

Peer Exchange Journal

Natalia Martinez,
Fundació Hàbitat3,
Barcelona



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Fundació Hàbitat3, Barcelona



An estimated 450,000 empty homes in the region offer a huge potential to meet Catalonia's housing supply gap.

Fundació Hàbitat3, a private foundation based in Barcelona, has the mission to provide social and inclusive housing for social organisations and local governments so they can deliver programmes for people with special needs or at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

The Catalonia region of Spain currently has about 60,000 affordable social housing rental units which represent 2% of the total housing stock.

Given this figure, it is clear that the social housing rental sector is insufficient, especially when we compare it with other European countries which have an average of 15%. Approximately 230,000 additional social housing units would be necessary to meet the current demand from citizens at risk of social and residential exclusion.

Hàbitat3 finds houses in the private market or from other suppliers such as financial institutions or even the public sector; renovates them with the help of non-profit organisations focused on job placement; and makes them available for people selected by public sector or non-profit organisations.

"Information's pretty thin stuff unless mixed with experience."

Clarence Day

As the head of the housing acquisition department I've always been keen to learn from other people's experiences, particularly on acquiring and updating properties. So when I got the invitation from BSHF to join the peer exchange to Self-Help Housing in the North of England, I immediately accepted it.

The work of Canopy in Leeds and Giroscope in Hull, in renovating empty homes to provide affordable housing to disadvantaged people is inspirational. Both organisations started in response to failed housing markets and a desire to match empty homes to people in housing need. They pioneered the 'Self-help' housing model in the UK which has inspired many others and has grown significantly over the years.

The model involves organisations acquiring long-term empty properties, renovating them using volunteer labour and letting them out at rates which are below market housing.

Joining the peer exchange was an incredible learning experience and offered me the opportunity to reflect on my work and the work of Fundació Hàbitat3. I'd like to share my 'learning journey' during the week of the peer exchange via my travel journal in the hope that this will give the readers further insight into the peer exchange as well as Canopy and Giroscope's work in the North of England.

Find out more about
Fundació Hàbitat3

www.habitat3.cat

FUNDACIÓ
HÀBITAT 3

Habitatge per a la inclusió social

2016

SUNDAY

18

SEPTEMBER

Day 1:

Meeting the group

After checking in at the hotel in Leeds, I met up for dinner with some of the participants and BSHF staff that had already arrived. There were participants from Canada, USA, South Africa, Spain and Puerto Rico. Steve Hoey, the director of Canopy, was also there to welcome and join the group.

We introduced ourselves to each other on our way to the restaurant and before supper arrived at the table we were already engaged in a number of conversations.

The majority of the group were working on the renovation of empty properties to use them as social housing and a few were working in homelessness. It was also interesting to meet two participants from Detroit – Chris Lambert of Life Remodeled, who annually mobilises 10,000 volunteers to clean up neighbourhoods in six days and Pura Bascos of Detroit Land Bank Authority, who manages the demolition of blighted properties! It was without doubt a rather diverse and interesting group.



Chris Lambert, Life Remodeled



Pura Bascos,
Detroit Land Bank Authority

MONDAY

19

SEPTEMBER

2016

Day 2:

Participant introductions

After a warm welcome from BSHF, Martin Newman from Giroscope and Steve Hoey from Canopy introduced their respective organisations. We also saw the video produced by BSHF on the work of both organisations for the World Habitat Awards. This gave us a glimpse of how the two charities are addressing empty properties in Leeds and Hull, which are amongst the most deprived areas in the whole of the UK. It also showed a few of the volunteers and tenants who have been involved in the renovation process or have been housed and whose lives have been improved through Canopy and Giroscope's work.

All the 12 participants also did presentations of their respective organisations and projects. These are key elements of the Peer Exchange; as a way to transfer information, experiences and knowledge. Half of the participants were working on addressing homelessness in their communities and were looking into the possibility of

tapping into empty homes to provide affordable, permanent housing for homeless people. There were several in the group that were directly involved in bringing back empty properties into use and keen to learn from the project about engaging volunteers and tenants in the process. It was very motivating to see that we all shared a passion for working with disadvantaged people and improving people's living conditions in our respective contexts.

