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A Radical Journal of Geography

Paul Chatterton, *Low Impact Living: A Field Guide to Ecological, Affordable Community Building*, Oxford: Routledge, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-415-66160-7 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-415-66161-4 (paper)

Low Impact Living tells the story of how an ordinary group of people built an affordable low impact cohousing community in an old industrial suburb of Leeds, in the north of England. Except there is nothing ordinary about Lilac (Low Impact Living Affordable Community), not least its modular straw-bale construction and the passionate commitment of social change activists, Paul Chatterton among them, whose collective efforts model a “green housing revolution for all”. The story introduces multiple dimensions of “building”, from social issues of group dynamics, through participatory learning and co-design, to legal and financial matters and the intricacies of an equity-based leaseholder approach to cooperatively owned housing. The mutual home ownership society (MHOS) developed by Lilac from a New Economics Foundation model creates an intermediate tenure that claims to maintain affordability by preventing a speculative return on housing between generations of new entrants.

As revolutions go, this one may not immediately capture the radical geographic imagination of *Antipode* readers who are more familiar with global movements of civil disobedience. The scale and focus entailed in people building their own homes can appear self-interested and parochial against a backdrop of global crisis. Yet as Nabeel Hamdi (2004) cogently observes in his book *Small Change*, big ideas often come from small places and the human scale of social change can have a huge positive multiplier effect. These are the lessons that Lilac has to offer as a “living laboratory of how the world could be different” (p.17).

How community-led housing contributes to social justice and ecological sustainability represents a modest revolution of lobbying and demonstration that chimes in many respects with state-sponsored localism. Yet projects like this one challenge the rhetoric of localism and

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“the Big Society” in UK planning by insisting on new forms of democratic participation to shape and influence housing and community development in socially progressive and sustainable ways. While at first glance the story may be of limited interest in the sense that it draws on the idiosyncratic details of English land-use planning and building regulation, it elaborates on why neighbours might choose to build and live together as trends of yearning that have widespread international appeal. This is evident in the existence of numerous local, regional, national, and transnational movements and mobilisations around community-led development. It is the embodiment of this small-scale social change agenda that makes *Lilac* much more than a custom self-build housing project or simply a place to live. This explains why, as well as being a book about cohousing, cooperative living, low-carbon housing, place making, and community self-governance, *Low Impact Living* contributes practical learning to an ambitious integrated and humanistic approach to social and ecological justice.

Low Impact Living is written in an accessible and engaging voice for a wide public audience. It is intended to be read by people in the construction and development sector, practitioners, and representatives in local and national governments, as well as people who are already participating in emerging community groups. I had both personal and academic motivations for wanting to review this book; I read it as a founding member of an emerging cohousing group, seeking information and inspiration, and as someone who publishes and critically examines academic evidence on this topic. As the title indicates, this is a “field guide” rather than a monograph: it will appeal most directly to readers who are curious to learn about, and act upon, innovative alternatives to speculative, mass-market housing. Anyone already involved in consensus decision-making and grassroots group-work will appreciate that it takes a huge investment of time in regular, lengthy, and frequently intense meetings to realise a project like *Lilac*. This is why in the literature on intentional communities, it is usual to distinguish between those “forming” community and those “finding” (or joining) community (Christian 2003; 2007: 163). *Low Impact Living* offers

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valuable insight to the potential pitfalls and rich rewards of forming a community from scratch.

For me, the most compelling thread of insight flows from the author's candid reflections on the long journey of inter-personal group development. Indeed, I would have liked there to have been more on the socio-technical transitions associated with individuals learning to function as a group while sharing the work and respecting the uneven skills each inevitably brings to social as well as material aspects of community building. Such reflections highlight the difficulties in "scaling up" grassroots development whereby groups and projects often fail because they "emerge too quickly, or are forced to act or form through policy or funding opportunities without enough consideration of what is motivating them to act" (p.11). Close attention to this human scale and negotiated sense of belonging distinguishes *Low Impact Living*, as a personal project of home-making, from the author's other seminal academic output in which a city-regional perspective inevitably tends to lose sight of the intimate social processes of urban transformation.

In particular this book will appeal to those exploring the meso-scale "housing-cum-neighbourhood" of socio-spatial arrangement known as cohousing, originally inspired by Scandinavian ideas of "living togetherness" dating from the late 1960s. In *Lilac* this concept is immediately apparent in a car-free landscape where homes of various household configurations form a horse-shoe arrangement around a large shared central area devoted to community amenities and nature. The principles of cohousing actively embed self-managed governance structures in a deliberate attempt to increase purposeful interaction between neighbours. Rather than impose any one model of development or procurement, the cohousing concept draws attention to the "social architectures" necessary to support a sense of trust and belonging, notably through the solidarity and conviviality of shared work and meals shared in a common house (Jarvis 2011). This emphasis on social rather than economic capability has led to confusion and misunderstanding over issues of access and affordability.

