



Community-led housing in the UK: Learning from Black British and migrant histories

Claude Hendrickson

Leeds West Indian Centre Charitable Trust
EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) advisor
People Powered Homes Leeds

Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia

Lancaster University

Abstract

How might Collaborative Housing be a space that creates support and opportunities for precarious migrants, or refugees? Where examples or initiatives do exist, what kinds of challenges, barriers and- indeed- opportunities may there be for developing stronger links? This conversation is an edited summary of a video interview between Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia and Claude Hendrickson, as part of the Migration and Collaborative Housing (MICOLL) project. Speaking about his life's work in the community-led sector in Leeds in particular, Claude shows us how there are cycles to the migrant story that are repeating themselves today in the UK, but also opening towards more hopeful spaces of opportunity. Tracing the movement from the riots of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the first Black Housing Associations to the Community Self Build Agency and, more recently, Community Housing hubs, his experience shows how community housing work across the UK is slowly moving towards more intersectional approaches that can, in many cases, challenge mainstream views towards migrants.

Keywords

Collaborative housing, migration, refugees, cohousing, housing histories, construction skills, race

Claude Hendrickson was born of Nevisian parents in Leeds in 1960 and has lived all his life in the Chapeltown Area of Leeds. He has been actively involved professionally or voluntarily in his community since he was 14 in projects involving regeneration, housing and construction, education, youth clubs, youth mentoring, and NVQ (national Vocational Qualification) Training. **Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia** is a sociologist and urban researcher who focuses on the home as a critical realm of inquiry where historical desires, everyday life and future aspirations intersect. She has long-standing research interests in how collaborative housing movements – and the ideologies and practices embedded in them- may be offering micro-examples of how to reorganize social relations through citizen-led urban housing development and, in this way, potentially be offering an anti-crisis economic, political and social orientation and practice. **Contact:** hopperuk@me.com
m.fernandez@lancaster.ac.uk

Melissa's Introduction

How might Collaborative Housing (hereafter, CH) be a space that creates support and opportunities for precarious migrants, or refugees? Where examples or initiatives *do* exist, what kinds of challenges, barriers and- indeed- opportunities may there be for developing stronger links? This piece is a summary of a recorded video interview that took place at the Leeds West Indian Centre in June 2022 between Melissa and Claude, as part of the Migration and Collaborative Housing (MICOLL) project, jointly funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and JPI Urban Europe. Our talk (edited down in the excerpt below) was part of a larger set of expansive conversations Melissa held with individuals and groups in both Leeds and London associated with the Community-Led Housing sector. In all these conversations, the purpose was to gather a range of perspectives and experiences from users and practitioners from the UK CH world as a way to begin to capture some of the links (existing, or possible) between CH and recent migrants or refugees.

Claude's experience- which is the voice leading this excerpt- is significant because like so many others of the UK's Windrush Generation, which refers to children of Commonwealth citizens from Caribbean countries arriving in the UK between 1948 and 1971, his is a personal journey that involves migratory histories and attendant discriminations in housing, employment and beyond, simply due to that status. These personal histories are inextricably connected and should form an integral part of the way policies and practices of housing, settlement and migration are conceived and addressed. Through his life's work in the community-led sector in particular, Claude shows us how there are cycles to the migrant story that are repeating themselves today, but also opening towards more hopeful spaces of opportunity. Tracing the movement from the riots of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the first Black Housing Associations to the Community Self Build Agency and, more recently, Community Housing hubs, his experience shows how community housing work across the UK is slowly moving towards more intersectional approaches that can, in many cases, challenge mainstream views towards migrants.

