Self-help in urban renewal

Colin Ward

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In his introductory essay to the modern editions of Ebenezer Howard's book Garden Cities of Tomorrow — the book and the author responsible for the founding of the Town and Country Planning Association at the end of the last century — Lewis Mumford remarks that 'with his gift for sweet reasonableness Howard hoped to win Tory and Anarchist, single-taxer and socialist, individualist and collectivist, over to his experiment. And his hopes were not altogether discomfited; for in appealing to the English instinct for finding common ground he was utilising a solid political tradition.'

The Association itself, operating in a political world, has always had to win support from that small number of politicians in any party who are actually interested in planning issues, or to educate those who actually hold office, nationally and locally. This is a task which of course becomes more and more difficult with the apparent polarisation of politics and political attitudes.

I am notoriously a non-political person. I always aspire to attain Ebenezer Howard's gift of sweet reasonableness, and to win over people from both right and left. But, alas, I seem to have a knack of antagonising both sides. I don't do it to annoy because I know it teases, I am simply obliged to do it because I have a different view of the world. And if my subject is 'self-help in urban renewal', I have to begin by antagonising everyone.

Let me begin by antagonising the left, by saying that a major example of self-help in urban renewal has been the process stigmatised as 'gentrification'. We have a stereotype of young, pushing, upwardly mobile, middle-class trendies (or whatever adjective suits you best) driving old and poor working-class tenants out of their traditional habitat. We all used to have our horror-stories about Rachmanism, and we all had our ready-made sneers about the in-comers. What we mostly remained silent about was that the particular middle-class trendies driving out the traditional inhabitants were in fact the officers of the local authorities pursuing the then fashionable trends in urban renewal.

This is why Wilfred Burns, Newcastle's planning officer and subsequently the Government's chief planner, was able to say that 'when we are dealing with people who have no initiative or civic pride, the task, surely, is to break up such groupings even though the people seem to be satisfied with their miserable environment and seem to enjoy an extravert social life in their own locality' (New Towns for Old: The Techniques of Urban Renewal, 1963); and it explains why another Newcastle architect, Bruce Allsop, felt obliged to remark that 'it is astonishing with what savagery planners and architects are trying to obliterate working-class cultural and social

patterns. Is it because many of them are first-generation middle-class techno-snobs?' (Towards a Humane Architecture, 1974).

Nobody cared to listen in the 1950s and 1960s, and even in the 1970s, when the cash was still swilling about in the urban renewal bran-tub, to those who pointed to the grotesque paradox that a line drawn on a map in town halls and county hall selected one side of whole streets for demolition and redevelopment as unfit for human habitation, while on the other side of that line absolutely identical houses, blighted by the redevelopment process, were beginning their upward progress, aided by the merry whirr of Black and Decker, into the desirable residence end of the market. A comparison of the bizarre prices that the rescued houses fetch today with the sorry state of the estate opposite is interesting in pondering the conclusion reached a decade ago by Dr Graham Lomas (formerly deputy strategic planner for the Greater London Council) that in London more fit houses had been destroyed by public authorities than had been built since the war (The Inner City, 1975).

The orgy of publicly financed destruction and of slapping compulsory purchase orders on everything in sight (which eventually reached the pitch that really progressive authorities like the GLC were actually setting in motion the procedure of compulsory purchase on properties they already owned) was followed by what should have been the gentler, more creative climate of General Improvement Areas and Housing Action Areas. Once again the official gentrifiers from the town hall took command, and urban renewal took the form of cobbles and bollards, and planting in the street. Several people here must remember Susan Howard's tragi-comic account, at the TCPA's 1974 conference on Housing Action: the Opportunities and the Dangers, of the experience of the first General Improvement Area in Leicester. At that conference Jim Grove underlined the principle that 'sovereignty over decisions must lie with the inhabitants' and Lawrence Hansen of Waltham Forest made the very significant remark that 'house improvements have value only as perceived by the occupants'.

We were now in the era of Public Participation. All of us here must have had the experience of attending those meetings of citizens held in the name of participation to discover what residents actually wanted, where invariably residents wanted things that the special central government cash could not provide: an improvement of ordinary municipal services, the kind of things that councils actually existed to provide — things like street-paving, street-lighting, street-cleaning and refuse-collection. They were revealing an unmentionable fact: that there has always been a hierarchy of excellence in these services, based on who complains most. The presence of complaining gentrifiers in fact pushed up standards for everyone.