After the presentations we were then split into two groups and briefed on the programme for the next three days. Each group would in turn visit one organisation (either Canopy or Giroscope) and then swap to visit the other so we'd all have the chance to get to know both organisations and see their work.



Meeting the participants and finding out about their organisations

2016

TUESDAY

20

SEPTEMBER

Day 3:

Visiting Canopy's offices in Leeds

My group started at Canopy's new office, a house they had just refurbished and converted into their office.

Their office walls were decorated with pictures of volunteers and tenants doing renovation work. Throughout the day we saw how crucial the involvement of volunteers is for their model's success. Staff, volunteers and future tenants work together not only to make the renovation of the houses possible, but also to help turn around the lives of those who will end up living in the renovated home.

Keith Gibson, Canopy's chair, spoke about their history; how over the past 20 years they have managed to get 'peppercorn' leases (nominal £1 a year leases) from the city council, and recently even purchased empty houses to renovate them and, in turn, rent them to people in housing need. They currently own 15 houses and have the lease or management of 45 properties.

Afterwards Steve Hoey, Canopy's director, took to the floor and made a point about the two situations that have set Canopy's work in motion:

- Empty houses
- The need of housing for many people and families

He also showed us a video posted on [YouTube](#) by The Guardian which featured their volunteers and tenants who are central to Canopy's work in the renovation of empty properties in Leeds.



Canopy has a bulletin board that contains the renovation schedule and a box of keys (just like we do at Hâbitat3!)

TUESDAY

20

SEPTEMBER

2016

Day 3:

“Everybody has something to teach and something to learn”

We also got to meet other Canopy staff members: Sharon, who is the Operations Manager and has previously worked at a big Housing Association; Rosie, who is responsible for tenant support and has experience in working with refugees.

We then met Alex who started as a Construction Site Manager and is now responsible for all the renovations that Canopy undertakes. He told us that his work does not have to do with homes, it has to do with people; he also told us that whenever he meets volunteers to work on a house, he always says that everybody has something to teach and something to learn.

He explained how volunteers are Canopy’s backbone; they bring in their expertise and skills. They also provide a support network which tenants seldom have.

The renovation process is also a process of creating ties between the tenants who take part in the renovation of the house that they will live in. Alex also mentioned that they refurbish homes to be more energy efficient, particularly improving the insulation in order to address the issue of fuel poverty.

Canopy homes are fully furnished and tenants are provided with a gift pack with some home essentials such as kitchenware, cutlery, bedding and towels.



Alex from Canopy talked us through the renovation process



Outside Canopy's office

2016

TUESDAY

20

SEPTEMBER

Day 3:

Renovating the houses

After lunch we went to a renovation site. There we met Sarah, the Site Manager; Patrick, the Maintenance Manager; and Daniel, who used to be a volunteer and is now on a one-year apprenticeship programme with Canopy.

They briefed us on safety rules, provided us with steel capped shoes and armed us with wallpaper strippers.

After a couple of hours and a tea break, this was the outcome:

It was engaging work and good fun to do it with other people. Alex played some music on the radio and we all talked about anything as we scrubbed and stripped the paper off the walls.

When it was time to finish, we took off our boots and gathered together to talk about the experience. It had been gratifying to be a part of the renovation work and to meet the workers and volunteers.



TUESDAY

20

SEPTEMBER

2016

Day 3:

"We talked less about the problems and more about the solutions"

Before we went back to the hotel, Alex showed us some very small houses called back to back terraces; they are about a half of a house. One can see them very well on this street since there is a block where just one side of the halves was still standing. They were the lowest form of housing of those built at the end of the 19th century to house Leeds' industrial workers.

At dinnertime you could tell we'd established a good rapport, having spent two full days together. Our conversations were more engaged with more questions being asked. We explained to each other all about our work and our projects back home. We stayed longer and talked more after dinner and some of us even went out for a late beer.

