THIS WAS
TOMORROW

JESS STEELE

Hastings Commons

In conversation with Enrico Policardo
Hastings Commons, Hastings, East Sussex
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01 Who are you, and what is Hastings Commons?

I'm Jess Steele, from Hastings Commons. Hastings Commons is a collection of difficult and derelict buildings that we've brought into community ownership, in a very small neighbourhood of Hastings - a town of about 100,000 people on the south coast of England. Hastings is quite a poor town and always has been, although it's becoming more and more gentrified. We've been trying for a very long time to make sure that by the time that happens, we've taken some buildings into community ownership, so people have affordable places to live and work, and good places to socialise where they feel they belong.

To someone who'd never seen community asset development, I'd say it's a bit of a beacon. It's quite exceptional, because we've taken such big risks to take on these buildings - risks most charities would never be able to take, the public sector is very unwilling to take, and a straight private business never would, because it wouldn't be worth it to them. So you need a combination of all three. The entrepreneurial spirit that says, let's just do it, let's take the risk. The social conscience that drives why we're doing it. And then the long-term steward - for us, Hastings Commons Community Land Trust. The idea of a community land trust is that it's forever, way beyond any of our individual lifetimes. It currently has 800 members, and I hope it'll have many thousands over the coming years.

02 How did you come to this?

I came to Hastings with my partner and our daughter 21 years ago. I really like underdog places. I grew up in Deptford, in south-east London, and was there a long time. My other favourite place in the country is Blackpool,

because it's such an underdog. I came to Hastings partly because it was a place where you could make change, and change would be positive. But the way to do that is to join in.

I'm always very interested in the "DFLs" - Down From Londons. We've had wave upon wave of them over the last hundred years. Some were very poor people pushed out of London by their councils, rehoused by the sea. Others had made significant money on unearned equity, just by having bought a house in London at the right time. Some come and join in and really become part of Hastings and appreciate what they're coming to. Others come more like colonisers, as if their arrival will make everything better - when in fact, though it may not be their fault as individuals, their impact is pretty much all for the worse, because it pushes up house prices and rents. That's caused a huge problem for Hastings: for the people pushed out of their homes by price rises, and for the council, who have to pay for temporary accommodation, where many of them end up. So here gentrification has proved a very serious problem for everyone, whereas often it's only a problem for those who are pushed out.

03 Can you hold personal accountability and "it's not their fault" at the same time?

Structurally, and in terms of their class position, they are doing something really damaging. Individually, they could perhaps be more self-aware. Hastings is a bit different from London. In London there's no way to pull up the drawbridge - people have come for thousands of years and always will; it's a global city. Hastings is very peripheral. There are calls to pull up the drawbridge - mostly against boats arriving on the beach, rather than trains arriving from London. But I've always been a bit of a drawbridge person, around Hastings. When we got here, there was a lot of talk that what Hastings needed was a fast train and a motorway - that was seen as regeneration, bringing loads of people from London who'd somehow make

Hastings better. I never bought that. I've always thought we've been protected all these years by a terrible railway, a terrible road and a terrible reputation, and those three things held back the massive force of gentrification.

Unfortunately, Covid blew that fence down. You don't need the train or the road if you can work from home - or from here, the Observer Building, where we're sitting. You can be a London-type person working for a multinational and live in Hastings. During Covid, lots of people came because they couldn't go anywhere else, and realised it wasn't the dump they'd thought - it's a beautiful place, with fantastic architecture, a great sea, great country parks and a fantastic community spirit. And they've been having that impact ever since. Before Covid there were 60 households in temporary accommodation. Now there are 700. An enormous rise. And almost all of them have simply been priced out. They haven't got the multiple problems some earlier households might have had. The vast majority were happily paying private rent until it went up so hugely.

04 What should be done about it, today?

The biggest thing is something the council is already doing: buying property it owns to use as temporary accommodation, so at least that rent comes back to the council. At the moment so much of it is private landlords - in some cases the very landlords who put their rents up so high their tenants moved out, and who then take sometimes the same tenants back at four times the price, because temporary accommodation is paid nightly rather than monthly. So making sure temporary accommodation is public or community-run is the starting point.

But there's a problem: it doesn't end. You can provide suitable housing for those 700 households - what about the next 700? Landlords aren't stopping their pursuit of what they call the "highest and best use", which in

gentrification-speak isn't the best use, it's the most expensive one. For decades, landlords took what the market offered, which was affordable - around a third of median earnings. That's no longer the case.

