From Conflict to Inclusion in Housing

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Introduction

In this chapter I take off from where others have landed; first from psychogeographer Patrick Keiller’s essay, and film of the same name, ‘The Dilapidated Dwelling’,\(^1\) in which he presents the remarkable insight that

> Under advanced capitalism it is increasingly difficult to produce and maintain the dwelling … Modernity, it seems, is exemplified not so much by the business park or the airport, but by the dilapidated dwelling.\(^2\)

By this Keiller means the ageing building stock that constitutes our domestic property, what he calls ‘old space’, which in the UK is the oldest and most underinvested housing in Europe, at an average age of 60 years. This he distinguishes from the ‘new space’ of mostly corporate economic activity – shiny sheds, retail units, offices, business parks and transport infrastructure – mostly built in the last few decades and replaced at a rate befitting the hyper-mobility and flexibility of late modernity. Such a discrepancy in investment between domestic and commercial property, Keiller argues,

> Is especially odd given that dwellings constitute the greater part of the built environment, that they are the spaces where most people spend most of their time, and where what is arguably the ‘real’ work of society is done.\(^3\)
This last point alerts us to the idea that dwelling is not simply a material or physical object, but also a setting for the ‘work’ of society, and indeed the activity of living itself. The question for this paper is how to resolve dilapidated dwelling(s) – in both a material and social sense. It draws on the insights of John F.C. Turner – that dwelling is not simply a noun, but also a verb; a social activity, defining the active dynamic process of social reproduction as much as the relatively static material building that facilitates it. On this reading, Keiller’s ‘dilapidated dwelling’ becomes an expansive metaphor for urban life in general: the relative dilapidation of ‘old space’ compared to ‘new’ is just the physical manifestation – the symptomatic expression – of a much deeper dilapidation in the collective activity of dwelling; the dialectical flipside of over-accumulation of capital.

The ‘dilapidation’ of dwelling – in these multiple senses – takes on greater weight in those deindustrialising shrinking cities, the old heartlands of global industrial production, long suffering from capital flight and urban decline. Many cities around the world are now facing the ‘wicked’ problems of mass unemployment, deprivation, depopulation, housing market failure, neighbourhood abandonment, crime and social unrest. This is particularly salient for one city in particular, Liverpool, whose severe economic decline – its fall from grace – has left it dealing with such tricky problems since the late 1960s. At its height as a world city, Liverpool was one of the biggest global seaports, the logistical nerve-centre of the British Empire at its apex. The seeds of decline were sown in the early twentieth century as the British Empire began to retract, and Britain’s trading partners shifted away from Atlantic-facing colonies thereby leaving Liverpool, in Tony Lane’s oft-quoted maritime metaphor, ‘marooned on the wrong side of the country’. This long-term structural shift slowly destroyed the port-based economy upon which Liverpool’s wealth and purpose was built. The consequences for the inner-city neighbourhoods reliant on port-related work were catastrophic. Unemployment followed by rapid population loss was exacerbated by the council’s post-war slum clearance programme and comprehensive redevelopment policies, which rehoused much of the population in outer estates and new towns. Around three-quarters of the docklands population were lost, with up to 60 per cent unemployment rates for those left behind. Many neighbourhoods were tipped into a spiral of decline, in which unemployment and depopulation conspired to create deprivation, housing vacancy and dereliction, whilst the council was left with diminishing tax income to pay for rising public improvements and regeneration costs (Figure 12.1).
Figure 12.1 A familiar image of dilapidated dwelling in Liverpool's inner-city neighbourhoods.
Such ‘wicked’ problems spurred Liverpool City Council to commission, design and lobby for the government funding of Housing Market Renewal (HMR) Pathfinders, the controversial £2.3 billion programme rolled out across de-industrialised inner-city areas in nine English cities from 2003 to 2011. The HMR programme was designed to intervene in failing local housing markets to reverse neighbourhood decline and attract new residents by refurbishing dilapidated housing and replacing ‘obsolete’ terraces with new desirable housing products. However, in the wake of austerity, it was prematurely cut short, leaving swathes of vacant land and empty homes without the funds for redevelopment. It is now increasingly clear that conventional large-scale housing-led redevelopment has failed to address the problem of dilapidated dwelling – and in many cases only exacerbated it. Liverpool’s recent history puts a new spin on Keiller’s conundrum as one of the dilapidated neighbourhood or even the dilapidated city. The question now becomes: how to resolve the problem of dilapidated neighbourhoods?

Keiller’s insight would be of no surprise to Engels, who in his seminal text on the housing question, saw ‘the housing shortage from which the workers and part of the petty bourgeoisie suffer in our modern big cities’ – including all other forms of deprivation and dilapidation in housing provision – as just ‘one of the numerous smaller, secondary evils which result from the present-day capitalist mode of production’. Engels derides Proudhon and his anarchist disciples as ‘bourgeois reformists’, criticising as simply untrue their claim that ‘as the wage worker in relation to the capitalist, so is the tenant in relation to the house owner’; arguing that their ‘practical solutions’ – self-help housing and common ownership – are futile spatial displacements or mere manifestations of a structural problem, which without total revolution would simply reappear elsewhere. It is not difficult to see how Engels’ observations of Liverpool informed The Housing Question. Here, in a passage from The Condition of the Working Class in England, written in 1844, Engels meticulously records the scale of the squalor:

Liverpool, with all its commerce, wealth, and grandeur ... treats its workers with the same barbarity. A full fifth of the population, more than 45,000 human beings, live in narrow, dark, damp, badly-ventilated cellar dwellings, of which there are 7,862 in the city. Besides these cellar dwellings there are 2,270 courts, small spaces built up on all four sides and having but one entrance, a narrow, covered passage-way, the whole ordinarily very dirty and inhabited exclusively by proletarians.
Conditions have clearly improved over a century on from the darkest days of industrialisation, but in many respects this is the original problem of dilapidated dwelling with which Liverpool has been struggling to contend ever since. Successive municipal modernist projects to improve such appalling conditions first targeted the dockside slums, replacing them with tenements and tower blocks, which themselves quickly became slums, requiring further redevelopment, whilst the inner-ring of speculatively built Victorian terraces were deteriorating and in need of attention. These council programmes were of a diverse ideological bent: Labour’s post-war policies of modernist comprehensive urban renewal; the far-left municipal socialist strategy of the Trotskyist Militant Tendency controlling the Labour council in the mid-1980s; and, in the twenty-first century, what might be described as a neoliberal public–private partnership approach, the HMR Pathfinder programme. Yet all succumbed to the same fallacy.

