

Following threads and spinning a yarn in West Dorset

Over the last 15 years, I have been involved – through an organisation I co-founded called the Wessex Reinvestment Trust group – with attempts to create community-led housing initiatives in Devon, Dorset and Somerset. This activity is now led by one of our social enterprises called Wessex Community Assets.

The main focus of this work to date has been the piloting of community land trust housing initiatives. A three bed house can be built for a predictable sum – between £1500 and £1800 per square metre (depending on specifications such as the amount of insulation). However, the market price can be much greater due to the cost of land. The ideal with a community land trust is to obtain land for free or at a below market rate, to hold it in trust, and not to include the full market price of the land in the cost of housing, thus protecting affordability for perpetuity¹. This is particularly important in many parts of South West England, where second homes, holiday lets and people moving in to retire have forced market prices well beyond the reach of many households.

Much of the support work to date by Wessex Community Assets has been requested by groups of residents in smaller towns and villages, concerned that people wanting to live and work in the neighbourhood cannot afford to buy or even rent accommodation. Housing needs surveys are conducted and generally the highest need is for affordable rented accommodation. To date, Wessex has supported the development of 12 completed community land trust developments (123 houses) and is working with a further 24 communities (around 250 houses).

In the larger towns in Devon, Dorset and Somerset there are growing numbers of people wanting to move out of rental accommodation into some form of “limited equity” or “intermediate market” housing. For some, one route is through self-build, as this allows people to create “sweat equity” by providing some proportion of the labour element of the process. Another route, sometimes combined with self-build is by creating a housing co-operative.

Over the last 12 months, I have discussed with the board and associates of Wessex Community Assets that we explore the feasibility of supporting self-build and co-operative projects, particularly for young (18 – 35) individuals and families. A number of parallel processes have emerged which now make this work more possible:

- The government has announced a £60 million fund for community-led housing, £11 million of which has been allocated to Devon, Dorset and Somerset. Wessex has proposed to the 15 local authorities receiving this funding that 8% be allocated to extend current support services into a “Wessex Community Led Housing Hub”.
- In Bridport, 760 new homes will be built in the next few years at Vearse Farm, and there have been discussions about the possibility of holding the land for the 35% of affordable homes (and possibly an additional 5% self-build homes) in a community land trust.
- Again in Bridport, a Local Economic Blueprint is being prepared by a partnership of agencies, and I have been asked to co-ordinate a section looking at how greater use of local materials could be utilised in local construction.
- Dorset County Council has secured £5 million of European funding to support the “Low Carbon Economy”, and this includes an indicative allocation to support a proposal I have put forward for the development of a Timber Design and Fabrication Lab, in the Bridport area. This initiative

¹ Alternatively, resale agreements can be enforced, in order to ensure that the price for future residents is always at a lower percentage than market rents.

could support the pre-fabrication of frames and other components for self-build housing initiatives.

- I am also the Chair of Dorset Community Energy, which has raised £500,000 in community shares to implement a number of renewable energy installations on schools and community buildings, and which is now looking at new business models such as energy efficiency, PV linked to storage and bio-mass district heating schemes for new build housing.

There is then the potential for Wessex to develop a new strand of activity, supporting self-build and co-operative housing, which would be linked to the use of local materials and a design and fabrication facility offering apprenticeships and training as well as lower cost build methods.

On paper this all looks exciting and achievable, and the temptation is to begin a process of consultation, feasibility studies, business planning and fund-raising. This is what I have been doing for 30 years, with some “success”. Yet it no longer feels right. This short essay explores how I might approach the process differently, drawing inspiration from Patricia Shaw, Hannah Arendt, Tim Ingold and John Shotter. They invite me to explore complex responsive processes of relating, phenomenology, social anthropology and social constructionism. I am also interested in what contemplative practices can bring to the process of inquiry.

The “firming of form”

Tim Ingold suggests that the “hylomorphic” model, whereby a form is created in the mind then applied out in the world, needs to be replaced by an approach inspired by, amongst others, Paul Klee:

“Form is the end, death, Form-giving is life” (Klee, 1973: 269)

Ingold argues “that what Klee said of art is true of skilled practice in general, namely that it is a question not of imposing preconceived forms on inert matter but of intervening in the fields of force and currents of material wherein forms are generated. Practitioners, I contend, are wanderers, wayfarers, whose skill lies in their ability to find the grain of the world’s becoming and to follow its course while bending it to their evolving purpose.”

