Self-Build Homes

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Taking self-build out of its ‘small and special box’: citizens as agents for the political and the social of self-build

Stephen Hill

All forms of self-building are, to a greater or lesser degree, expressions of political as well as economic or social agency. Individuals and groups invest their time, money and social capital to achieve outcomes for themselves or their communities that the state or the market are unable or unwilling to provide. This chapter explores how citizens could become more effective political agents through community organising and locally accountable democratic institutions, not just in relation to their housing needs, but in other aspects of public life, both locally and nationally.

This exploration draws on the author’s practical experience of working in both mainstream housing development and regeneration and in supporting self-organised groups of citizens to develop their own housing schemes since the mid-1970s, and the writing of four publications that are a mix of qualitative research, reflections on professional practice and polemical proposition-making:

• The Future of Community Self-Build (Hill et al., 2000), analysing the barriers to increased levels of community self-building and proposing changes to the national agency-led model of self-building;
• ‘Time for a citizens’ housing revolution’ (Hill, 2009a), proposing the Right to Build and a political narrative for policies to promote individual and group self-building;
• ‘Justice for the professions or a moment of destiny?’ (Hill, 2009b), tracing the development of professional practice from the radical technical aid agencies supporting citizens in planning and housing in the 1970s up to today and the progressive erosion of the ‘public interest’ in professional practice; and
Using first-hand experience of community land trusts (CLTs) and other forms of community housing in the UK, USA and Canada to explore how new forms of land ownership have been used to strengthen civil society institutions and the agency of citizens, both in opposition to and, mostly, in partnerships with the local or national state.

The last of these publications makes a strong case for community organising as a more effective and systemic means of enabling citizens to exercise power and control over their housing circumstances. In this chapter, I take a further look at community organising, using case study projects located in New York and London, comparing it with other ways of promoting ‘community’ or ‘community-led’ housing. I refer to the political narrative of community, derived from the modernising local government policy agenda of the New Labour government from 1997 to the mid-2000s, but from which the intended devolution of power to communities has long since been abandoned in favour of more limited programmes of community asset transfer, under New Labour, and then community rights of the Coalition government’s Localism Act 2011. In this way, I ask questions of the current political context of ‘community housing’ and suggest some possible strategies for the development of a more widely drawn movement of ‘citizen-inspired’ housing solutions as a more effective voice for the demand side in housing policy.

Self-build is great, but...

In 1999, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) commissioned a research study of future options for ‘community self-build’ housing in England and Scotland. The research question was, ‘If community self-build housing has such positive social and economic outcomes for its participants, why was it so hard to make happen, and how could we do more of it?’ It was jointly commissioned with the four self-build promotional agencies: Community Self-Build Scotland (CSB Scotland) and, from England, the Walter Segal Trust, the Young Builders Trust and the Community Self-Build Association (CSBA).

The interviews provided a valuable insight into the culture of mainstream housing politics at the time. As the report highlights (Hill et al., 2000), the agencies, charities working directly with people building their own homes, policy analysts and a few local authorities and housing associations had enormous enthusiasm for self-building and its many
beneficial outcomes, despite its undoubted complications. From many other interviewees, especially those in an official position in central or local government, or senior roles in mainstream housing providers, the reaction was mostly hostile, condescending and dismissive, unable to see how community self-build might meet wider public policy priorities.

This research also threw the spotlight so firmly and critically on the role and attitude of the agencies that they were unable to agree on the text of the summary findings which JRF usually produced to disseminate its research. In the absence of any agreement, no findings could be published; *The Future of Community Self-Build* was later published online independently, but with JRF’s acknowledgement.

The four agencies’ difficulties with the report’s recommendations may have been a sign of things to come. Of the four agencies, only CSB Scotland had an appreciation of how self-build needed to be aligned with central and local government policies and priorities, or what role self-build might play in local housing markets and in local cultural and political contexts. The agencies did not have the resources to provide locally or regionally based expertise, but neither were they willing to adapt or develop entrepreneurial partnerships that could have expanded their localised capacity, whilst retaining a necessary but ideally unified national advocacy role. It is perhaps unsurprising then that, excepting CSBA, which continues to operate albeit at a low level, none of these agencies now exist as active promoters of self-build.

