THIS WAS
TOMORROW

ANDY PLANT AND ELIZABETH FRASER

Residents, Cressingham Gardens

In conversation with Enrico Policardo
Cressingham Gardens, Lambeth, London
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Edited from the recorded conversation.

01 Who are you, and what brought you here?

ELIZABETH: Hi, my name is Elizabeth. I live in Cressingham Gardens - I've lived here since 2003.

ANDY: And I'm Andy. […] I came to Cressingham Gardens in 1994. Something I'll always be grateful to Lambeth Council for. Probably the only thing I'll ever be grateful to Lambeth Council for.

ELIZABETH: I was a baby - seven or eight months old - when I moved here with my parents. They came from Bermondsey and bought our house from the council, which I live in now with my mum. So this is my childhood home. All my childhood memories are up here. I moved back home after university, and I've tried to get more involved with what's going on, because I really care about it. I don't want my childhood home to disappear off the face of the Earth.

02 What's special about this place?

ANDY: Community, definitely. When my wife died, ten years ago, the people here saved me. […] When she was gone, people here took care of me. Apart from the army, I've lived in council property all my life, and this estate comes closest to reminding me of the estates I lived on in the seventies, when communities were still strong […]. The community here is fantastic. And it's ongoing. It's not that the community back then was great - it still is. Even with quite a few empty properties now, community is still strong.

ELIZABETH: I agree. And it's a unique place to live. You don't see a place like this very often, in London or any city in the UK. The way it was created has really succeeded. It's an example of how to do social housing, how to do

estate design and community-minded design. On a lot of other estates or tower blocks you can feel more separated. This has really worked in creating community. It should be used as an example and treasured. There's soul here.

ANDY: Lord Esher, when he was head of what came before Historic England, said it had the feel of a village, and that it was the best small scheme he'd ever seen in England. I think that's right. The design actually promotes a sense of community, which is why we still get so many architects and architecture students visiting. Can we do our thesis on this place? Of course - come down, we'll take you round and tell you what we know. In the summer, if you're walking round, people come out and say, what's up? You don't get that in a lot of London. You get it in the tiny rural village my parents retired to. In most of London, people put their heads down and walk past. Here, everybody's interested in their neighbours.

A group called Social Life assessed this place in 2013 to measure the social value of what they called "neighbourliness", and worked out that the council saved £3.25 million a year in social services not being used, because residents were delivering those services to each other for free. That's a testament to how the community here formed and has lasted. And the architecture promotes it - long sight lines everywhere, what they now call Safer by Design. Edward Hollamby was doing that before there was a name for it. There are two other estates nearby he designed, Cherry Laurel Walk and Blenheim Gardens, and you can see him experimenting with different forms, all intended to promote community. Which I don't think is a word a lot of our politicians recognise now. To them, community just means a group of people in a location. They don't see it as an emotional or social thing.

ELIZABETH: At a planning committee meeting this week, people were protesting about the redevelopment of International House and the two huge tower blocks they want next to it, which would block out about 90% of the sunlight for the estate next door. Someone said the social value of

International House was in the millions - there are loads of charities and community organisations there, really serving the community. And they just ignored it. They don't see the value of community and social value in these committees. It's like they're wilfully blind.

03 What is a community, to you?

ANDY: I don't think there's a hard and fast definition. On this estate, it means communicating with the people around me, taking their needs into consideration, and them doing the same for me. It's as simple as that. It's not just a geographic location - people who've moved away still come and use the hall, still keep in touch, still ask what they can do to help save Cressingham Gardens. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It's caring.

ELIZABETH: And not really expecting anything back.

ANDY: I have people here who still phone me regularly to check I'm all right. If I'm doing something for the community, I know people I can call who'll post flyers, happily. […]

ELIZABETH: When I was a kid growing up here, […] - neighbours would collect me from school, I'd go to their house in the evening when my mum was at work. Another grandmother on the estate looked after me too. You just looked after each other. Your kid is my kid.

ANDY: One of our older residents was telling me how the children were always in each other's houses - if your kids were three doors down playing with their friends, they'd get fed, and vice versa. That's just what people did. You couldn't take that for granted even in the seventies. But this kind of architecture seems to promote it.

ELIZABETH: It's safe as well. There are no cars in front of your house, no road for a kid to cross to see a friend.