Sheldon Pollett, the Director of Choices for Youth in Saint John's, Newfoundland (Canada) said that the conversation had been shifting and we talked less about the problems and more about the solutions. He felt it was a step forward - I couldn't agree more.



Houses in Leeds



Outside a Canopy home

2016

WEDNESDAY

21

SEPTEMBER

Day 4:

Our last session with Canopy

Steve told us his view on innovation - that it is not only about doing something new. Building a home used to be common, however it is rather unusual now and that's why it is an innovation.

He also shared with us his thoughts on the future of Canopy and explained about the negotiations with Leeds City Council to extend the leases. They were quite hopeful that they would grant them 99-year leases. Canopy will also use the Council's Right to Buy scheme money to fund the rehabilitation of five houses that will be rented to people on the Council's waiting list for affordable housing.

The relationship between Leeds City Council and Canopy has worked well in providing social housing. Steve mentioned they are now trying to extend this good practice to other places both in England and abroad.

He also told us about a study on Canopy's return of social value: Canopy has produced £4.28 of social value for each £1 of external investment. Examples of social value include obvious measures such as reduction in benefits payments but extend also to less obvious and perhaps less-easily-quantifiable measures such as "better family relationships". This has been done by calculating the Monetary Equivalent Value. In spite of Canopy's small size, they often get consulted by housing related study groups, who think their model could be adapted and replicated.

We said our farewells and set off for the station to take the train to Hull –'Ull' as locals say – to visit Giroscope and see their work.



My Group (from left to right): Mariangela from BSHF, Alejandro from RAIS Fundación, Kathryn from BSHF, Eduardo from Provivienda, Kallan from Homes First, Robert from the California Coalition for Rural Housing and Sheldon from Choices for Youth.

WEDNESDAY

21

SEPTEMBER

2016

Day 4:

Visiting Giroscope's office in Hull

Upon entering Giroscope's office, we saw a display of pictures on their office walls just like Canopy, showing their volunteers doing renovation work. It's quite interesting how photographs show each organisation's style, personality and differences.

Robert Amesbury, the chair of the Board of Trustees and Martin Newman, the Coordinator told us about Giroscope's origins and its evolution from a housing cooperative to its current charity status also including a company undertaking renovation work.



Walls inside Giroscope's office



Outside Giroscope's office

2016

WEDNESDAY

21

SEPTEMBER

Day 4:

Learning about the history of Giroscope

Giroscope was formed in 1985 by a group of ex-students and unemployed young people who decided to take direct action to resolve their own housing situation. Fed up with renting poor quality private sector housing, the group decided to take advantage of cheap house prices, purchasing their first property using their giros (unemployment benefit cheques) and borrowing funds. They established a worker's cooperative to renovate the house which was then let out to provide accommodation for unemployed people. Over the next few years they managed to scrape together enough money to purchase several more houses to renovate, picking up more building skills along the way. By 1990 the same group of friends already owned 16 houses.

In 2012 a £50 million government programme, the Empty Homes Community Grant Programme, was created to refurbish empty homes. As a result of this programme, Giroscope expanded until it owned 48 properties and started a construction company that carries out the renovations and seeks contracts in the private market. This way they could employ their workers and volunteers when they were not doing any in-house renovation projects.

Giroscope's volunteers are usually people without work; they may be on parole or overcoming drug use issues, often both.

They do voluntary work with Giroscope a few hours a week together with the renovation teams. Often through this process volunteers became tenants and tenants became volunteers.



