

Co-operative Housing

REHABILITATION IN SUNDERLAND

by

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Until 1977, much of the older private housing stock in Hendon, Sunderland was designated for slum clearance. Hendon, located within half a mile of the town centre was subjected to a general process of decay, common to many other similar inner urban areas in other towns. The idea of housing Co-ops here accompanied the general shift away from clearance to conservation.

Negotiations began between Sunderland Borough Council, who were interested in modernisation, but who had little financial input to make, the Housing Corporation, who recognised Hendon as an area of housing need and who had money to invest, and Banks of the Wear Co-op Housing Services who had the will and expertise to see Co-ops get off the ground. As a result of these negotiations, a Housing Action Area was formed and 50 per cent designated specifically for Co-op activity.

Initial interest in the Co-op idea was anything but strong. Several of the houses in St Vincent Street, central to the area, were vacant and boarded up and most of the others were occupied by private tenants, living in often appalling conditions. Having been included in Sunderland's slum clearance programme only a year earlier, most of the area's tenants had expected eventual council rehousing. Not surprisingly, many of them took some convincing that a housing Co-operative represented a much better alternative. But convinced they gradually became and the first house to be completed by the newly registered St Vincent Housing Co-op was occupied on Christmas Eve 1978.

Co-ops as Clients

St Vincent Co-op expanded very gradually. Co-ops were encouraged and eventually formed in adjacent streets. A development pattern for the Co-op area of Hendon began to emerge which differed radically from the remaining Housing Association zone. The Co-ops began to form "hamlets" within the "village" of Hendon and street identities were once again reinforced in a way which single landlord development could never hope to achieve.

The importance of the sense of identity that Co-ops create cannot be stressed enough. The overall success of housing rehabilitation ultimately depends on something much more than the physical transformation of the building fabric itself.

Spin-offs from Housing Co-ops

Co-ops are about getting people involved in problem solving with others. The forming and running of a housing Co-operative opens people up to new experience and exposes latent skills in people. The amount of control involved can lead to confidence and a conviction that things can change and that ordinary people can be the catalysts for that change. It is a natural progression from satisfactorily providing decent housing to asking what can be done about employment.

Sunderland has an unemployment rate of 26 per cent and the figure with-in Hendon itself far surpasses this average. Using some of the lessons learnt from involvement in St Vincent Housing Co-op, two members formed a workers Co-op called BoWork in 1981. Making use of the local authority's Revolving Loan Fund, they started a wet-blast brick and stone cleaning Co-op specialising in removing graffiti from masonry. The Co-op has now grown to employ seven workers and is involved in a wide range of work from contract painting to janitorial services on blocks of flats.

Other Co-op members have spent many months of hard labour converting a derelict site at the end of St Vincent Street into a productive allotment. Women members of Peel Street and St Vincent Street Co-ops have launched the Hendon Play Campaign. Lack of facilities for local kids has long been a serious problem in this part of Hendon. There are no playgrounds and no open spaces. Apart from campaigning for better play facilities, the group organises an amazing variety of highly successful events. No less than 25 separate daily trips/activities have been planned for this year's school summer holidays.

A sense of pride and belonging to a Co-operative extends gradually to confidence in dealing with outside professionals — in effect, becoming informed clients. An obvious advantage of Co-operative development is the increased element of choice available to individual members concerning their housing. Using both independent architects and the in-house architectural section of Banks of the Wear, the Co-ops have been able to become fully involved in design issues from the very outset.

Naturally, this is not specific to rehabilitation Co-ops; new-build Co-ops get to choose the actual site and dimensions of their accommodation. But in rehabilitation areas the effect of this involvement is twofold. Primarily the individual members are assured that internally their specific family requirements are met and satisfied. At the same time their choices externally, i.e. window design, front doors, boundary walls, paintwork colour, contribute to creating a degree of visual variety in streets which under most other types of tenancy tend to take on a bland uniformity.

Problems of Organisation —

It would be naive to think that all this Co-op housing development was being carried out without any problems. The problems do exist and they

range from organisation within Co-ops themselves to major problems of the surrounding environment.

From an organisational view point rehabilitation Co-ops have a problem not shared by the new build Co-ops. They tend to evolve gradually and by the nature of that evolution they have longer serving members and properties developed at different times, by different consultants, under differing financial constraints. By and large new build Co-ops tend to be linked to one site. They tend to have a total membership from inception (allowing for a small percentage of drop out), and as a result can develop a cohesion as a group which lasts and grows after their buildings are complete.

Rehabilitation Co-ops, on the other hand, can suffer from the Co-op members learning the hard way. It is a fact that with the benefit of experience the Co-ops become more and more discerning as clients and what was acceptable at the outset (because it was a palace in comparison to the appalling unimproved condition) could, with hindsight, have been done differently. It can be a problem for long serving Co-op members to see new members moving into improved houses developed in the light of all the lessons learnt. The brighter side of this situation is the fact that housing Co-ops have it within their power to begin to redress any imbalances by deciding to spend money on their older improved houses to bring them in line with the latest ones.

— And Geography

As previously mentioned the proximity of dwellings in a rehabilitation Co-op is important in terms of the overall success but in some cases no matter how close the properties, the general geography of the area can create problems of its own.

Hendon's Tatham Street Housing Co-op has suffered to a certain extent by being formed within an area of older housing bordered by the city centre, two main roads and a disused railway line. On the one hand, the tightness of the area is one of its attractive qualities, but it has meant that for a variety of reasons the Co-op has not been able to acquire as many properties within the area as it would have liked. This in turn has put more and more of the work load of managing the Co-op business on to fewer heads with a predictable feeling of disillusion. The problem is not insurmountable, but is indicative of the difficulties that can arise in rehabilitation housing Co-ops when they are not allowed to grow to their optimum size in terms of management.

Co-op Improvement

Both by the sheer level of investment in the area and by the individual nature of Co-op house improvement, the Hendon housing Co-ops have been responsible for a renewed confidence which has had spin-offs for private owners in adjacent properties. Nevertheless, what is desperately

needed now is a comprehensive environmental scheme to pull together and complement the housing investment in the individual houses.

Although there is much left to do, and many of the underlying economic problems still remain, the people in this part of Hendon have proved that, with a bit of help and enthusiasm, they can bring their community back to life. That is what housing Co-ops are really all about.

Note of the Author

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