arq (2016), **20.4**, 381–382. © Cambridge University Press 2017

Housing crisis: building a Protohome

Artist Julia Heslop introduces a housing-design & build project, produced by individuals with an experience of homelessness in Newcastle upon Tyne.

Crisis's 2016 Homeless Monitor reported that rough sleeping in England doubled between 2010 and 2015, whilst placements in temporary accommodation have increased by 40% in the same period, and two-thirds of local authorities reported that welfare reform was directly responsible for rising homelessness in their area.[1] So often considered in relation to family breakdown, a lack of familial networks, drug, alcohol, and mental health problems, the relationship between housing policy, welfare reform, property relations and precarious lives is becoming increasingly clear through austerity policies.

It is within this context that protohome, a self-build housing prototype has been created. Constructed by members of Crisis, the national charity for single homelessness, Protohome was temporarily sited in Newcastle upon Tyne and open to the public for eleven weeks. The 'house' hosted a range of events, from film screenings, to artist residencies, public forums, workshops, performances and more, examining issues of homelessness, austerity, the politics of land and development, and participatory housing alternatives. The project attempted to reconnect notions of self-build housing to self-help, where self construction confronts issues of territorial stigmatisation, inequality, rising homelessness, intergenerational unemployment, so-called 'failing' housing markets and empty homes. It was also about reframing housing as something that is active, as something that has social use and value, challenging preoccupations with the economic function of housing.

The premise for the project was not so much about creating a finished 'product' in the form of a working house (protohome is a shell-like structure and does not have services attached to it), but instead lies in the process of becoming that both the house and the people who made it have gone through. For the individuals involved in the project who have experienced homelessness, building has been a learning process, one that has been therapeutic, has built confidence, and has forged friendships and social ties. This isn't to say that this cannot or should not be a model that has the potential to be replicated into a fully functioning house in the future – indeed it is very much a provocation for Newcastle to create more alternative and participatory forms of housing, in a city that lacks these.

The design, which was completed by xsite architecture (a medium-sized architecture firm based in Newcastle) and brought into being by Crisis members alongside Tilt Workshop (a collective of artists and joiners), is based on the Segal method of timber frame construction. Walter Segal was an architect who developed a system of self-build housing specifically designed for untrained self-builders. In the Segal

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method there are no wet trades involved, just dry jointing techniques and the build can be done incrementally, using standard 'off the shelf' material sizes, so that less cutting and waste is involved. Learning and training being at the core of this project, this system of building offered an approach through which learning could occur whilst building.

For the many people involved, the project has created an awareness and a confidence in our ability to self-build housing, something that has largely dropped out of the collective imagination, overtaken by mass housing solutions built by the volume house-builders. It has also offered a critical analysis of participation at a point in which participation in architecture is increasingly being debated and practiced.

www.protohome.org.uk

Notes

1. S. Fitzpatrick et al., *The Homeless Monitor: England 2016* (London: Crisis, 2016).

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