Throughout his writings, Keiller is fond of citing Henri Lefebvre, whose theory of the (social) production of (social) space is clearly a major influence. Indeed, it is no great leap to see how the relative dilapidation of dwelling, compared to corporate new space, is an expression of the relative power of exchange value over use value in the socio-spatial production of urban space. The domination of ‘abstract space’ over ‘lived space’ is what Japhy Wilson has emphasised in Lefebvre’s work as the ‘devastating conquest of the lived by the conceived’. To help unpick the politics and prospects of resolving dilapidated dwelling – as both material setting and social activity – I draw on the theoretical insights of Lefebvre, to argue that ‘housing-led’ regeneration, focusing narrowly on built structure, erroneously treats the symptom rather than the root condition: locating the problem at the door of the housing ‘product’ itself rather than the myriad socio-economic relations and cultural processes flowing through it and materialising in dilapidation. I sketch out an alternative vision that attempts to reconnect the ends and means of dwelling – building on Turner’s insight – in alternative collective housing practices, such as cooperatives and Community Land Trusts (CLTs). This chapter draws on recent critical interpretations of the concept of abstract space, as well as my own doctoral research on Liverpool’s recent alternative public housing history, to suggest how successive housing-led regeneration approaches have failed to resolve persistent dilapidated dwelling in Liverpool.

My second point of departure is Robert MacDonald’s essay ‘The City as a Laboratory of Shadows: Exposing Secret Histories While Thinking of the Future’, in which he draws our attention to Liverpool as a city of shadows: an urban laboratory of experiments, ideas, images, ‘absent
presences’, inconvenient truths, contradictions, hidden myths, radical ideas and possibilities. Closely related is Lefebvre’s notion of ‘experimental utopia’: testing out in the present through concrete material forms and social practices the utopian visions and conceptual horizons of radical urban transformation. Liverpool has a hidden or ‘shadow’ history of experimentation in housing, in which two moments of utopian possibility are significant. First, in the late 1970s Liverpool produced one of the largest, most concentrated and most innovative working-class movements in co-operative housing in British history. The first new-build co-op to be campaigned for, designed, owned and managed by its working-class resident-members, the Weller Streets, was the pioneer in a new form of co-operative housing incorporating radical new ideas around dweller control and design democracy – and inspiring successive groups of council tenants to develop a new wave of new-build co-ops across Liverpool.

The democratic moment of the 1960s that spawned the movement soon faded – and political changes in urban governance and deeper structural shifts conspired to arrest their further development – but the movement nonetheless left a legacy of some 50 co-ops still functioning today, providing a vision of how dilapidated dwelling could be approached differently.

Fast forward to the twenty-first century, and a second democratic moment, following the 2008 financial crisis, has inspired a new generation of mutual alternatives to public housing and neighbourhood management. In 2011 – the ‘year of dreaming dangerously’ as Žižek puts it – some of the country’s first urban CLTs were established in Liverpool as legal entities, the first step towards successfully applying the CLT model to a disinvested urban context. Granby Four Streets CLT and Homebaked CLT are innovative projects aiming at acquiring and rehabilitating for community use the terraced housing and local assets left vacant and derelict by successive large-scale state-led urban renewal programmes, notably HMR. These CLTs mirror the co-ops that went before them, emerging out of grassroots campaigns against the demolition and displacement of communities wrought by top-down modernist urban renewal programmes. They share an antipathy towards the monolithic, universalistic, technocratic, bureaucratic, alienating – and commodity fetishising – approach of the latter, tending to be more spatially piecemeal, temporally incremental, socially inclusive and politically experimental. Although different in institutional design, co-ops and CLTs are united by a shared aim of reconnecting the producer and user of housing (the means and end of dwelling), aspects which property-led regeneration serves to keep apart, to be achieved through participatory design and development methods and the democratic collective
ownership of land and housing. The final part of this chapter draws comparisons between Homebaked CLT and the 1970s co-op movement; by way of conclusion, I offer some reflections on the nature of ‘experimental utopia’ in the context of abstract space.

**Lefebvre’s theory of abstract space**

In this theoretical section, I build on Lefebvre’s concepts of ‘abstract space’, ‘concrete abstraction’ and ‘commodity fetishism’ to construct an explanation as to why state projects of comprehensive urban renewal have focused on the condition of housing stock rather than the social relations of production that produce it. I suggest that their failure lies not simply in the scale, complexity and severity of the problem, which should not be underestimated, but also in a tendency of planners and policymakers to fetishise the dilapidated dwelling itself as a ‘product’ rather than see it as the final result of fluid social processes – the surface symptom of a vast hidden hinterland of structural shifts, social relations of production, cultural practices and historical layers – just as commodity fetishism obscures the relationships of exploitation in the production of the final product.