Claude's journey into community-led housing

Melissa Fernandez Arrigoitia: This project is interested in how collaborative housing might be a space with or for migrants, with a particular focus on refugees. I'm looking at how different forms of community-led housing - and I'm not limiting myself to a co-operative or cohousing but all the range of possible community-led housing typologies - could offer more favourable conditions to recent migrants or refugees than they do in the regular housing market; it could be housing, but it might also be something else like a social infrastructure that can provide a form of support, a space that enables meetings or trainings or meals.... It doesn't have to necessarily be a housing unit, although it could be. Community-led housing is community *and* it's housing. So, to begin, you're obviously very grounded in this community in Chapeltown and this is where you've developed your life. Can you tell us a bit about yourself, and your journey with community housing? Was that a part of your life when you were young? Or is that something you came to later on?

Claude Hendrickson: My name is Claude Hendrickson and I'm an accredited community-led housing advisor. I am also a Community Land Trust (CLT) ambassador. I've been active in my community since I was about 14 in Chapeltown, Leeds - for over 40 years. I'm of the first generation of young people that was born here. My mother came here in 1958 from St Kitts and Nevis in the Caribbean, part of the Leeward Islands, and I was born in 1960 so I'm of that, the first of that Windrush generation children. So we've had to tackle all the issues that come with a settling group of people in the UK. And housing is obviously one of the issues we had to tackle, education, employment, training, policing, the community, health services, activities to the community...all of them issues over the years, health and wellbeing. We've had to tackle all of them.

Housing is central. So yes in the 1960s living in England, one of the first things I think I would say became evident to me is **postal discrimination**. Areas of the country and areas of the city that had been discriminated against postally. And we lived in the time when there were no blacks, no Irish, no dogs. Our parents came to England and they were knocking on doors and they were shutting doors saying, 'no rooms here'. So our parents struggled in the '60s with housing. I remember when I was a young child moving nearly every six months. You could go to school and come home and your mum say, 'ah well we're moving, we're packing your bags and you're moving again'. So my experience was quite strange.

We lived in streets where there was lots of dereliction, where the house next door might be derelict. Nobody lives in it because when the migrating people moved into a house the indigenous people moved out. You know, they left you. And so you was always chasing good housing and you were getting the worst housing. But it actually left a window, on reflection, to start building a community. So my mother could tell a friend, 'oh, the house next door or the room next door is free, come and try and rent that room.'

And my experience was that a lot of the menfolk that came from the Caribbean, they had construction skills because if you live in the Caribbean or Africa or them kind of so called 'developing countries', no matter what you did as a vocation, occupation, **you had to help in the building of your house**. And what happened for me was a lot of the men that came from the Caribbean were joiners, plumbers, painters and decorators, builders. But in Britain they couldn't, even though there was a house there, it was derelict, they couldn't go in there and fix it up, which was a kind of crazy situation where they had the skills as migrants. They came here as tradesmen, but they couldn't use them skills. They had to go and work on the buses, or they had to go and work in iron-making foundries, furnace foundries. It would have been easier to have said to our parents, 'There's that house, it's in disrepair, fix it yourself and you can live there rent free for a period of time'. That would have been a better option as I grew up. As I got older and we moved around, I lived in some terrible housing up until I was 11 years old. This was the first time as a child in England I had a proper house with a bath and upstairs and downstairs - it was the first time I had a bedroom where I just shared with my brother. We'd been living up until then as a family like six of us living in one bedroom. So housing has been fundamental to empowering people of a sense of being happy. When you've got a house

you can make it a home. And no matter what's going on outside of the house you've got that safe haven. So, yeah, that was my first experience of housing.

And then after the riots of 1975 in the UK, that was when my generation was coming of age. At '75 I was 15 years old. Up and down England- in London, in Birmingham and in Manchester- there were social uprisings because of negative policing. We were getting herded by the police and treated really bad. And by '81 there had been mass uprisings. People were looking for equality, you know an equal right, an equal right for your children to go to school, an equal right for your children to get a good education, **an equal right to get a good house**. And that was the time when the government decided to create Section 11 which was a funding stream of European money.

At that same time they created **black housing associations** around the country, because one of the biggest issues amongst the migrating people of that time was housing. Housing became the beacon for unifying people, black housing associations started building housing where black people would get the first choice of refusal which gave you a chance to start building communities and, you know, having proper neighbours. So black housing associations were going to deliver affordable housing, social housing and, with that, the promise that when they were building these houses, that the black men, the ethnic minority men, would get jobs.