There was one General Improvement Area in the country which was proposed, implemented and subsequently managed by the residents themselves. It was also an example of the ironical crudity of official designations of places, for it moved in a few years from being a Clearance Area not worth saving to being a Conservation Area where every brick became part of our Priceless Architectural Heritage. That street was of course Black Road, Macclesfield, and it owed its transformation to the fact that in 1971 a young gentrifying architect moved in because it was cheap and had his application for an improvement grant turned down because his slum cottage was 'structurally unsound'. He, of course, spiralled up to becoming the next president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, and must often reflect on the truth of the remark of Samuel Smiles in his celebrated book Self-Help where the author remarks that 'the duty of helping one's self in the highest sense involves helping one's neighbours'.

Now what have these gentrifiers got, apart from an expanding asset in a milieu of dwindling assets? They have dweller control, which people like me always insist is the first principle of housing, more important than housing standards assessed from outside. And the other thing they have is know-how: that is, they know how to work the system. The whole thrust of the TCPA's innovations in the 1970s, with their planning aid service and their environmental education service, was towards expanding this kind of knowledge into something available for everyone.

I now have to antagonise the right by asserting that a further major example of self-help in urban renewal is the process stigmatised as squatting. We have a stereotype of vandals, junkies and dole scroungers jumping the housing queue, and we have all heard squatter horror-stories and have done for years. They are as untypical as the tales about the gentrifiers. We all know the reasons for the growth of organised squatting since the late 1960s. In the crude duopoly that emerged in postwar British housing in the period between owner-occupation and council tenancy, whole categories of people notably the young, single and childless — were left out of account altogether, for housing policy was based upon the standard family of two parents and two-and-a-half children, even though by now this unit has been overtaken by demographic facts and is a tiny statistical minority of households. Sub-letting and taking in lodgers – the traditional way of getting a room for the mobile young — was usually specifically forbidden by mortgage agreements in one category and by tenancy agreements in the other. At the self-same time, policies of accumulating huge sites for eventual comprehensive redevelopment left a vast number of houses either slowly rotting awaiting demolition, or similarly rotting awaiting eventual renovation. Policy itself, as Graham Lomas stressed, 'left great areas unoccupied and ripe targets for vandalism and squatting' (The Inner City).

Fortunately the squatters sometimes got there before the unofficial vandals. The response of the authorities was interesting. Central government changed the law on squatting for the first time since the Fourteenth century — although squatting is neither criminal nor illegal, it is simply unlawful (see the Squatters' Handbook). Local government in many places distinguished itself by destroying its own property to keep squatters out — ripping out services, smashing sanitary fittings, and pouring wet concrete down drains. In others it employed so-called 'private investigators' as agents of the council to terrorise and intimidate squatting families (see Nick Wates and Christian Wolmar, Squatting: The Real Story, 1980). On several occasions councils actually blamed the squatters for damage to property done on their instructions by their own employees.

Just in case you, either in the past or today (when there are 50,000 squatters in London), believed the stories told about squatters, surveys showed that in Haringey 51 per cent were actually people with children, in Lambeth over 60 per cent, and in Cardiff 77 per cent. And what property did they squat? 'The Haringey survey found that of 122 squats, only three were required by the Council as part of its permanent housing stock (i.e. ready to let). Over half were privately owned and those owned by the council were either awaiting renovation or demolition. The squats had been empty, on average, for over six months. And a survey on squatters in council property commissioned by the Department of the Environment found that only one-sixth of the sample was in permanent stock, and that even much of this was regarded as "difficult to let". The reality is not that squatters jump the housing waiting list or deprive others of a home but rather that they opt out of the queue altogether and make use of houses that would otherwise be empty.' (Squatting: The Real Story)

The squatters' movement has been a most remarkable example of self-help in urban renewal, since it has operated against every kind of obstruction and opposition. So keen have they been on

urban renewal that the Department of the Environment survey found that 71 per cent of squatters claimed to have made some kind of improvement to the property they occupied. One of them, Andy Ingham, wrote a Self Help House Repairs Manual specifically for squatters, published by Penguin in 1975 and continually reprinted. Of course the one thing most squatters most desire is legitimisation with a rent book, and the London Borough of Lewisham was the pioneer authority in 'licensed squats'.