(Ingold 2010: 92)

The nature of “inquiry” and “methods”

How, then, do I “find the grain of the world’s becoming” in order to follow its course and begin to bend it towards the goal of creating sustainable and affordable housing with young people in West Dorset?

According to John Shotter, “practice is *not* a matter of applying theories! And the enrichment and development of better practices is not merely a matter of discovering better theories! Much more complex issues are at stake.” He continues: “Classically, science assumed that successful action depended on the accuracy of one’s representation (one’s theory) of reality, and that an accurate representation is a sufficient guide to practical action.”

(Shotter, 2008: iii)

In my own case, I have developed a range of ways of creating representations which would guide my research and subsequent action, in particular using systems theory to create models of the key “building blocks” of any proposed initiative, and how these could be financed and organised.

Yet as Ingold points out (2015: 22-23), by using such a metaphor, we can end up imagining “a world comprised of rigid elements (or blocks)” that are linked externally by articulating side by side. I have become expert in creating systems diagrams to guide my practice, but Ingold calls for approaching the way parts link together in a different way:

“This whole is a correspondence, not an assemblage, the elements of which are joined not ‘up’ but ‘with’. Whereas the agglutinative accretions of the assemblage are ‘and...and...and’, the differential sympathies of the correspondence are ‘with...with...with’.” Ingold gives the examples of carpentry and textiles, where “the form of a thing does not stand over it or lie behind it but emerges from this mutual shaping, within a gathering of forces, both tensile and frictional, established through the engagement of the practitioner with materials that have their own inclinations and vitality.”

Returning to Shotter (2008:vi) I have sought some guidance from his particular approach to social constructionism, which focuses, in an echo of Paul Klee, “on the *spontaneous, expressive-responsivity* of growing and living forms.....it is in the fluid and back and forth flow of living, interdependent activity – activity that is always inseparably intertwined, as in an ecology, in with all the other activities occurring in the surroundings – that a certain kind of understanding becomes available to us.” Shotter calls this form of understanding “dialogically structured” (after Bakhtin, 1986) and contrasts it with mechanistic, monological accounts of our relationships to our surroundings.

Such “witness thinking”, as opposed to “aboutness thinking”, calls for a different way of finding the grain of the world’s becoming as well as the bending of this world to our evolving purpose. He calls on us to “*engage ourselves in a ‘living’, flowing interaction with [living forms] over an extended period of time*”. (Shotter, 2008: vii)

Already then, the shape of my “inquiry” begins to feel very different. What is it to take a dialogical, witness approach? In *The Life of Lines*, Ingold (2015: 132-137) provides further guidance, contrasting a maze and a labyrinth:

“The maze puts all the emphasis on the traveller’s intentions. He has an aim in mind, a projected destination.....in the maze, the outward cast of action follows the inward cast of thought.....Yet in so far as the maze-walker is wrapped up in the space of his own deliberations, he is perforce absent from the world itself. In the labyrinth, quite the opposite is the case. The path-follower has no objective save to carry on, to keep on going. But to do so, his action must be closely coupled with his perception.....Path-following is thus not so much intentional as *attentional*.”

Ingold refers to the philosopher of education Jens Masschelein and suggests that we are not “picking up, and turning to one’s advantage, the affordances of a world that is already laid out.” Instead, “attention abides with a world that is not ready made but always incipient, on the cusp of continual emergence.”

What does this mean, then, for the enquiries we undertake? On the one hand, we need to understand the world in which we make our “endeavours”, and this world, at least in those

countries most influenced by neo-liberal ideology and policies, provides a great deal of structure, boundaries and resistance to what we may choose to attend to – or care about - or give ourselves to. So I need to understand Karl Polanyi's (1944, 2011) critique of marketisation (the commodification of land, labour and capital). I need to understand how to see enterprises as systems, and utilise Meadows' framework of "leverage points"² to address the goals and rules of those structures. I need to understand that orthodox macroeconomic theory crumbles in the light of complexity theory, behavioural economics, and other analysis based on real world, empirical approaches (such as Piketty, 2013)³.

And in identifying problems to attend to, such as creating equitable and sustainable food, energy and housing systems, I must be able, as an economics practitioner, to concentrate on the details - the planning, the financing, logistics, etc. This calls on the down-stream, monological thinking that allows me to produce scoping reports, funding bids and proposals for new organisational structures.