Repudiating Engel’s uncompromisingly structuralist Marxism, the housing question is for Lefebvre not simply that working-class housing is marked by material deprivation, as a secondary consequence of worker exploitation, but that this reveals a deeper dilapidation in the activity of dwelling, arising from cultural and political alienation as much as economic. With bureaucratic state management of housing and other basic needs came new forms of deprivation, located in cultural and political spheres. Lefebvre like many on the New Left criticised Marx and Engels for limiting their analysis of alienation to the economic sphere and the commodity form: for not seeing the effects of abstraction in the political and cultural spheres of bureaucratic state power and the quantification, calculability and managed spectacle creeping into everyday life.\[^{22}\]

In post-war attempts to resolve the housing question, Lefebvre identifies the increasing incursion of what he calls ‘abstract space’ in the discursive shift from ‘residence’ to ‘housing’:

> It was at this juncture that the idea of *housing* began to take on definition, along with its corollaries: minimal living-space, as quantified in terms of modular units and speed of access; likewise minimal facilities and a programmed environment. What was actually being defined here ... was the lowest possible *threshold of tolerability*. Later, in the present century, slums began to disappear.\[^{23}\]
As the post-war welfare state began to eliminate the worst conditions brought about by capitalist urbanisation, through the construction of council estates, new towns and the subsidisation of suburban housing, this was however paid for through the imposition of standardised units measured according to the bare minimum of acceptable standards, both in terms of material tolerability and the ‘lowest possible threshold of sociability – the point beyond which survival would be impossible because all social life would have disappeared.’

Central to this perspective is the idea that housing delivered through impersonal state bureaucracies and profit-making corporations alienates dwellers from their immediate living environments, thereby failing to instil any real sense of ownership or pride, removing all obvious incentives to care and maintain the property and, crucially, severing the psychologically health-giving and spiritually fulfilling direct connection with the home. Among the most articulate proponents of this position during the twentieth century were ‘anarchist architect’ John F.C. Turner and ‘anarchist planner’ Colin Ward, who famously argued that the bureaucratic alienation of public landlordism – the treatment of tenants as ‘inert objects’ rather than active subjects – was largely responsible for the swift physical dilapidation of council housing estates, which in turn contributed to the rationale for their residualisation and replacement with marketised social housing.24

Likewise, Lefebvre’s is above all a critique of the disconnection of ends from means and the instrumentality brought about by the abstraction inherent in capitalist andtechnocratic rationalities. This is the root of alienation in urban modernity, which Lefebvre perhaps sees as the paramount experience of late capitalism, as opposed to the exploitation in the workplace as Marxists before him saw it. For Marx, like Engels, the production process – founded on the labour–capital relation – was the primary source of exploitation and alienation, and all other relations were merely secondary reflections of this primary contradiction:

The capital–relation presupposes a complete separation between the workers and the ownership of the conditions for the realisation of their labour … So-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production.25

The abstraction and alienation that Marx had identified at the core of production was, for Lefebvre, emerging in more and more aspects of late twentieth-century everyday life. The common conceptual thread tying
this all together was ‘abstract space’ – the spatial dimension of global capitalism and state technocracy. This is a purely instrumental, partitioned, rational space in which the embodied, sensual, emotional ‘lived space’ of localised everyday life is overlain, controlled and channelled by the plans, classifications, abstract divisions and orderings of ‘conceived space’ – that of planners, architects, scientists and bureaucrats. The ideological and structural dominance of abstract space over everyday life is shored up by the visual-objective illusion of transparency, which suggests to the perceiver that space is merely a product, an object, visible to the eye, thereby obscuring from view the complex reality of social relations and historical processes that goes into creating it and infusing with meaning. In this way, abstract space obfuscates from the dual dialectical nature of socio-spatial reality – in being at once thing and flow, object and process – leaving us with a conception of space as homogeneous, material and container-like, composed of separable units. When we are led to believe space is an empty transparent container, it becomes easily abstracted from its socially produced and embedded context, detachable for exchange on the world market. Space also appears as objective, given, unchangeable, and therefore not amenable to change through collective action, proving politically disempowering. In sum, abstract space obscures social reality from view in an analogous spatial process to that which Marx called commodity fetishism. Lefebvre offers a striking description of this enigma:

What is a commodity? A concrete abstraction. An abstraction, certainly – but not an abstraction in spite of its status as a thing; an abstraction, on the contrary, on account of its status as a social ‘thing’, divorced, during its existence, from its materiality, from the use to which it is put, from productive activity, and from the need that it satisfies … Self-exhibition is its forte … And yet, once it has appeared, its mystery only deepens. Who has produced it? Who will buy it? … Who, or what purpose, will it serve? … The commodity does not answer these questions; it is simply there, exposed to the gaze of passers-by … be it in a nondescript small shop or in a glittering department store.  

Thus, Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space has been described by Andy Merrifield as a ‘spatialised rendition’ of Marx’s commodity fetishism concept; and likewise by Lukasz Stanek as analogous to Marx’s concept of ‘concrete abstraction’: labour as an ‘abstraction which became true in practice’. First, it abstracts from the qualitative
difference of diverse lived experience a general homogeneous form that is common to all instances. For instance, the diverse actions of labourers in all sorts of industries are abstracted into quantiative labour-time, made equivalent as units of abstract labour-time, represented by money. Similarly, in space, as Lefebvre shows, abstract space divides urban space up into particular parcels or plots abstracted from lived context, and made available as commodities with exchange value on the global market. Second, it produces ‘concrete abstractions’ in the real world, making materially and socially concrete the abstract concept in question, which in turn then has real power to affect people’s behaviours and social practices. For instance, money is for Marx a concrete abstraction of the abstract ‘commodity form’ – the social relation that transforms a use value into a commodity – in that money has a real material existence that people can physically hold and act in relation to. Likewise, in space, Lefebvre reveals how property plots, distribution channels, communication networks and other physical spaces of circulation and exchange are the concrete abstractions of abstract space. Concrete abstraction, then, describes the transformation of material space in the image of abstract representations, such as those of modernist planning, and the infusion of social space with the strange immaterial objectivity of exchange value.

