but our ambitions are often limited.*

*Relating different and complementary things on large platforms is not very typical of the English-way-of-doing urban struggles! When networking happens, it is also often limited to single-issues: right to housing, fights against gentrification or against that specific real-estate project.... Too large goals seem scary, somehow, because they do not attract, they do not communicate properly with citizens, so they tend to remain confined into small elites"*

*"There is another weakness which prevent the expansion of the "Right-to-the-City" concept, and it concerns the carriers which tried to spread such a key-word in Britain. My impression is that those who tried to work with this concept were often too much linked to the academic world or to small radical groups of intellectuals. And those people are always seen as eccentric, as queers. Their struggles are barely our struggle...In the end it is just a concept, why care so much about it? Concrete struggles are the important thing".*

*"But there is a possibility of change. A new window was opened in these days by the People Assembly Against Austerity (<http://www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk/>) which marked an important turning point towards a future shift in urban struggles. This is not only because it grew up from a large networking of different movements, but mainly because its work had an important pedagogic objective: that of teaching common citizens to understand a word – "austerity" – which up until six months ago was not-understandable, and for that reasons was used as a final threat by politicians of all colours...*

*The Assembly undertook a pedagogy of awareness, so that the majority of people now know what austerity is about, about cuts, about deepening inequalities. Now that word scares no more the common citizen, we can fight its contents.... Maybe it can happen the same with the Right-to-the City in the future, it is just a matter of educating people".*

My personal response to the statements above are mixed. The first is to agree that the concept of the whole city is hard for people to absorb. They might think globally, or watch the drama of the national political debate, but how that manifests in community action is often in the very local. In issues as prosaic as parking or littering, or sometimes more contentious issues such as the resistance to 'fracking' for shale gas. What was noticeable was how the People's Assembly campaign was sidelined. The Assemblies focus became organizing a national march against austerity, held in London in summer 2014. 50,000 people attended, but it was totally ignored in the national media.

These micro and macro patterns of influence, reaction or rejection in neighbourhoods play out in two fundamental urges;

- To Privatisise: To protect one's own backyard and to scorn people who we perceive despoil what is ours. Reflected in calls to move on travelers, ban immigrants, evict anti-social neighbors, install CCTV. Even occasional vigilantism, but generally including calls for more robust policing and enforcement of property rights.
- To Collectivise: The common bond in action, forming residents groups, setting up community businesses, land trusts, publishing local histories, campaigns for better urban design, producing informal public artworks and reclaiming wasted land.

A little story of how this dilemma, this tension between private and public ownership is playing out almost in my own backyard. In my neighbourhood is a 'secret lake'.

It doesn't even have a name yet. A post industrial reservoir that fed a 19<sup>th</sup> century bleach works. Closed many years ago the site became derelict and nature invaded, reclaimed the space, forming a pleasant urban lake. All hidden behind an abandoned railway line and the 'tip' (the council waste recycling site). I have lived locally for 25 years and never heard of it. It was a hidden local gem 10 minutes on foot from my door.



Over years, hidden from public view, local fishermen took up residence and stocked the lake themselves. Teenagers broke in to drink, light fires, throw stones into the water. Doing what teenagers do. Such informal use stayed quite limited, as this was essentially well hidden private land. But slowly the fences decayed.

It's said that once the private owner tried to re-develop the site. But environmental surveys showed rare protected newts had moved into the lake. Development stalled and the fences collapsed. Informal tracks leading into the site now look like established footpaths. Recently the secret lake came into wider local awareness through conversations on social media... like within the group formed out of the political campaign to save our council facilities described above.



What was immediately pointed out was that as private land no-one was picking up the litter dropped by the informal users. The site was both 'beautiful' and 'a complete mess'. Sparking off other local campaigns around littering a fairly spontaneous community action took place. About 50 people congregated and cleaned up the lakeside. Over 50 sacks of rubbish were removed by volunteers in just one hour. Homemade signs encouraging greater civil responsibility were erected. Local youths looked on, perhaps a little bit uncomfortably.