But when you looked on the building sites there were no men of colour, there was no people of colour, there was **no migrants on the building sites** which actually was probably the first moment when I felt something is really not right here and I want to be involved in changing the narrative. And that's when I kind of went on this journey, saying, 'Well, if amongst the black people, black men, there's high unemployment and there's high dereliction of houses and you're going to build new houses, doesn't it make sense to train these people to help you build these houses?' That was part of a catalyst that got me moving.

I'd been involved in campaigning about inequalities of police brutality and other things but then what I saw a programme on TV about a project in Bristol where a group of unemployed young black men had built a block of flats and they were going to get them. That became my inspiration; that's when that light was turned on for me about, '**Could I be involved in changing the narrative that black men were lazy** or the migrant men were lazy, didn't want to work?' And you've got to remember, the building site is probably one of the most dangerous places you can be. Cause things drop on you. So, when you're dealing with racism on a building site, very dangerous for the migrating people.

So that's how my journey started into community-led housing - I wanted to take these unemployed men, give them the skills that they could fix these houses and then live in them, or other people could live in them. It didn't seem like rocket science to me, it looked really logical. So I put together a group of unemployed young men, myself included. We managed to access the funding. It took us, four, five years of lobbying, arguing, jumping over hurdles to get it. But March the 23rd 1993 we laid our first brick on site and 18 months later we had laid 92,000 bricks, 52,000 blocks, 8,000 roof tiles, and we built 7-, 12

sorry, 12 houses, one for each of the members of the group. So we completed them in the back end of 1994, early 1995. They are in the Ravenscar area of Leeds which is up round Hay Road in a predominantly white, quite a conservative area. We got a lot of resistance when we was building them as well, but I think everybody became very proud of what we achieved.

And then my journey went on further because then I became a member of the Community Self Build agency which was a group that had set themselves up to be the voice of community self-build. And the Community Self Build Agency we had groups in the North of England, Sunderland, Newcastle, Wallsend. We had groups in Manchester, Liverpool, we had groups in Bristol, we had groups in London, Brighton. We had groups all over that was under the umbrella of the **Community Self Build Agency**. And yeah that was a good time. We were lobbying, banging the drum. I personally have been banging the drum for community-led housing for over 20 years on my own as a lone person because the community-led housing sector is really predominantly educated middle-class white people. They're the ones that know about it. Poor white people that I grew up with in the postally discriminated communities that I grew up with, they didn't know about it, they also were living in dereliction so when I finished frontline, my initial idea was to go back to these poor white areas and help them. That was my dream, because I grew up with these guys. Even though I was African Caribbean I grew up with English kids, Scottish kids, Irish kids. I went to school with them and I could see them living in dereliction and I was like, 'Well, I can help them' but I was told by somebody in the Local Authority, that's not my responsibility you know, 'you've been lucky'. He really took the wind out of my sail.

But then I had these people in London that were setting up the Community Self Build Agency. And we went on to do a number of self-build projects in Bristol that were for ex-military men because they were homeless, they'd become homeless. And we started a project specifically aimed at veterans that was sleeping on the streets in Bristol and we did a number of projects like that and they kept that drum going. And then I was working back in the community, working with young people. And then I went and worked for the College of Building trying to keep vocation and construction skills on the agenda and give the opportunity to females and give the opportunity to migrating children. And with that I've moved on over the years to becoming a community-led advisor.