To get a firmer grasp on the concrete power of abstract space over urban life, Liverpool provides a good example. In another essay in The View from the Train,29 Keiller discusses the destruction of Liverpool’s raison d’être as a maritime hub, which has virtually eliminated its main source of employment and global importance. This is the abstraction of global capital, moving elsewhere according to the logics of efficiency and profitability, being made concrete through technological change – the rationalisation, containerisation and general abstraction of port activities – which meant that Liverpool’s port economy shed its workforce at a rate far outweighing the loss of its economic value. Keiller surprises us with the fact that ‘Liverpool can still be described as the UK’s largest conventional port, with more traffic today than even at its peak’, and that

The dereliction of the Liverpool waterfront is a result not of the port’s disappearance, but of its new insubstantiality. The warehouses that used to line both sides of the river have been superseded by a fragmented, mobile space: goods vehicles moving or parked on the UK’s roads – the road system as a publicly-funded warehouse.30

Most port traffic passes through via complex mechanised processes without generating local jobs. This mechanised ‘new insubstantiality’
is a specific process of ‘concrete abstraction’: the abstraction of global trade made concrete in material and economic infrastructures – containers, cranes, lorries, motorways and car parks – as the fetishised objects obscuring from view the real scale and scope of the social relations that make up the vast chain of logistics stretched out, as Keiller implies, along the road network.

**Towards a spatialised conception of commodity fetishism**

Applied to space, then, abstraction conceals the social reality of urban space in the same way that the commodity form obscures in the final product the multiple geographically and historically layered social relations of production and exploitations of labour. In terms of buildings themselves, Lefebvre points to the tendency of ‘productive operations’ in general to ‘cover their tracks’, sometimes with ‘this as their prime goal: polishing, staining, facing, plastering, and so on’. It is these tendencies of abstract space in the production of buildings and urban space more generally that led Lefebvre to identify a dangerous forgetfulness:

> When construction is completed, the scaffolding is taken down; likewise, the fate of an author’s rough draft is to be torn up and tossed away … products, and even works, are further characterized by their tendency to detach themselves from productive labour. So much so, in fact, that productive labour is sometimes forgotten altogether, and it is this ‘forgetfulness’ – or, as a philosopher might say, this mystification – that makes possible the fetishism of commodities: the fact that commodities imply certain social relationships whose misapprehension they also ensure.

This ‘forgetfulness’ works in two ways: to obscure from casual view the full productive process that went into making a dwelling what it is; and to mystify the critical faculties from recognising the power of users to change it. First, all traces of the labour that produced it are made invisible by the rendered, polished, homogenised – fetishised – end-product. This is tantamount to Lefebvre’s insight that modernity is marked by the ‘manifest expulsion of time’ by fetishised space; that ‘with the advent of modernity time has vanished from social space’. A building produced as a commodity conceals the myriad historical layers, social relations, imaginaries, plans, skills, construction techniques, sweat and toil that went into making the building. Moreover, this also hides from common sense the inhabitants
themselves, who infuse material structure with life and project their subjective experiences, memories, dreams, fears and hopes into buildings in ways which actually produce it as a social space rather than abstract product. Abstract space helps us forget that it is the users of dwellings that truly ‘perform’ dwelling – that dwelling is a verb as well as a noun.

Second, a fog of abstraction descends over our critical faculties, preventing us from seeing buildings in any other way than abstracted and exchangeable products; a tendency which Lefebvre identifies as affecting both users and critics – but which just as easily applies to policymakers and practitioners:

Fetishized abstract space thus gives rise to two practical abstractions: ‘users’ who cannot recognize themselves within it, and a thought which cannot conceive of adopting a critical stance towards it.34

In this chapter, I want to trace how this forgetfulness has informed attempts in Liverpool to resolve the problem of dilapidated dwelling. The dilapidated dwelling itself becomes a fetishised object for planners and policy makers, who treat the material building as the target of their intervention rather than the social relations that produce it. This is evident in increasingly property-led attempts at regeneration in which policymakers locate the problem at the door of the end ‘product’ itself rather than the complex background process that produces space. In response to such commodity fetishism, I posit an alternative that seeks to reconnect the user and producer of housing, in ways that attempt to resolve the alienation at the root of a production process founded on abstract divisions of labour. In Liverpool there are two movements that define such an alternative method: the 1970s co-op movement and the contemporary CLT projects. I address each in turn below.

**Liverpool’s housing question reconsidered**

In the 1970s and 1980s, Liverpool once again found itself at the centre of the housing question. Just as Engels had attacked Proudhon, the latter’s self-help heirs, John F.C. Turner and Colin Ward, were likewise critiqued by Marxist structuralists such as Rod Burgess for misunderstanding the commodity nature of housing.35 They responded by highlighting the failure of the structuralists, going back to Engels, to usefully distinguish between *ends* and *means* in answering the housing question.
Turner draws our attention back to the insight that ‘dwelling’ is a verb as well as a noun – an active lived process of doing, as well as a static material resource, the building itself. Liverpool found itself caught up in this debate when Ward’s ideas – strongly influenced by Turner’s – were to find their expression in Liverpool’s 1970s housing co-operative movement, which Ward retrospectively explains:

The book had a salutary effect in Liverpool during a brief period when the Liberals controlled the city’s housing policy. It inspired several instances … of newly-built housing where the tenants of old slum houses were enabled to find a site, and commission an architect to design their own new housing … The proudest moment of my housing advocacy was when the Weller Street Coop chairman, Billy Floyd, introduced me at a meeting by waving a tattered copy of Tenants Take Over and saying: ‘Here’s the man who wrote the Old Testament … But we built the New Jerusalem!’