In a small way the community organisers were 'exerting' their 'right to the city.' And were regulating the behavior of the previous informal occupants. But is the new visibility of the site now the greatest potential risk to it? If I was the private owner, seeing my property becoming 'collectivised', a new commons, my urge might well be to resist the invasion, to rebuild the fences now, before it is too late.

We will see if the next step in this mini-drama is a community reclaiming ownership and the land reverting in perpetuity to informal self managed common use. Or become protected under the 'wing' of the state as a formalized country park. With by-laws and rules on lighting fires; the fate of other nearby ex-industrial land. Or be eventually developed into private, tidy, fenced and defensible homesteads, like much of the latest Hulme.

As land prices start to rise again, someone is going to suffer, somehow, somewhere. Is it going to be the local young people and fishermen, squeezed off their hidden playground? The newly confident 'community champions', engaged in a perpetual struggle to self govern themselves and everyone else? Or the legal owner, dispossessed of their title? The cycle of urban development, decay, decline, re-valuing and re-colonisation is an ongoing one. In the process truly 'free spaces' continue to be squeezed out.

I'd like to finish this supplement by focusing on its link back to Community Land Trusts, the main subject of this article. In his research Giovanni Allegretti records a leading academic with strong ideas on rights to the city in the UK:

*"Community Land Trusts (LCT's) are becoming growingly important, but as with all the counter-capitalist streams are hard to become popular. We would like them to be a wider reference for anti-capitalistic movements, but at present they are still not. And the movement itself is not so strong. Many power structures which act as a reference for urban struggles in London are like "The London Forum" which can congregate a very conservative old-fashioned movement which sometimes fights against symptoms of wild capitalism, but never cast doubts on the causes, on the oppressive system that originates those effects.*

*In such a panorama talking about Land Value Tax, as is happening through the big Land Value Taxation campaign seems much more effective and fruitful... On this issue there is [a task] to raise awareness, too... In fact, while in Brazil talking about a "landless" is very attractive because slums are so widespread, and it makes the land issue so real, in Britain the structure of land is something invisible. So, anything like LCTs, whose innovation is strictly referred to the structure of land ownership, is not immediately understandable. [What] is needed to make people aware that with no land they have no capital ... The Labour Land Campaign is trying to be incisive in such a direction.*

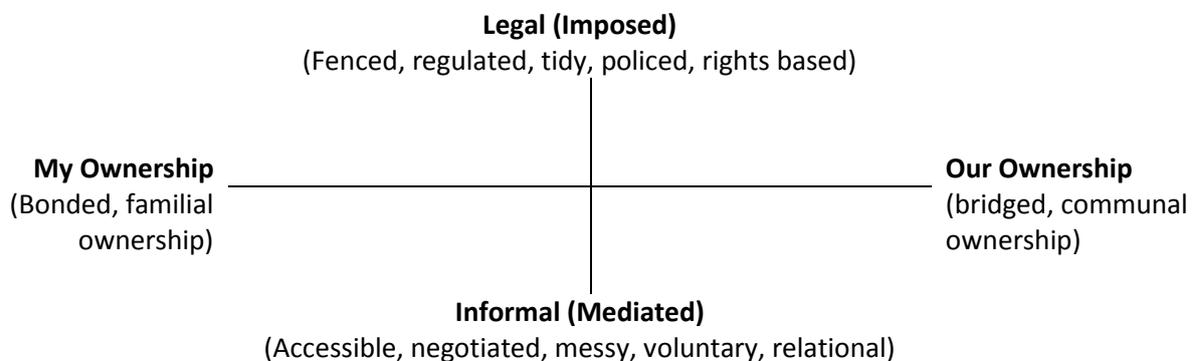
*But we undoubtedly need more successful examples from the alternative ways of managing land in the interest of weaker individuals, groups and communities. That would make CLT more visible. In the UK it is all about making emerge the concrete cases which can act as a legal precedent to then create new visions".* Conversation with Prof Michael Edwards (UCL).

## A weak conceptual compass for imagining “UK” Rights to the city”

---

I will close with a simple typology to help ‘position’ the various ideas expressed above. I will leave it to others to ‘place’ the examples given above, or examples from their own context in some kind of framework that fits them. Mine is not addressing the practical legal framework of Prof Edwards, but a more conceptual framework to help me answer the first of two fundamental of questions: “who owns this (bit of) the city?”

