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Published online: 08 Mar 2021.

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A sense of legitimacy in low-impact developments: experiences and perspectives of communities in South-West England

Emma Griffin, Katie McClymont and Adam Sheppard

University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

ABSTRACT

Informality in the global North has been largely overlooked in literature to date (Devlin, 2018). Unlike the global South, the role of informal practices in northern countries are under-represented in both theory and practice. Despite this, informality has a long and established role in housing provision outside of the global South. However, contradictions in what is perceived as legitimate and illicit or unlawful, compounds barriers between planners, policy makers and people living in informal ways. This article draws on a two-year research project that engaged with people living informally to better understand their relationship with the planning system. Grounded in real life experiences, this article engages with questions around how and if informality could be better supported in planning policy, as a space for innovative, flexible and adaptive approaches to housing production. In so doing, it challenges the way housing is conceptualised in most mainstream global North policy and academic discourse. Finally, the article sets out how informality in the highly regulated English countryside provides a useful lens through which to develop a more nuanced debate on the role of informality in wider planning practice.

Introduction

This article explores ideas of informality in housing in the global North through a study of people both living 'off-grid' and campaigning for alternatives to standard models of development as experienced through planning in England.

In a highly regulated, highly developed market economy, 'informality' in housing suggests something actively countercultural or oppositional. This

article challenges this assumption in two ways. First, whilst people living in informal ways may hold different values to mainstream models, an unwillingness to engage with and work alongside mainstream models should not be assumed. Second, that assuming informality is always motivated by countercultural values, overlooks informality of need, borne from systemic absence or failure of state provision.

Literature on informality in the global South provides a more developed discussion on this point (Acuto et al., 2019; Devlin, 2018). It questions what 'informal' housing *means*, both in the provision of accommodation and for our understandings of ways of life legitimated by the planning system. This speaks to debates about the nature of 'home' ranging from architecture (Després, 1991; Sixsmith, 1986) to cultural geography (Blunt, 2005; Blunt & Dowling, 2006). Although our focus is on housing as built form – particularly in relation to the planning construct as a determinant of formality – 'the complex entanglements of nature and culture, and of human and nonhuman agency, in shaping the domestic sphere' (Blunt, 2005, p. 512) cannot be avoided. Low-impact housing in England not only refers to the building materials used in construction but also to the lifestyle choices of its inhabitants.

In defining 'informal', legal and cultural assumptions are blurred and sometimes in conflict. Devlin (2018, p. 122) defines informality as breaking rules, either 'for the purpose of convenience, entertainment, efficiency or in service to a specific ideological project' or 'as practices undertaken by lower-income residents (…) in order to fulfil basic needs like income generation or housing'. We use the term 'informal' to describe places and ways of living which break rules and norms associated with the majority of housing developments in England.

It is important to distinguish between the language of 'informal' and 'illegitimate' through the lens of the English planning system wherein there are two important dynamics. The first is whether a form of development is ultimately authorised via 'planning permission' either from the local authority (municipality), Development Order (Permitted Development for example) or via an appeal to the national level of governance. Within the English context the pertinent matter is not one of *legality*, but rather whether development is *authorised,* confirming legitimacy via acceptance by the state (McClymont & Sheppard, 2020).

The second dynamic in parallel is the definition of *acceptability* via the planning policy construct. Here, forms of development are defined as acceptable in principle, acceptable by exceptional allowance in more restricted contexts, or beyond the provisions of policy. In the case of the latter the relatively unusual arrangements of England's discretionary planning system become critical; it remains possible to secure planning

permission when a matter is contrary to policy on the basis of an 'other material consideration'; ergo, a development may secure planning permission, and achieve this form of legitimacy, yet otherwise be considered unacceptable when specifically considered against the provisions of planning policy. It is within this space that the discussion in this article is primarily focused; forms of development that may have gained legitimacy via planning permission, but can be considered 'informal' by falling outside of the rules (and presented forms of acceptability) within planning policy. They break the 'rules' (Devlin, 2018) of planning policy, yet are – or become – authorised and legitimised development.

In practice this breaking of 'rules' presents in different forms, but this article focuses upon a form of development where policy conformity challenges are derived from areas such as locational characteristics, permanency and the characteristics of the built form and lifestyle.

The provisions of planning policy within England are inherently restrictive outside of settlements and within the 'open countryside', with national planning policy enabling only a limited and defined number of exceptions (Paragraph 79, NPPF) (Ministry of Housing, 2019). Low-Impact Development (LID), in England is not provided for, or even acknowledged in this policy, or via local policy provision in most instances (although a small number of exceptions do exist in some localities)[1]. LID has a nonconforming character, and is in countenance to the formal and policy/rule conforming compliance and acceptance of the majority of mainstream housing development.

We use informal here to refer to the LIDs investigated in this project as they represent an alternative way of both 'doing' housing development and conceptualising what housing is in the context of both socially assumed and stated (by planning policy) concepts of acceptability. We adopt Fairlie's definition of LID, set out in Pickerill and Maxey's book:

> LID is development which, by virtue of its low or benign environmental impact, may be allowed in locations where conventional development is not permitted (2009a, p. 1)

Continuing to discuss the achievements of, and scope for, LID reinforces Pickerill and Maxey's (ibid) argument that the LID can deliver genuinely sustainable development within short time-frames and affordably.