Visiting a house currently under renovation

WEDNESDAY

21

SEPTEMBER

2016

Day 4:

Walking tour of houses and social enterprises

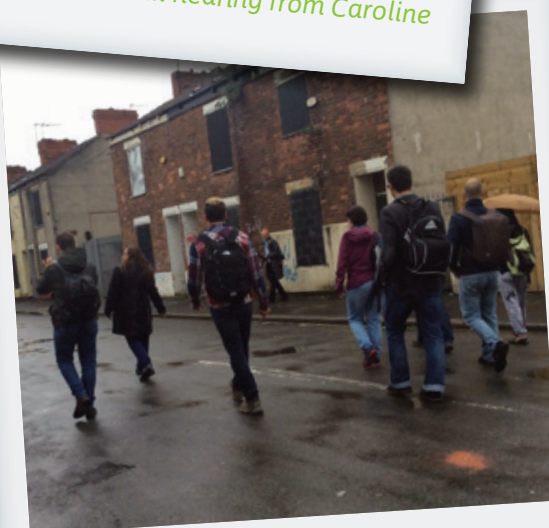
After lunch, Caroline Gore-Booth, the Project Coordinator, and Robert led the group to see a house that was undergoing refurbishment; it was the first house that Giroscope had bought.

There we met Ian, the manager of Giroscope's construction company and several staff members, who would be joining us for dinner tonight.

From there we walked to an area where there had been houses selected for demolition under the Housing Market Renewal Initiative, a government programme that ran from 2002 to 2011, which aimed to demolish hundreds of Victorian terraced houses in some cities in the North of England and replace them with newly built better housing. By the time the programme ended, many houses in Hull had been vacated but never demolished. The place was like a ghost town.



On the streets of Hull hearing from Caroline



An area where houses had been selected for demolition

2016

WEDNESDAY

21

SEPTEMBER

Day 4:

Caroline told us that the houses were not in such a bad state ten years ago. In fact they weren't worse than others that had not been designated for demolition. But having been abandoned and empty for 10 years, the houses are now in such a bad condition that there's no alternative but to demolish them. As a result, the neighbourhood has suffered abandonment and faces uncertainty about the future with properties being left abandoned, lots of boarded up houses and problems of crime and antisocial behaviour not being addressed. In some areas where demolished houses used to be, some new developments are being built.

We kept on with our walk and we arrived at where Giroscope's offices used to be. They have now rented these spaces to various local social enterprises at an affordable rent.

There was a bakery that had provided our lunches, a small brewery, a sauce company and a school of English for immigrants. We also visited a bicycle repair shop called R-evolution, which provides employment and resettlement support to people on parole or recently released from prison and provides the community with affordable bikes.

Before dinner, we walked to the Humber river docks and saw Hull's aquarium, which was built for the millennium. The pub where we would be having dinner was very close by. We had a very lively meal, fun conversations and learned more about our respective projects.



Bakery social enterprise



R-evolution bikeworks

THURSDAY

22

SEPTEMBER

2016

Day 5:

Refurbished homes and the community garden

In the morning, Sally Clarke and Sarah Sanders, the Volunteer and Tenant Support Managers at Giroscope, took us to a house near Giroscope's office. The house has four units and we got to see one of the units which had been recently vacated and refurbished and was now ready for tenants.

There was a big garden just outside the house, which was the one we've seen on the video, so we already knew Sharon, who was taking care of the garden. It's going to be a community garden and she had done quite a lot of work since the filming. With some volunteer help she had managed to clean and improve the garden.

She was keen to engage different people – children, elderly people and people with learning difficulties – in the garden work. She also told us that Giroscope had managed to rent the garden next door at a very low price, so she has a new challenge. She was quietly proud of the garden and one could see how much she cared.

Afterwards we went to a house which was being refurbished and to another empty house that Giroscope had just bought. Giroscope tries to buy empty properties for around £40,000 and renovates them for £25,000.



At the community garden with Sharon (far left)



A recently refurbished house

2016

THURSDAY

22

SEPTEMBER

Day 5:

Meeting residents

Back at the office we learned about one of Giroscope's newest projects, a self-build development of four or five houses in their own back yard.

They were giving it a lot of thought, for the cost of building these houses is around £100,000 per house without accounting for the land value, which is far more expensive than the renovation model.

We also had a chance to meet and talk to two young Giroscope tenants, two single mothers who told us of how grateful they were to Giroscope for providing them a secure, affordable accommodation in a time of housing need. Instead of worrying about their housing situation, they could now focus on providing a good future for their children.