The current generation of agencies promoting their various approaches to ‘community-led’ or more accurately ‘community-inspired’ housing for co-operatives, community land trusts (CLTs), development trusts, co-housing and self-help housing must learn from that experience and how to survive through the careful and constant adaptation of both national and local functions, developing a unified national voice in policy advocacy and the promotion of good practice, whilst supporting and enabling local action for new and locally appropriate forms of housing.

**Developing more attractive and powerful political narratives for self-build**

*The Future of Community Self-Build* (Hill et al., 2000) was the start of a journey of exploration and developing practice, continuing through to my recent programme of research for the Churchill Fellowship in 2014 considering the relationship between the state and the citizen in the formulation and implementation of public policy. In the following section,
I draw on one of the nine political narratives developed for the Churchill Fellowship research, published as *Property, Justice and Reason* (Hill, 2015). It identifies the power of community organising as a means of mobilising citizens over an extended period to achieve the housing outcomes they wanted and needed. These narratives cover a wide range of housing approaches in different but mainly urban housing markets and political contexts.

**Community organising as sustained street action to achieve systemic change in urban policy**

The chosen narrative describes the situation in New York in the 1960s and 70s as having many similarities with the experience of low- and middle-income citizens in London today, at risk of economic and social displacement through the interplay of public policy (or its absence) and the impact of global financial market behaviour on local housing markets.

The story of Cooper Square Committee began in 1959. New York City Council was in clearance and highway building mode. Robert Moses was a ‘city planner’ of unparalleled powers through his political connections, with ambitions to remake Manhattan Island into a twentieth century city. Campaigners like Jane Jacobs in Greenwich Village and Frances Goldin on the Lower East Side had other ideas.

The Cooper Square Committee was formed to oppose the City of New York’s Slum Clearance Plan, which would have razed much of the Lower East Side around Cooper Square, an intensely developed area of mixed uses. With local resident Frances Goldin driving a community organising process, the community designed a viable plan of their own to preserve over 300 buildings and prevent the displacement of several thousand people, including families, senior citizens, small businesses, workshops, artists and art organisations. Their main objectives were that existing residents should be the beneficiaries, not the victims, of the plan, and no resident should be forced to relocate outside the community.

After a decade of intense campaigning through community organising, and sometimes violent street demonstrations, the Committee eventually managed to have their ‘Alternate Plan’ adopted as the City of New York’s official plan for the Lower East side in 1970. As Angotti’s (2008) close documentation of the campaign reveals, community organising was undoubtedly central to this: ‘The Alternate Plan would have died an early death if it weren’t for the radical and often militant community organizing behind it’ (2008, 119).
Between 1991 and 2006, the Committee modernised 356 homes in 22 formerly city-owned buildings for $20 million. When, in 2007, New York City Council redefined ‘affordability’ as up to 160 per cent of the Area Median Income, way beyond the means of lower-paid New Yorkers, the Committee started a process to strengthen its legal structure to safeguard the permanent and genuine affordability of its housing stock. The original Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association, a limited equity co-operative, separated itself from the underlying land interest, the freehold ownership of which was vested in a new CLT. Set up in 2013, the CLT now acts as a stand-alone independent custodian to protect land ownership and permanent affordability.

The current chair of the CLT, Harriett Putterman, explained in a research interview (April 2014) that it had not been an easy process:

This was very much the idea of the older generation, who have been here since the beginning. They know what it took, and what the dangers are. We could have done a better job at explaining to the younger people here.

Figure 14.1 East 4th Street today, where Cooper Square Committee have their offices and community resource centre (© Stephen Hill)
However, the current activities of the Committee show their continuing commitment to their founding principles through taking an active role as community organisers in the housing politics of the city, helping in campaigns to support other tenants in the Lower East Side being exploited by landlords doing dangerous and probably illegal conversions and with plans to displace lower-income tenants (Cooper Square 2009: npg).²

Members of the Committee have also been involved in the establishment of the New York City Community Land Initiative (NYCCLI), an alliance of academics, social justice and affordable housing organisations trying to find new solutions to the housing problems of all New Yorkers. Their mission is to lay the ‘groundwork for CLTs and other non-speculative housing models that promote development of housing and neighborhoods for and with community members not served by the private market’ (NYCCLI, n.d.).