This article first turns to notions of informality in housing in Europe and the global North more widely. Drawing on Colin Ward's (1983) work on housing, and in particular his claim that UK housing remains divided in a 'crude duopoly' between market and state, this article discusses how informal ways of housing fit with this. Although some housing organisations and associations may rightly claim that they are not state or market, Ward's distinction remains useful for the basis of this article. In the majority of policy making and planning, there remain two types of housing: that delivered

for the market, and that subsidised and supported by another organisation. Neither of these models directly conceive of the self-provision of housing nor readily encompass inhabitants' roles in the process of housing. Both market and state (or other provider), Ward claims, do not see the importance of tenant control in housing and hence fail to achieve socially viable solutions because of *the removal of agency*. The importance of this is not something that is readily acknowledged in understandings of informality or conformity in planning for housing in England.

Drawing on research gathered during semistructured interviews with people living 'informally' in rural settings and working to promote alternative lifestyles, this article presents the experiences of people seeking third ways to the market-state binary. Two interlinked areas of interest are presented. The first explores the way Low-Impact Developers (LID-ers) relate to the planning system, highlighting tensions in attempting to categorise ways of living as informal or formal, and legitimate or illicit. This article argues that in practice these oppositional positions are less clearly defined. Planning permission may confer legitimacy (McClymont & Sheppard, 2020) to an 'informal' form of development that is not in accordance with planning policy rules, but in not conforming to these rules it can be argued to carry an informality and lack of acceptance not associated with mainstream housing development. This complicates definitions of formality and of housing, and – as seen in the second area – relates to the ways in which LID-ers frame approaches to housing themselves. This demonstrates an under-researched conceptual gulf between life as lived and life as regulated, linking back to wider debates about the notion of home and its relationship to housing. This article identifies how LID-ers construct a different sense of legitimacy through alternative, yet not necessarily countercultural, conceptualisations.

Informal housing: an overview

Literature on informal housing in the global North is still in its infancy and largely undeveloped compared to equivalent discourse related to the global South (Devlin, 2018; Iveson, 2013). A small collection of recent literature problematises the tendency in northern scholarship towards dualistic conceptualisations of informal–formal practices (Acuto et al., 2019; Devlin, 2018). Acuto et al. (2019) argue how binary conceptualisations of formal–informal lead to the 'othering' of innovative housing practices. Rather, informality may provide insights, which can inform planning policy rule approaches and resultant planning practice. Discussing the 'grey zone' of informality that may demonstrate 'compliance with the law and unauthorised tactics', Acuto et al. (2019, p. 483) use the example of co-working

spaces to describe informality 'as a form of organisation of everyday life, rather than a lack thereof'.

Bulkeley et al. (2019) refer to opportunities to learn from grassroots urban innovation in the Urban Living Laboratory (ULL) typology where experimentation is an important condition within an improving city. Both Harvey (2012) and Hou (2010) highlight how insurgent and guerrilla urbanism can re-define and re-make cities. Similarly, Pagano (2013, p. 341) discusses how DIY urbanism creates '"spaces of insurgent citizenship," countering an orientation toward the state as the only legitimate avenue for activities of citizenship'. In the UK, and internationally, there is a growing community-led housing (CLH) movement, which has found ways to create more inclusive housing (Bunce, 2016; Jarvis, 2015; Moore, 2014; Thompson, 2015). Yet there are fewer CLH examples that are inclusive of people with very limited funds or those in significant housing need. Literature on DIY urbanism provides a valuable lens for re-imagining housing futures, however, we argue that insurgent forms of rural citizenship can significantly contribute to discussions on innovative and inclusive housing.

Southern literature has come further in understanding the role of informality in shaping formal systems. Canclini's (2019) ethnographic account of informality in Mexico City provides insight into urban processes that have a key role in shaping the city but are less well understood. Acuto et al. (2019, p. 476) claim that informal practices give a platform for 'key and emerging voices in urban studies', whilst Devlin (2018, p. 581) argues that informality in the global South offers 'a potential source of progressive urban politics while allowing informal actors to define their own political subjectivities for themselves'. Similarly, in examining the opportunities for activist planners of intentional communities to inform planning theory, Sager (2018, p. 456) highlights how '[t]he combination of hybridity and nonconformity is the reason why planning by intentional communities can contribute something new to planning theory'.