Here, the Old Testament referred to is Colin Ward’s book *Tenants Take Over*, his radical manifesto for ‘collective dweller control’, whilst the New Jerusalem is the Weller Streets Co-op, the country’s first new-build co-op to be designed, owned and managed by its working-class residents (Figure 12.2). The Weller Streets in turn ignited what some have dubbed the ‘new-build cooperative revolution’ – and Liverpool’s ‘Co-op Spring’ – fuelling what became the country’s largest housing co-operative movement, at least outside of London. It was an extraordinary shift from a situation in which most of Liverpool’s working-class residents were housed by the council, or the ‘Corpy’ as it was known, without any control over the type, design or location of their home, to one in which residents had for the first time a genuine choice over these aspects and a real sense of ownership. It heralded a radical new model, the ‘Weller way’ of doing things. This put residents in the driving seat of a development machine funded and legislated for centrally by the state but deploying resources through an unprecedentedly decentralised programme of design and construction by a range of local professional services organisations, all chosen and commissioned by residents themselves. This new form of cooperative housing incorporated radical new ideas around dweller control, design democracy and participatory techniques – then being experimented with in what became known as the ‘community architecture’ movement – and which inspired successive groups of council tenants to develop a new wave of new build co-ops across Liverpool.
Figure 12.2  Weller Street Co-op resident-led design, well managed and in better condition today compared with surrounding housing built afterwards.
The leading secondary co-op agency, Cooperative Development Services (CDS), played a crucial role in the movement’s development – initially suggesting a co-op as an idea for groups of residents campaigning to be rehoused together, as a solution to the problem of displacement posed by the ‘slum clearances’ then demolishing much of inner-city Liverpool’s terraces. The work of CDS with the Weller Streets Co-op was to set the trend for the rest. First, CDS suggested architects, developers and agents for the co-op committee to shortlist and then interview; the Weller Streets’ committee insisted that ‘the architects act as advisers and scribes’. Their selected scribe was a local newly trained architect, Bill Halsall – another key figure in the movement, who went on to design many other co-ops, notably the Eldonians, the most famous of the Liverpool co-ops and the largest and possibly most successful community-owned housing trust today. Halsall worked with the Weller Streets Co-op to pioneer a radically democratic design process that would put the flesh on the theoretical bones of Ward’s ‘dweller control’ concept. Participatory techniques and ‘planning for real’ exercises were innovated to traverse the wall separating technical architectural knowledge practices from the lived experience of inhabitants. These included questionnaires of residents’ needs and preferences; exhibitions to illustrate design ideas; fact-finding trips and site visits to schemes designed by bidding architects and to brief architects on design ideals; and group modelling methods, such as moveable blocks rearranged on cork boards to find desired layouts.

Spin-off benefits of such intensive involvement included individual empowerment through teaching new skills; tackling socio-economic needs by producing more responsive designs; lowering long-term maintenance costs; and building better communities, in developing community confidence and sense of ownership, thereby instilling responsibility for housing, helping deter vandalism, crime and neglect, and giving people a political voice in local decision making. Indeed, such skills were often life-changing. Working-class people otherwise without access to the professional knowledge and mores of architects and planners were suddenly immersed in that world and picked up new know-how that would help them in their own lives. What might have initially seemed alienating and intimidating jargon, such as housing ‘cost yardsticks’, was absorbed and put to good use in negotiations with professionals. This not only turned power relations on their head but, crucially, gave individual members the tools to expand their aptitudes and open opportunities to new areas of employment, often in local architectural practices.

Empowerment was not simply a matter of education and skills, but also one of power, confidence, self-belief and identity. Prior to the design
stage, members cut their teeth on intensive political campaigning and collective negotiation with key gatekeepers to secure the legal support funding and development for their co-op. Co-op campaigns were like a kind of ‘political school’ for many members, who were inspired and empowered to go into politics full time, representing their communities and often becoming councillors. Phil Hughes, treasurer of the Weller Streets Co-op, became a Labour councillor and eventually Chair of Housing following the fall of the Militant Tendency. Other men from Weller Streets and the Eldonians also became Labour councillors, and women too were radically empowered: Jackie Harris, a single parent leading the Kirkby co-ops, is now a Labour councillor for Knowsley Council; and Jane Corbett, an activist in the Langrove Co-op, is now a Labour councillor and Cabinet Member for Education and Children’s Services on Liverpool City Council. In these various ways, therefore, the intensive campaign and design process through which co-op residents empowered themselves and their communities was a vital move in making their new co-op neighbourhoods more than just a collection of better-quality material dwellings: it also strengthened their capacity to take collective control over the social activity of dwelling. Community self-government was in turn buttressed by individual empowerment to find employment and a political voice.

In providing the resources and skills for people to make significant steps towards housing themselves, the co-op movement in many ways bridged the growing chasm between the ends and means of dwelling, bringing the user and the producer of housing into closer synergy. The movement embedded the seeds of an alternative model of neighbourhood regeneration which would later inspire the growth of a new generation of grassroots action in the community land trust movement, and made real steps towards resolving the alienation at the root of the problem of dilapidation dwelling(s). However, we will never really know the true regeneration potential of co-ops, for the life of the movement was dramatically cut short by subsequent political events, which I now turn to.

**Militant mono-mania for housing**

Within less than half a decade of the completion of Weller Streets, following the election in 1983 of a far-left municipal socialist administration led by a Trotskyist sect within the Labour Party, the new-build co-operative revolution was dissipated by an agenda of centralised local
state control over the means of social reproduction. Militant saw co-ops as a bourgeois conspiracy and a threat to municipal housing – much like Engels saw Proudhon’s self-help reformism – and forcefully quashed co-op development through a programme of ‘municipalisation’. Gestating co-ops were either aborted or taken into municipal ownership, as part of a bold and ambitious £350 million housing renewal programme, the Urban Regeneration Strategy (URS) – which met targets of 1,000 new homes built per year up to 1988: a remarkable achievement for a time when, nationally, council housebuilding had come to a standstill.