ANDY: It's low-rise, not tower blocks, but it's actually high density. The council assumes it isn't, because there are no towers, but in rooms per acre it's high density. It just doesn't look or feel like it.

ELIZABETH: There's a road round the edge, with underground car parking, so inside it's completely pedestrian. That's how I could stay out late as a kid, playing out the back. My mum could see me from her bedroom window and scream my name, and I'd hear her.

ANDY: You can hear your mum when she shouts. Heavy northern accent!

ELIZABETH: She still does it.

04 What would you tell people trying to resist "regeneration" like you have?

ANDY: You have to have a horizontal structure. If you have leaders, the council picks them off. The Stop HDV campaign in Haringey followed our lead, and it stopped Haringey Council picking off their members. If you don't have leaders and the council doesn't understand the structure, it's much harder for them to work against you.

[…] You don't let them get away with things. That's something we've found: you have to punch back. They punch down, we punch up. We've taken them to judicial review four times. It's not even about winning, it's about doing it, so they know that every time they come for us, we'll go back at them. And we've seen four council leaders out now.

05 How do you build resilience in a community?

ANDY: It starts with people talking to one another. Once there's a certain understanding between people - the basic stuff, like: this isn't political, this is about saving our homes - then the resilience is there. Once people understand they're being screwed, they don't want to be screwed. Once they know they can resist, they want to resist. On any estate there'll always be some doers and some supporters, and that's fine - you need supporters to protest outside the town hall, and you need people to dig up hundreds and hundreds of pages of information for each judicial review.

The great thing is, it's like fighting a guerrilla war. You don't have to win. All you have to do is hold them at bay, and that in itself is victory. People feed off that, and the community gets stronger. Whenever Lambeth comes up with a new way to stab us in the back, we shrug it off and fight back. When they decided to grant themselves planning permission to develop the block at the top of the estate, we rallied our troops, and I think 635 people put in their own detailed objections. Two were in favour. They still granted themselves permission. But if we take them to court, we can show it - and for any court action, you have to show you've been through all the proper avenues of protest. So resilience comes with resistance.

And having tough people. We have a multitude of strong women on this estate, […] all tough and all totally prepared to kick some backside. That's another factor in the resilience here: strong women.

ELIZABETH: And it feeds into the young people too - growing up surrounded by that attitude.

ANDY: Most of the young women your age who've grown up here are exactly the same. They don't feel threatened, because they know resistance is possible.

ELIZABETH: Once you've been given examples of what can be done... So many times in history people give in, or lose momentum, or things fall apart. Here it's been so constant, this energy. It's kind of crazy. It's not something you often see.

ANDY: We knew we were in for the long haul. We've been under threat for fourteen years. […] after a couple of months, once their children are in the local schools, people want to stay. It's next to a park, it's quiet, kids can do their homework. I grew up in a scissor block where you could hear everything next door. These places are very well built, with little sound transmission. We consistently have half the crime rate of the rest of our ward. People wonder why until they walk round for a couple of hours. It's quiet because of the way it's put together.

ELIZABETH: And you can hear the birds. Did you hear the woodpecker today?

ANDY: Very annoying. I love the crows, though. About four in the morning the crow parliament starts, all shouting at each other in the trees towards the park.

ELIZABETH: And it's perfect for cats. A cat haven.

ANDY: We have quite a few feral cats, fed by the community, and they're not badly behaved. In summer the female cats all gather on the grass out there. People say they're sunning themselves. Personally I think they're conspiring. Everybody knew your late cat.

ELIZABETH: Lily Snowball. The Queen.

ANDY: She used to go up two or three flights of stairs to the walkways and waft along.

ELIZABETH: I'd see her looking down on me when I came back from school. And then she'd go round slapping other cats in the face. She'd go into people's houses and get fed, so she got really fat. We put a label on her collar - "Please do not feed me" - and people still did. It's the generosity of this community.

ANDY: We had another tiny black cat, Millie. One morning at six I came to open up and she was staring at a fox, and the fox was staring at her, and she walked a step closer, and closer, until she was right under its nose. Then, in a really leisurely way, she swiped her paw across its nose, and it yelped and ran away. I thought the fox was going to eat her.

