

Low Impact Living. A field guide for affordable, ecological community building

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Chapter 1. Introduction

BUILDING AN IMPOSSIBLE COMMUNITY

‘You are doing what?’ asked Peter, in a half-incredulous, half-disinterested tone.

He had obviously heard hundreds of people with similarly ambitious ideas over the years, and this was another one. Peter ran a successful eco-camping site in rural Wales, on the back of a long-standing career as an eco-builder.

‘We are going to build 20 houses from strawbales in Leeds where we live. We are going to run it as a co-operative so it’ll be permanently affordable. It’s based on cohousing principles with a common house in the middle where we will eat and hang out together’, I repeated briefly this time as I detected he was starting to lose interest.

This was 2007 and Tash and I were standing in the middle of a large marquee in a forest deep in west Wales at the Do Lectures, a weekend retreat showcasing radical alternatives run by the ethical clothes makers Howies. I had been invited to give a talk on my experiences in self-management and popular education in changing the world.

‘Have you found some land? Have you got a project manager? Where is the money coming from? What’s your loan to value ratio? Has your quantity surveyor done a preliminary budget?’ Peter asked abruptly.

‘Well err, no. We are right at the beginning, but we’ll sort all that out’ replied Tash authoritatively attempting to retain some control over the conversation.

‘Look, good luck with it. It sounds great. You’ve got a long way to go. But if you don’t mind me saying you sound incredibly naïve. Get some help. You’ve got a long way to go,’ said Peter as a parting shot as he drifted off round the tent to talk to other guests. We looked At each other.

‘We are building an impossible community right?’ she said.

‘Yeah, probably. But it’s never stopped us before.’

WHAT’ S THIS BOOK ABOUT?

Back then it did seem a truly ambitious idea, a dream that may or may not come to fruition.

Now I live in the Lilac project. It’s the first of its kind in the UK, and maybe even the world.

It’s certainly never been done before in the way we have done it. Lilac stands for ‘Low

Impact Living Affordable Community’. It is a member-controlled cohousing co-operative

comprising twenty highly insulated homes built from timber and straw with a shared

common house. It uses a unique fully mutual equity leasehold model that makes it

affordable in perpetuity. The dream became a reality after nearly seven years of hard work.

This is the book about how we made it happen; about how a group of ordinary people got

together do something quite extraordinary - build the first cohousing project that was both

affordable, low impact, co-operative and committed to building a supporting nurturing

community. And all this happened in the rather unlikely city of Leeds - a large post-industrial

city in the north of England struggling to find its feet after heavy industry had long moved

overseas.

Low impact living is a book about lots of things - cohousing, co-operative living, low carbon housing, good place making, community self-governance, and social and ecological justice,

are just a few of them. Specifically, it's a book about the lilac project and how a group of people made what seemed like an impossibility into a reality. How years of dreaming, talking and planning became a pioneering reference project. It was six incredibly hard years. But of course we didn't just make Lilac happen on our own. A huge cast of people and ideas were mobilized, and our idea grew strong as we walked on the shoulders of countless other inspirational people and places. This book tells the story of what motivated us to build Lilac, how we actually made it happen, what Lilac means, its main aspects, glimpses of what it's been like living there in the first year of its life, and what lessons can be drawn from this experience.

The reasons for writing this book are numerous. There is so much to say about how Lilac came about, so many insights, lessons and potentials for the future for others to follow and learn from what we have done. I wanted to offer an honest 'warts 'n' all' account of how we did it. I wanted to show how difficult, complex, but also how amazing and exhilarating, it is to believe in something that breaks through the deadlock of convention, and then find a way to turn your dream into a reality. But beyond a straightforward account, I want this book to provide some useful factual and technical information and resources for those who want to follow up the detail of what we did and how we did it. A glance through any large bookstore and you will find scores of books on eco-building, green architecture and sustainable cities. These are great, of course, and many have inspired me along the way.¹ But they lack something. With a few exceptions, they are often dry technical guides. They offer a wealth of concepts, insights and technical data, all of which are really vital. But what's missing are people. How do sustainable cities actually come about? Who is doing the ecobuilding, for what reasons, and what kinds of visions of the future do they have? What

motivated them, and how did they overcome obstacles? Who is going to use these books to bring about the wide-scale and increasingly urgent social transformation in our lifetime? The underlying premise of this book is that the task is too vast and complex, too delicate and subtle, to leave it to the architectural profession, big government or big business. Sure, they have resources and answers. But they need to be seen as enablers rather than experts in charge of the process. All too often the story of our cities unfolds through power and politics of an elite group. This kind of top-down approach, as I'll explore in this book, can't on its own deliver the kinds of innovations needed to tackle the multiple crises ahead.