In order for informal practices in the global North to inform planning policy and practice we need to better understand the nature and form that informality takes. Devlin (2018, p. 571) calls for a more nuanced understanding of the motivations behind informality and conceptual distinctions between 'the "informality of need" and the "informality of desire"'. Devlin identifies the former as a response to the failure of the state to provide necessary provisions, whilst the latter emerges from the creative or ideological motivations of more middle- and upper-class residents. This is a useful distinction to draw, and conceptualisations of need in southern scholarship have much to contribute to discussion of informality associated with inequality in the global North. However, we consider that the either/or categorisation may mask certain judgements about definitions of 'need' or

'desire' in the global North. Basic requirements on offer may serve to provide for a state definition of need, including shelter and sanitation. However, other requirements such as community, belonging or the valuing of caring responsibilities may be viewed as needs by some and desires by others. This is not to diminish the importance of acknowledging that informal housing is often undertaken out of pure need for basic necessities, and in situations where there is no other choice, and that this is not the same as having some other options and rejecting them as morally or emotionally unacceptable. However, in the context of the global North, informal housing practices offer a useful insight into reframing certain assumptions of necessity.

The motivations of citizens engaged in informal practices should be understood in relation to the value judgements constructed through policy making. As discussed by Acuto et al. (2019), to regulate or formalise informal practices gives a superiority to 'formal' that diminishes the scope for informal practices to be framed as innovative or adaptive spaces for advancing existing systems. There is an inherent tension here between becoming 'part of the system' – and therefore, losing some of the freedoms needed to creatively unsettle or transgress standard assumptions, or remaining on the 'outside' – and lacking the legitimacy to be taken seriously.

Exploring the sense of legitimacy within informal housing in the global North highlights notable distinctions between urban and rural contexts. There is significantly less evidence of people having found mechanisms to live informally alongside dominant systems in an urban context. Importantly, without productive agricultural land against which to claim a tie, there is little opportunity to create any outward sense of legitimacy. Nevertheless, cities in the global North have seen a rise in informal housing provision, partly in response to systemic failures to provide the type of homes people want or need. Recent attention has been given to the Beds in Sheds phenomenon (Ministry of Housing, Communities and local Government, 2015), where landlords illegally rent sheds or garages at less than market rates to economically marginalised and-or migrant people. Numbers of people van-dwelling has also increased in cities such as Bristol, UK (Bristol City Council, 2018). The increase in Property Guardianship Schemes, where individuals – often young working professionals – take on temporary guardianship of reduced rent property in exchange for live-in security, demonstrates the growth of people who cannot afford to live conventionally in the cities they work in.

Beds in sheds, van-dwelling and Property Guardianship Schemes, are all forms of urban informality, yet the distribution of power within these different informalities vary significantly. Housing practices in the global North remain dominated by a logic that prioritises the legitimacy of property ownership over tackling housing inequality. Therefore, property guardianship

schemes grow as a form of legitimised housing precarity in the UK whilst squatting and van-dwelling are largely curtailed through legislative processes. Formality in this example does not convey any benefits to the occupiers. Myopic conceptualisations of formal–informal, legal–illegal, legitimate–illegitimate arguably fail to move beyond neoliberal or market driven lenses. Simplifying these to binary concepts accords greater conceptual and legal value to property ownership than the human need for shelter.

In drawing distinctions between the global North and South, Devlin (2018, p. 581) discusses how informality in the South 'allows planners to conceptualise needs-based informal practice as a loosely articulated, politically indeterminate, functionally imperfect, yet valid form of city-building from below'. In the global North, and particularly in England, strict regulation over where can and cannot be developed leads to a lack of marginal land of low economic value for more grassroots city-building to take place. Conceptualisations of informality in the global South are often more nuanced and less binary, with informal and formal dwellings co-existing and informal becoming formalised and vice-versa (Dovey et al., 2020). In this sense LIDs share some similarities, moving between informal (without permission) and formal (with a form of permission). We believe this makes discussions on rural LID pertinent to wider, including urban, agendas to re-frame and disrupt relationships between informality and legitimacy in the global North.

Discourses on informal ways of living in the global North commonly lack engagement with the associated conceptual and theoretical frameworks (Iveson, 2013). These include conditions such as austerity and the extreme monetisation of housing, but also concepts of choice, autonomy and political ideologies that encourage people to seek out informal housing options. Reducing the debate on formal–informal practices to one of legality risks overlooking important debates on how these practices feed into wider issues of equitability and the role of human agency.

Influenced by the work of Hardy and Ward (1984), Bower (2017, p. 80) argues how systems of the global North are no longer heralded as best practice. Bower draws on the historical UK Plotlands movement to help demonstrate the 'positive potential of informal and alternative housing models in the Westernized world'. Characterised as informal and temporary housing found on marginal land around England in the interwar period, Bower describes the Plotlands movement as:

> a practical, informal and unconsciously anarchistic response by the working classes to the emerging intersection of capitalist economics and urbanization theory (Ward cited in Bower, 2017, p.82)

However, Plotlander housing has largely been demolished and replaced with more conventional formal housing or retrospectively legitimised and

formalised by the State. It must also be recognised that the regulatory and planning policy environment was very different prior to the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, with the countryside, to a certain extent, 'beyond' the scope and reach of the planning system. This, therefore, changes the context within which the phenomenon manifested itself, and the relationship with concepts of legitimacy and formality

Transcending the regulatory contextual differences however, Bower (2017, p. 96) argues how neoliberal development exacerbates inequality, claiming that 'the growth of the post-colonial global South appears to be shattering the illusion of Western projection of development and social equality being interconnected'. Whilst Western models of home ownership work for people with resources to enter into property ownership, people lacking financial resources remain in precarious housing conditions. Standard models of growth and development do not bring about fairness or greater benefits for the whole population than informal housing may.

