

Over our heads; housing for the common good

Affordable Christian Housing 25th anniversary speech 8/6/13

I'd like to talk about the three words of your name: Affordable Christian Housing; first by setting the wider London scene ('affordable housing') and then by turning my attention to what the word 'Christian' might mean when applied to this. I hope it might provide some complementarity to the input of your Associates later on, and offer you a challenge as you contemplate your next 25 years.....

Let me start with this provocative recent article on housing policy by Owen Hatherley:

There have been a few striking moments where the sheer scale of the housing crisis and the coming exodus from London suddenly became obvious. One was when the London Borough of Camden announced earlier this year that it was planning to rehouse 761 families who would no longer be able to afford to pay the local rents after the various benefit caps, taxes and cuts, somewhere outside of London. What made it particularly shocking was not so much that this was a London Labour council acting in this fashion. Indeed, Newham Council's strikingly cynical proposals for 'decanting' its tenants to Stoke-on-Trent had already grabbed a few headlines. But Newham is Newham and Camden is Camden. While Newham has never had a great reputation as either a borough or a provider of council housing, Camden, as Ken Livingstone pointed out in his recent autobiography, has long been a minor London showcase for the possibilities of municipal socialism, with 'the best run social services, libraries and council housing in London'. Even after its shift to New Labour policies, Camden, unlike Hackney, Southwark or Tower Hamlets, did not offload its more potentially lucrative stock to developers or Housing Associations, and still maintains a large social infrastructure. It can still residually resemble the nearest thing London has to a not entirely dysfunctionally-run local government. If Camden, too, is reduced to throwing up its hands and expelling its less wealthy inhabitants, then we are in a crisis that sweeps across political and municipal boundaries, that is seemingly beyond the abilities of even relatively conscientious local government to do anything about; an unprecedented onslaught on the remnants of council housing and Britain's relatively socially mixed cities that leaves councils unprepared, even in the event that they are willing to defend their tenants and residents. Estimates of the number likely to be made homeless begin at 100,000 and go upward.

No punches pulled there!

The problems are obvious to anyone who spends a bit of time trying to understand them. We have research and policy papers overflowing! So much analysis, so few answers.

So, prepare to be overwhelmed by the scale of the problem.....

- There is a vast shortage of affordable homes
- The Government target on building new affordable homes is modest (150k 2010-2014 despite 1.7 million households on waiting lists) but even this modest target is only achievable by increasing rents under the new 'affordable rent' structure whereby developers can charge up to 80% of market rent on 'affordable homes' – which are totally unaffordable in London.
- Government support for an 'affordable rent' model is based on providing incentives for developers to build; a high ratio of affordable housing in development planning and a low rent, inhibits development. This policy increases the incentive to build but inevitably it redistributes housing socially, demographically and geographically.
- So the policy will increase new builds – modestly – but force people to move towards lower-cost housing (away from their communities), or face hardship.
- At the same time as all of this, direct Government funding for social housing has been cut by 60%
- The main drivers to the increased demand for housing are these:
 - Population increase (driven by the young)
 - Influx of new communities
 - High-value developments (for instance Canary Wharf/the Olympic Park/the City Fringe) – these keep prices high and attract overseas investment
- 60% of new homes in central London are bought by overseas investors and a high proportion of them are kept empty (land-banking).
- 88% of Knight Frank's Canary Wharf tenants are from overseas
- In 2011 overseas investors (mainly from the Far East) spent £5.2bn on housing in London, which was more than the total government investment in the Affordable Housing Programme for the whole of England.
- Alongside all of this, Private Rented Sector (PRS) rents have increased substantially, and the benefit cap will affect significant numbers of residents and hit the poor hardest
- So property purchase and rental prices are beyond the reach of most people, and the cost of housing drives poverty, especially in London
- Local people/lower-paid are being priced out of the London housing market
- Overcrowding is one response
 - Impacts on physical/mental health
 - Impacts on educational outcomes
- Homelessness in London is on the increase
- Everything points in the direction of London becoming more like a Parisian 'doughnut' (with a rich centre and a ring of deprivation) rather than the mixed communities that have characterised London's development over the years

Now some of the problems can depend on your perspective:

- If you're a developer the problem is this:
 - Too much land is owned by non-builders (nearly half the land with planning permission in London is owned by non-builders. This is where much of the land-banking problem arises).
 - Funds for development are difficult to obtain, and highly priced
 - There is a question mark over private sector capacity to build.
 - The planning system is slow, complex and changes too often.
- Whereas if you're a Local Authority it's the lack of subsidy for public housing that is the problem. A key question for Local Authorities is how they can find ways of raising funding to invest in new housing at genuinely affordable rents.

If the problems are very obvious, what are the ideas being proposed by way of solutions?

Let me offer you a smorgasbord of different ideas that people are considering. The point is that the situation is so serious that we need a combination of creative and controversial thinking.

Many of us are now saying that mixed-income communities will require state intervention in the local housing market (to create a range of affordable housing options for local people). That's not palatable to national Government but it's hard to see any sustainable solutions without it.

One of RIBA's recommendations is the creation of a £10 billion Local Housing Development Fund, raised via Local Authority pension funds.

The New Economics Foundation have proposed an 80% capital gains tax on all land sales (over a certain price per acre), the proceeds going to a national land fund to subsidise social landlord land purchases.