The compass has two dimensions, representing an axis from highly controlled and regulated to high informal and mediated. And a second axis about whether I consider something mine or everyone’s. Or more precisely, an asset I will only share with those closely bonded to me (perhaps equivalent to bonding social capital) and those bridged or shared assets. Something collectively owned and managed that provides for the interests of often very different stakeholders. Echoing perhaps concepts of bridging social capital.)



This is not a static model; a specific location; when seen ‘frozen in time’ might start in one clear position, to later move into another quadrant with a new ‘concept of ownership’. Like a once prosperous now derelict house being squatted. Or at one time different communities may perceive a places’ conceptual ownership differently and so actively conflict with each other. Overarching it, at any moment in time, is our individual perception about whether I, we or indeed they have ‘a right to be here’. When in public view, about almost anything we do when ‘in society’, we continually ask ourselves this simple question: “So, can I do this here?”

It is in this second question, and our reaction to it, that we exhibit our own beliefs. Maybe a belief in others, to care about the places we care about or of our mutual responsibility to act well ourselves. Or perhaps know it’s ok to move on and leave it to others to sort out. If we generally answer “no, I don’t have the right”... we censor ourselves before we have begun to act in altruistic ways that helps others, and so harm the collective good by self imposed ideas of a limited ‘right’ to play our part.

If we say “yes”, we may risk ‘occupying’ someone else’s space and limiting their potential through imposing our individual or our collective ‘ownership rights’.

But we might gain an opportunity to benefit from experiencing the passion, energy and care of people just waiting to become our friend and neighbor.

## Further Links

---

Along with the 'typology' above I have some further suggestions of websites, all accessed in July 2014, where the "Right To The City" appears or can be listed as a carrier of the concept: With thanks again to Giovanni for starting the list.

### **New Left Project articles:**

**On London Renters:** interesting because written by a militant of Rentyers Movement!

[http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article\\_comments/london\\_renters\\_and\\_the\\_right\\_to\\_the\\_city](http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/london_renters_and_the_right_to_the_city) ....

**On Rights to the city:** <http://newleftreview.org/11/53/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city>

### **Presentations of Harvey's book or related academic ideas:**

**Rebel Cities:** (which was linked to the commentaries on URBAN RIOTS in London):

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/12/owen-hatherley-rebel-cities-harvey>

**The London School of Economics "LSECities" Centre:** <http://lsecities.net/objects/research-projects/access-to-the-city>

**A Campaign in Islington, a dialogue with related African Movements:**

<http://www.waronwant.org/news/press-releases/18001-activists-fight-for-right-to-the-city>

**Relates Rights to the City to struggles in Southern Countries...**

<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/aboutkings/worldwide/initiatives/global/brazilinstitute/NewsandEvents/eventrecords/Right-to-the-City.aspx>

### **More general/social movement related;**

**Ex-Hulme:** Archive of stories of Hulme: <http://www.exhulme.co.uk/>

**UK Network of Social Centres:** [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UK\\_Social\\_Centre\\_Network](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UK_Social_Centre_Network)

**Subrosa:** <http://manchestersocialcentre.org.uk/>.

**The Basement:** The Basement, <http://thebasement.clearerchannel.org/new>)

**People Assembly Against Austerity :** <http://www.thepeoplesassembly.org.uk>

**The Labour Land Campaign :** <http://www.labourland.org/>

**Land Value Taxation campaign:** <http://www.landvaluetax.org/what-is-lvt>

**Trafford Hall:** Home of the National Tenants and Residents federation. Moderate organisation, but with a heart based in social organising within housing <http://www.traffordhall.com/about-us/history-of-trafford-hall.aspx>

**Planning Aid:** national charity providing information on planning issues

<http://www.rtpi.org.uk/planning-aid/>

**Locality on Community Rights:** Government sponsored pages on new 'community rights' that are supposed to allow greater local control. The powers in effect are rarely used and difficult to enforce:

<http://locality.org.uk/projects/community-rights/>

**Thames Research on Homelessness:** <http://www.thamesreach.org.uk/news-and-views/homelessness-facts-and-figures/>

## **Introduction: Community Land Trust and Rights to the City**

---

One of the most effective ways that people are denied their 'right to the city' is through a system of private property that regulates access to, and control over, urban space on the basis of capital. The division of the urban fabric according to private ownership leads to a situation where land is primarily managed for the purpose of generating profit. In the words of David Harvey, "[w]e live, after all, in a world in which the rights of private property and the profit rate trump all other notions of rights."<sup>1</sup> Against a backdrop of land speculation and profiteering, the Lefebvrian ideal of active collective participation in the appropriation and production of urban space remains a distant prospect. Control over the city and how it is shaped remains in the hands of relatively few. Yet the idea of land and space being privatised is hardly natural:

"The first man who, having fenced in a piece of land, said "This is mine," and found people naïve enough to believe him, that man was the true founder of civil society. From how many crimes, wars, and murders, from how many horrors and misfortunes might not any one have saved mankind, by pulling up the stakes, or filling up the ditch, and crying to his fellows: Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody."

*Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Discourses on Inequality, 1754*

Community Land Trusts (CLTs) provide an alternative to private land tenure. With their membership typically consisting of local residents and civil society representatives, CLTs are set up to ensure the democratic ownership and stewardship of local land and assets. The removal of land from the open market means that it can be managed for the long term benefit of the local community rather than the profit-seeking interests of external stakeholders. Against a tide of neoliberal marketization and privatisation, the CLT model is increasingly seen as a way to rescue the idea of collective rights to land and housing.

In this short report, I will consider the case for community land ownership in the UK. I will provide an account of the UK's current housing crisis, elaborate upon the UK's CLT movement, and then use the example of East London to show how the threats posed to people's right to the city are being addressed using the CLT model.

## **The UK's Housing Crisis**

---

The UK is characterised by a lack of affordable housing for rent. The latest incarnation of this problem can be traced back to the 1980s. By the late 1970s, local authorities in the UK provided affordable housing to 6.6 million households (more than a third of society). The

---

<sup>1</sup> David Harvey, 2008, 'The Right to the City', *New Left Review*, 53.

availability of council-owned property allowed the UK's working classes to rent accommodation and build resilient communities in inner-city areas.

Under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government, however, the UK learned to aspire for home ownership (the recent ramifications of which are highlighted in Figure 1). Much of the country's social housing was privatised – between 1980 and 2009, a total of 4.39 million of houses owned by local authorities were either sold off to private landlords or demolished. The process was expedited through the 'Right to Buy' scheme which invites people living in rented council accommodation to take ownership of the property at a discounted price.<sup>2</sup> Over 2 million council houses have been sold in this manner since 1980.