Picture the Homeless and the El Barrio CLT are two programmes of organising to have emerged from NYCCLI. In the former, homeless people have tried to change the nature of debate on homelessness, by conducting their own research into the number of empty properties in the city. This revealed that if all the city’s empty homes were put back into use, they could house four times the number of people currently homeless in the city (Picture the Homeless, n.d.). They argue that CLTs are part of a solution that will enable empty properties brought back into use to be maintained as affordable homes in perpetuity. The latter is developing community organising capacity in East Harlem, a part of the city badly affected by Hurricane Sandy, trying to ensure that the existing community is not displaced by city council plans to renew the city’s ageing and obsolete infrastructure. Their efforts over the five years since Hurricane Sandy struck in 2012 have now been rewarded with the formal adoption of CLTs as one option for the future ownership of new affordable housing in New York City’s draft East Harlem Housing Plan.³

The NYCCLI initiative draws on the experience of the ‘Alternate Plan’. In the 1960s, Goldin and her colleagues established the three basic principles that have since been widely adopted in neighbourhood and community planning policy, even if these principles are still not accepted and adopted everywhere:

- Displacement must be minimised.
- Development must be carried out in stages.
- Site tenants must have first priority for new housing and workspace.
Communities affected by major redevelopments all over the world, especially in cities in the developed world, are still having to fight for these basic principles to be incorporated into public policy, as a matter of course.

Both long-serving and newer members of the Cooper Square Committee clearly take the continuing responsibility of their institution very seriously, to ensure that the benefit of their experiences and learning are not lost. As 90-year-old Goldin recently stated, rather more colourfully:

It took fifty fucking years! It should never be necessary to save a community, and work for fifty years – day after day, after day. But that’s what it took, because we were fighting in the richest city (in the country), and we didn’t give up.4

Lessons from Lower East Side – communities as successful long-term investors

Without community organising, it is certain that the Alternate Plan would never have gained the political traction that it ultimately did. Sustaining the citizens of the area over more than a decade to win the initial battle, and then over the following 40 years, it was community organising that enabled them to carry the project through. The result was the preservation and growth of a unique ecology of affordable housing, workspace and cultural life. The degree of affordability and protection against displacement achieved at Cooper Square, retaining equity within the neighbourhood for the benefit of its residents and businesses, would not have been a priority for any other kind of developer or investor.

The combination of political action with the activity of housing created a social and economic environment that is hard to achieve through rational planning or top-down policy from government. The orthodox political and development approach would, however, assume that the successful outcomes at Cooper Square could only have been achieved by (well-intentioned) commercial developers and their access to capital, and through a process of development in which some displacement would have to be accepted as inevitable and necessary. Cooper Square is a living witness to a viable and successful alternative way.

While there is limited evidence of such community organising succeeding in the UK, the lessons from the burgeoning CLT programme in England and Wales seem to support the assertions above. In rural areas, the rather genteel English model of community organising that
characterises social life in a village has been effective in creating the impetus for action on housing as an essential step in improving the quality of life in villages and small towns. It was assisted in the first instance by the Carnegie UK Trust, acting as catalyst in a proactive but generic programme of social change to improve the quality of life in rural areas in England and Scotland. Villages have then worked in partnerships with councils, which created a space where CLT projects have become normalised as a mainstream solution to getting new homes built in small settlements in rural areas.  

In urban areas, the experience of London Citizens and the East London Community Land Trust has shown that without community organising, and the political impact of London Citizens, the St Clement’s Hospital project, London’s first CLT, would never have happened. It needed a sustained political campaign over a decade to secure the project

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**Figure 14.2** London mayor Boris Johnson ‘laying the first brick’ at the London CLT’s first project at St Clement’s Hospital, Bow, East London, in 2014 … over 10 years after the first mayoral commitment to London Citizens to support a CLT in London on the Olympic Park. St Clement’s became the ‘pilot project’ for the Olympic CLT, which has not yet happened (© Stephen Hill)
(now nearing completion), even though key politicians, such as the first two mayors of London, had publicly committed to supporting the establishment of a CLT. Neither of the two mayors nor their officials understood what they then needed to do to assist its establishment and development, whilst the relationship between them and community organisers often became fractious over their apparent political inaction.

Elsewhere, in urban areas, citizens’ groups without community organising resources and skills find it much harder to gain and retain leverage on the political process. The following case study from a local authority housing estate in London illustrates how the influence of the hostile culture identified in The Future of Community Self-Build (Hill et al., 2000) continues to be a major drag on the ability of citizens to determine their own housing futures.