However, Shotter, Ingold and Patricia Shaw call on me to begin my inquiry "upstream", and return to this dialogical, witness mode as often as I can during my inquiry into the firming up of new forms of community-led housing. This is the space, the flow, the net - the generative domain where new possibilities emerge, where people are free to take a lead and attend to what is important. Patricia Shaw (2016) puts it like this:

"We make representations of the relatively stable patterns emerging in our ceaseless activity so that we can look at them together and agree on changes we can identify and plan for. This is why organisations, institutions and the civic realm are full of models, 2 by 2 matrices and mappings of various kinds.

This may well be a valuable and necessary intellectual exercise to engage differences of view and agree common frameworks that we will use in our talk with each other as we go about our lives. Leaders become rather skilled in dealing primarily in this generalised world of sophisticated abstract talk which give us the sense that we can re-engineer and control our human endeavours in the same way we can manoeuvre the literal 'things' around us.

But representations can never capture real complexity because that complexity is a flow in time not a static image or model. The representations are always not just inadequate but useful approximations, they can really mislead and falsify - taking them literally easily leads to frustration."

So we need to explore a different, complementary way of "working live" - but we also need to ask why this space is so challenging?

According to Shaw, it "involves sophisticated skills of seeing connections, making links, giving expression to emerging themes, shifting power relations, nuanced use of language, drawing attention to unexpected new possibilities as they open, inviting collective reflection, re-fashioning the meaning of success as we come to recognise the form it is beginning to take, and so on....."

*All our moves are playing a part in shaping what emerges; it is just that we cannot know **fully** what may turn out to be particularly influential or insignificant before we make the moves, we can only stay really in touch with what is happening as we live into the moves we find ourselves making.*

The work of change is actually performed through a process of continuous communicative action that patterns itself. People become mutually reoriented in networks of interdependent relations and

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve_leverage_points

³ <http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/fr/>

activity. My colleagues and I at the Complexity and Management Centre at Hertford University Business School came to call all this **complex responsive processes of relating.**"

Our challenge, then, is to explore how we can weave together action and reflection, managing "things" while at the same time immersing ourselves in patterned flow, attending to both detail and to relationship. We need to continue to bring our attention to the phenomenon that are appearing and "coming to light". As David Abram (1996) explains, we should:

"question the modern assumption of a single, wholly determinable, objective reality. This assumption has its source in Rene Descartes well-known separation of the thinking mind, from the material world of things, or objects.....Descartes laid the foundation for the construction of the objective or "disinterested" sciences.....yet those sciences consistently overlook our ordinary, everyday experience of the world around us.....The fluid realm of direct experience has come to be seen as a secondary, derivative dimension, a mere consequence of events unfolding in the "realer" world of quantifiable and measureable scientific "facts". It is a curious inversion of the actual, demonstrable state of affairs."

Matthew Crawford (2015) states something similar, in explaining the dominance of the Cartesian worldview:

"If I am thinking, I must exist. This is the secure beginning point that must serve as the foundation for knowledge altogether.....Attention is therefore demoted. Or, rather, it is redirected. Not by fastening on objects in the world does it help us grasp reality, but by being directed to our own processes of thinking, and making *them* the object of scrutiny. What it means to know, now, is not to encounter the world directly (thinking you have done so is always subject to skeptical challenge), but to construct a mental *representation* of the world, according to canons of correct method."

Yet, as Heidegger shows us, there is no such thing as a world apart from our experience of it – what we are and what the world is are mutually interdependent. Another phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty, suggested:

"To return to the things themselves is to return to *that* world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge *always* speaks." And to return to that world we need to be in the world with our whole body, not just our mind: "The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which the subject itself projects." (Merleau-Ponty, 1962)

This takes us also into the work of Hannah Arendt (1958) and her distinction between labour, fabrication and action. I am beginning to act – to bring things into the public realm – but alongside words I also bring myself into this realm as well as engaging with materials such as timber and clay. Bridport's industrial base is centred around the rope and net industry, which in the past was linked to the local production of hemp and flax. There is an interesting overlap here with Tim Ingold's discussion of the links between textiles and carpentry.

So in choosing to take a lead around affordable housing I can seek to open spaces within which dialogue and meaning-making can take place. This may be through discussion but it may also be through providing possibilities for imaginative exploration and feeling the injustice of the present housing market. What then are my first steps to be?

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