Migration

Claude Hendrickson: One of the first things I wanted to do was tackle migration cause we have a lot of projects in Leeds that are dealing with people that are homeless and undocumented. Because they don't have documentation in the UK they can't get jobs or housing. So it was that we've got a project called RETAS. I'm part of their network, I'm part of the Refugees' Movement Network and Homelessness group where we're looking at how we can empower migrating people. I'm working with a number of agencies that work with people, some documented, some undocumented to how they can be involved

in helping solve their housing problem. It's very hard because a lady might be documented but her husband's not documented and because he's not documented he can't get into meaningful employment. In fact he can't even get meaningful accommodation. So on the back of her accommodation he has accommodation but he can't get work. But because England has come out of Brexit...So there's a lot of fear going on and there's a lot of uncertainty. But I'm going to keep banging away with that because like I said, Britain complains that it needs more construction workers. It needs more people with skills and lots of these migrating people have got them skills. So why are we not tying the skills up with our need and stop persecuting them? Because you know people don't- I often say this, people don't leave where they live to travel and walk and risk their life to come somewhere else for fun. They do it because there is a need, there is a change in the situation where they've lived. So with community-led housing, that's where it's taken me now.

Melissa Fernandez Arrigoitia: There's a linking factor, then, that seems to connect everything that has to do with the housing dereliction and the construction skills, or work. Through this project I'm finding the general and historic disconnection between on the one hand the migration policies, attitudes towards migrants, the currently hostile environment and the housing crisis, problems, construction deficiencies that operate in silos. Two kinds of policy environments that generally don't connect except through these temporary accommodation programmes that are very piecemeal and not very well thought out.

Claude Hendrickson: It's not people centred. It's housing unit centred, it's about, I mean in Leeds for example, they have a waiting list of something like 23,000 people. And then they have **empty houses**. They may have 4, 5,000 empty houses stood there doing nothing. And they may have certain parts of the area sitting derelict. And then they've got new building sites happening. And they've got all these people putting them into detention centres...

Melissa Fernandez Arrigoitia: Enormously substandard, inhumane conditions...

Claude Hendrickson: and it's crazy - they're people. They haven't migrated to end up in a detention centre because they're happy about it, you know. They've migrated because of issues around climate change, issues around war, issues around bad government. Cos you know that's why they've migrated.

And remember England or the United Kingdom, when our parents came here there were already Eastern Europeans. The Polish, the Yugoslavians, the Serbians, the Latvians. They were already here. They'd already helped Britain rebuild after the Second World War. Now and then time had come and they started returning home. And then with the breakdown of Europe some of them have come back. And the way they've been treated. But I can take you around in Leeds and you'll find Polish clubs, Latvian clubs, Serbian clubs. So that shows the evidence that they were here before. And they contributed to rebuilding this country. But now they're migrants this time round. And I'm seeing that

now with Caribbean people and people from Africa...the way they're treated on the other side is inhumane, and I struggle to deal with it.

A movement, and hope

Claude Hendrickson: One of my greatest findings in the last two years was that the Community Land Trust comes out of the Civil Rights Movement of America. So the Black Panthers, the Malcolm X's, the Civil Rights Movement in America is where the Community Land Trust Network, where the strategy came from. It came to Europe through Denmark and through Sweden and through Europe and then, it's come to England. So when I found out it was very enlightening and very heartening for me to know that actually **this thing I'm part of actually comes out of the movement of people that I'm from.**

Melissa Fernandez Arrigoitia: Right. Because there's a historic struggle for home and homemaking and belonging through the people, through community that has not been given any kind of real-

Claude Hendrickson: Opportunity.

Melissa Fernandez Arrigoitia: - government, institutional, infrastructural support, yes. So, just having to take that power into the community. In this long time that you've been involved in different ways with community-led housing, what do you see as similar and what do you see as different? What things have changed in the sector and what do you feel is the same? I'm thinking about challenges and opportunities to making it happen. You said the sector as a recognised sector is predominantly white and middle-class, the one that gets recognised.

Claude Hendrickson: The biggest thing is that all of the different strands of community-led housing were living in silos. What has been amazing for me is what the Community Housing Fund under the auspice of the Community Land Trust Network has done. It has created these 26, 27 hubs that are umbrellaed by it and within that 26, 27 hubs, some might be doing cohousing, some might be doing cooperative, some might be doing self-build but it's under the umbrella and they appreciate speaking together as a movement.