Militant believed that large-scale municipal house-building would revitalise Liverpool’s economy and environment by providing jobs and decent homes for all, but became seduced by a form of design determinism – blinded, perhaps, by the power of commodity fetishism – which sat awkwardly next to socialist beliefs in collectively controlling the means of production. Their assessment of council house designs revealed ‘one bright spot’ of ‘problem-free’ semi-detached housing built in the inter-war period, and concluded that this was the pinnacle of British council housing design: this ‘insight was the germ of the URS housing programme’. At around the same time, the geographer Alice Coleman was popularising her ideas on the ‘design disadvantage’ of modernist council housing estates, which she had borrowed and adapted from Oscar Newman’s theory of defensible space from across the Atlantic. Ironically, despite the clear influence of Coleman’s ideas on Militant’s most despised ideological opponent – Thatcherism – Tony Byrne, the brains behind the programme, had come to the same conclusions as Coleman. In a strange twist, Coleman gave her seal of approval to Militant housing policy, publicly stating that ‘Liverpool has got it right’, which leading Militant members are proud to report: ‘she completely concurred with the main thrust of the URS and of the council’s conviction that the majority of people preferred to live in traditional houses’. The URS development principles that she praised were published as new guidelines which prescribed that only houses and bungalows, semi-detached where possible, were to be built. No cul-de-sacs, clusters or inward-facing dwellings; no shared surfaces, common areas or play spaces; only conventional road layouts with private gardens. This was bad news for uncompleted co-ops. Many of the more interesting courtyard designs with built-in communal space, community centres and focal points for collective gathering – essential to the social life of a co-op – were now in contravention of the new guidelines. Not only did Militant take co-op developments under council control – if they had
Figure 12.3  Hatton houses in Liverpool’s urban core, overshadowed by Radio City tower and the Anglican Cathedral.
yet to sign a council agreement – they also radically altered their design to reflect their belief in plain suburban housing, thereby threatening the social existence of these co-ops.

In many respects, however, Militant had accurately captured the mood of many tenants, alienated by several decades of living in dysfunctional and decaying council flats. In his architectural review of Liverpool, Owen Hatherley concurs that ‘Militant’s policy was perhaps the widest-scale attempt to give people what most (if not all) always said they wanted – a house and garden, close to their place of work.’49 However, the result was perhaps less desirable. An ex-manager of council housing regales a common observation: ‘“Hatton houses” we called them, because they were directly controlled by Derek Hatton’,50 leading Militant member and deputy leader of the council. He continues: ‘so they built the sort of “story book” look of what a house was supposed to look like, in a way entirely wrong for a hundred yards from here [Liverpool city-centre]’ (Figure 12.3). Owing to fiscal constraints on the URS from the ongoing struggle to find financial sources amidst an illegal budget deficit, the housing was often of a lower design quality than the council housing it replaced, often not big enough for new tenants to fit the furniture from their old house.

Militant’s mono-mania for housing, reflected in the stringent URS design prescriptions, was found guilty of spatial determinism by critics, including co-op agency CDS Chief Executive, Catherine Meredith, who accused Militant of a ‘megalomaniac belief in housing type’,51 for failing to recognise the importance of dweller control in the management and maintenance of housing. Militant ultimately fell victim to a kind of housing fetishism, in which the design and type of housing were seen as the key to resolving dilapidated dwelling. The Coleman/Militant ‘design modification’ approach worked on the assumption that people wanted semi-detached Hatton houses, overlooking the fact that working-class co-op tenants had opted for terraces, enclosed courtyards, cul-de-sacs and communal features in the participatory design processes at the heart of the new build co-op movement. The URS made the very same mistake as the post-war modernist council designs it critiqued: a narrow focus on providing the right design over any consideration of tenant participation in the design, management and ownership of their housing. Supposedly alienating high-rise flats and council estates may have been replaced by more popular, human-scale traditional houses; but the distant paternalistic bureaucratic structure remained unmoved.
History repeats itself: first as tragedy then as farce

We see history repeating itself with Housing Market Renewal (HMR) in the twenty-first century. The primary objective of HMR was to restructure failing housing markets by improving and replacing dilapidated housing to attract new residents back into the inner city, after decades of depopulation in the wake of economic decline. Much like Militant’s URS, HMR focused too much of its energy on treating the surface symptom of a deeper structural problem, but upgrading the materiality of housing by itself is not enough. This is acknowledged even by leading figures in HMR policy making and management, captured in this quote from a Liverpool regeneration manager and former executive of another HMR Pathfinder:

You have to try and make sure that housing is linked into other forms of socio-economic regeneration ... And if I think a mistake was made in the work that ... led to Housing Market Renewal ... [it] should have been called ‘Market Renewal’; because housing in a sense in itself may stabilise, may stop decline, but in itself it will not be enough to promote economic well-being, you have to have other things that go alongside it. That’s where the Eldonians were clever.52

Initially, HMR was quite a forward-thinking and radical approach which took as its object the wider systemic structure of markets, and attempted to resolve the ‘wicked’ problems of vacancy, dereliction, unemployment and so on, by reconnecting failing neighbourhoods with more stable regional markets. However, this expansive market restructuring rationale was soon distilled to the narrow issue of housing type and design. The reasons for this mission drift are complex and highly political, as documented in David Webb’s research.53 In very basic terms, because HMR followed an abstract logic of markets and exchange, the problem was increasingly reformulated and framed as one of housing ‘products’ competing for the attention of upwardly mobile consumers in a residential ‘market of positions’.54 Terraced housing was deemed to be unpopular and therefore unviable by researchers owing to its low market price, and so a solution was found in replacing it with a new product, reflecting consumer choice, rather than improving wider systemic factors, such as employment, education, health and environment.
The terraced house itself was thereby vilified as the enemy, deemed ‘obsolete’ because it was assumed to be unpopular among potential residents who were subjectified as rational consumers competing for the best ‘product’ on the open market. This internalised the responsibility for the problem of housing vacancy and dilapidation into the terraced house – not in its concrete context, as particular buildings with place-based economic dependencies and social relations, but rather in its abstract form as the general concept of the terrace, interchangeable with like type anywhere else. Dilapidated dwelling is fetishised as a commodity to be easily replaced with a better model, simplifying its complex reality as a spatial constellation of fluid social processes – just as commodity fetishism obscures the relationships of exploitation in the production of the final product on the shelf.

