

Housing – Critical Futures.

Statement by: **Dr. Rob MacDonald**

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DIY and Affordability

It seems blatantly obvious, but Affordable Housing needs to be affordable!

I want to suggest that if its design and construction remains in the hands of professionals, it may never be so. We need to be more DIY.

In the UK young people cannot afford the first rung of the housing ladder and the traditional mortgage is beyond reach – but it is not just an issue for young people or those who seek to buy. Achieving affordability is a complex function of low cost finance, land values, availability and architectural systems and solutions. We need to radicalise the whole system of housing production to generate long life, loose fit and low cost dwelling support systems if the political ambition of building 2-300,000 dwellings per year in the United Kingdom is to be achieved.

It is not a simple process. Design and construction methods may need to be completely upturned. Emphasis ought to be on the reuse of brownfield inner city sites and not building on existing existing green parks and lungs. The procurement methods of public finance, private building and third way collaborative approaches need to be organised around similar coordinated development methodologies. New and old ideas need to be tried and retried.

We would do well to remember John Turner's arguments in "Housing is a Verb" when he highlighted that making and inhabiting dwellings is a process. A professor with experience in Third World housing John Turner has written extensively on housing and community organisation. He was influenced by a formative



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period spent working in the squatter settlements of Peru from 1957-1965. What he identifies is that for many people in the world houses are not objects they buy – they build them piecemeal. Housing is not a noun, it is a verb.

We should also rediscover and apply the theories of Nicholas Harbracken and his "Support Systems" and Low Cost Site and Service projects as developed in the third world. For Harbracken the success of mass (and affordable housing) come from the integration of users and residents into the design process.

Walter Segal's system is also one we can also still learn from. Low cost and flexible and adaptable. The Segal self-build method is based on timber frame methods modified to use standard materials all readily available today. It eliminates the need for wet trades, is light-weight and was intended to be built by residents themselves.

Central to these approaches of the past, and clearly needed in the present, is the Philosophy of DIY, as in "DIY integrated Cities". While the solution to the housing crisis is complex and beyond the capacity of one person or group to solve we would be well served in looking at those who see the solution close to home – in our own hands.

Why do so few self-build projects contribute to the UK's housing stock, why are there so few community led design and build projects today? These initiatives have existed and thrived before. They continue to do so in other countries. In the UK, and the western world more generally, we need a new ideological framework within which to tackle this problem – one that takes responsibility out of the hands of professionals and empowers local residents to do it themselves.

Rob MacDonald is an Architect & Reader in Architecture at Liverpool John Moores University, School of Art, Design & Architecture. He has practiced in Zambia, Scotland and Wales. In Africa he designed housing for The World Bank. Rob made four Trans Sahara expeditions and lived with the Tuareg Nomads. In Glasgow he designed tenement and back courts, whilst working with ASSIST Architects, a locally based practice. In Liverpool Rob was project architect for many new build housing cooperatives. He has published about various Urban Issues and his publications include: Housing Co-operatives; DIY City; City of Shadows; Design in a Benign City and the foreword for Design in a Complex World.