We wrapped up with Martin and Caroline sharing with us some of their thoughts on the future of the organisation. Giroscope had recently closed a deal with a local bank to secure their loans and had been working together with other self-help

housing organisations such as Canopy. They told us about their relationship with Hull City Council and about a loan from a Building Society to develop housing for young people. They plan to offer managing and maintaining services to local landlords, especially those around neighbourhoods where Giroscope owns properties. Exciting new approaches and ideas!

They thanked us for our visit and informed us that the peer exchange and our questions about their work had not only been a source of information but had also triggered a soul-searching exercise for the organisation.



FRIDAY

23

SEPTEMBER

2016

Day 6:

A return to Leeds

On the last day of the peer exchange the two groups reconvened at the Tetley, an old brewery building that had recently been renovated and turned into a cultural centre and meeting room in Leeds. We started the day working in pairs – one from each group – to think about the differences and similarities between Canopy and Giroscope, to see their opportunities for improvement and growth and to give feedback on their work.

Both organisations use ‘trade-mark pictures’ that show their volunteers and tenants working on a renovation project and hang them up proudly on their office walls and websites.

We all agreed that a common trait for both organisations is the strength they have from their local roots and the fact that they focus on the inclusion of people in housing need. Volunteers and tenants do not just turn around houses; they turn around their own lives.

Canopy and Giroscope valued having a group of visitors from around the world asking questions and sharing their opinions and thoughts. For them the peer exchange had fostered a process of analysis, provided an outsider’s perspective and helped them to be more self-critical.

Steve explained again how important it is to determine the social value of the organisation’s work in monetary terms. Also how much organisations can learn from networking with one another and how important it is to develop sustainable financial models together with local authorities.



Visiting a house being renovated by Giroscope volunteers

“Volunteers and tenants do not just turn around houses; they turn around their own lives.”

2016

FRIDAY

23

SEPTEMBER

Day 6:

Celebrating Canopy's 20th anniversary

Afterwards we had two presentations, one by Mark Ireland from Leeds City Council and the other by Neil Evans, Director of Environment and Housing. Both focussed on the reasons why Leeds City Council has been working together with organisations like Canopy and the reasons why other local authorities should do the same. They said that the partnerships formed with these groups were good value, built on trust and making a difference to people's lives.

We also had the opportunity to join and celebrate with Canopy in its 20th anniversary. Canopy's staff, tenants and volunteers were also there for the celebration. They thought it was a nice coincidence to have received the World Habitat Award on their 20th birthday.



Hearing about Canopy's 20th anniversary
from Steve

FRIDAY

23

SEPTEMBER

2016

Day 6:

Final conclusions

Lastly, David Ireland, director of BSHF, gave us his thoughts on how both organisations are more alike than not; for their energy, the passion for what they do and their seizing of opportunities and use of resources. Both seek to empower people.

He also reminded us to submit our own innovative projects to the World Habitat Awards.

BSHF's mission, he said, is to help people have a decent home and that's why they identify innovative housing practice and support the exchange and transfer of good practice.

After having our group photo taken with the rest of the Canopy team, we went to the board room for our last session discussing our conclusions and proposals to keep in touch and continue our exchange of information and experiences.



Group photo at The Tetley in Leeds

Summary

“Now it is time to go back to work and take with us what we have learnt here”

The week of the peer exchange had been intense days of learning, meeting other people and exchanging experiences and information. We met and talked with the people involved in both organisations: staff members, volunteers and tenants of their properties, board members and other local stakeholders. We came in contact with people from Canada, United States, South Africa and Europe and shared each other's projects and successes and failures. We have seen we have so much in common.

We have been led through the streets of Leeds and Hull, and we have seen areas that have improved as a result of ideas that came to fruition through the work of enthusiastic people, people like us who believe their dedication may make a difference and enhance the opportunities of decent housing for those who most need it. It had been a privilege to be a part of the peer exchange, to

see first-hand the award-winning work of Canopy and Giroscope and immerse ourselves in a rich learning experience. Now it is time to go back to work and take with us what we have learnt here, apply the lessons from this good practice and continue to learn collectively how to create innovative solutions to housing issues.