There have been some attempts at problematising the informal–formal divide that informs governance practices, cultural divides and ways of belonging in physical spaces. McFarlane and Waibel (2012) highlight how informal–formal relations may be presented in a range of different ways, spatially, organisationally and governmentally, or as something which is negotiable. However, any notions of informal housing as a socially acceptable response to the housing crisis in the UK and which break the rules of the defined policy context remain far from political acceptability. The co-operative housing movement is perhaps an exception to the previous statement given its well-established history across much of Europe and the West. However, compared to other European countries, the UK co-operative sector is small, making up just '0.6% of the UK's housing supply' (Bliss, 2009, p. 5).

To help conceptualise the issues at stake, which are exacerbated by this 'formal–informal' dichotomy, this article turns to Colin Ward's writing on housing.

Informality as undermining the 'crude duopoly'

Colin Ward remains an important yet somewhat overlooked thinker in planning and housing studies (see Bower, 2017; Wilkin & Boudeau, 2015 as notable exceptions). His writing on anarchy and citizen-led development demonstrates different ways of theorising the relationship between the state and market in contemporary settings, something that challenges dualistic thinking and the attendant categories of agency, 'formality' and legitimacy that this brings with it (Ward, 1976, 1983). Specifically, this section outlines how the 'crude duopoly' of the state (with the caveats discussed

above) or the market as the only legitimate means of housing provision is problematic in terms of how it defines housing (as a product not an action, following Turner, 1972), and therefore, the scope allotted to individuals or small collectives in taking action to combat the housing crisis. These reflect Ward's views on human needs for the construction of a good society: 'people valued the things they had taken a hand in building, running and maintaining themselves' (Wilkin & Boudeau, 2015, p. 1328). Without real power, and therefore, the control of resources, being in the hands of the users (the 'housers' in this context) housing remains something that is bought or 'given' as a benefit entitlement, formal housing remains a product. Housing conceived of and constructed otherwise is, therefore, somehow outside of the 'normal' system and its stated rules; or informal. Ward argues that this is an unhelpful misapprehension of the potential of people to solve their own housing needs. He states:

> there are vast numbers of people whose faces or situations don't fit in either the director of housing's office or the building society office, and are simply victims of the crude duopoly of housing which, without intending to, we have created (Ward, 1976, p. 206)

The ability of people as co-producers in housing solutions is overshadowed by assumptions that housing is a product provided by the market or the state. This means that those who do not have the capital or income, nor the quantifiable need and entitlement to meet the requirements of social housing (whether met by the state or a housing association) will be difficult to house and in turn exacerbate the current crisis. This duopoly is based upon assumptions founded on consumerist ontologies, ones in which atomised individuals express their (rational) desires through consumer choices:

> the assumption in the kind of welfare capitalist society we live in, is that the magic of the market will satisfy most ordinary human needs, and that the government-administered welfare bureaucracies will meet the rest. The ideology of the passive consumer is assumed in both sectors (Ward, 1983, p. 8)

When housing is only a product of the market (with varying levels of state welfare 'safety nets' for those without the means to be effective consumers), human agency is reduced to a series of (constrained) choices: it does not have the scope to co-create; to make housing a verb rather than a noun. Ward (1976, 1983) argues strongly for housing to be something done *by* rather than *to* the people; both for greater efficacy, as demonstrated in post-war squatting of former military bases, and for greater empowerment, as discussed in his history of the Plotlands movement (Hardy & Ward, 1984). Instead of waiting for action from the state or the market to meet their needs, both plotlanders and post-war squatters took housing into

their own hands. In so doing, they housed themselves rapidly and in ways which 'manifest pride and pleasure' (Ward, 1983, p. 86).

Since 1947, the right to develop land in the UK has been universally nationalised. Land is still overwhelmingly in private ownership but the permission to develop on this land has to be granted on a case-by-case basis by the local authority (municipal government) in most instances (see, Sheppard et al., 2019, for a comprehensive overview). The spaces of informal housing, or housing which sits outside of the 'crude duopoly' which current land ownership and financing systems are set up to support, is harder to envisage, let alone establish.

This article now turns to our research on LID, which offers a potential alternative to market or state provisions. Pagano (2013, p. 341) writes that 'tactics that are innovative and experimental, but have not yet gained widespread acceptance, are often still worth trying, and in some cases preserving, even if they have illegal origins'. Following this, we argue that the alternative spaces created by LID-ers provide a vital lens to examine the role of informal housing in a highly formalised planning system.

Research methods

This research draws on 12 interviews with people living 'informally' in South-West England, and people who campaign for informal housing and lifestyles to be more accepted by the (planning) system (See Table 1 for an overview of interviewees and LID communities). Participants were selected because they had been involved, either directly or in advocacy roles, in establishing their own homes beyond the state and the market. Interviews ranged from one-to-one interviews, to interviews with up to three interviewees. Interviews have been anonymised and the names of low-impact communities removed to maintain the privacy of people who contributed to this research. These methods were deliberately flexible to accommodate the different settlements and individuals who are part of the LID movement in England. As interviewers we were explicit about this being exploratory research and that we sought to gather people's opinions and experiences rather than demonstrate any particular position on the relationship between LID and the planning system. This was intended to reduce the risk of respondent bias and encourage interviewees to feel able to discuss their experiences of living both with and without planning permission.