The ‘willing souls’ of the Andover Estate

The Andover Estate is a public housing estate of over 1,000 homes in a deprived ward in the North London borough of Islington, built in the 1970s, and with a reputation for being a difficult place to live. Despite its reputation, residents, especially young people on the estate, resented their representation as a ‘problem estate’ in the mainstream media, by the police and their council.7

The Finsbury Park Community Hub, a long-established community anchor organisation, was at the centre of an ambitious plan to regenerate the estate, to solve many of its seemingly intractable and long-standing challenges: overcrowding, under-occupation, unwelcoming and poorly designed and used public spaces between buildings, disused garages, lack of work and recreation opportunities for young people, loneliness and poor physical and mental health. Thinking ahead of the council’s own plans to build new ‘infill’ homes on their estate, the community were awarded a small grant from the government’s Neighbourhood Projects Small Grants Programme in 2011 (administered by the Design Council) to devise its own plans for more affordable (social) rented homes, identifying land for up to 170 new homes, compared with the council’s estimate of about 30.

The then leader of the council was attracted by the opportunity to benefit not just from such a significant increase, but also the willingness of the community to embrace new homes, unlike other estates in the borough. ‘Why don’t we always do it this way?’ she asked at the project stall at the 2013 Soul in the City community summer festival held on the estate and in the surrounding area. The council thus generously funded
the Hub, with a non-returnable loan to develop the initial plans into a full estate masterplan. This community-initiated planning process had confirmed how the eyes and knowledge of people living on and around the estate bring a level of understanding and insight into possibilities that external professionals and council officials can rarely achieve on their own.

The Hub established the Andover Future Forum, following the guidelines for a statutory neighbourhood plan process, to oversee the production of the Andover Estate Development Plan. The Forum worked closely with the council’s planning and housing departments. The result was a comprehensive physical, social, environmental and economic regeneration plan, derived from the community’s own understanding and knowledge of the challenges they faced. It was acknowledged as unique by the wider planning and development community (Sell, 2014) and acclaimed by Planning Resource with the national Placemaking Award for Regeneration (2013).9

The next stage in the story has followed a rather different course, as the council has clawed back control, refusing to consider the option of the new homes being owned by a co-operatively managed CLT that

Figure 14.3 Residents learning about land use analysis for the Andover Estate Development Plan (© Stephen Hill)
would have achieved, amongst other objectives, permanent protection for the new homes from the existing Right to Buy of council homes, or the then proposed and later enacted compulsory sale of high-value council homes. The council later shut down a joint council/community regeneration partnership, offered as an alternative to the CLT, that had been set up to oversee the development of the project.

Lessons from the Andover Estate – politics at the heart of community housing

Despite being orphaned by the political leadership in Islington, the Andover Estate project later featured in the *Anti-Gentrification Handbook for Council Estates in London* (Just Space et al., 2014). The handbook aimed to support council tenants who felt disempowered and disadvantaged at the hands of the property market and their local authority landlords. Andover was held up as an exemplar of joint working with a council before council authority was re-imposed.

The language of purposeful disempowerment and disrespect by public officials, presumably sanctioned by their own elected representatives, is striking. Far from being recognised as the prize-winning...
community client and valued as a resource, a council email sent to members of the Forum described them as ‘willing souls’, implying that they could now hand back their leading role to the ‘professionals’. When the dispute between the community and the council escalated into the news and letter columns of the local papers, a senior council officer explaining the closure of the regeneration partnership was quoted in an article (Gruner, 2015) as claiming that residents wanted ‘too much autonomy’. The concept of ‘too much’ in relation to autonomy is a puzzling one. Unwittingly, the attitude of this Islington council official exemplifies the gulf that exists between the practice of representative democracy by politicians and public officials and participative democracy as practised by citizens acting in their own and the public interest.

In the next section, I trace the emergence of community housing as a subject of political significance.

**Time for a citizens’ housing revolution**

In 2009, I contributed an essay of this title and intent to an assessment of the post-crash housing market for the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (Hill, 2009a), proposing a statutory Right to Build. The essence of this was to liberate the potential of citizens to house themselves, urging citizens to be disruptors of the housing market and the financial and public policy systems that had resulted in an increasingly limited range of housing choices that were frequently unaffordable relative to local incomes and of poor design quality. The state was recast in a new enabling role vis-à-vis the citizen and community organisations through the use of planning policy, land assembly and financial support (see also Hill, 2013a, 2013b).

