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PROTOHOME – NEWCASTLE

An Experimental Self-Build Housing Installation



Introduction

Protohome was a self-build housing installation, built over four months and temporarily sited in the Ouseburn area of Newcastle upon Tyne, occupying a site owned by a local development trust and open to the public from May to August 2016. It was a collaboration between Crisis, the national charity for single homelessness, and their members (individuals who are homeless, have been homeless in the last two years or are at risk of homelessness), xsite architecture (a local architecture firm), TILT Workshop (an art and joinery organisation) and myself, as artist and project initiator.¹ Whilst Protohome was open, it exhibited the documentation of the project and hosted a range of events, workshops, exhibitions, performances, artist residencies and talks examining issues of homelessness, the politics of land and development and participatory housing alternatives. Following the events programme, Protohome was deconstructed and reconstructed at a local community farm to be used as a classroom/workshop. A publication and a website (www.protohome.org.uk) were

FIGURE III.1.1 Protohome open to the public. Photo by John Hipkin.

created to extend the reach of the project and to continue conversations on these issues into the future. Protohome is not a “complete” housing model; instead, it is a test, a prototype, a “shell” of a building at 5 m × 10 m in size, without insulation or services, yet it is a model which does show potential to be extended into “working” housing in the future.

Protohome was embedded within the current context of austerity and rising homelessness. In England, rough sleeping increased by 165% between 2010 and 2019, whilst placements in temporary accommodation have increased by 71% since 2011 (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019). Within a context of prolonged austerity, through Protohome, we wanted to tentatively evaluate the added social and educational value that co-produced building processes may offer. The importance of transdisciplinary skills of all participants involved in the project cannot be overstated. In successful collaboration the processes and methods for participating as well as the quality and degree of the participation result in in-depth contributions from both practice and research (Polk, 2015).

The Process

The project was launched to Crisis members in February 2016. Overall, 14 members of Crisis contributed to the project, whilst nine stayed with the project throughout. Three of these members were women and all had very different experiences of homelessness – some were “at risk” of homelessness, living in crowded or unsuitable accommodation, some were street homeless, whilst others were “sofa surfing,” sleeping on friends’ or relatives’ sofas, or living in hostels. Following the launch, joiners from TILT Workshop and I worked with members of Crisis on two half-days per week for three months to train them in woodwork and design skills and to build the “house” in sections in Crisis’s wood workshop.

Most members did not have any previous experience of woodwork, so we began by learning how to use basic tools such as chisels and saws, learning different jointing techniques and using these activities to build the furniture for Protohome. Developing technical understanding through making, many members learnt more effectively through tacit, hands-on methods instead of through linguistic techniques, and as workshop facilitators, we attempted to get group members to use both the expressive qualities of the body and the imaginative qualities of the mind. The method of timber frame building that we used – the Segal method – is specifically designed for untrained self-builders, being built on a dimensional frame using only dry jointing techniques and simple hand tools. The use of simple plans and techniques meant that group members could more easily understand the process of building, as well as undertake a gradual process of learning. As the joiner said, “The whole point of this project is that with very limited tools we can build something quite substantial [...] and that’s how they’ve done it for thousands of years. So it’s more interesting because you’re actually getting skilled up”; whilst a group member, reflecting on the use of hand tools instead of power tools, noted, “if you keep practising with the hand tool then you’ve learnt how to make it properly by yourself instead of relying on a machine.”

During the first few weeks, we also focused on building knowledge about design, undertaking two sessions with the architect whereby members designed their own homes using a design template for Protohome. These designs were exhibited in the finished building to show the flexibility of the design system. Knowledge about the design, planning and building process emerged through instances of seeing and hearing, including a site visit, whereby members discussed how the building might respond to its immediate environment, and a visit to a self-built Segal house in Northumberland where we met the two architects who had built it. The use of a precedent like this was an important



FIGURE III.1.2 Learning jointing techniques in the Protohome workshop. Photo by Julia Heslop.



FIGURE III.1.3 The dimensional grid of Protohome. Photo by John Hipkin.

tool to inspire and motivate members. Whilst much of the structure of the building was completed on-site, each week in the workshop members learnt a new skill – for example, learning how to construct window frames or doors – and during this period members acquired qualifications, distributed by Crisis, including working with hand tools, health and safety, and lifting and handling. Yet, beyond building individual and collective knowledge, our time in the Crisis workshop was vital in building group trust, confidence and a sense of collective purpose.

After three months in the Crisis workshop, we went on-site for two weeks to construct the building, using the elements built in the workshop, whilst the frame, flooring, walls and roof were completed on-site. During this period, Crisis members had an active involvement in all processes of building, including cutting timber, lifting and securing materials into place, and painting and installing the exhibition of project documentation; and so, during this time, the learning did not stop.