Two important points of caveat need to be made here. First is about the definition of 'informal' – the people we interviewed were not living illegally or even illegitimately (see McClymont and Sheppard (2020) for discussion of differences between the two in the English context), with the exception of one family living without permission in a caravan at a LID. All settlements

Table 1. Description of case studies and individual interviewees.

LID case study	Description of LID	Planning permission status
Case study one	A rural, off grid community in South West England, made up of 12 homes built largely with timber that is felled and processed on site. Addition of a common house building, constructed using traditional cob construction methods, which is equipped with shared kitchen and communal facilities. The community use traditional agricultural practices to produce the majority of their food as well as produce to sell at local shops/markets.	Temporary (10 year) planning permission achieved retrospectively. Intention to apply for full permission in coming years. Temporary permission for 12 dwellings, without foundations, built of natural materials.
Case study two	A rural, off grid community in South West England, comprising 17 homes built from timber and recycled materials. Each home has a self-contained kitchen and bathroom. There is some shared outdoor spaces. Whilst community members do some individual and communal maintenance of buildings and woodland the majority of residents have paid employment outside of the community.	Full planning permission was achieved retrospectively over 20 years ago for 17 low-impact individual dwellings. Planning was given without any restrictive ties.
Case study three	A low-impact co-operative in South West England with 15 permanent residents and a number of additional volunteers who live on site. The community consists of a large house and outbuildings, shared by the residents. The community is connected to some services such a water and produces the majority of its electricity. A number of residents work mainly within the community whilst others are employed outside of the community.	This community occupies a large Victorian property and outbuildings purchased by the co-operative in the 1980s. As well as a number of additional low-impact dwellings.
Case study four	A small off grid community in South West England comprising three people living in a cob house and mobile caravan. The community is an agricultural business as well as mainly	Planning permission was granted over a decade ago to erect a low-impact strawbale house that can easily be removed. The dwelling has an agricultural tie as well as being tied

(*continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

LID case study	Description of LID	Planning permission status
	living from crop yields and livestock.	specifically to the landowner. Additional members of the community live in a mobile caravan and work within the community. No formal permission has been obtained for the addition of a caravan and the residents are aware that they could be evicted at any time.
Case study five	An off grid community in South West England, practicing permaculture principles. The community hosts workshops and events and has permission for a number of additional low-impact dwelling which provide accommodation for visitors and volunteers	Full planning permission, achieved retrospectively over a decade ago, to convert four existing buildings and to erect a permanent low-impact dwellings. Permission was also granted for worker/ visitor accommodation comprising caravans and yurts.
Interviewee one	Planning consultant	
Interviewee two	Planning consultant	
Interviewee three	Campaigner for LID-ers/gypsies and travellers	

had some form of planning permission – the formal stamp of state sanction, however, their routes to achieving this vary markedly from more commonplace 'formal' developments, and the majority had begun without formal permission. Permission tended to be temporary, tied to an individual, achieved retrospectively or dependent on sustained commitment to agricultural land practices; all markers which differentiate these developments from housing delivered through the mainstream market that conforms to the rules of planning.

Research findings

The findings are presented in the following two sections. First, the relationship with planning is outlined, with a particular focus on how LID-ers experience the planning system. Second, the challenges this raises, both practically and conceptually for informal housing in the global North. This section demonstrates how informality calls for a reframing of more than just housing materials or temporality.

Low-impact development and the relationship with the planning system

> a lot of the very alternative stuff will try and do stuff within the system if they can because they want to be noticed and they want to make a change (Kate)

While the notion of informality in the global North is commonly associated with a rejection of dominant systems or rules as manifest in the planning system in particular, people interviewed as part of this research often expressed a belief that the planning system brought some benefits. Interviewees acknowledged that planning practice preserved the country-side and minimised people building individual dwellings on agricultural land. This was cited as important in tackling second home ownership or a rise in new-build dwellings for city workers. Many interviewees expressed a desire to ensure people being granted permission for rural new dwellings were committed to working with the land and engaging in sustainable practices, rather than perpetuating urban capitalist lifestyles in a rural setting.

A common theme in interviews conducted with LID-ers was a basic acceptance of the planning system and an acknowledgment of the need to find creative ways of interacting with it. One interviewee spoke of having been refused planning permission but granted it at a later date. When asked to talk about their feelings on the role of the English planning system they said:

> That (planning system) has to have its respect and at the same time our system disregards so much of what is important in life there's a whole other level of legitimacy that comes from a feeling of connectedness and moral responsibility (…) going through the planning process we had a sense of. we are justified in doing what we are doing even though it's been named as beyond legitimate (Peter)

From this statement, a sense of the importance of shared rules – as a way of managing development – can be discerned, but that these rules have become out of sync with the values required to develop in a way which is socially and environmentally beneficial. It is not a challenge to the *idea* of a planning system per se, but to the way the English system operates. There is support for the control of development in the public interest but an assumption that planning needs to re-evaluate what this looks like.