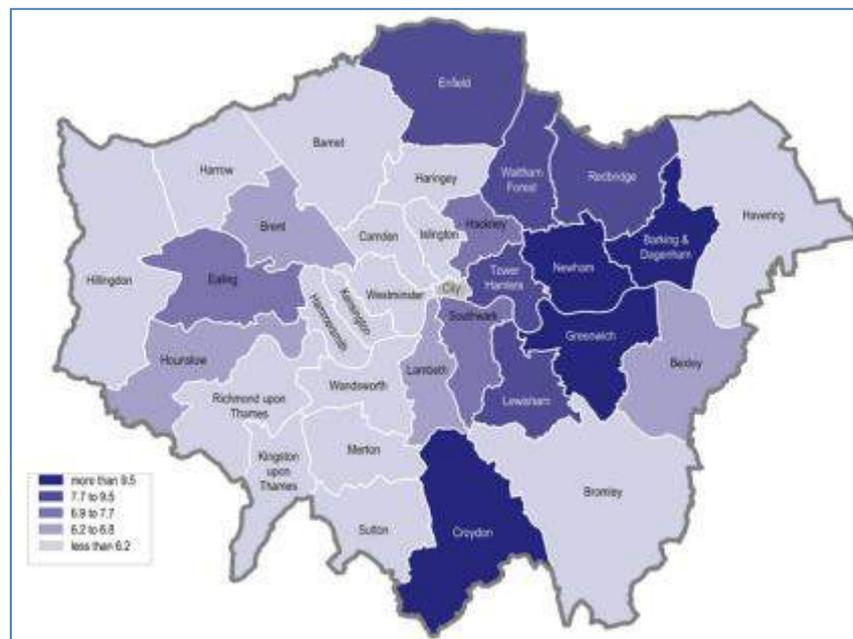


Figure 1: This map shows the average 2010-2011 rate of mortgage repossession per 1,000 mortgage holders for Boroughs across London. (Source: Trust for London and New Policy Institute)

Needless to say, the revenue that local authorities have generated through the sale of such public assets has only rarely been invested in new council housing. And this can only mean that the UK's stock of secure, affordable housing for rent has diminished. According to the 2012-2013 English Housing Survey recently published by the Department for Communities and Local Government,<sup>3</sup> the number of privately rented homes in England (4 million) has overtaken the number of social-rented homes (3.7 million) for the first time.

Thus, while *the need* for social (affordable) housing has not necessarily diminished a growing number of households are left at the mercy of private landlords in a largely unregulated rental market. Indeed, a significant proportion of the houses bought under the Right to Buy scheme have now entered the private rental market. In Tower Hamlets, London, 50 per cent

<sup>2</sup> The scheme has been revitalised under the existing administration.

<sup>3</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government, February 2014, *English Housing Survey: Headline Report 2012-2013*.

of the council houses sold in this way are now privately let. In areas where housing demand outstrips supply, inflation in the private rental market can quickly force long-term residents from the neighbourhood and lead to the disintegration of local communities.

Some critics have even suggested that the government may be spending more on subsidising private rents for low income households (in the form of housing benefit) than the cost of providing more social housing. This all works to benefit private landlords and further stigmatise those that seek financial support. Even where social housing is still available for rent, local authorities can charge up to 80 per cent of the local market rate under the 'Affordable Rent' scheme. In many areas, this can hardly be deemed 'affordable'. Policies such as the controversial 'bedroom tax' have further penalised those that rent from the council<sup>4</sup> while the combination of soaring land values and a strained public purse can only lead to temptation for local authorities to offload their housing stock.

In essence, the problem for many urban communities in the UK is that the open market has failed to supply sufficient housing for the wide-ranging needs of its residents. By current estimates, over 1.8 million households in England are currently awaiting social housing. The Institute for Public Policy Research projects that demand for housing will outstrip supply by 750,000 homes by 2025.<sup>5</sup> The combination of under-supply and rising costs can have all manner of social consequences, not least in the form of overcrowding, displacement and community instability.

## **The Community Land Trust Option**

---

Against this backdrop, the possibility that land and assets might be held in perpetuity for the benefit of the local community is attracting attention. The idea is not especially new. The Digger movement of the 1650's envisioned a radical 'levelling' of society through the abandonment of private property rights in favour of the common ownership of land<sup>6</sup> and these ideals can be traced forward to the emergence of socialism and the cooperative movement.

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, political and social reformers in the UK continued to lay the ground for future moves towards collective ownership of assets. Often these went hand in hand with private initiatives, like the planned communities of reforming industrialists like Titus Salt at Saltaire<sup>7</sup>, and Bournville<sup>8</sup> founded by the Quaker chocolate making Cadbury family.

---

<sup>4</sup> The UK's so-called 'bedroom tax' reduces the level of housing benefit available to households that are deemed to have a spare bedroom in a council-owned property.

<sup>5</sup> Institute for Public Policy Research, 2011, 'The good, the bad, and the ugly: Housing demand 2025'

<sup>6</sup> <http://bcw-project.org/church-and-state/sects-and-factions/diggers> (accessed February 2014)

<sup>7</sup> A history of Saltaire is available at [http://www.saltairevillage.info/Saltaire\\_World\\_Heritage\\_Site\\_1028.html](http://www.saltairevillage.info/Saltaire_World_Heritage_Site_1028.html)

<sup>8</sup> Bourneville Village Trust was incorporated in 1900. See <https://www.bvt.org.uk/> (accessed February 2014)

In 1898, Ebenezer Howard published his seminal work, *Garden Cities of To-morrow*.<sup>9</sup> His utopian vision of self-sustained communities living on land leased from a local trust was seen as a way to prevent land speculation and suburbanisation, and keep local housing at an affordable level for the city's workers; in short, as a way to capture value for community benefit. Howard's work led to an experiment in practical land reform with the construction of Letchworth Garden City outside London in 1903 and several other such settlements in the following years.