We can't change everything, we can't house everybody, we can't solve gentrification ourselves. What we can do is make the spaces we've got - which now add up to 9,000 square metres of difficult buildings, mostly renovated - affordable and stable, and make the people living and working in them feel in control, rather than suffering the uncertainty of some landlord about to kick them out of their home or their livelihood. I think stability is almost as important as affordability. Something has to be affordable, but it also has to feel safe - to protect the mental health of residential tenants, or the business health of workspace tenants. So our rents are capped and only rise with inflation, and when inflation was ridiculously high, we capped them again.

And it's about demonstrating that something different can happen. That's where utopia comes in. If utopia is a way of imagining the world otherwise, it's a hell of a lot easier to imagine it differently if you can see something real, tangible and working. So being a beacon isn't about PR. It's about proving we're not just talking theory: it's possible in practice. I have to say it's extremely difficult in practice. There are a lot of unnecessary barriers. If it were a bit easier, it would be much more common, instead of the exception we sometimes feel we are.

05 You talk about "sustained impatience". What does that mean?

You're never starting from a blank slate, and the more you can draw lessons from the past, the more likely you are to succeed. I always say failure is the development cost of your next success. It's part of learning - your own failure, or a previous attempt. We stand on the shoulders of giants: the people

who stopped this building being demolished for 35 years are as important as the people who finally rescued it, because the second wouldn't have been possible without the first.

Sustained impatience is my favourite concept, because I believe people should be impatient for regeneration in places that have been neglected for decades. Impatient for maintenance, for looking after things. We need to be indignant about the treatment of people and buildings and places, and in that indignation you get impatience. But you have to sustain it, because impatience is great for a campaign but not for a community land trust. You have to keep that same sense of: today we're going to make progress, and tomorrow, and the next day.

So we try to make the redevelopment create benefits along the way. Not take on a massive building like the Observer and cut a ribbon six years later, but get a bit of it ready as soon as possible, get some people in, then some more. We did it with Rock House next door, which is nine floors. When we first got it, we had a report saying it would cost nearly £2 million to renovate. We threw the report away and got going, floor by floor, getting tenants in. Looking back we call it phased organic development, and I really believe in it: occupy while you work out what to do, get on with it, get some benefits along the way.

When we opened what's now Eagle House, down the road, it was an old furniture shop. The owner couldn't sell his furniture because of lockdown, so he sold us the furniture as well as the building. What do you do with six three-piece suites? We opened a public living room. We had no idea if it would work, and the building was pretty scruffy, but it worked brilliantly. We were coming out of Covid, after all that social distancing and isolation, and here was a free, non-transactional space with comfy sofas, tea and coffee, biscuits if people brought them. A proper third space. You take your own cup to the sink - some responsibility, but also some enjoyment. That's the heart of

the commons. You've got the common resource, you've got the people, the commoners, and you've got commoning: stepping up and enjoying. Rights and responsibilities.

Of all the bricks-and-mortar legacy this project has created, I think the most important thing is the name. Every time someone says "Hastings Commons", it makes them wonder: what does that mean? It's not the council. It's not just a business. What is it? The more people talk about commoning in the coming years, the more likely we are to survive the crises we're facing.

06 Everywhere I go, there's one "mad" person who carries it. Has capitalism wiped out our ability to self-organise?

I vehemently disagree with Garrett Hardin's "tragedy of the commons" from the sixties, and I'm backed up by a Nobel Prize winner, Elinor Ostrom, who found at least 10,000 successful commons around the world. We know it can be done. She also set out design principles - it doesn't happen by accident, and it doesn't maintain itself by accident. From the very birth of capitalism, the commons have been enclosed. Stolen. Capitalism's primitive accumulation is the theft of the commons. So early, middle and late capitalism are all intensely hostile to commons, and commons have to be antagonistic to capitalism. You can make a commons in the cracks of capitalism - but can you sustain it when the capitalists come to repossess?

So what we try to do is subvert, or abduct, the tools of capitalism for a different purpose. Freehold ownership is a tool capitalism uses to exclude people; we use it to include them. Capitalism uses it to rack up rents; we use it to cap them. It gives you a choice; it doesn't tell you your motivations. Debt finance is another tool, limited companies another. Can we use them to create something other than what they're used for all around us, including the landlord-tenant relationship?