As a genuinely non-partisan policy idea, it was cautiously taken up by Labour’s John Healey and then, with increasing enthusiasm, by subsequent Coalition and Conservative housing ministers – all five of them since 2010. The effective roll-out of policy into practice has been promoted by the National Custom and Self Build Association and their political sponsor Richard Bacon, MP. He championed new legislation in 2015 and 2016 to support the acceptance of people building their own homes into mainstream planning and housing policy, and claimed on many occasions that these measures represented ‘a bottom-up revolution in how housing is done in the UK’. The Self-Build and Custom Housebuilding Act 2015 requires all councils to put in place a custom-build register of people wishing to build their own homes, and a chapter
of the Housing & Planning Act 2016 describes new duties on councils to ensure an adequate supply of land to satisfy the level of demand on the register.

But could this be genuinely revolutionary? Consider who would not want to build their own home if they did not currently have one, could not afford what is available, were dissatisfied with the quality on offer, or could not find one or adapt one to meet their particular needs or wants? The register is thus potentially open to every citizen who would not buy a new home from a house builder or housing association if other options were available. At the very least, the register could be understood as a first step by which the demand side of the housing market could begin to have a genuine voice in housing policy and the way the market works. Perhaps this could be revolutionary. Yet passive membership of a register is unlikely to provide the effective revolutionary spark. The evidence of community organising in both the UK and the USA in achieving political objectives suggests that unless that membership can be organised and mobilised to exert democratic pressure based on evidence of what housing demand really looks like, revolutionary or indeed any other systemic change is unlikely.

The ‘power to’ not the ‘power over’ and the problem with ‘experts’

My programme of research for the Churchill Fellowship additionally picked up the theme of professional ethics initially explored in ‘Justice for the professions or a moment of destiny?’ (Hill, 2009b). As part of the Churchill Fellowship, I conducted a research interview with Luke Bretherton, an Anglican priest and currently professor of theological ethics and senior fellow of the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, who had been active with the community organising group London Citizens in its early days.

Bretherton proposed a paper, Civic Agency and the Cult of the Expert (Boyte, 2009), as a starting point for our discussion at the interview. Boyte had worked with Dr Martin Luther King in the 1960s, advised on Clinton’s ‘New Covenant’ State of the Union speech in 1995, and was still actively developing his ‘public work’ and ‘civic agency’ approach, based on ‘the capacities of people and communities to solve problems and to generate cultures … community is the living context for evaluating expert knowledge’ (Boyte, 2009, 3). Power in the civic agency model is the ‘power to’ not the ‘power over’ (Boyte, 2009, 3 and 37).
Drawing on Boyte’s analysis, Bretherton explained:

The tension between community organising and the local authority is the struggle between the political and the procedural. The local authority response to communities is protective and technocratic, based on the evidence they have and control (of how and about what evidence is collected). Not everyone are friends in this relationship. Politicians usually think they are the good guys, part of the solution. But the very asymmetry of agency between the politician and the community is often the problem, and can misdiagnose the nature of the solution that may be needed. The elected politician understands the point of taking power as giving them a one-off enduring legitimacy, rather than being the start of an ongoing relationship, a consultation. But if it’s a consultation, who owns and controls the data? Community organisers must work harder to validate their own data better. They need to be better informed, so they can educate and develop their leaders to have a wider critical perspective of the possible solutions for their members. The ‘issue’ for community organising is not the issue. It’s all about agency, creating leadership and organising capability, of learning about a problem, and being trained to solve it.

This way of thinking about the nature of community organising helps explain the achievement of the Cooper Square Committee and Picture the Homeless. By creating a viable Alternate Plan or collecting their own data, communities could challenge the comfortable political and market-led status quo by reorienting the problem away from the people and towards, for example, the unused resource of land and empty buildings. As Bretherton advised, ‘Data isn’t everything, it is understanding that there is another way of making policy, through agency: policy formulation is accomplished by policy “doing”’. At Cooper Square, there has been over half a century of ‘policy doing’.

**Prefiguring revolutions and ‘taking back control’**

Revolutions tend to be bloody. At worst, revolutions destroy political, social and economic capital over generations before benefits begin to flow in the new order. At best, transitions can be less painful if there are already models of what works better. If civic agency or citizen action represents revolutionary behaviour, revolution is already being prefigured by
self-builders, custom build developers, and particularly community housing groups, whether co-ops, CLTs, co-housing, self-help housing, mutual housing associations or development trusts. What all those groups share is a belief that their housing needs are defined by important political ideas about how we need to live more equitably or sustainably, and how citizens might indeed ‘take back control’ over these important aspects of their lives.