While Howard's 'garden cities' met with limited success in the UK, the idea of managing land for community benefit gathered momentum elsewhere. In 1950s India, for instance, Vinoba Bhave led the Gramdan 'village gift' movement which saw rich landowners donate some of their land to village trusts. Such land was then leased to the landless who could use it to earn a living. Similarly, American civil rights activists in the 1960s sought to recover land for the African-American population. Their efforts culminated with the establishment of the world's first Community Land Trust (CLT) in 1969 and there are now over 240 CLTs in the US.

Back in the UK, through the 1990s and 2000s rural communities in Scotland set up community trusts and foundations as a way to purchase the islands and estates on which they resided. With local land often owned by absentee landlords, many communities found their tenure increasingly insecure.<sup>10</sup> The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 has formalised the rights of communities to buy their land should it come up for sale (and, for crofting communities, irrespective of whether it comes up for sale). The succession of community buyouts of land in Scotland continues to this day.

Learning from developments in Scotland and experiences elsewhere, a number of academics and housing and community developers in England began to recognise the value of Community Land Trusts (CLTs) as a way to empower communities. This led to a National CLT Demonstration Programme which ran a number of rural and urban pilot studies from 2006-2008.<sup>11</sup> Whilst still in its infancy, the UK's CLT movement is gathering momentum. The National Community Land Trust Network (NCLTN) was established in 2010 to act as the umbrella body for CLTs in England and Wales which now number over 150. The body works to raise awareness of CLTs, create an environment for their success, and provide advice and support.

While many of the UK's CLTs are only in the early stages of land management and the potential value of their work therefore remains unclear, there are exceptions. Presenting itself as a social enterprise and development trust, Coin Street Community Builders was established in 1984 to take over and develop a 13-acre derelict site on London's south bank. The takeover, led by local residents, was seen as a way to spark a resurgence in what was

---

<sup>9</sup> Initially titled *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*

<sup>10</sup> Examples include the community purchase of the North Assynt Estate in 1993, the Isle of Eigg in 1997, and the Isle of Gigha in 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Led by Community Finance Solutions with support from Carnegie UK Trust and Tudor Trust.

then a dying residential community and a weak local economy. 20 years on and the South Bank is a hub of activity. The area has seen the development of co-operative homes, shops, galleries, cafes, parks, sports facilities, event venues, and a range of community support programmes. The requirement that all members of the company live locally ensures that developments meet with the needs of local residents. Whether CLTs continue their surge in the UK remains to be seen, but there are various projects worth keeping an eye on. Perhaps none more so than the East Community Land Trust (ECLCT).

## **Development and Redevelopment in East London**

---

Since the expansion of London beyond its city walls began to accelerate in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, areas in the north-east of the capital have come to characterise images of urban Britain. Indeed, the 'East End' has come to be seen as a microcosm of the structural trends affecting the country more widely.<sup>12</sup> Through the rise of textile manufacturing and the Spitalfields riots of 1769,<sup>13</sup> through various dock expansion projects in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to cater for a burgeoning British Empire, and more recently through the Canary Wharf and Olympic Games developments, the history of East London has attracted considerable attention. More often than not, however, it is images of overcrowding, crime and poverty that have come to dominate popular understandings of the area.

Waves of immigration to East London during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries put pressure on the local supply of housing and meant that wages for working in local industries were undercut. So while the area's dockworkers and factory workers allowed investors to reap the rewards of colonial expansion, their own living quarters descended into squalor. According to the 1881 census, around one third of the area's one million residents were living in poverty. With disease rampant, the life expectancy of an East End labourer was less than 19 years. The living and working conditions of East London inhabitants in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century led to many social reformers of the time focusing their efforts in the area. During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the East End of London suffered further: firstly with significant damage during the blitz and secondly from industrial decline in the 1970s.