So I wanted to write a book that stands out from what already exists - a book that is based on the direct and real-time experience of a group of people. I wanted to write a book that many different people could relate to and be inspired by. The book's title *Low Impact Living* is intentionally open and questioning. It can be interpreted in many different ways. At the most basic level, low impact living evokes the daily practices of treading more lightly on the planet. This has long been a moniker of the environmental movement. And of course now we can measure exactly how lightly we live on the planet through sophisticated ecological footprinting tools.² But beyond the ecological, what else does a low impact life mean? The Lilac model is a living experiment into the interconnected and holistic ways in which our lives can be reformulated so they tread more lightly. Thus, low impact can refer to many areas of our lives be it social, political and economic. This raises a whole raft of challenges such as: how can we create communities that are both more inclusive and embrace difference, how can we find a deeper sense of fulfilment beyond rampant consumerism, how can we communicate in ways that are less violent, how can we move away from the brutality of top down planning, how can we govern ourselves in less hierarchical ways, how

can we control and soften the impacts of a turbo-charged casino-like global economy? A neighbourhood based upon low impact living then, is intended to be deeply transformative, a bulwark against the status quo and a move towards a possible future that is only partially outlined but urgently needed. The subtitle '*A field-guide to ecological, affordable community building*' was chosen for specific reasons. It will be great if this book is dog-eared, scrawled on, used in all sorts of contexts, and covered with tea and coffee stains. And it's about the act and art of building - not just bricks and mortar (or straw and timber!) - but the communities who will mobilise to shape the neighbourhoods of tomorrow.

So, you may find the book educational and challenging if you are student or researcher in further or higher education looking to broaden your understanding of the challenges and responses that our society faces. You may find this useful if you are a teacher and looking for case study material that you want to share with others. You may find this inspiring if you are part of an emerging group looking for ideas and advice about your project and how to move forward. You may find this informative if you are a policy maker, stakeholder or part of a statutory agency and have a role in facilitating these kinds of projects. I wanted to lay down something that was a mixture of styles and narrative voices – that weaves together diverse elements such as conceptual discussion, personal story, chronological narrative, resource manual, technical guide, reference list. So in this book you'll find detailed discussions of the ideas and concepts that underpin the Lilac project, a grounded chronology of events as they directly unfolded, and personal reflections woven together with technical information, guides, resources and templates that we have directly tried and tested.

This book is only my account of how we built Lilac. It is written from my perspective as the first secretary of the society and as the contact point for our team of professionals during the construction phase. But I helped build Lilac along with several other hugely dedicated cofounders. And now there are thirty four adult inspirational members and amazing nine children who all together make Lilac what it is. I see Lilac now as part of an open source revolution. The creative genius of the collective exceeds any of the talents and competencies of the individual parts. At this scale of operation, there is a logic, and indeed magic, to Lilac through group think, collective learning and skill sharing. Of course, now there are lots of other stories and perspectives about Lilac from the diverse membership. Each would recount the Lilac story in their own way, and from their perspective. And in the future I hope many more stories on Lilac will emerge. So mine is an initial and partial account, and I owe a debt of gratitude the many other perspectives and ideas I have encountered along the way. This book would not have happened without them. It is a deeply individual account set in a deeply collective context.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

I have divided the story of Lilac into seven chapters. After this introduction, chapter two deals with the motives, values and challenges that underpin Lilac, and made us act. Chapter three presents quite a detailed chronology of the six years that represent the development journey of Lilac, as well as some reflections on the first year of living there. The next three chapters offer a detailed exploration of what the main aspects of the Lilac concept – low impact living, affordability and community. Chapter three explores how we put low impact living into practice looking at how we designed Lilac and conceived the overall strategy for reducing its ecological impact. Chapter four discusses our pioneering mutual co-operative

financial model that attempts to embed economic equality. Chapter five explores what community means to us and how we put it into practice especially in the context of cohousing. As the figure below shows, Lilac is about much more than its three elements. These three elements are deeply integrated and holistic and together have synergistic effects, reinforcing the positive impacts of the other. Although this book discusses the three elements of Lilac in turn, this division is rather false and the real strength comes from the whole model working together. The final chapter provides some overall insights and lessons, for a range of different groups (grassroots, developers, the local state) and explores the problems and pitfalls associated with projects like Lilac.

These chapters could be read in any order or indeed as stand-alone entities depending on your interests. I have kept the book as brief as I could – so it offers an initial understanding without overwhelming with detail. Behind every page there almost lurks another story! Clearly, I hope this book is used to give impetus to projects around the world. But I must offer an honest disclaimer and reality check. What worked for us might not work for you. And Lilac represents the specificities of the UK, its financial, land and legal arrangements, many of which are unique and not repeatable elsewhere. I have tried to keep this in mind and give broader lessons as my hope that this is a book that will be read and used as much outside the UK as within it. No two moments in time or place are the same. Your journey, wherever you are, will be different to ours, and necessarily so. The rest of this book is dedicated to telling the story of Lilac in some detail.