Political motivations were common amongst all of the LID-ers with whom we spoke. Many of the interviewees discussed feeling disillusioned with dominant approaches to housing and having been driven to find alternatives. A perceived failure of the political system to take care of people or the environment arose in many interviews. Many LID-ers wanted planning officers to be better informed on low-impact living, believing they had a role in the future of LID. For the LID-ers interviewed as part of this research, the motivations for their lifestyle choices were entwined with a perceived need to reduce the environmental damage associated with capitalist western lifestyles.

In examining the relationship between LID-ers and planners the majority of criticisms related to the perceived lack of awareness or understanding of

LID in practice and how to assess them appropriately. One community spoke about a planning officer being concerned at the lack of concrete foundations in their small timber and cob huts, demonstrating the assumptions which make up common understandings of formal (or legitimate) housing. Another interviewee shared their experience of trying to prove their financial viability[2] and get the planning officer to understand that self-sufficiency meant they needed significantly less income despite not meeting the standard assessment criteria of viable businesses.

An interviewee who worked for a planning consultancy specialising in supporting traveller communities and LID-ers said:

> most case officers I know have a very specific way of looking at things and that does not open up to kind of an understanding of lifestyle (Tara)

Whilst interviewees expressed a lack of understanding from planning offices, a number of people shared a belief that Planning Inspectorate[3] were more aware of the nuances of individual cases. Interviewees spoke of cases where planning inspectors had found mechanisms to grant permission even when the LID-ers had failed financial tests, demonstrating some awareness that LID-ers live lower cost and lower impact lifestyles. Most people said that whilst they found the planning system rigid and narrow in scope, there was also a significant amount of luck based on the inspector that was assigned to the case. At one LID a family lived in a caravan on a site where planning permission was tied to the original landowner despite the family carrying out the majority of the agricultural work. Although they are the future recipients of the now elderly landowner's estate, they will be required to remove all dwellings when it passes to them because of the personal nature of the existing permission. Conversely, two nearby LIDs were able to secure permanent planning permission despite having less agricultural tie to the land.

Many of the LID-ers acknowledged the benefits of maintaining a closeness to the system, and finding different ways to work within it, rather than being openly oppositional. This reflects the argument put forward by Acuto et al. (2019, p. 484) that 'not all informality has an explicit radical purpose', and that whilst informal projects may seek to challenge the status quo this does not necessarily assume an oppositional position towards more formal frameworks. Closeness to the planning system was perceived as an important factor in successfully effecting change. Some LID-ers believed that being able to demonstrate alternatives was vital in getting the planning system to recognise the value in such approaches. This is important when reflecting on the potential for spaces of informality to be expanded to a wider and more urban scale. Instances where planning inspectors chose to grant permission despite specific conditions not being met demonstrate a case-by-case willingness to reconsider notions of legitimacy.

Whilst almost all of the LIDs we visited had some form of planning permission, the majority had gained it retrospectively, in marked contrast to standard practice. The extent to which each LID had been required to fight for their permission varied significantly and was apparently not representative of their ability to make applications, their impact on the landscape or their expertise in agricultural land management. Some LIDs obtained temporary or conditional planning permission whilst others had been granted permanent permission. Yet this did not produce differences in the LID-ers' sense of legitimacy. LID-ers did not doubt the legitimacy of their projects, nor the right for a state to set some limits on development, rather the ability for planners to have the language or imagination to conceive of it before its physical existence or to grant permanent permission for a site on which the physical infrastructure may change and develop over time. This idea that the planning system lacks flexibility reflects Bower's (2017, p. 85) commentary on the elimination of space for the type of informality available before the establishment of nationalised planning controls seen in the Plotlands movement of the global North, which enabled working class people to escape urban poverty, and set up rural dwellings where they could 'live off the land'. Bower (2017, p. 97) argues how the peripheral and left-over sites that gave space for these informal approaches 'now exist only in the global South where informal land ownership and planning policies are themselves expressions of the necessity of informality to solve realworld problems'. We would argue that the LID examples presented here, as well as the community-led models of housing discussed in the introduction and literature review, do offer alternatives to the market or state, but the extent to which this is a possible option for most people in the global North remains severely curtailed. To develop this discussion further, we draw on LID-ers' vision for an alternative way of living that responds to wider political and environmental challenges.