NEF also propose that new residential planning permissions above a certain minimum size could only be granted to registered social landlords or Local Authorities.

Both of these ideas would redistribute 'fairness' away from landowners towards the homeless (or vulnerably housed).

Boris Johnson has proposed that London should be able to retain Stamp Duty to build up an investment pot for housing.

Increasingly, people are discussing 'fair rents' alongside a 'fair wage'. Stabilising the Private Rented Sector is vital – increasing security of tenure, advocating local fair rent

regulations, etc. Two specific practical actions to take here: support London Citizens 'Living Rent' campaign, and promote ethical lettings agencies

Liberate the constraints on the development of more Community Land Trusts

Tax empty homes and land that is not being developed (and reduce the time before planning permission expires, so that speculators have to build or sell on).

Get a public return on up-market development – tax/levy whatever the market wants to build and invest that in affordable housing elsewhere (does this produce a mixed development?).

Explore the idea of a voluntary code for housing development and local land ownership, establish a coalition of the willing to exert as much pressure as possible for people to follow it; put housing back on top of the social agenda.

Abolish the right-to-buy locally

Build on greenbelt land where it is sensible or appropriate. Again, this is controversial, but we have to think the unthinkable – even if we don't do it!

Some of these problems are political, many are national, some are economic, some are ethical – and none are easily solved.

So – that's a quick canter through the landscape of affordable housing in London at the moment. Now let me turn to a 'Christian' response.

The first thing to say is that Christians have some agency we can apply to this:

Agency as individuals – crisis responses (food-banks and similar)

Agency as landlords

Agency as investors

Agency as voters

Agency as employees

Agency as churches

Agency as citizens

So let me move the conversation in a different direction, and offer three challenges to the 'Christian' in 'Affordable Christian Housing'. All of which are based around the challenge that 'affordable housing for Christians' is not enough!

The first is a theological challenge. 'Affordable Christian Housing' is an interesting name. What makes housing specifically 'Christian'? – this is a theological question, and it's not easily answered. The Bible has a lot to say about 'home' but very little about 'housing' – and what it does say about 'home' makes uncomfortable reading, because following Christ takes us to a place of deep domestic insecurity (foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head; blessed are those who have left homes – etc – for my sake and for the gospel; make your home in me and I will make my home in you)

You could argue that the Bible offers us a radical new definition of house and home that bears very little similarity to most of the received wisdom on the subject in the 21st century Western world. Certainly it blew my mind to visit Nazareth and to see the very small number of household units that would have existed in Jesus day – all of them troglodyte. Jesus was born in a stable and lived in a cave, then became an itinerant preacher without a home. Work out the theology of Christian housing from that one!

I don't think there is much theological thinking going on around housing; could ACH commission some, and would this help the church get its act together better?

The second challenge is around justice

I think what the title 'Affordable Christian Housing' is doing is saying that, for the Christian, affordable housing is a question of justice. Certainly a quick trawl across your sister organisation 'Housing Justice' throws up a clear understanding –

We take our inspiration from Isaiah 58:6-7

The kind of fasting I want is this: Remove the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, and let the oppressed go free. Share your food with the hungry and open your homes to the homeless poor. Give clothes to those who have nothing to wear, and do not refuse to help your own relatives.

and Matthew 25:37-40

"When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we ever see you a stranger and welcome you in our homes, or naked and clothe you? When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you?" The King will reply, "I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me!"

When we work alongside homeless and badly housed people, we are responding to the challenge to love our neighbour, we are responding to the call to put our faith into action, we are responding to the vision of a society where everyone is valued and everyone has a home.

So the 'Christian' in ACH is something to do with justice, making provision and campaigning alongside those who suffer as a result of the housing crisis.

And the 3rd challenge is to do with ethics, with human rights.

There is an often invisible and unacknowledged dimension to housing policy, which you very rarely hear spoken about in this country. Is it right to own property?

The right to own property is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but is not without controversy – some people want to tie it in purely to the notion of subsistence, to nothing beyond a bare minimum. So, for instance, European human rights law recognises the right to peaceful enjoyment of property, but recognises that member States can balance the right to peaceful possession of property against the public interest.

Some would argue that there is nothing ethical, certainly not Christian, about some people owning large properties while others are crammed together in over-crowded property. How can that be in the public interest? And if it isn't in the public interest, if it doesn't contribute to the common good, do you still have a right to peaceful possession of that property?

These are uncomfortable questions. Difficult questions.

The redistribution of housing space is a hot topic. The bedroom tax (a tax on under-occupancy of social housing) is a blunt instrument but its purpose is clear – if you could redistribute the amount of spare room space from those who have too much to those who have too little, there wouldn't be a housing crisis – because, just as with global food production (where there is enough food to feed everybody, but it's badly distributed), so with housing – there is enough space for everyone in this country to live with dignity, but it's poorly distributed.

So applying the word 'Christian' to housing takes us in to questions of political and economic ethics.

So the question is: what currency does the 'Christian' in 'Affordable Christian Housing' have?

I suggest that it needs to take in theology, justice, and ethics.

We have a song to sing, a contribution to make, agency to exercise, in response to the housing crisis in this country. I thank God for organisations like ACH and Housing Justice, who are leading the way for the church in these matters. My challenge to you, as you enter in to your next 25 years, is for your contribution to be deeper as well as broader, to increase your grasp as well as your reach.....