THIS WAS
TOMORROW

HILARY

Resident at New Ground

In conversation with Enrico Policardo
OWCH New Ground, High Barnet, London
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Edited from the recorded conversation.

01 Who are you, and how long have you been here?

My name's Hilary and I live at New Ground in High Barnet. I have a flat on the first floor that I live in with my cat. I've been here ten years - but I was with the Older Women's Co-housing group for ten or twelve years before we came to this site. We met once a month, and in between we worked in task groups, trying to set up a co-housing community where we could live in our old age. That's the process that led to this place.

02 What was your life like before?

I'd lived in co-ops and shared places a lot in my life - shared with friends, with people with children. I think it's a great way of living, particularly with children, because it's not a nuclear family: you've got lots of people around to help look after them. I really enjoyed it.

I left home in 1969, shared flats, and then lived in co-ops around London, mostly North London, until I was 40. The last one was quite small - I only had a room, there were about six of us and two children - and I wanted more space. Not my own kitchen, but a room to sleep in and a room to work in or have visitors. I looked for bigger co-housing groups around London and there wasn't anything at that time. They were all in the countryside, and I work in theatre - I couldn't have worked if I lived in the countryside. So I eventually bought a one-bedroom flat and lived there for 25 years before I came here. I was 40 when I lived on my own for the first time.

03 How did those co-ops come about?

They grew up organically, with people who just wanted to live like that. Several people would get together to buy a house, and they'd share more than if you just rented a room in a house. It was a more intentional thing to do.

When they chose people, I was interviewed, and I bought into some of them. It was word of mouth, mostly. I lived in one that was all architects and designers, but in the others we all had very different jobs.

04 What made you want to leave the flat?

I enjoyed living on my own and I had nice neighbours. But my neighbours got younger and younger - not that they went backwards! The older ones moved out and younger ones moved in. I was getting into my fifties and I realised I probably couldn't carry on living like that.

I wanted to spend my later years like my mum. She lived in a village outside Swindon and had an amazingly active life. They'd eat together once a week in the church hall, cook together, they'd get coaches all over the place - they went to France every month. When she was 90 I'd phone her and she'd say, I can't stop and talk now, I'm going down the road to a class. She ran the local magazine. I thought, that is what life's about - not getting stuck in a one-bedroom flat on the second floor where I can't get down the stairs, and then ending up in a care home with a lot of other people who don't want to be there either.

But I didn't want to live in a village outside London - particularly not one where you don't mention fox hunting. So I kept thinking, how am I going to do this? There isn't anywhere in London. Then I heard Maria talking on Woman's Hour about the Older Women's Co-housing group, and I thought, yep, that's what I'm after. I went to meet them and thought, this is great - we'll have somewhere to live very quickly. Twelve years later! Shirley, who set it up, thought it would take two years to get a site and move in. She was in her sixties then. It took nineteen years.

And I'd seen older friends be perfectly fine until their mid-eighties, living in flats in London, travelling across the city to see friends. You get to 85 and you can't do that any more. Then they go downhill very quickly, because their friends can't get to them and they can't get to their friends. I really didn't want that. This seemed a way of being in control of my life in my later years. And it is.

05 What's it like living here now?

It's like a little village. We have control over who lives here - I know the next neighbours who are going to move in. It's a good way of living, and a very challenging one, because we all have different ideas about how to do things. It really makes you sort out what's important in your life and what's not. When I lived on my own I might have fought for what the front of the house looked like. Now, because I know everybody and work with them, I think: they can choose, I don't mind. I'd stick up for the big things - our ethos that we work together and help each other. But all those small things really aren't important.

06 Is this the future you were dreaming of?

Sort of. Yes - largely. There is no nirvana. It's wonderful, but of course it's hard work as well. The hard work keeps us going too - it's because we're in control of this. We're maintaining a big building. We now have people who are getting older and need more care for themselves, so they can do less of the work, and it pushes some of it back on the people who can. You have to want to put time and energy into a place like this. You don't come here, sit back and ask someone else to look after it. But it's great, because we have autonomy.

A long time ago I had a dream about how I wanted to live, and it was always about a big garden. And we have a big garden.

