#SHARE HOME @LONDON’S HOUSING STRUGGLES

ALBANE DUVILLIER
ARCHITECTURAL ASSOCIATION SCHOOL, LONDON

“Architecture should have little to do with problem-solving – rather it should create desirable conditions and opportunities hitherto thought impossible.” Cedric Price

More than 80 social housing estates being currently demolished!

More than 200 000 residents affected, i.e. evicted!

More than 20 km2 of land in London changing ownership from public to private entities, the value of this land being £52 billion!

London is in a permanent state of crisis in term of housing.

A crisis with no beginning and no end, as London is being owned by disconnected interests creating holes in the fabric of the city and divisions among its users.

How is the notion of home responding to this condition of permanent crisis within the context of the “extrastatecraft”, the very fast evolving technological infrastructures, or rather the infrastructural technologies we live in today.

How can the existing conditions be modified, in order to create opportunities for a home that would be a space of collective attention instead of individual evictions and never ending invisible profits? On one hand, the hidden realities of the housing struggles need first to be uncover and mapped, while on the other hand the connections between the different actors involved, (such as planners, developers, architects, politicians, activists and residents) needs to be made. #Share home @ London’s Housing Struggles is a project made of several trends, such as mapping, making objects for direct actions, setting up a wiki-leak website for architecture (Concrete action) to counter the regeneration planning processes and designing a home as a space of collective attention. Each trends is an attempt to respond to this lack of knowledge and connections.

Designing a home as a space of collective attention is leading into the territory of common ownership and extreme sharing. What possibilities would offer a series of discreet architectures for sharing, based on not usually valued activities?
MAPPING THE BATTLEFIELD

Information about regeneration scheme is supposedly public as it is part of the planning process, but it is actually buried in the labyrinthine process of planning. Each piece of information has been collected from each London’s council websites. Mapping the existing battlefield took one month of intensive online research, in order to make the struggles visible in a series of maps and a website. The website was launched in November 2014 and has been widely used by campaigners and residents to oppose regeneration schemes in their local area.

There are three maps published to date: the “battlefield”, the developer and the local campaigns fighting back. The first one, the “battlefield map” is tracing the different sites of struggles and the actors. It takes two appearances, as a folded printed map or as an online interactive map using an open source software (u-map), so that it can be modified by each users. Every estate is being listed with the number of residents affected, the demolition intent and eventual regeneration scheme, the value of the land, the name of the developers and architects, along with the council involved.

The second one, the “developer map” is delivering an overview of the current change of ownership of London, by revealing the various joint venture partnerships, the amount of land being exchanged… London is going through an historical moment, whose scope is similar to the 1946-1948 period, except that this time, the process is reversed: land is changing ownership from public to private entities, including developers and housing associations.

The third map is celebrating the diversity and the strength of the local residents lead campaigns currently fighting back in London, with more than forty local campaigns and a series of organizations building up an horizontal network that has the ability to organize and pop up anywhere anytime.
MAKING OBJECT OF PROTEST

Architects could be involved in a constant dialogue with users, ie residents, rather than clients. One local campaign Focus E15 located in Stratford is an opportunity for architects to be on the ground and explore alternative to regeneration and evictions.

Focus E15 campaign started in September 2013, when a group of young mothers decided to organize themselves after receiving eviction notices from East Thames Housing association due to Newham Council cutting its funding to the Focus E15 hostel for young homeless people. The group was only offered by the council private rented accommodation in Manchester, Hastings, or Birmingham. Due to cuts in housing benefits and lack of affordable housing in the borough, Newham Council was ready to displace them far away from their families and support network. Since then Focus E15 have been fighting back, demanding “social housing and not social cleansing”, with a weekly stall in Stratford, a protest to Newham Town Hall, while also building a network with other local campaigns opposing evictions and with the organization of the occupation in September of one maisonette on the Carpenters estate in Stratford. This incredible networks of campaigns and residents can be supported by architects, by participating in different protest and pursuing this attempt of rendering information visible by making objects of protest as trigger for social change or awareness.

Carpenters Estate's occupation, Focus E15, Stratford, London, 21 September 2014
Making objects of protest is an opportunity to explore the economy around eviction generated by regeneration scheme. How to displace in the streets the architectural elements of the conflict, such as the Sitex security steel screens? What if the architectural elements of eviction could become new objects of protest, participating in the knowledge broking process?
TURNING PLANNING’S OPACITY INTO A DESIGN OPPORTUNITY

The Opacity of the Planning Process is its Own Flaw

The opacity of the planning process is its own flaw. A series of loopholes⁶ have been identified. Unfortunately these loopholes are being used by developers and housing associations to implement luxury developments under the cover of regeneration schemes.
What could be the conditions to turn these loopholes into design opportunities? What if some documents, such as the viability assessment, could be publicly disclosed? The viability assessment seems to be the main mechanism exploited by developers. The viability assessment is key, as it is illegal to disclose it. It takes place after the planning permission has been granted. It is a document which inform the negotiations between the council and the developers. It is kept secret as it contains commercial clauses.