Several of our most enterprising and successful housing co-operatives have grown out of the squatters' movement. In a forthcoming study of housing co-operatives, Dr Johnston Birchall of the Institute of Community Studies reminds us that some well-established co-ops, like Seymour Co-op in West London, grew out of squatters who 'took on the management of short-life property and then evolved as they gained experience and confidence, into the promotion of long-life co-ops' and that short-life housing in general 'originated out of the squatters' movement' (Building Communities: The Co-operative Way, 1988). Roof Housing Co-operative in Lambeth evolved from a squat by people who were convinced that housing allocation policy was discriminatory.

(Surveys conducted by the Commission for Racial Equality showed that their conviction was correct.) Jheni Arboine, the secretary, told Shelter that 'the days when white middle-class people determined the needs of black people are over so far as we are concerned. Groups like ours are going some way towards destroying the "old boy network" that exists in housing, a network that until recently excluded anyone who was black.' She goes on to say that 'black people are now prepared to take on their own housing problems and we no longer want or need white missionary types to treat us like poor people with problems that we're not capable of solving ourselves' (Roof, November/December 1986). The squatters' movement, just like gentrification, is a great know-how builder: a lesson in the art of working the system. It's a lesson in dweller control.

And a consideration of the evolution of several groups from despised squatters to admired co-operators leads me to my last case-history of self-help in urban renewal, based once again on what has actually happened, rather than on what could happen, or what I would like to happen. Ideology may prevent you from learning from the gentrifiers on the one hand and the squatters on the other, but I want for my final example to evoke Ebenezer Howard's 'gift of sweet reasonableness' in 'appealing to the English instinct for finding common ground'.

Housing co-operatives, of which we had hardly any fifteen years ago, but of which we have several hundreds today, ought to appeal right across the political spectrum. They should win the support of the present Government — and in fact a clause in the Housing and Planning Act of 1986, which came into force in January 1987, allows local authorities to delegate the management of houses and flats to tenant co-operatives as well as giving tenants' groups the right to put such a proposition on the council's agenda'. They should win the support of the present Opposition, since the co-operative movement as a whole was part of that network of organs of working-class self-help and mutual aid which created the labour movement in the nineteenth century. And they should appeal to the various parties in between.

It was my privilege in November 1986 to chair a meeting which brought together the various people from up and down the country who are involved in monitoring the experience of co-operative housing. (It is precisely because this form of dweller-controlled self-help has been neglected for a century that we have had to gain experience and learn about the successes and failures in a hurry.) One of the striking things about the preliminary findings that we were told about concerned precisely the burning question of repairs and renovations — of urban renewal, in

fact. For example, Peter Bolan of Bristol Polytechnic reported that, at Cloverhill Self-Management Co-operative at Rochdale, there was felt to be 'considerable improvement especially on smaller repairs'. David Clapham of Glasgow University reported on his research in the very interesting large-scale transfer of former council housing in Glasgow to tenant co-operatives. He found that among tenants it was thought immensely important that tenants themselves should be able to organise and carry out not only minor and major repairs, but also renovations and modernisation programmes, and that they and not the council should employ people for this purpose. It was Glasgow's Director of Housing who declared last year that 'our greatest resource is not our 171,000 council houses, but the tenants. The potential is there waiting to be released' (Roof, July/August 1986). And at that same meeting Anthea Tinker, giving a preliminary account of the Department of the Environment's current research on housing co-operatives, found 'a high degree of satisfaction. The speed and quality of repairs are valued more than anything else' (to be reported in Housing Review).

We have varieties of self-help in urban renewal to suit all tastes. What we need is not only a huge extension of access to finance, but a broadening of access to know-how and a simplification of procedures. We also need, as Ebenezer Howard insisted ninety years ago, to burst the bubble of urban land valuation.

A talk given on 27 January 1987 to the Town and Country Planning Association conference on 'Our Deteriorating Housing Stock: Financing and Managing New Solutions'.

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