To get ‘objective’ evidence on what type of houses to build, HMR policy makers conducted surveys with their target population – those middle-class residents currently living in the affluent suburbs – whose responses were unsurprisingly in favour of the kind of suburban housing they currently lived in: neo-traditional semi-detached homes arranged in cul-de-sacs with gardens and garage space for a car to commute into the city. But this was not the suburbs, and the resulting (sub)urban design was a ‘bizarre’ abstraction from Liverpool’s unique urban context. In an uncanny reflection of Militant’s housing policy – though from a very different political angle – HMR has built what many regard as the next generation of ‘Hatton houses’ (Figure 12.4). Owen Hatherley’s scathing description of the inner-city suburban housing built by Militant in the 1980s could equally apply to the decontextualised housing estates built by HMR since the 2000s:

It’s not dignified for the city centre to mimic the ‘burbs. It leads to depressing juxtapositions … the scale is preposterous, with the houses seeming to desperately want to be somewhere less dramatic, a murmur of discontent with the idea of getting above your station … it becomes a tragicomedy.

By singling out the terraced house for extinction, and building off-the-shelf housing in its place, HMR alienated the inner-city neighbourhoods from their urban context, but also the existing residents from their surroundings. Campaigns against demolition thus gathered momentum to confront HMR. An anti-demolition campaigner laments
the proclivity for homogeneous suburban-style housing in the HMR clearance zone surrounding her terraced home, which she helped save from demolition:
It’s kind of despising of working-class terraced housing … and giving people these poor shoddy imitations of sort of suburban living as if that is the pinnacle of human aspiration … it’s a kind of despising of any public or communal space … the idea that you huddle so that you see as little of your neighbours as possible and there’s no through movement anywhere; it’s always like dead-ends.57

Some of these campaigns channelled their anti-HMR sentiments into more proactive projects for alternatives, culminating in two CLTs one in Granby and one in Anfield, on opposite sides of the city centre – amongst the first urban CLTs to rehabilitate empty homes. The campaign process for Granby Four Streets CLT – its emergence out of guerrilla gardening activism and ongoing development through innovations in ‘community homesteading’ – has a complex social history and political context, which I have documented elsewhere.58 Most recently, Granby CLT has recently received a great deal of media attention following the nomination of the project for the 2015 Turner Prize. The architecture collective working with Granby residents, Assemble, are the first architectural and design studio to be nominated for the Turner Prize – suggesting how art, traditionally focused on aesthetic objects, can be reimagined as a lived, collective process and dynamic socio-material practice. The other CLT project so far to be established in Liverpool, Homebaked CLT, across the other side of the city in Anfield, has emerged more directly from radical artistic intervention. For the remainder of this chapter, I consider the process-driven philosophy of Homebaked CLT as an alternative to the abstract space of HMR.

**Homebaked: ‘brick by brick, loaf by loaf, we build ourselves’**

Right from the outset Homebaked had a powerful political agenda, beginning as a public art project commissioned by the 2010 Liverpool Biennial, whose organisers invited Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk to visit Anfield and work with local residents on an art initiative to address the effects of HMR on lived experience. Out of her initial interactions with local residents and artists, Jeanne created ‘2Up2Down’, a community-led participatory design project to reimagine the future of the area as constructed through small-scale community-led alternatives to top-down policies; or, as their website suggests, ‘a way for local people to “take matters into their own hands” and make real social and physical change in their neighbourhood.’59 2Up2Down takes public arts funding
and pursues something more akin to political activism, aiming for radical redistribution of land and power to traditionally marginalised communities. Discourses on the urban commons, co-production and participatory democracy are central to the design philosophy of Jeanne van Heeswijk, who believes ‘communities should co-produce their own futures’ in an art–action–research method she calls ‘radicalising the local’, which works ‘by empowering communities to become their own antidote’.  

Active participation, performance, and community storytelling were at the heart of the project, which gained momentum through a participatory design process with 40 young people from the area, gradually expanding to include local adults who were affected by HMR and whose housing needs and desires were expressed in the evolution of the project. The process was facilitated by a young architect from URBED, who adapted URBED’s ‘Building for Change’ modelling toolkit, used to get adults to remodel their neighbourhoods – a contemporary equivalent of the ‘Planning for Real’ exercises developed by CDS in the new-build co-op designs. The architect also explains that ‘for my previous diploma thesis I did a case study on the Eldonians, and the design process … and community architecture, just doing a comparison between that and Byker, and Homes for Change in Hulme’. There is thus a direct lineage from the design democracy infusing the 1970s co-op movement, and community architecture more broadly, to the resident engagement that helped create Homebaked.

The slogan at this time was: ‘Housing is the battlefield of our time and the house is its monument.’ By acknowledging the terraced house as the ‘monument’ of Liverpool’s present conjuncture – but just that: only a monument, the symbolic edifice of a deep-rooted condition – the aptly named ‘2Up2Down’ recognises the commodity fetishism at the heart of the HMR’s strategy in the ‘battlefield’. It seeks to reveal this illusion for what it is by turning the prevailing wisdom on its head, proposing a sustainable rehabilitation approach to breathe life back into the much-maligned two-up, two-down terraced house through new community uses. Just as the dilapidation of dwelling signifies that of the activity of living in place as well as the physical place itself, so too does rehabilitation taken in its most expansive sense. The project thus aims to revitalise the community as well as the buildings, by restoring the local bakery as a community anchor and co-operative, providing social space and jobs, and eventually new affordable housing in the terraced row – all to be owned and managed by a CLT governed democratically by and for the interests of local people.

2Up2Down eventually became grounded in the neighbourhood in 2011 when they took over the lease of a newly vacant bakery in the heart of Anfield, whose custodians had been forced to accept the council’s compulsory purchase offer after the loss of most of their customers, emptied out
from the surrounding streets by HMR. The Mitchell’s Bakery was founded in 1903 and known as ‘The Pie Shop’ by football fans from all over the world – located opposite the stadium main entrance (Figure 12.5).\textsuperscript{64} Symbolically the bakery is a cornerstone of the community, and 2Up2Down has

![Image](image1.png)

![Image](image2.png)

**Figure 12.5** Homebaked bakery emblazoned with its slogan, and the terraced row the CLT is hoping to acquire from the council for affordable housing.
capitalised on this cultural history by renaming the bakery ‘Homebaked’. This clever piece of branding conjured up new slogans that would prove to be very marketable: ‘Brick by brick, loaf by loaf, we build ourselves.’

