



Housing – A Critical Perspective.

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Abstract / Initial Proposal Form:

1. Paper / Proposal Title: How to grow community-led development in the UK – a call for the Professional Independent Enabler

2. Format: Written paper

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4. University or Company Affiliation: Levitt Bernstein Architects

5. Abstract (300 words):

Many design professionals are driven by the desire to serve their communities and contribute positively to the built environment by producing high quality, well-designed buildings appropriate to their time and place. However, the UK's currently predominant mode of housing delivery – speculative developers and volume house-builders using design and build procurement – can sometimes champion fast delivery and cost-efficiency over robust design and quality; where sales targets rather than long-term performance are the priority. For architects in the industry, it can be frustrating to see designs and specifications value-engineered – not so savings can be passed on to future residents, but to increase profit margins.

The emerging community-led housing sector in the UK reverses this model. All stakeholders, including the design team and future residents, are involved throughout the design process and are committed to the quality of housing being created. Together, design decisions can be made balancing want and need, quality and affordability, to create buildings where residents feel a real sense of ownership.

In the UK, many community-led projects struggle to get off the ground. Each newly forming group is unique, and since the sector is so new, and there are many difficulties to overcome, the process can be overwhelming and exhausting for those attempting it. Well-meaning but inexperienced groups often reinvent the wheel, particularly when it comes to group structure, financial arrangements and planning and development processes. Local authorities, who often have land available and should be positive about community participation, balk at the reality of working with so many non-professional stakeholders.

In other countries, a specific role has emerged to help community groups navigate this process: the Professional Independent Enabler.

Design professionals are accustomed to working in this way: each new project has different site constraints and stakeholders, so each design solution is unique. Architects in particular have experience across a range of development processes and many contacts within the housing sector and so are well placed to fulfil this role.

This presentation explores how potential Professional Independent Enablers can engage with the UK's emerging community-led housing sector; drawing on extensive research across the UK, a recent field trip to cohousing in Berlin and voluntary work with RUSS Community Land Trust in Lewisham and Jon Broome / Architype Architects at the co-design sessions for residents.

7. Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Zohra Chiheb
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Zohra Chiheb is an architect at Levitt Bernstein working on the design and delivery of large-scale housing and mixed-use projects, specialising in technical design. She plays an active role in the Practice's housing research – particularly around alternative models of development.

She is passionate about community-led development and spends time researching, visiting and writing about housing cooperatives, community land trusts and co-housing projects. Her research is focused on the many positive impacts of community-led housing: economic, environmental and social.

Zohra is currently volunteering with RUSS Community Land Trust in Lewisham as a co-facilitator at the design sessions hosted by the architects for the residents. Using her professional skills to help residents think about the design of their future homes, and bringing them together to perform as a group – she is facilitating their informed decision making.

She has spoken about her research at the RIBA, New London Architecture, Urban Design London and at Sheffield and London South Bank Universities, and written articles for New London Quarterly and Building Design.

Zohra is a passionate advocate for equal access to quality education, and has been on the RIBA Education Committee for three years. She is also an occasional technical critic at Newcastle University.