JUDE: For me the benefits are being part of a community, belonging, and being secure. The challenge is making sure it's sustainable - the social mix of who comes in, the finances, the buildings. We have total ownership of this, but I'm very conscious we'll be handing it over to the next generation of women, and it's also a legacy from the women who started it. And as Hilary said, some of us are getting older, and people who feel secure in what they've got don't always want change. So you're constantly honouring that while still bringing new ideas in. It's a challenge of development.

07 What makes you happy in life?

Doing my artwork, probably. A nice sunny day, a lovely place to live, people around me that I know. I have quite an active life outside here as well - I think it's really important to have that balance.

One thing I haven't said: in the twelve years I worked on getting here, all my friends were against it. Nearly all of them. They said, this is complete madness, don't do it. I think they thought it would be too intrusive. Now they see how supportive we are of each other, and that it's quite light - not in terms of work, but in terms of living here.

When I had both my knees replaced, everybody was around bringing food, taking me to the physio. And with the windows onto the corridors, I've found two people on the floor - one bleeding badly, one who couldn't get up. If someone's ill and I make a meal, I only have to make one meal out of twenty-odd. In my old flat, my next-door neighbour and I would have done all the looking after each other, because our other friends were too far away. Here it's shared. People really rally when someone isn't well.

08 Do you think we've been taught to fear living with other people, as if it takes away our freedom?

It is bizarre. And I don't want to say the big C word - capitalism. They want us all to buy a washing machine, all to buy a fridge, all to live in a little box. We're consumers. It's got nothing to do with how we might need to live. And the nuclear family is really tough - psychologically and economically. It's divide and rule. A good way of controlling us.

People say that in the war, people pulled together, because in times of adversity they do come together more. And people move around so much now. My grandparents knew virtually everybody in their street, and most people had lived there a long time. Those communities weren't intentional, but they always helped each other. Now people often don't know who their neighbours are.

There's no support from the government to live like this. And yet they're trying to get old people out of their bigger houses so younger people can have them. When my mum died, a family with two young kids moved into her house, which was great - she'd been in a big house on her own because there was nowhere else for her, and she didn't want a home where she couldn't be in control.

09 What would you tell people who want to do this, and what's needed?

The only thing you can say is: keep pushing. You have to. But it's sad that it's such hard work. We were lucky we had Shirley, the founder. I remember we'd gone quite far with a site and it fell through, and I came to the next meeting thinking, is this worth pursuing? Is it ever going to happen? And she just stood there and said, right, we've lost that one - on to the next one. You need someone like that. She was very tenacious. You need crazy people, and people who stick with it.

But it shouldn't be that hard. The government really should be investing in this - I'm sure it's much cheaper than public health and social services. When we got this site and tried to get change of use, the council said to us, we don't want old people moving into our borough, you'll need social services. And we said no - the point of this is we won't need so much social services, because we're all together. All politics is short-term.

So: keep pushing, you need crazy people, and you need funding. We were lucky - we got forward funding. We couldn't have sold our flats and funded ourselves at the time, because the banks wouldn't. It's always been very hard for women. You couldn't get a mortgage as a woman on your own until the seventies - you had to have a man sign it. It's not that long ago. And it was 1991 before the law changed so a husband could be charged with raping his wife. The police wouldn't come out to a man beating his partner until it became a noise nuisance after nine at night. […] That's another reason communities are good - people look out for each other. And kids in co-housing get a much wider view of people, not just their parents' ideas. They say they're more grown-up, because they take responsibility and see people around them taking responsibility.

And good design. We designed the space with the architects - the balance of public, private and common space. Quite often people don't know each other and get put into places they've had nothing to do with, and then you get toxic dynamics. You need to get together with like-minded people you can work with. The garden is crucial. And I can have a cat here - by agreement with everybody.

10 Anything else you'd like to say, to people in this country and beyond?

Get on and bloody do it! We could do it. It's not a big deal. We did it - so can you.

This Was Tomorrow – Is This the Future We Were Dreaming Of?
A long-term audio-visual investigation by Enrico Policardo.
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