Low-impact development: creating space for ontological difference

The dominant housing market does little to disrupt the neoliberal status quo. As Ward (1983) argues there is a lack of space for people seeking an alternative role to passive consumer of either market property or increasingly precarious state provisions. Many LID-ers in this research expressed ontological differences to what they perceived as dominant societal narratives. These ways of framing and making sense of the world offer different thinking about informality and the potential legitimacy of informal ways of being. In framing their motivations for living in a LID, one participant stated:

> Central to the philosophy of all this is that we are not actually separate from the land at all but that we are actually part of nature and it is only in how our culture has developed that we've come to these notions of ourselves as separate from the whole system (Tim)

Participants' decisions to live in LIDs were not only motivated by finding an alternative to the dominant model of passive consumer. LID-ers talked about building systems which enable them to live more cohesive lives. For many of the LIDs, the boundaries between work and home, employment and leisure were blurred. Home was not just a physical space to return to after a day of work, but a whole way of being. In one LID the residents felled wood to build their houses, grew and reared the majority of their food, governed themselves through group meetings, and developed systems of valuing work that enabled residents to retire within the community without pension provisions or property equity. Like Turner (1972) and more recently Cohen (2015) argue, housing may be seen as an ongoing process which is embedded in the inhabitant's wider life. Conceiving of housing as a verb challenges the concept of home as a finished and complete product which is consumed. It gives greater legitimacy to the processes of housing oneself beyond regulation.

There was a clear sense that the way residents connected with the land gave them a different sense of legitimacy. This was not based on seeking entitlement to live in such a way, but rather challenging, dominant systems to better recognise their ways of being in the world. Discussing how to evidence financial viability in a planning application, one LID-er spoke of the requirement to demonstrate that they would generate enough income to cover their living expense and provide future investment into the business:

> they (planners) don't really understand how cheaply people can live and build a house if they are … given the wherewithal to do it you know (Charlie)

This quote indicates that planners and policy makers could look to these small-scale informal ways of being on the land as innovative responses to the shortage of affordable housing, but are currently embedded within assumptions of 'normality' which exclude these alternatives. Discussing the plotlands developments in the UK, Bower (2017, p. 91) argues that they 'offer a critical counter-narrative to the presumptions and cultural perceptions of Westernized housing as economic investments and assets, rather than engaging with their inherent wider social relationships and potential benefits'. The same potential in informal housing can be found in our research. Instead of being marginal or 'alternative'; LID could become a learning opportunity (Bulkeley et al., 2019). When viewed as a space of innovation and experimentation, power is shifted to LID-ers and simultaneously to the alternative space that LID inhabits. The self-provision

Image 1. A self-build round house at one of the LID communities visited during this research.

of housing reflected in the LIDs inevitably disrupts assumptions of who may self-build and have active choice over their living conditions. Pickerill and Maxey (2009b, p. 1526) refer to this as a sense of creativity which comes from 'a critique of dominant hierarchies of expertise within construction and design professions' highlighting how '[t]he majority of LID structures are not designed by architects; rather, people are self-taught and share skills'. The low-cost self-built homes created in LIDs are far-removed from standard conceptualisations of self-build housing in the UK which are reserved for individuals with significant financial resources (See Images 1 and 2 for examples of LID self-build homes).

Looking at the nature of LID in the heavily regulated English countryside offers an interesting counter to the urban English context. There is a common narrative that in England urban planning policies are less constrained for development than rural ones, due to protective countrywide rural legislation set out initially in the Town and Country Planning Act (1932). The importance of protection of the countryside is still present in the NPPF and its political value/sanctity can be seen in reports such as CPRE (2018). However, this argument only reflects rural development that fits with accepted practices of agri-business, and potential urban development that fits within market or state models. Therefore, for a large number of English citizens who are unable to afford to build within the mainstream housing market, the pro-development planning environment does little to improve

Image 2. A self-build home at one of the LID communities visited during this research.

their housing prospects. Here, usual assumptions about rural versus urban living, lifestyles and developments become blurred. Some LID-ers believed the temporality of informal rural housing enabled people to live on the land in ways that would not be possible through more conventional building practice. LID-ers recognised that whilst it was often case-by-case, their connection to the land and commitment to create minimal impact on it, provided common ground that bridged what would otherwise be a significant divide between themselves and planners. Whether this emerges from a purely practical planning consideration is not yet clear. Without concrete foundations, and with time-limited permission, LID housing can be removed if necessary when the permitted time has elapsed. But a general acceptance of rural informality could also indicate something more fundamental about planning epistemology, and the ideal of rural as regulated and urban as less regulated. LID-ers share concerns about the preservation of rural land that underpin much rural planning policy, but see it as an active space rather than a backdrop to the urban which needs to be preserved inviolate.

Wider lessons from low-impact development

For informality to be welcomed into any discourse of bottom-up, genuine affordable housing, there needs to be more space for alternatives to market and state provisions. Any attempt to do this requires a shift in the way we

conceptualise housing. In order for both the LIDs discussed through our primary research and the alternative housing examples documented in the literature review to be re-framed as innovative solutions to systematic housing inequalities, we need to further disrupt the dominant narrative of housing as consumable. Rather, we argue that for people who cannot or do not want to fit with the dominant narrative, conceptualising housing as an action, as proposed by Turner (1972) and Cohen (2015), gives a greater sense of legitimacy as an alternative way of doing things. Neither LID-ers nor people living informally in cities fit within Ward's (1976) 'crude duopoly': they have not bought their residences from the housing market, nor qualified via a state sanctioned set of needs. Both the LID-ers and people living informally in urban environments experience uncertainty about their right to remain on land they occupy, although LID-ers commonly find permissive mechanisms within the planning system by maintaining a closeness to it. Spaces for informal housing in an urban context, as discussed in the introductory sections of this article below, are harder to find. CLH, goes some way in providing alternatives to the dominant market-state binary, yet many forms of urban informality, including squatting and van-dwelling, are viewed through a lens of public disruption rather than as a third way of doing housing. However, these could be supported through planning practice such as the temporary rental of disused council land, or serviced van parks. Longer-term temporary planning permission had afforded some of the LIDs the opportunity to build relationships with local residents and planners, integrating into local communities and building a sense of legitimacy, yet this opportunity is rarely provided in an urban context.

