THIS WAS
TOMORROW

NAOMI CULL

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In conversation with Enrico Policardo
Two Up Two Down, Anfield, Liverpool
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Edited from the recorded conversation.

01 Who are you, and where are we?

I'm Naomi. I'm communications and engagement lead at Homebaked CLT, which basically means telling people about what we do and bringing them along on the journey with us. We're sat in Stanley Park in Anfield, a beautiful green space in the heart of the neighbourhood. The CLT exists to create warm and affordable homes, for now and for future generations - and to create spaces where we can come together, share, learn, celebrate, and just be in community.

As we found on our way to the park, there aren't many spaces where you can just exist without paying, or without a football match on, or some other reason to be there. So a lot of our work is about creating opportunities for people to come together around things that connect us - things that give us hope and help us feel we have some control over the future here.

02 The CLT and the bakery are connected but separate. What's the relationship, and which came first?

Back in 2012 the Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk came to Anfield as part of the Liverpool Biennial. Her work centred on what it means to live well. She worked with people here to ask that question, and used the empty Mitchell's Bakery building as a kind of centre of operations. People kept knocking on the door asking to buy a loaf. Through those conversations - exploring what it means to live well, but also who owns the land and who holds the power here - the CLT was formed to take ownership of the bakery building, which we now lease to Homebaked Bakery, the co-operative bakery. So the bakery are our tenant. The CLT has a neighbourhood-wide mission: more than one building, more than one street. It's about retrofitting the whole neighbourhood.

03 Usually these things come from a need, a common enemy, an eviction. This started from art?

It started from art, but that was also a reaction to a lot of failed regeneration in the area. There'd been a number of initiatives that moved people out of their homes under compulsory purchase orders, promised newer, better places to live, and ultimately didn't deliver them. So when that project started there was a sense of grief, of a common enemy, of being let down. Jeanne's work really galvanised that sense of wanting to take back control - wanting the future of this place not to be in the hands of others, but to belong to the people who live here.

04 How does the project benefit the area? What's changed since it started?

Along with a number of other local initiatives, we give people something to come together around. It offers an alternative, and something of a road map for how we might move towards a better way of existing together. That's really hard, and the road map isn't clear. But I think what we do is say: there is another way, and it is possible. And we invite people to come with us to create it.

05 Where are things now? There was a planned development next to the bakery.

For many years we worked on a large flagship development of the nine houses next to the bakery building. That row is owned by Liverpool City Council, so a lot of our work was with them and other partners to make it a reality. Then a few years ago the council did a U-turn: instead of transferring the row to us, as we'd agreed for many years, they put it on the open market to private developers. We still put in a bid, and frustratingly our bid was in line with the successful bids. But it was sold to a private developer, which we found out earlier this year.

That was really, really hard for us as a team and as a membership. Years of dedication and hard work went into that scheme, and into what we'd hoped and dreamed together for those buildings. It's taken us a while to take stock and re-centre ourselves. But none of that work is lost. We've learned so much and developed so much along the way, and we go again, with a renewed mission. The vision was always for the neighbourhood. Over the last few years that row of nine homes became our focus, as it needed to. But it's been refreshing to step back and ask, what actually is our vision? It's more than nine homes. It's neighbourhood-wide, and we have other buildings in the pipeline. It'll be a slightly different approach, but we're still absolutely committed to retrofitting the whole community.

06 Is this the future you were dreaming of?

I'll answer personally, because it means different things to different people - to people who live here, or who've worked on the project longer than I have. I've been here six years. Yes and no. There are magic moments in every day, and there are small wins, and there are beautiful, beautiful things happening. They're small and often feel invisible to other people, but they're here and they matter. They're all part of building what we're doing, brick by brick.

But it's undeniable how hard it is. We're working in a system that's set against us. We were talking earlier about market rates and the cost of retrofit - when you use national standards and metrics, it doesn't stack up here. Investors look at it and say, why on earth would you spend more than the value of the house to retrofit it? So it's hard. Really hard. But sometimes the best things are the hardest, and it highlights the work that needs doing rather than being an obstacle. It shows up the systemic issues, and those become part of what we do.

07 What makes you happy?

Being outside, in nature. And being in a space and using all your senses to understand a place.

08 What would you tell the people of this country?

That an alternative future is possible, and that we have to believe that to make it happen. And if we don't, it won't.

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