One of the most important but barely noticed political acts of recent years was the inclusion of a legal definition of CLTs in a private amendment to the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008, promoted by the National Community Land Trust Network and CDS Co-operatives. CLTs must be set up expressly to further the social, economic and environmental interests or well-being of their communities. They can hold and use assets only for the benefit of the community, and they have to be democratic institutions, locally accountable to their communities.

The primary concern of CLTs in the USA, Canada and the UK has been the dysfunction of the land and housing market in their place. So they frequently decide to stop the land and housing market working in the ‘normal’ way, by constraining the price of land to ensure that CLT homes are genuinely and permanently affordable, with a defined relationship of housing costs to income.

Whether deliberately or unintentionally, the parliamentary draftsmen at the time created a unique legal concept that does not otherwise exist in the English and Welsh legal system: the giving of democratic legitimacy to communities to ensure land will be used only for the common good. Whatever was in the minds of the lawmakers in 2008, they subsequently adopted the CLT definition to describe the kind of organisation that could give itself planning permission through a Community Right to Build Order in the Localism Act 2011 – a similarly significant, if underused, policy instrument, in which the citizen is empowered to take on the public interest planning functions of the state.

CLTs have no specific legal or financial form, but they do have very clear values and purposes. They were never intended to be a ‘model’ of community housing, though they are often described as such. They are a political idea that belongs to neither the Left nor the Right. Citizens promoting CLTs are not only ‘problem solving’, they are ‘problem defining’. They embody an approach in which citizens can take the time to explore and understand the complexity of their villages, towns and cities, and their communities and what makes them work. As with the principles of community organising, this is ‘policy doing’ and it is thus much more revolutionary than was supposed or probably intended by lawmakers, though not by the promoters of the amendment.
Community housing as ‘civic agents’ rather than revolutionaries

There is a large potential audience for self-build amongst those who have never heard of CLTs, or co-ops or co-housing. The challenge for today’s generation of self-build agencies is to engage with citizens at large, who, even though they may never have heard of their brand of community housing, are looking for the qualities of living that they champion: affordability, neighbourliness, mutual support, freedom from debt, sustainable living and personal and collective autonomy.

However, the challenge of ‘scaling up’ community housing posed by the Building and Social Housing Foundation at their annual consultation in May 2014 (BSHF, 2014) needs to go beyond the horizons and identities of the existing agencies. Some of the solutions found in the JRF research (Hill et al., 2000) are still relevant today. They focused firstly on a more housing market-driven analysis of what actions were needed to ‘scale up’ levels of housing production, irrespective of the other beneficial outcomes that would be achieved:

- Recognising the role of self-build in local and national housing markets and local housing and labour market strategies, from which it could not be isolated;
- Engaging with the established positions and expectations of power in central and local government and existing housing providers;
- Developing locally appropriate responses to housing needs and land market dysfunction, with access to local knowledge, advice services and production supply chains; and
- Learning greater self-awareness of the effect of the self-build promotional agencies themselves, in the way they defined their purpose, values and identity through the exclusion of others (including each other), however similar they all appeared to outsiders.

The first three of these are challenges which require political responses, to which the last factor is arguably the key. The political initiative must come directly from citizens, however they might be organised. The agencies may therefore need to reimagine themselves as the enablers of citizens in making new relationships with the state with regard to how citizens need to be housed, particularly at the local level, for which the ready availability of technical aid on the full range of possible community housing solutions will be essential.

Self-Help Housing’s leadership of the Empty Homes Community Grants Programme 2012–14 achieved impressive and quickly realised
results by bringing over 2,000 empty homes back into use over two years with a wide variety of local civil society organisations. The ‘central’ advocacy and coordinating agency role played by Self-Help Housing encouraged government to simplify the grant-making process and free it from excessive and lengthy bureaucracy. This liberated local capacity, enthusiasm and creativity to best effect to complete projects on the ground.