Artists and activists involved in the project see in Homebaked an alternative vision for social change through slow cumulative learning, analogous to home cooking, ‘denoting the slow building of collective resilience within the face of the “tyranny of emergency” … that characterises the everyday lives of the residents of Anfield’. Homebaked’s incremental, experimental, immersive and hands-on process stands in stark contrast to the abstract time horizons and monolithic operation of HMR, in which current users are simply cut out of the picture. On the other hand, there are many on the Left who would deride Homebaked’s performative art techniques and cutesy branding as a kind of bourgeois reformism – sharing as much with trendy pop-up entrepreneurialism of creative-class politics as any serious political resistance. Indeed, some observers refer to Homebaked’s campaign strategy as ‘half-baked’. This is a contradiction that likewise we can see in Patrick Keiller’s project, as Will Self suggests:

Keiller’s dilemma – and the source of a fruitful tension in his work – is whether to see his films as part of a strategy of resistance to the spatial forms of late capitalism, or only as incorporations of the everyday into a bourgeois calculus of the arty-factual.

Homebaked’s approach, like Keiller’s work, occupies ambivalent ground, positioned self-consciously within prevailing cultural trends, exploiting connections, media attention and marketing to gain a wide audience and win over both public and political support, whilst simultaneously pursuing a slow-burn strategy of transforming capitalist property dynamics and neoliberal regeneration policy through demonstration of an extraordinary alternative. After decades of failed state solutions to dilapidated dwelling, Homebaked is a vital injection of creative energies, skills, expertise, publicity and funding into an otherwise deprived neighbourhood that had been brought close to social extinction by the violence of abstraction, both through economic decline and state-led displacement. Yet Homebaked is taking into CLT ownership only one terraced row within a large area in need of rehabilitation, as part of the council’s broader Anfield Village masterplan. Their ability to contest the conventional large-scale demolition-and-rebuild approach was ultimately constrained by their reliance on local government support and acquisition of public land. Experimental activist-art projects like
Homebaked are especially time-consuming, labour-intensive and piece-meal endeavours, which remain highly vulnerable to the whims of both participants themselves and those external stakeholders, not least local politicians, who are important gatekeepers in the transfer of public land and assets into community hands. Moreover, their ability to make headway with structural change on any significant scale appears intrinsically limited. The flipside of the coin of the huge potential social benefits accruing through democratic, intensive and immersive methods is the inherent difficulty to replicate or scale up such schemes without attenuating the spontaneous energies at their source.

**Conclusion: towards experimental utopias?**

The commodity fetishism and concrete abstraction that Lefebvre saw as a fundamental facet of abstract space – and which I have sought to show as permeating the logic of diverse state projects from the Trotskyist municipalisation of Militant to neoliberal market restructuring of HMR – is essentially a failure to see the importance of means in achieving ends. The ends themselves no doubt differ radically between these state projects. For Militant, the end was state socialist control over the means of social reproduction – notably housing – and eventually the means of production. They were so fixated on this substantive political goal – as a first step towards the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism – that they forgot how important the process of getting there was for its full fruition. They overlooked the tiny incremental steps in between that must connect and channel the everyday life of working class Liverpudlians into the radical political change they sought. Such a misapprehension of ends and means reflects that of Engels’ *Housing Question*. It is also evident – though in a very different, neoliberal form – in HMR’s misidentification of the terraced house as an obsolete product and the root problem of inner-city neighbourhood decline, when in fact it was just the tip of the iceberg.

To truly effect change, then, Militant’s URS and HMR alike needed to bring residents along with them, through a participatory process that would instil legitimacy and, crucially, develop their skills, capacities and values in co-operation to eventually realise collective self-management. Co-ops and CLTs – as microcosms of democratic or even utopian socialist states, operating at the street or neighbourhood scale – are the natural muscle tissue or organs required to grow the socialist body. Tragically, Militant mistook them as a threatening bourgeois
virus. Lefebvre’s dialectical insight – the production of (urban) space as both determined by and in turn determining of social relations and cultural practices, through constant iterative co-evolution – offers a way out of this impasse. It is this dialectical tension inhering in projects like Homebaked that gives them so much dynamic potential and creative energy to sow the seeds for future transformation – straddling the delicate dialectic between reform and revolution. Homebaked does indeed embody a distinctly Lefebvorean vision of experimental utopianism, seeking out urban change in concrete ways bit by bit in the here and now, whilst staying present to its own limitations and contradictions:

The idea of a new life is at once realistic and illusory … The fact is that the space which contains the realized preconditions of another life is the same one as prohibits what those preconditions make possible … A total revolution – material, economic, social, political, psychic, cultural, erotic, etc. – seems to be in the offing, as though already immanent to the present. To change life, however, we must first change space.70

Homebaked CLT – like the co-ops that went before it – attempts to change life by first changing the space – material, architectural, ideological and social – in which we live out our daily lives. This alternative model – first pioneered in the dweller control of the 1970s co-operative movement and evolving through the contemporary CLT campaigns – does not alienate the users of the final product from the process of getting there; it designs in their needs and desires from the outset, in a way that ensures social use is valued over market exchange. It is a simple and humble ambition of incremental and piecemeal urban transformation that gradually draws in more people, building on their strengths and providing additional resources, in an inspiring and empowering process, breathing life and hope back into both buildings and minds that have long been neglected by economic and political forces. In contrast to the kind of spatial and temporal abstractions imposed by large-scale state-led comprehensive redevelopment programmes, experimental projects like Homebaked have the potential to reconnect the ends and means of dwelling – as self-sustaining and democratic attempts to heal dilapidation, both material and social.