The viability assessment is produced by consultant firms and assesses the deliverability of the scheme, the land value and its competitive returns. It is in the viability assessment that quantifiable factors are being applied to assess the deliverability of a housing scheme.

“Competitive Returns: To a willing landowner and a willing developer to enable the development to be deliverable, a competitive return for the land owner is the price at which a reasonable land owner would be willing to sell their land for the development. The price will need to provide an incentive for the land owner to sell in comparison with the other options available. Those options may include the current use value of the land or its value for a realistic alternative use that complies with planning policy.”

Within the planning process, it is when a home becomes quantified. When it becomes a commodity, a house, assessed by quantifiable factors only, ie economical factors related to a neo liberal understanding of the economy as stated by Joseph Grima: “As the markets seeps through its walls and into the bedroom, the paradigm of the home as a space of intimacy, separate from work is replaced with that of the home as an asset, in which no distinction exists between the private sphere and the marketplace: the ultimate realization of the neoliberal idea of making everyone an entrepreneur of themselves.”

What if viability was to be replaced by livability, by unquantifiable factors?

Already in 1981, Lucius Burkhardt was hinting at the possibility of livability, of taking into account what he called “invisible needs”, therefore criticizing the quantitative analyse of needs which is the base of the viability assessment today. Lucius Burckhardt was calling for the recognition by planners and architects of unquantifiable factors such as mutual aid and participation which are the social mechanisms turning houses into homes.

How to counter this viability discourse? What if some documents, such as the viability assessment, could be publicly disclosed, could be made visible?
Concrete Action, a Website to Counter Regeneration Schemes

Concrete Action\(^{10}\) is an independent network of professionals working in architecture and its related industries. Concrete Action aims at disseminating information to communities under threat of development, at providing alternative plans for development based on community participation, at being a catalyst for reflection within the architectural community. Concrete Action is actively linking with historical figures who have implemented similar views in the United Kingdom in the seventies or eighties, such as John Murray who was part of the New Architecture Movement\(^{11}\). The Nam was tightly connected to the Arc, which was launched by Brian Anson at the Architectural Association in 1974. Some traces of the actions lead by the ARC and Brian Anson in the 1970s can be found in the Architectural Association archives, such as supporting the Save Covent Garden Campaign, questioning the role of the RIBA or the ethics of architects.

As Brian Anson stated it in a letter to the archivist of the Architectural Association in 2008: “So long as there is blatant injustice in the way land is developed and construction is created (and goodness knows such injustice is rife these days) there will be a need for revolutionary thinking in architecture. I mean revolutionary in the social sense. (...) I condemn the (architectural) profession, which, to my mind, has become the image-maker of Global Market Capitalism which is, literally, destroying our small planet and, specifically, the myriad of communities which inhabit it.” \(^{12}\)

The first public presentation of Concrete Action was held with with John Murray on the 25\(^{th}\) March at the Peer Gallery in London.
As a first step Concrete Action is setting up a website to allow currently undisclosed planning documents to be available publicly for campaigners and journalists, a sort of wiki-leak for regeneration. We are creating a secure drop on the dark web, similar to the model of the secure drop coded by Aaron Swartz. Concrete Action’s website allows councilors, architects, consultants to download anonymously documents that, if disclosed, might be a turning point in regeneration schemes’ implementation.
As a second step, Concrete Action is developing the alternatives to regeneration, by organizing workshops with local residents and campaigns groups based in London in order to “translate the planning process” and to imagine alternative regeneration proposals, that would include residents desires and dreams: imagination and action as opposed to speculation.

THE HOME AS A SPACE OF COLLECTIVE ATTENTION
Common Ownership and Extreme Sharing

Nevertheless, the question remains: how to create the conditions for a home that would be a space of collective attention instead of individual eviction and never ending profits?

What are the conditions that need to be created to turn highly privatized houses, commodities into homes? The provocative work of Superstudio in the seventies was already addressing the domestic realm and its connection to social changes, while being fascinated by technological innovations of its time. Colombo’s Total Furnishing Unit in 1972 was a pragmatic attack on the commodification of the interior, while the collages produced by Superstudio for the New Domestic Landscape exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1972 were a radical attempt of “anti-design” 14.
In London in 2015, common ownership and extreme sharing\textsuperscript{15} appeared to be part of an alternative way of thinking about a home as a space of attention. The idea of common ownership draws on the long tradition of cooperative housing in London and the notion of common ground, with the tradition of the commons as a shared public space devoted to communal activities\textsuperscript{16}.

Sharing is already a contemporary condition of the neoliberal economy which more and more people are willing to experience\textsuperscript{17} as it has been rendered easy by peer to peer technologies and the internet\textsuperscript{18}. Airbnb is an example of sharing a home within the neo liberal economy, when the notion of “home” itself is the product which is shared against a money retribution\textsuperscript{19}.

What if sharing was to be implemented at a more extreme level as a social structure based on constant exchanges excluding money exchanges. Could extreme sharing be a mean to achieve a feminist home? What if, rather than a kitchen-less home, domestic tasks were to be undertaken by the community, involving in the domestic tasks each member of the community according to its abilities?