Yet, recent decades have seen considerable effort invested in regeneration. The West India Docks on the Isle of Dogs were closed in 1980 allowing for the construction of the Canary Wharf business district. The area is now home to many of the world's leading banks, professional service organisations and media corporations. Just a couple of miles downstream, the Royal Victoria Dock has been replaced by the ExCeL exhibition and conference centre which has hosted a wide range of high profile events since opening in 2000. Visitors to the venue can make use of London City Airport, located just a mile or so further to the east and also situated on a former 'docklands' site. The reincarnation of East

---

<sup>12</sup> 'East London' refers to the north east region of the city encompassing the Boroughs of Barking and Dagenham, Hackney, Havering, Newham, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets and Waltham Forest. The 'East End' is often used in specific reference to Tower Hamlets.

<sup>13</sup> When local silk-weavers protested against the lack of tax on imported silk

London received further impetus in 2005 when London beat Paris to host the 2012 Olympic Games.<sup>14</sup>



*Figure 2: Satellite image highlighting dockland developments in East London (Source: Google Earth)*

Canary Wharf      ExCeL Centre      London City Airport

With any of these developments, however, the question immediately arises of who they serve. How much investment in Canary Wharf improves the lot of those East London residents most in need? If investment in grand construction projects trickles down into surrounding communities then it is all too often in the form of soaring land values that soon put rental costs out of reach for local residents and entrepreneurs. It is a process occurring across East London. The tremors of regeneration are felt in the gradual influx of middle-class bohemians and speculators; in the transformation of local grocery stores and bookmakers into coffee shops and artisan bakeries; in the segregation of urban space from those that previously wandered free.

### **The East London Community Land Trust**

---

Members of The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO)<sup>15</sup> sensed that London's bid to host the 2012 Summer Olympics represented both a threat and an opportunity. If areas of East London were to benefit from the staging of the event whilst being protected from runaway inflation in land value, it was essential to act. And so the TELCO team sought to have long term community sustainability built into the Olympics bid. They campaigned for the site of the proposed Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in Stratford, Newham, to be set aside

<sup>14</sup> Five London Boroughs were officially proposed to host the bid: Newham, Tower Hamlets, Hackney, Greenwich and Waltham Forest.

<sup>15</sup> TELCO is the East London branch and founding body of Citizens UK which is an alliance of community organising groups. It was set up in 1989 to galvanise the community into action on local issues.

for affordable housing development using a CLT framework. Their efforts laid the ground for the establishment of the East London Community Land Trust (ELCLT) in 2007.

The ECLCT are yet to secure full rights to manage the legacy of Stratford's Olympic Park for community benefit but they have been given license to carry out a pilot. The site for development is St Clements Hospital in Mile End, Tower Hamlets, which is located just a couple of miles from the Park. Built in 1849 as a parish workhouse to house the destitute and infirm, the building was used as a psychiatric hospital from the 1950s until its closure in 2005. Ownership of the site freehold was passed from the NHS to the Greater London Authority (GLA) before being handed to the ECLCT and house-builder, Galliford Try, in 2012.

The agreement assures that at least some of the historic site will be used to provide permanently affordable housing. Community ownership of the land ensures it is protected from the inflationary pressures of the open market and that the price of homes can be linked to local income levels. In terms of specifics, of the 252 homes that will be built 51 will be made available for affordable rent at a level below 80 per cent of the open market rent. 23 will be for sale at permanently affordable levels. This will be ensured by linking the house prices at times of onward sale to local income levels rather than the open market. Community involvement in the design of the site means that a community centre and café will also be included in the development. Construction work is expected to commence later this year and to last for three to four years. In the meantime, the site has staged the ELCLT's Shuffle Festivals which are used to showcase local culture and creativity.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

---

As an area historically tainted by poverty and overcrowding, and more recently the displacement brought about by rapid development, East London is an obvious candidate for the further trialling of the CLT model. The ELCLT has taken on this project. The conversion of an old hospital into affordable housing is certainly a step in the right direction towards protecting East Londoners' right to the city. The UK's CLT movement will gather further momentum if London's Olympic Park can also be secured for community benefit.