These discussions raise important questions around housing in the global North, in both theory and in practice, including the environment/scope of acceptability as defined by planning policy rules. Ward states, 'we have to change the role of the citizens from recipients to *participants*, so that they too have an active part to play in what Lethaby called the great game of town building' (Ward, 1976, p. 207). By giving greater power and freedom to people to develop their own housing, the whole notion of housing is altered; as is any sharp distinction between formality and informality. Conceptualising experimental, innovative or temporary housing as developed through active citizenship and embedded learning clearly speaks to inclusive planning practice and to the development of homes that responsively and intrinsically meet the needs of residents and communities.

Conclusions

Informal approaches to housing within the English planning system are not free from contradictions or discrepancies. Informality is an amorphous

concept especially when considered in relation to legitimacy. LID-ers inter-viewed as part of this research construct their sense of legitimacy around a connection to the land, and a wider and more dynamic understanding of housing. Those who have obtained planning permission to live in this way may have their physical developments legitimised by the State too, but their lifestyle and motivations remain a challenge to 'business as usual' and the nature of their development fall outside of the normal rules of policy in England. The LID-ers disrupt the status quo of the market-state binary by enacting a third way. Reframing housing as an action is helpful in further legitimising and acknowledging the value of such alternative approaches. The temporary nature of LIDs was often important in gaining acceptance from planners. In the highly regulated English countryside, there was agree-ment from LID-ers that it was sometimes possible to challenge the market-state binary and find alternative ways to house yourself despite a lack of clear conformity with planning policy rules. This was generally done through close links to planning, but also necessitated reinterpreting the sys-tem from within. The majority of the LIDs we visited began their projects without planning permission and under the threat of eviction. Whilst each had subsequently gained some form of planning permission for at least part of the development, some may not maintain their permission in the future. Despite this, each LID had a strong sense of legitimacy, which did not waiver when we spoke about their experiences before achieving plan-ning permission or in the future where permission may be uncertain again.

Despite some positive examples of LIDs finding ways to work alongside more formalised planning systems, it is difficult to conceive of a system in which informal housing approaches are widely welcomed and viewed as innovative responses to the inequalities associated with market-state driven property practice without a vast ontological shift amongst planners and policy makers. Whilst there were examples of projects that had successfully negotiated planning systems to gain some form of permission to remain, the LID-ers recognised that this was still partially reliant on a mixture of location and luck and that what might work for one LID may not for another (see McClymont & Sheppard, 2020) for discussion on the unsuc-cessful planning appeal by Steward Community Woodland). Whilst the research reported here focuses on the relationship between LID-ers and the planning system, there is wider discussion around the perceived logic of homeownership as something earnt over time and with significant financial burden. This inevitably feeds into perceptions of legitimacy and entitlement to feel control over a home.

LIDs contrast with informal housing approaches within urban contexts, in part because they are able to draw a particular and distinct sense of legitimacy from their relationship to the land. Urban environments in the

global North leave little space for alternatives. The marginal spaces on which large areas of informal homes are created in the global South are virtually eradicated from cities in the global North (Bower, 2017), and particularly scarce in England. Despite being heavily regulated, the language of rural informality in the global North is significantly better developed than its urban counterpart. Literature on urban informality in the global North still has a long way to develop and can draw from rural conceptualisations. Whilst it is important to recognise the diverse nature of informality (Bower, 2017; Roy, 2005), and to highlight that in the global North some people live informally due to a lack of other options available to them, dualistic thinking around informality of need and desire do not necessarily further develop these narratives. Similarly, assuming people who choose to live informally are opposed to any state sanctions over where and how people can build reduces opportunities for dialogue and reciprocal learning between citizens and state. Looking at the way LID-ers position themselves as oppositional to market and consumer driven models, whilst engaging proactively with the planning system, demonstrates the potential for informality to be part of wider conversations about solutions to land and property-based inequalities.

Notes

1. Here, we must distinguish from Wales, where national policy provision and permissive rules to exist specific to certain forms of Low Impact Development (LID)
2. Requirements for LID-ers to prove financial viability relates to paragraph 79a of the NPPF and evidencing that it is essential for people to live on site at a land based rural enterprise and that the business is viable for the foreseeable future. https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-planning-policy-framework/5-delivering-a-sufficient-supply-of-homes#para79
3. Planning Inspectorate provide advice and recommendations on issues relating to land use planning in England and Wales. For more information please see: https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/planning-inspectorate/about

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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