Collaboration

As with any participatory process, Protohome was not without hierarchy, whether this emerged from professionals or from the group/community itself. In designing/building processes there is always a danger that the process will be co-opted by expertise or that professionals, such as architects and builders, will hold onto their knowledge, meaning that no “devolution of knowledge” (Fals-Borda, 1987, p. 344) to groups/communities takes place. During Protohome, we tried to challenge the dichotomy between the “expert” and the “amateur” through the cyclic process of planning, action and reflection, as well as through building a sense of trust, respect and reciprocity between the joiners, myself and members. Here, the tutor took on the role of the “interpreter and co-ordinator rather than dictatorial designer” (Fowles, 2000, p. 62). The role of “interpreter” was particularly important. Part of the role of the joiner and myself was to break language barriers down, not through “dumbing down” terminology, but through careful explanation, grounded in real-life examples. In line with the Participatory Action Research’s imperative to build critical capacity, Dean, the lead joiner, attempted to expand the analytical skills of the group by asking members, “What shall we do next? What’s working? What’s not working?” prompting them to assess and change the course of the process and to problem solve. So, instead of leading members directly, he led them indirectly. He also taught through trial and error whereby members learnt by trying and sometimes failing – such as the creation of complex joints, which one member, Daz, had particular trouble with, stating, “It looks like I’ve done it with a chainsaw!” Yet, the success of this methodology was realised when members started teaching each other. Furthermore, Dean and myself wanted to remove the workshops from an atmosphere of “schooling,” whereby the teacher tells and the student listens. When asked about the “teacher–learner” relationship during Protohome, one member, Nyree, stated, “Nobody in the whole time in the Crisis woodshop or in Protohome, nobody once said to me ever... ‘You’re doing it wrong,’ or ‘You’re not doing it right.’” We thus wanted to use the project to actively create opportunities for challenging, questioning and dissension and for interrogation into our own professional working practices.

Collective working practices were central to Protohome. An “ethic of care” between people was particularly important as the lives of group members brought with them certain sensitivities and complexities, as people moved on and off the streets and had health and money troubles. Members wrote a Group Contract, which outlined the ethics of the project, including having respect and care for each other, the importance of listening, and looking out for each other’s well-being in the workshop and on-site. As Nyree said, “sharing responsibility ... for each other, for the equipment,



FIGURE III.1.4 Collaboratively lifting the roof panels into place. Photo by John Hipkin.



FIGURE III.1.5 A public event inside Protohome. Photo by Julia Heslop.



FIGURE III.1.6 Using Protohome to have challenging discussions on the issues of housing, homelessness and participation in building. Photo by Julia Heslop.

for the wood, for the whole build and for the project itself” was vital. Dean described how we needed to be “an extension of each other”: if someone “put[s] their hand out, I’ll put the right tool in their hand and vice versa.” These practices were of great importance because, as Dean said, in large-scale builds, “if one thing stops functioning then the job wouldn’t get done,” but in the worst case, if we failed to work together then someone could get physically hurt. And so, the initial process of group formation was key, as this conversation between two group members highlights:

Sarah: “... to me it was like learning to work with other people. You know people that you haven’t really met and known as long, so you kind of get the ... gist of the ups and downs of people never mind just yersel, it’s how other people ... work around yer and how [you] would work with other people.”

Tony: “Cause we all stuck together and acted like a proper team, looked after each other, instead of arguing and squabbling on.”

Furthermore, working collaboratively with an organisation like Crisis was vital. They provided pastoral support and advice on training, skills, employment and housing for group members, as well as resources for the project as a whole by providing a space to work in, organising trips and refreshments.

Concluding Comments

Through Protohome, we began to understand how practices of designing and making can be a tool for widening access to skills and qualifications, as well as generating opportunities for processes of personal transformation and the creation of new social networks. Some members have now entered stable housing or employment, but for others the project was too fleeting or the depth of personal issues they faced too severe. For members, a growth in confidence allowed them to take control over their situations. As one member stated: “For me now it’s about taking the reins back ... I think you lose it when you get into the system.” For some, it was a learning process through which self-worth emerged: “It’s showing me that I can do what other people are saying I can” – instead of feeling like a burden on society, as one who is homeless, living on benefits or having health troubles, as another member stated: “Yesterday I went home and I was knackered and exhausted but I felt this new sense of ‘I love myself, I value myself.’” Members supported each other both inside and outside the workshop, creating lasting friendships. So, the creation of social ties – what members termed “bonding” – was particularly important, especially for those that were physically or socially isolated. Furthermore, when Protohome was open to the public, members presented the project, as well as speaking about their experience of homelessness, to people in positions of political power, such as local authorities, Homes England and the Deputy Head of Housing for the Greater London Authority. As a result, the project created a route to “speak truth to power” in a public manner. Whilst this was tentative, it did go a small way to question unequal power relations in processes of housing.

There are many ways that the collaborative and participatory process can be improved. There is a need to critically evaluate whose voices are being heard and whose are being left out, and whether people are really being empowered, by undertaking an ongoing, cyclical process of reflection. Slow-burning projects may also have more transformative potential, as opposed to fleeting projects like Protohome, where transformation might be difficult to sustain. People might fall back into old routines when the project ends, or when the resources (whether these be people, skills or tools) are

no longer available or present. Furthermore, when working on building projects and with people that may require extra support or advice, it is important that there is a professional support network involved, yet this is not without its risks – partners may have different guiding assumptions, practices and subjectivities to those of the group. Lastly, there is also a danger that temporary projects become piecemeal, one-off interventions that have little impact on cycles of homelessness and displacement. As a result, it is vital that participatory build projects retain a sense of the political by publicly questioning how, where and by whom knowledge in housebuilding is nurtured, as well as aiming to bring forth the voices of those that have been the victims of housing precarity.

Notes

- 1 This project has been published and was also part of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project. Instead of an extractive process of research, this project is about working with people through the co-production of new knowledge, not on them, and offers potential to create embedded and equitable processes of learning, particularly for individuals who may be socially and/or spatially isolated or excluded from networks of political or economic power. Throughout the project, an open and reflexive methodology was used, using a cyclic process of planning, action and reflection (Kesby, Kindon, & Pain, 2007). It involved gathering knowledge on building techniques and processes, planning a task and then actioning it, and finally reflecting on what worked and what could be improved in order to begin the cyclic process again. Reflection was particularly important as it established a sense of self and collective criticality and allowed members to assess the knowledge gained. This methodology meant that members could be involved in decision-making processes and enabled the parameters of the project and the activities to adjust to changing conditions and challenges.

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