

Julia Heslop

... Protohome



1–3 PROTOHOME under construction, summer 2016, Newcastle upon Tyne.

When we talk about our housing ... ultimately what we are talking about is our freedom.¹

Protohome is about access to housing, control of housing, choice in housing and being without housing. It is about housing in its basic element: as shelter, comfort, social security, being able to close the door on things and people; being able to close the door on the weather, being protected, being loved. Yet the project unearthed stories of lives framed and controlled by being *without* housing. Of falling through the net, endless meetings at the Jobcentre, jumping through hoops, sleeping in the woods, begging on the street. But we also unearthed new ways to imagine and create housing: how social ties might be formed through this process – how in changing the urban fabric, we can change *ourselves* in the process. Protohome focuses not just on what housing is but what it *does* in people's lives. How the process of housing, as the architect John Turner suggests 'as a verb', can be productive for its users and the wider community – as a tool for building skills, confidence, and friendship for people in the most need.

'I'd like to be able to look at it across the room and say "I made that!"'²

Protohome was built over the course of four months in summer 2016, across two half-day sessions a week in homeless charity Crisis's Skylight carpentry workshop in Newcastle upon Tyne, and then two weeks on site in the city's Ouseburn Valley. The workshop process involved members learning basic woodwork skills and the simple design programme *Sketch*

Up. Hands-on learning methods were used as many members learned more effectively through practice, through tacit methods of learning.

The tutors (two joiners, an architect and myself – artist and researcher, and project leader) acted as enablers. It was important that we weren't seen as distant professionals. With a light-touch guiding manner, our aim was to enable members. This approach was also about 'sharing responsibility ... responsibility for each other, for the equipment, for the wood, for the whole build and for the project itself',³ where ownership of the project was collective.

'I think we've lost the ability or the imagination to build our own housing'⁴

Protohome was about learning skills, unearthing new ways to use our hands, and our innate creativity. Built on a shoestring using the Segal system of self-building, this is an alternative to the 'one-size-fits-all' approach of mass housing solutions and addresses the challenges of financing homes for low-income groups, being highly affordable (a two-bedroom house can be built for around £60,000, excluding the cost of the land). The concept behind the Segal system is, in the words of our joiner, 'with very limited tools we can build something quite substantial ... just with a saw and a chisel ... that's how they've done it for thousands of years'.⁵ The system uses simple tools, standard component sizes and easy jointing techniques, helping to democratise the building process, so that it is not just those with money that can self-build, but also those that might be cash poor and time rich.

The form and aesthetics of Protohome emerged from the process of learning, adapting, developing and gradually crafting a structure out of the labours of differently skilled individuals. The marks of their learning forms the look and shape of the structure. It physically consists of their hands, their touch, their ideas, and their aspirations. It is situated in an economic and cultural climate in which we feel that we need more. We want to consume more, we want larger places to live with more amenities, and we then need to buy more to fill these spaces.



4 Completed Protohome, Stepney Bank, Ouseburn.

This occurs while the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' in housing terms is widening. We need to rethink the ontological foundations of home and the systems and methods with which we build them. The Segal system, with its flexibility, efficiency of build and affordability, provided a perfect opportunity to do this in the urban condition of Newcastle, that is seeing an increasing rise in homelessness.

'That social glue'⁶

In practice, the project was about much more than creating a *product* in the form of a prototype house, but was about the *process* – how relationships were created and how they thrived. There was a certain therapeutic aspect to the workshops:

*I think that's the sign of something good going on ... when people are connecting, because when something not right's going on, like problems with mental health or problems with housing or whatever, that's when things fragment or isolate ... It's like that social glue. It's like these are dry joints with no glue necessary, and this is a project with no glue necessary.*⁷