**The Carpenters Estate in a State of Frozen Crisis**

The Carpenters Estate in Stratford is in a state of frozen crisis and therefore can be used as a testing ground for architectural speculations on common ownership and extreme sharing. It was built by Newham council in 1968. Since more than ten years, the Carpenters estate has entered a state of crisis. Preceding a series of master plans drawn up by the council, a decant process was started in 2004, followed by a bid from UCL to buy the land to implement a campus in Stratford\textsuperscript{20}. This bid fell through in 2013. Since then, the situation on the estate is frozen. It has been partly decanted, with only 800 residents remaining out of 2 000. The residents are located mainly in the low-rise maisonettes, while the three towers are nearly completely empty\textsuperscript{21}.

The size of the estate is 93 000m\textsuperscript{2} and its value estimated at £265 millions, which is probably underestimated as it sits in front of the Olympic site. On the figure ground below, the white space indicates the public space available, the black space are the private property or development, along with the ongoing construction site. The Carpenters estate appears as displaying the biggest amount of public space compared to the surrounding developments.
Some not usually valued situations are about to be erased by the Stratford Masterplan put together in 2011 by the council. The public spaces, the pub, the community center and more important the network of interactions of the existing community are under threat, while the Olympics legacy have become an endless series of luxury empty developments surrounding the Carpenters estate, a visual testimony of the “boom and bust” speculation currently operating in London.

The on-going process of evictions has become another testimony of oneself possessions or goods. What would happen if everyone were to agree to a scheme of common ownership and would be willing to share everything from the private space to the fridge to the socks?

In the context of London being in a state of permanent crisis, what possibilities would offer small architectures for sharing, based on not usually valued activities?

De minimis

Could some discreet extreme sharing architectures tune into the existing not usually valued activities of the communities living in the maisonettes? Rather than producing a monumental master plan to solve the Carpenters estate or the London housing crisis, a series of small, mobile and discreet interventions using camouflage and remote effect can be tried out. By disturbing the current conditions, these design speculations are closer to implement new situations, or to be a set of instructions, in fact to act as plugin software trying to modify interactions and to create reciprocal exchanges within horizontal organization.

Could it be a way to value and reorganize the existing in order to extend the home to the estate, potentially to the city?

Like dropping a pebble stone into apparently still waters, #share home @ London’s Housings struggles is an on-going project working with remote effects, counting on the ripples to destabilize the current conditions and creates opportunities for design.
ENDNOTES

1 Samantha Hardingha, Supercrit #1, Cedric Price, Potteries Thinkbelt, ed. Kester Rattenbury (New York: Routledge, 2007), 11.
2 Yet today, more than grids of pipes and wires, infrastructures includes pools of microwaves beaming from satellites and populations of atomized electronic devices that we hold in our hands. The shared standards and ideas that control everything from technical objects to management styles also constitutes an infrastructure. Far from hidden, infrastructure is now the over point of contact and access between us all - the rules governing the space of everyday life.” Keller Easterling, Extrastatecraft: the Power of Infrastructure Space (London: Verso, 2014), 11.
3 4 http://focus15.org
7 Joseph Grima, “Home is the Answer, but What is the Question?” in SQM, the Quantified Home, ed. Space Caviar (Zürich: Lars Müller publisher, 2014).
9 Concreteaction.net
10 “The New Architecture Movement (NAM) was founded in 1975 and arose out of a conference organised by the more tightly knit ARC. NAM also took an explicitly oppositional stance to normative architectural practice: it set out to criticise the conventional notions of professionalism and the internalised structure of the profession, and in particular the system of patronage where the designer of a building has little contact with its user. NAM also called for the unionisation of architects, claiming that the RIBA failed to represent the majority of architects working within the private sector, dominated as it was (and still is) by private practice principals rather than their employees.” http://www.spatialagency.net/database/new.architecture.movement.nam
12 refer to : freedom.press/securedrop
15 “The sharing between equals and, at the same time, the opening of the circles of sharing towards “outsiders”, necessarily implies creating institutions that can manage difference and tolerate unpredictability. (…) The establishment and comparison of differences is a first step towards the creation of common ground. And common ground, as a constantly negotiable in-betweeness is a primary form of sharing. Sharing between different people who accept others as equals (equally in need and having equal rights to claim existing resources), is based on the creation of a common ground”
21 Retrieved from the internet: newham.gov.uk/Pages/ServiceChild/The-Carpenters-Estate-Stratford.aspx#TheRoadToRegeneration
23 De minimis
24 From the Latin de minimis non curat lex (‘the law does not deal with trivial matters’). This is a term accorded to activities or changes too minor to fall within the legal definition of development. The local planning authority would decide that such changes would make no difference to the outward appearance of a building. This generally includes installation of equipment such as television aerials, microcells or small antennas.
25 “When the object of design is not an object form or a masterplan but a set of instructions for an interplay between variables, design acquires some of the power and currency of software. This spatial software is not a thing but a means to craft a multitude of interdependent relationships and sequences – an updating platform for inflecting a stream of objects.” Keller Easterling, Extrastatecraft, the Power of Infrastructure Space (London: Verso, 2014), 80.
BIBLIOGRAPHY