POSTSCRIPT: COHOUSING IS GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH. IT'S OFFICIAL

On Sunday 2 June 2013, only a couple of months after we had moved into Lilac, and only one week after the contractor finally left site, I had a cerebrovascular accident (CVA) – more commonly known as a stroke. It was a fairly small stroke, but it was a life changing event nevertheless. I was sat on my allotment at Lilac which is only a few metres away from the houses. I was marking a few end of term essays (I teach Geography at the University of Leeds) and doing some weeding in the sun. I was pretty dehydrated from a bottle of wine that I had drunk the night before. I was chatting to Ellie who had the allotment next to mine and she went off to get us both a cup of tea as I sat there in the hot sun. I stood up to go and do some weeding and the most amazing lightheaded and out of body sensation engulfed me. I started to wobble, my limbs felt heavy and I fell to the floor on all fours. I was having what the medical profession calls a ‘vasovagal attack’. Then I began to vomit profusely. It was heard right across the site by people who were wandering around doing their Sunday chores. Through a cloud of mist I saw Ellie walking back towards me holding two cups of tea. I began to call her name but I couldn’t form any words. When she arrived she asked me jokingly what I was doing on all fours thinking I was messing around. But when she realised what state I was in she immediately started to help.

Luckily for me, Ellie is a paramedic and remained calm and shouted for help and a bunch of Lilac residents came running. I was hyperventilating. They calmed me and gave me some water. I was totally out of control and couldn’t speak or move my body as I slumped to the floor wondering what the hell had happened to me. After about five minutes they decided to try get me inside. They found a wheelbarrow on the allotment, lifted me up and put me in it and began to wheel me back towards my house. After another five minutes they got me back in and wheeled me back to my house. At the front door, they lifted me out and I

started to crawl on all fours into the hallway. I again attempted to talk to them but couldn't. It took me about twenty minutes to crawl towards the sofa and I lay there lifelessly into the evening. For the next two days I lay in bed recovering.

I only found out eight days later that I had a stroke. Throughout the whole of that week, I thought I was recovering from a nasty virus. Although they know it was an ischemic stroke, they never found a cause. It's what they call cryptogenic. Their best guess is that a small blood clot may have formed from an arterial dissection in my neck. The clot then broke off and created a blockage. Dehydration may also have played a part. The block restricted the flow of blood and oxygen to my brain which led to three small lesions where brain tissue had died (or infarcts as they are called) in my cerebellum and mid brain. It is terrifying to think that this is like a game of russian roulette. The block could have affected other parts of my brain, and more important functions. Luckily, the parts that it affected related to coordination, and specifically fine motor skills in my right hand. The damage was not severe and new neural pathways opened up around the dead cells within a few months.

This all happened in the middle of writing this book. The second half of it has been written with me slowly punching individual keys like a school kid learning to use a keyboard for the first time. I then acquired some dictation software to speed things up. Living in a cohousing community was an amazingly lucky break to deal with an event like this. Everyone knew what had happened, and everyone was eager to help. Normally, it's great having one neighbour who can help you out. But I had dozens of people checking in, making food and doing little chores for me to make my recovery period easier.

Did the stress of building Lilac play a part? We will never know. One person's stress is another person's pleasure. And the medical profession cannot offer any definitive evidence linking stress and stroke events. Certainly the six years of building Lilac taxed me heavily. There are certainly lessons to make sure the big workloads are shared early and evenly as the size of projects develop. What happened on that Sunday in June was a huge shock to my body. There were probably countless warning signs building up to this which I had ignored as I was too busy frantically helping to finish Lilac and keep up with my day job. But after the day of my stroke, there was no doubt that things had to change. I am now a lot slower and do much less. I spend more time pottering around Lilac with my family. My body is now in control, and I'm listening to it everyday.

I always wonder what would have happened if I had collapsed in a quiet corner of my house or an empty allotment far from my house where nobody would have found me for hours, possibly days. But thankfully I was surrounded by fellow cohousers, with a strong sense of togetherness. People often say that one of the great benefits of a cohousing community is the natural surveillance it offers to check in on people's well-being and health. That day I knew exactly what that meant. On June 2 2013, cohousing could possibly have saved my life.

¹ There are many great books out there, and too numerous to mention. A selection include: Satterthwaite (1999), Newman (2008), Newman et al., (2009), Rydin (2010), Anderson, (2006), Biknell et al. (2009), Phillips et al. (2013), Hamdi (2004, 2010), Bulkeley et al (eds.) (2013), Williams (2012), Lerch (2007), Peters et al. (2010) Pullen (2011), Santini and Zilafro (2009), Cook (2011), Desai (2009), Hall (2013), Johnston et al. (2013), Anderson (2009), Calthorpe (2013) and Register (2006).

² The concept and tools of ecological footprinting are now well developed. See for example: Wackernagel et al. (2006), and see the very useful and comprehensive website <http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/>. One Planet Living (<http://www.oneplanetliving.org>) and the Living Building Challenge (<http://living-future.org/lbc>) are also useful frameworks to assess the broader ecological and social impacts of a community.