**Conclusion: a community or citizens’ housing alliance?**

At the end of my Churchill Fellowship research, I made three main propositions through which civil society could play a more direct and instrumental role in the shaping of housing and planning policy, and lead a change in the political, professional and popular culture about the operation of land and housing markets. The third of these propositions is to build a citizens’ housing alliance, bringing together organisations representing or supporting a national demand-side voice in housing policy. This has six aims:

1. Creating an effective voice of the demand side in housing policy, for ordinary citizens and communities of place and interest across the UK, directly influencing government and the supply side about what should be built where, by whom and at what cost.
2. Enabling and supporting the state to develop a pro-housing narrative, and to gain the consent of the public to building ‘more homes near them’.
3. Developing a strong shared identity and set of ‘common good’ values and objectives across a range of community housing interests and organisations.
4. Gaining political and popular recognition for citizen-inspired housing as an expression of both the demand side – ‘what people really need and want’ – and as part of the supply side – ‘we will do it our way’.
5. Creating a more open culture in councils and housing providers to include citizen-inspired housing as a normal choice in the building of new homes and reusing empty properties.
6. Ensuring that the resources and opportunities needed by citizens to create their own housing solutions are included as a matter of course in policy initiatives that support other already-established supply-side institutions.
This agenda for democratising the operation of land and housing markets goes some way beyond the role allocated to communities and active citizens in both the watered-down Double Devolution reforms under New Labour in the early 2000s and the weak community rights relating to land and property included in the Coalition government’s Localism Act 2011. The abandonment of a genuine devolution of power to communities in the local government reforms of the 2000s was partly softened by greater focus on community asset transfer.

It is possible to regard the asset transfer initiative, however, as little more than a consolatory and diversionary substitute for the real transfer of power to communities that had been on offer – reflecting, perhaps, the views of those JRF interviewees in positions of power (Hill et al., 2000) who had regarded communities as ‘the other’, neither worthy of public policy support nor capable of responsible autonomous action, and certainly not as credible and necessary partners in Bretherton’s ‘policy-making by doing’ or sharing of power.

Now, given the conspicuous failure of policy and the market to create well-ordered and fair land and housing markets that respond to demand, active citizenship is clearly needed to refocus political attention on some fundamentals: what all citizens need, and can and should be able to afford in the national interest. The task of citizens seeking their own solutions at scale, therefore, is not to become part of the mainstream, but to reshape the mainstream. All mainstream institutions will naturally aim to neutralise or marginalise challenges to their currently dominant position.

‘Community housing’ or ‘citizen-inspired housing’ may be ‘small’ for many reasons, but the ambition of the demand side cannot be small. Community housing could just as well be ‘large’, if that is what is needed. What is crucial is the local control and autonomy of citizens to make their own choices throughout the process of development into management and ownership. Citizens have to give themselves the power to tackle the difficult structural defects that politicians are afraid or unable to deal with on their own. More informed citizens and politicians can achieve outcomes that neither could achieve on their own, co-designing the actions needed to create a fair housing market and to maintain fair housing policies into the future – better together, in fact.

What will that new configuration look like? The foundation of systemic change must be widespread presence wherever civic agency or citizen action emerges in response to a perceived need for national or local policy change and intervention in markets that are not working for the common good. Citizen action needs to be integrated into local, sub-regional or regional political systems, with access to advice and the
The interplay between bottom-up citizen action and top-down planning and resource allocation needs to create a policy environment in which national housing priorities and policies are properly informed by local knowledge. All the technical resources, financial products, skills and experience of the existing agencies could be integrated to this end, as the practicalities of housing development are broadly the same whatever other social, economic and environmental outcomes are desired by citizens.

The focus on the local should not be confused with sentimental attachment to the apparent merits of ‘small is beautiful’ or ‘small and special’. Market making is a quite different activity from operating within the essentially administrative functions that are prescribed by the limited ambition of the community rights in the Localism Act 2011, a bureaucratic understanding of housing that will change little. The task of local housing action is ambitious, both to inform national action and policy and to change the mainstream.

Whatever else any new configuration of community housing agencies may turn out to be, therefore, it must be focused primarily
on connecting with future and currently unmet demand, understanding what that demand represents and what is needed for it to be fully realised. Looking at the past, or what is currently done, has little value, beyond the nurturing of existing identities and organisational forms that have, by definition, already demonstrated their own limitations for ‘scaling up’.

Just as the protection of the identities and organisational models led to the decline of the community self-build agencies in the early 2000s, the current generation of community housing support organisations need to be courageous in reinventing themselves to take advantage of new political opportunities and market realities. As Steve Wyler, then interim director of the Development Trusts Association, interviewed for the JRF research 1999–2000, wisely stated, ‘The trick for self-build is not to stay in the “small and special” box too long.’ Self-build housing has been in the ‘small and special box’ long enough already.