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A common misconception is that cohousing can only be achieved through the efforts of middle class owner-occupiers who pay a premium to secure planning permission and finance for nonstandard housing. The UK Cohousing Network hold information on 15 established cohousing communities, with a geographical spread across urban and rural areas of England, Wales, and Scotland, plus an estimated 50 developing groups (<http://www.cohousing.org.uk/>). This portfolio includes examples where provision has been made for affordable housing through partnership arrangements with Housing Associations or where a proportion of units are cross-subsidised for tenants on low incomes. Nevertheless, any small-scale housing project is going to pose a challenge for diversity (income, gender, generation, ethnicity, and lifestyle), not least the means to service project capital and revenue requirements, but the role of self-governing community formation does warrant closer scrutiny in this regard.

The Lilac story is inspirational because it demonstrates how short-sighted it is to privilege low-impact cohousing as a “green niche” and to assume that it is less accessible to low income and high dependency groups. Indeed, groups who are excluded from mainstream market options are especially motivated by self-reliance. At the same time, Lilac arguably had extraordinary good fortune in securing one-off innovation grants and a preferential asset transfer: such favourable conditions are unlikely to be repeated for subsequent groups and when the market for land is buoyant. Thus, while it is tempting for policy makers to take successful community innovation in one context and scale it up in another, care should be taken instead to “scale out” diverse demonstration interventions such as Lilac. Rather than to regard this book as a template to replicate I would urge people to read it as a means to lobby policy makers and industry gatekeepers to better understand and support widespread experimentation in community building and intermediate housing markets. Arguably this calls for a more robust evidence base than is currently available, in order to substantiate claims of added-value with respect to combating social isolation, especially for an ageing

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population, supporting economic localisation, and reducing household energy, material consumption, and waste.

The Lilac story begins in Newcastle upon Tyne shared house in 2007 with a core group of six friends imagining a radically different way to live together against the grain of the ready-made city. It culminates in a reconfigured core group relocated to Leeds; by 2013 it has grown through effective recruitment to occupy 20 homes (35 adults and 10 children). As the first residents move into their new homes, exhausted but exhilarated, a posse of reporters and photographers capture the iconic image of Grand Designs TV presenter Kevin McCloud planting the first tree in the Lilac orchard. This image captures an awkward juxtaposition of grassroots social organising and “grand designs” public relations. It highlights the way that efforts to translate ideas on low impact living in practice often draw on a nebulous language and competing models of climate change mitigation and adaptation.

This is evident in the case of a national newspaper competition which invited its readers to vote for a favourite eco-home project from ten selected on the basis of innovations in low-carbon design. The results of the vote placed Lilac joint runner up alongside a very different interpretation of low-carbon living: the Lammas ecovillage at Tir y Gafel in north Pembrokeshire, Wales. In Lammas, nine families live on a 74-acre site, independent of all mains services. Among the self-built homes is a much photographed roundhouse structure created using wooden posts in the round (whole tree trunks) and walls of reclaimed timber insulated with straw bales and rendered with lime. These are the same basic materials used in Lilac but hand-crafted (with no straight lines) rather than standardized for urban development via a ‘flying factory’ modular system (see *The Guardian* 2014).

By judging Lammas and Lilac as equivalent contestants, this competition fails to address the multi-scalar interdependence of ecology and justice for a growing world population; competing strategies of climate change mitigation for relatively high density “sustainable urbanism” are conflated with very low density “back to the land” rural self-

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sufficiency. While such debates lie beyond the scope of this *Field Guide*, Chatterton acknowledges not only scale and replicability but also collective action and capacity for sharing as key functions of low impact living for all. As David Harvey observes: “The right to the city...is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanisation” (2008: 23).

Ultimately, *Low Impact Living* has to navigate a tricky path between a sort of “activist cookbook” (redolent of Chatterton’s co-authored *Do it Yourself: A Handbook for Changing Our World* [The Trapeze Collective 2007]), and a more mainstream celebration of innovative design. Indeed, while the story benefits from a generous sheaf of colour photographs in the centrefold, the glossy end-product sits awkwardly alongside claims endorsing Creative Commons publishing in opposition to sites and sources of innovation that are locked behind corporate firewalls. In reality the cover price (around £27 paperback; £115 hardback) and strict terms of copyright imposed by commercial publication (in Earthscan’s ‘Tools for Community Planning Series’ imprint, which has been taken over by the publishing behemoth Routledge) will limit the circulation of this particular form of knowledge. At the same time, it is a shrewd move to publish the Lilac story in a format for policy makers and politicians to readily engage with: these are among the key enablers to recruit to a future green housing revolution. Moreover, to their credit and entirely consistent with their ideology, the Lilac community regularly open their doors to visitors, making this a “perpetual place of learning”. They have posted numerous versions of their story together with a number of technical documents on their website, free to download (<http://www.lilac.coop/>).

I would recommend this book to everyone looking for a comprehensive account of this truly inspirational “living laboratory”. The book can be read in different ways according to the focus and level of interest. Community groups will find the “inspiration” and “how to” chapters of particular value while practitioners and policy makers will be drawn to the wider

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lessons to be learned from the completed project. The book is richly illustrated with site photographs, and tables and line drawings demystify complex legal and financial elements as well as the process of making decisions as a non-hierarchical body. The narrative strikes an effective balance between providing the technical detail necessary to support bold claims of innovation, and personal insight to the mindset required for a group of people to work and ultimately live together, as a first small step on the road to changing the world.

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