The project has also built confidence for people that may have been marginalised or socially isolated. Members mentioned that the project aided them to 'have something to get up for in the morning', 'It's made us want to actually get out and do something', 'I was always in front of the telly. It's opened the world a bit more for us'.⁸ This 'opening up of the world' through engagement

in new activities was a key aspect of the project. This happened not just through hands-on tasks, but also through the many group discussions over tea and biscuits, about issues that were framing members' lives and beyond, creating a space for critical and also hopeful conversation about futures. It is through these discussions that we saw changes in attitudes, and a certain process of empowerment happening, as members gradually saw their lives from the outside in, and analysed their problems and the reasons for them differently. In some cases the project opened up a moment of self-discovery after health problems and experiences of homelessness:

*I've realised that I've never put my whole heart into being me and finding out who I am. And this project's changed that, it really has, 'cause I don't know whether it's the circumstance of being homeless or ill or whatever it is, but I've had a lot of time to think, but I'm starting to think constructively about how I want to shape my life. How I want to be with people and what kind of things I want to be doing.*⁹

For some it was a process of personal realisation: 'It's showing us that I can do what other people are saying I can', through which self-worth emerged, instead of feeling a burden on society as one who is homeless, or living on benefits, or having health troubles: 'yesterday I went home and I was knackered and exhausted but I felt this new sense of "I love myself, I value myself"'.¹⁰



5 Protohome closing event, summer 2016.

'It has to come from us'

The methodology of the project was not approached simply as a series of practical methods employed systematically, but it attempted to uncover many stories and to speak through many voices. Working with people that have, in many respects, been *done-to*, we tried to use an approach that was *done-with* people, not *on-them*, through co-production of knowledge, through collective self-inquiry and reflection. This project was also about exposing the relationship between knowledge and power – actively using the practice of building to question 'what knowledge is produced, by whom, for whose interests and towards what end?'.¹² This was about validating the voice of the subaltern, the marginalised, or the excluded. At the end of the process group members presented the project twice in public, and once to a group of invited housing and architecture professionals, including the Homes and Communities Agency, local council officers and the deputy head of housing at the Greater London Authority. This self-representation was vital, as one group member said, 'it has to come from us'.¹³

The enabler

The idea of the 'professional as enabler' is at the heart of Protohome. This kind of co-production demands that professionals shift from fixers who focus on problems to enablers who focus on abilities – valorising experience over

technocratic and professionalised forms of knowledge. Throughout the project we tried to reduce or blur the distinction between the 'professional joiner/architect' and the 'amateur user', but the process also highlighted a real need to re-evaluate participation in architecture, particularly in an age in which participation has become diluted and institutionalised through government policy and is now expected to play a role in the 'rolling back' of the local state through austerity – as a tool for crisis management.

Therefore, we need to fully question ethical approaches: who has control? Who has power? We also need to question the drive for consensus between group members and professionals undertaking participatory projects: consensus that so often attempts to smooth over power inequalities within groups. In this project criticality and disagreement were important and we also tried to actively highlight and antagonise potentially exploitative or manipulative relationships that occurred either within or through the project, or which framed participants' lives in a wider sense (such as their relationship to the welfare state, or to homelessness services). Whilst it is impossible to remove power relationships completely, power can spread from one individual (the professional) to many people through an individual and collective process of learning, knowledge creation and self-realisation.

But participation is hard. It requires continual critique and reflexivity. Yet, if we can repoliticise participation by using it not only to give a voice to, and empower, potentially excluded individuals, but also to question the structures and nexus of power, we might be able to propose alternative value systems, particularly for housing.

Notes

1. D. Dorling, *All That Is Solid: The Great Housing Disaster* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), p. 1.
2. Protohome Group Member.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Dean Crawford, joiner at Tilt Workshop.
6. Protohome Group Member.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. J. Gaventa, 'Towards a Knowledge Democracy' in *Action and Knowledge: Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Action Research*, ed. by O. Fals-Borda and M. A. Rahman (New York: Intermediate Technology Publications/Apex Press, 1991), p. 131.
13. Protohome Group Member.

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