This training of people to become community-led housing advisors, I think that's fantastic. I think they have something like 130, 540 accredited advisors across the UK, and they're still training more. The negative is still that it is still a predominantly educated, white middle-class network. What I do accept is that they are willing to listen, they're willing to open their doors, they're being more open, they're trying to share good practice. But, it's still the same kinds of people. Some people like the people that are involved to look and think like them, still kind of educated, academically middle-classed white people. But I have to be honest, based on my experience of the last 20 years, there's some good people in there that are trying to make it more inclusive. You know, one of the things that's missing within the network which I'm working on with them is an equality, diversity and inclusion policy. **Every single organisation, every single group should have an**

equality, inclusion and diversity policy to ensure, not just about race, about women fleeing domestic violence, about people with disability, about LGBTQ people. That's what I want to see change. **Don't just think about the sector as how many units you can build but think more about the people and think about how we can give better opportunity to people.** And let's look at their skills and let's look at what they bring to the table.

The house next door to where you live may be empty and you think, 'let me go in there and sleep and you'd be arrested, you'd be put into prison, da da da, sent to a detention centre'

Melissa Fernandez Arrigoitia: Because they're not offering the possibility of like you said, to take it into your own hands, or the opportunity to self-build. Neither of those options is there because you can't work.

Claude Hendrickson: Yeah, to give you a couple of tins of paint and say, 'go here and paint these houses make them liveable'.

Melissa Fernandez Arrigoitia: While you wait. It's something rather than criminalising you and you being homeless.

Claude Hendrickson: You know, and I watch it now and I still feel it. So yeah equality, diversity and inclusion.

You know, just in West Yorkshire they need to build 120,000 houses over the next ten years. *One hundred and twenty thousand.* That means you need construction workers, you need builders, you need people that you can train. If you don't do it now, what's going to happen? The opportunity's there. Look at it as an opportunity, not as a negative, look for the positivity. If we can train some of these people they will build houses, they will be paid a wage. If they're paid a wage they will take that wage and spend it in the local shop. It's not rocket science, it's a circle.

Melissa Fernandez Arrigoitia: Thinking about migrants whether they be citizens or whether they be asylum seekers or refugees, there's a common kind of background (to what you've been describing from the Windrush generation), historic and-

Claude Hendrickson: A vicious circle.

Melissa Fernandez Arrigoitia: ...that keeps happening. With that situation and with what's been happening with community-led housing which, where you described a greater openness and desire internally for change but still within a broader housing system/market that we know is broken and problematic in lots of ways, how do you see CH offering something for migrants, for this group of people that we've been talking about?

Claude Hendrickson: I haven't forgotten where I've come from and I constantly and you know I enjoy engaging with migrant people. You know, because I know the story of my mother and coming here and remember even with the Windrush generation, we were actually citizens, were treated like migrants, you know. So I've had that experience and I

understand it and I don't want, I speak to my children about it, I don't want going forward to see that happen.

I think the community-led housing sector can look at issues like homelessness, look at issues like ex-offenders, cos these are not massive numbers, they're small numbers in society. And I think even the problem around migrants and housing, I think the community-led sector is in a better position to look at and tackle them than mainstream housing. I think we're in a better place. Let the community-led sector look at that issue and maybe look at temporary housing that we could give people for five years. But the government needs to then ringfence money. So I think, and I'm advocating for maybe 5 to 10% of the annual housing budget to go to community-led housing so that the sector can look at these issues and how it tackles them. And at local authority level the same thing. 5 to 10% of housing budgets here. Because the sector is small enough and we can have the personal link as we're not great big Housing Associations or great big Local Authorities. I think we can look at them specialist things and we can tackle them. And we can utilise the people you know, to do the building, to do the decorating, to do the maintenance. Because the reality of it is that migrants in the UK make up less than 15% of the population. We're not the majority. They are using a smokescreen to convince the majority that they're in a bad place, but they're not. We are not the big problem but migration is always used by government as a smokescreen to keep its own people at bay.