Rights to the city are threatened by models of urban development that prioritise the generation of profit. In a system where "the rights of private property and the profit rate" trump all others,<sup>17</sup> runaway inflation in the value of land brings an increase in living costs. Local people are forced to leave their neighbourhoods or compromise on their living conditions. Established communities are gradually weakened. The problem is further exacerbated by the sale of public assets (namely, social housing) to private investors. The effects of these processes are in evidence across the UK.

---

<sup>16</sup> Further information about the ELCLT can be accessed at <http://www.eastlondonclt.co.uk/>

<sup>17</sup> David Harvey, 2008, 'The Right to the City', *New Left Review*, 53.

Yet, against this tide of neoliberal marketization, CLTs provide an alternative to private land tenure. These are the latest in a long succession of movements and initiatives that have put some form of collective and communal living at their core. This history extends back long before Ebenezer Howard's vision of garden cities owned and managed through trusts at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Throughout this article we have hinted at the rich world of collective living. Yet, the influence of this world is rarely limited to living arrangements. The autonomous, self-organising Radical Routes<sup>18</sup> network is another successful initiative in the UK. The network brings together housing cooperatives that work across the UK to support each other and encourage new co-operatives. As a part of the struggle for a more equal society, Radical Routes coops are more than simply housing units. They can be seen as centres for a wider social movement, working consciously against neo-liberalism, within individual cities, in a national network and are backed by their own ethical investment initiative called Rootstock<sup>19</sup>.

At the other end of a possible spectrum lie initiatives like the Findhorn eco-village<sup>20</sup>, inspired by religious ideals and a close identification with the environmental movement. Or the recently completed Lancaster Co-housing<sup>21</sup> project at Halton Mill in Lancashire, where individuals can buy into a new intentional planned community with some degree of collective living, whilst crucially retaining their individual private stakeholding.

Stakeholder models, whilst being important in innovating sustainable design and promoting community living, are a far cry from the more radical collective, democratic run communities espoused by the Diggers. Privately funded co-housing excludes those without the economic power to pool their wealth within an ethically responsible and well planned but ultimately exclusive development.

Building on previous struggles for community asset ownership, CLTs are being used to rescue the idea that access to land and housing should be a collective right. They allow for the value of local assets to be removed from the open market and to be captured for the benefit of the community in perpetuity. The CLT is a model of democracy which means that all decisions about the management of land are made in accordance with the interests of local people.

---

<sup>18</sup> Website of Radical Routes: <http://www.radicalroutes.org.uk/> (accessed February 2014)

<sup>19</sup> Website of Rootstock: <http://www.rootstock.org.uk/> (accessed February 2014)

<sup>20</sup> Website of Findhorn eco-village: <http://www.ecovillagefindhorn.com/> (accessed February 2014)

<sup>21</sup> Website of Lancaster Co-housing: <http://www.lancastercohousing.org.uk/> (accessed February 2014)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Owen Dowsett is a freelance researcher and writer based in Bristol. Having spent time at the Universities of Exeter, Lancaster, and Lincoln (New Zealand), he has a keen interest in social and environmental futures, and in the technologies that might support these. If you have a project that addresses these themes, Owen would like to hear from you. [OwenDowsett@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:OwenDowsett@hotmail.co.uk)



Jez Hall is a director of Shared Future CIC and long been involved in the not for profit and participatory democracy world. He has had a long interest and involvement in cooperative and community led initiatives, including working for a community architecture charity, supported community enterprises as a social enterprise business consultant and coordinates the UK participatory Budgeting Network.

[www.sharedfuturecic.org.uk](http://www.sharedfuturecic.org.uk)



With the authors' permission this report is available under an Open Source Licence.

Protecting the Right to the City in the UK:  
Urban Development through Community Land Trusts  
By Owen Dowsett and Jez Hall

is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share Alike 2.0 UK:  
England & Wales License.

To view a copy of this licence, visit  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/uk/>