On individuals: I believe in distributed leadership, because I think it creates the best outcomes for communities. But distributed leadership doesn't mean expecting everyone to be the same. There should be differential commoning, because that allows for diversity. Otherwise you get a monoculture. And I recognise that my own role has been to be the mad person. One colleague says he got involved when he saw me stand on a chair giving a speech about how we were going to do capped rents and great things at Rock House, and how I'd put some of my own money in - and he thought, she's mad. His response was: I'll find out if this is real by moving in. So he became a tenant.

So yes, doing the mad things, which are about risk - a particular approach to risk - and a particular skill in telling the story. An emergent story: where are we, where are we heading? Back then, on that chair in Rock House basement, we were right at the beginning, and the story was what could happen. That's a very particular kind of leadership, and it's not enough on its own. It doesn't fix the buildings or manage the cleaners. The storytelling role is the one people see and hear, so they identify it most as the leader - the face, and sometimes the conscience, holding the vision and reminding everyone what this is about, especially as you grow and there's a temptation to become more like the private or public sector. We have to keep asking: what would this look like if it's a genuine commons?

I recently made a spreadsheet called All Commoners Ever: all the tenants, trustees and staff who've come and gone and got involved beyond just renting for a few months. It's 200 people. A hundred are still involved, a hundred aren't. All of them matter, and maybe thirty to fifty were essential at the time. So it's never one person. If it is, it's not really a community project. I come from community organising, and part of that is listening. Leaders are people who go and listen, pull together thoughts, feelings and ideas, and turn them, with people, into action. That's leadership.

And in three days I'll stop being Chief Executive of Hastings Commons. I'm very proud that we've got to a point where we can intentionally delete the role, because we don't think a commons should have a chief exec. I was a founder investor and involved in lots of ways, but not in charge. Then a few years ago lots of staff had left after Covid and it looked like it might fall apart, so the trustees asked me to step in. We've made huge progress, and now I'm handing over to a co-leadership team of three people who've already been here as staff. That should be a symbol and a starting point for spreading power more widely. I'll be on a part-time freelance contract as "commoner at large". I keep saying: at large, but not in charge. Holding the vision, keeping the memories, telling the story, and helping bring in resources by telling it. I hope it's an example of a founder moving sideways and achieving succession without disappearing.

07 Is this the future you were dreaming of?

The rest of the world isn't the future. Maybe that's the point. The rest of the world is fairly terrifying, horrifying, sad and scary. This little piece of Hastings - well, it's not horrifying, but it is scary. It's a massive rollercoaster. We've had some really difficult moments, including very recently, when survival wasn't guaranteed at all, and I had no idea how you'd take something like this to pieces if it failed. That was really scary. I feel much more confident now.

It's sort of the future I'd hoped for. I wrote the business plan for the Observer Building in 2018, when it was a crazy idea to even write one. It starts with something like: we stand here in front of this derelict building and all we can do is have faith - step forward in good faith, because everything is unpredictable. The one thing I could predict was that it would take eight to ten years to unlock the building's value completely, and I hoped we'd unlock it year by year along the way. That's what we've done, so I'm happy about that.

The number of things that turned out differently is huge, including infuriating ones - like having to give a big chunk of really nice space to the power networks for a substation, which they get to own, inside our building. If we'd bought the car park opposite earlier, it could have gone there. There's so much you can't foresee. So you go forward in good faith and tell a good story about what you're trying to do, and people join you and shift how you think. That's another sign of a good leader: allowing the organic part of phased organic development - letting yourself be shifted, rather than sticking to a plan. And one of the best ways to be shifted is by the people who are part of the commons, staff and tenants, who have a right, and in fact a duty, to help move it in good directions.

08 What would you put on a billboard in Piccadilly Circus?

I'd like a map of all our buildings and their characters - but what's missing from that is the people. We run a fabulous youth club. We've got a public living room, a creative technology hub. I'd love something that connects the spaces with the people: people doing great things, having fun, getting to know each other, making things, supporting each other through life - with space and people coming across as equals. Usually you get ruin pictures, Detroit dereliction, or else it's all smiling people. Very few images genuinely balance something special about a space with people doing something interesting in it.

My biggest reward is every time we open a new space, after the blood, sweat and tears and fundraising, and people are in it for the first few times. It gives you a tingling up the neck. I'd like to capture that on the billboard so people get the tingle. For me that tingle is pride. For other people it could be inspiration - that sense of, we could do that.