06 What makes you happy?

ELIZABETH: Being grounded somewhere. I'm a Cancer, so I really like having a place I can always come back to. […] Here I had a constant home, with my bedroom through all the eras since I was a baby. So to have it threatened for so long - I was about twelve when this started - is quite traumatic, especially as a child. Happiness to me is having somewhere peaceful and safe that you can always come back to. That's why I have such a strong attachment to it. […] Knowing I'm trying to get justice, and doing all I can to save this, makes me happy.

ANDY: Friends, community, good books, good music. There was a great live music scene round here until about ten years ago […]. But this place and this community make me happy. Fighting Lambeth makes me very happy. […] We have such a well-educated community here: MBAs, lawyers, social scientists, proper scientists. I'm a social scientist, which isn't a hard science. And artists.

ELIZABETH: My mum has a master's in ceramics.

ANDY: Lambeth attracted a lot of artists in the eighties and nineties because of the squats. We had a big Italian squatting community here in the eighties - about a dozen households in Carlton Mansions alone, just doing their art, and so many musicians. All squeezed out now by gentrification. The council won't call it gentrification.

ELIZABETH: They call it regeneration.

[…]

07 If you had a list of what works and what doesn't, what would it be?

ANDY: Number one: don't trust that a petition or a protest alone will make your point. Use it as the first of many attacks, and always attack from at least two angles at once, because that confuses them - especially if you can target different departments of the same local authority, because they do not communicate.

ELIZABETH: See where people's strengths are. My mum's an artist, and I'm an artist - I do editing, animation, drawing, illustration - so I've used that to create content for social media. I think I'm the youngest person involved right now, and that's something I can do that nobody else here really does. Creating protest art. My mum did that within her abilities.

ANDY: She did a fantastic banner. And her ceramic bats.

ELIZABETH: And a ceramic frog, somewhere under the shrubs now. Some people have a legal background, and that can be used. It's about seeing where everyone's skills are, because everyone has something to offer. Someone might be a great, confident speaker.

ANDY: And definitely have a horizontal organisation. They'll still try to pick people off, but it's much easier to repel. […] They'll try to wind you up.

[…]

ANDY: But if you know that's what they'll do, it's so much easier to resist. […] And bear in mind it'll be a long slog. Not a week, not a year. We're more than a decade in and still fighting. And yes, look for people's strengths. I didn't think I had any beyond criminology and forensic psychology. I was very uptight about speaking in public. This got me used to it - same as you knocking on doors. I suspect we'll win in the end. We're the thorn in the lion's paw. The lion is mighty, but the thorn gives it an infection.

ELIZABETH: Like a mosquito, going round and round.

[…] You often have no right of reply unless you're willing to be thrown out of the room. And class isn't acknowledged in this country, except in private conversation. […]

08 Is this the future you were dreaming of?

ANDY: No. But it's a future I accept. My dream was living here with my wife into old age, but fate intervened. I've always been political and fought for causes, and this is the worthiest cause I've fought for. I lived in West Berlin for a year and a half in my early twenties, when there was a lot of friction between the city government and squatters - they were throwing squatters out wholesale, and people just moved on to other half-demolished buildings, because West Berlin was full of empty property. It showed me what the chance to make money does to government, especially local government. So it's not what I dreamed of. But it's worth fighting for. It's a dream place to live.

ELIZABETH: It's dominated a lot of my life. I remember it going on in the background at school. You feel so alone, because no one else around you is going through it except your own community. I've never met anyone my age elsewhere who's dealt with this. It can happen to anybody - you just get thrown into it. It's completely changed the direction of my life. When I graduated last year I thought I'd put my head in the sand for a while, because it was too upsetting to confront. But now I think it's actually been a good thing in some ways. It's opened my eyes, or shown me what I need to do right now.

ANDY: And what you can do.

ELIZABETH: Exactly. Because you can feel so powerless in these situations. And none of us thought it would go on this long.

ANDY: None of us. […] Because they said they were giving us a choice and then took the choice away, they shot themselves in the foot. People just weren't having it. So every time they came up with something new, we took them to judicial review again.

I used to get furiously angry, like Elizabeth does. Now I meditate. I let it flow over me, and then I put my boots back on and go out and look for Lambeth's ideas to kick. Because every idea they've had has been a bad one.

09 And your names?

ANDY: I'm Andy Plant, resident of Cressingham Gardens Estate.

ELIZABETH: I'm Elizabeth Fraser. I'm a resident of Cressingham Gardens Estate.

This Was Tomorrow – Is This the Future We Were Dreaming Of?
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