09 Is it seeing people happy and secure that makes you happy?

It's more than that. I'm interested in agency. It's systematically beaten out of us by our systems. The two things that give people a bit of it back are education and money, and that's totally unfair - as if only people with education and money should hold on to their scrap of agency. And even then, there's a sense that unless you're a politician, or have the job title, you should stay out of it. That's mad. We hand power and responsibility to people we know can't deliver - because they're focused on profit, or because we no longer have a coherent idea of what the state is for. So it does a ridiculous mixture of things, from war to regeneration to potholes. We expect it to solve every problem - I pay my council tax, why don't they plant flowers there? - and we don't want to pay much tax.

The state we've got is riven by party politics. Before every election the pre-election period gets more rigid, so nothing can happen for ages, and then nothing happens afterwards while they work out who's in charge. At local level it doesn't build relationships - there's huge churn. Politicians go and knock on doors only before elections, to ask for votes, not to listen to what people care about.

There's a brilliant story from Bologna. A local man painted a very scruffy bench he used to sit on, and a council officer fined him for it. The mayor heard, was furious, refunded the fine, and set up a ministry of civic imagination to help people like him do the things they cared about, and make sure nothing got in the way. That's my dream of an enabling state: one that knows it gets in the way, and not only stops doing that but actively helps. If we had a state like that, everything would be different. And one reason we don't is that party politics is so adversarial they spend too much time fighting each other and not enough doing the job.

10 So how do you reverse it?

Through local action, because that's where people find their agency and realise they can do things - and do them together. I've seen it over and over. Back in the nineties I saw people come out of the far-left newspaper-selling world into community action and find it amazing, because selling papers on street corners trying to convince people to support revolution in the abstract is so hard. Once you're actually doing something on the ground, people are transformed by being able to get things done.

Do you know Gibson-Graham? Two women, Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham - one has sadly died - who wrote about diverse economies. The iceberg metaphor: above the water, what we call "the economy"; underneath, all the mutual, reciprocal, caring, favour-based economic activity. And they ask: how come feminists can have their revolution now, but Marxists have to wait? Such a brilliant line. The feminist revolution is rooted in the everyday, in every interaction we all have, whereas Marxists are waiting for capitalism to fall, which is a bloody long way off, and needs an awful lot of people willing to break a lot of rules. I like the idea that community action is more like feminism: in the day-to-day, in personal relationships, in how we behave. So we can have our revolution now, and as we do, we're helping the Marxists, slowly cracking capitalism from the inside, making bigger and bigger spaces.

The hard bit is turning community action into society-wide change. I believe that happens the way social movements always happen: people inspiring each other, talking, realising their agency. If you can do it, I can do it. If they can do it, we can do it. That needs peer-to-peer behaviour, not some great leader on a big horse. They're not coming, and they're not necessary. It's the mycelial approach - under-the-radar connections - that will make the change. That's where I'm going to spend the rest of my life: connecting people up to try to achieve it.

11 Are you more or less hopeful than ten or twenty years ago?

It depends how you define hopeful. Ten or twenty years ago I was full of hope for a future I had no idea was possible. Now I know a lot of it is possible, and I'm full of hope that other people will do lots more. I'm also wiser. I've hit an awful lot of brick walls. Some we've overcome, some we've gone round, and some are still too hard.

The biggest is that this work has no respect from outside - which is odd to say, since we're a case study for this, that and the other. But broadly it isn't respected, and because it isn't respected, it isn't funded. The only way to fund it is through literally hundreds of small project grants. Since we bought the first building in 2014, Hastings Commons has had 142 loan and grant awards - with about a two-thirds success rate, so another fifty-odd we didn't get, which still took a lot of work. And the ones you get take enormous management, of the work and of the funder relationship. It's hugely time-consuming, risky and uncertain, and the decisions are all in their hands, not ours.

That's why your billboard matters. One reason it isn't respected is that it isn't widely known, especially by the public. Politicians may have heard bits. But the public is badly served on information about land and buildings, so most people think it's boring, or too difficult, or not for them. Whereas land and buildings are where power is stored. If communities don't pay attention to them, they're giving up a source of power. And the way to learn about land and buildings is to do it. Most people won't go on a university course - they can just get started, and part of what I'm trying to do with colleagues is help them: be inspired, and get on with it. So I'm hopeful.

This Was Tomorrow – Is This the Future We Were Dreaming Of?
A long-term audio-visual investigation by Enrico Policardo.
Listen: thiswastomorrow.co.uk/sites/hastings-commons/

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