THIS WAS
TOMORROW

# PAUL CHATTERTON

*Co-founder and resident, LILAC*

In conversation with Enrico Policardo
LILAC, Leeds
14/05/2026

*Edited from the recorded conversation.*

### 01 What is utopia for you?

I think it's about making practical, hopeful interventions in the present. Making the future begin. For me it's like prefiguration - be the change you want to see, Gandhi and all that. All the amazing stuff we dream about: let's make it happen now. Because you don't want a deferred utopia, where things will get better at some point. So something like LILAC is: how can we fast-forward the future into the present? Try stuff out, experiment. That's utopia - people trying things, failing, experimenting. Hopefully.

### 02 Jess Steele at Hastings Commons talks about "sustained impatience".

Yes - because that impatience keeps you wanting to break through business as usual. It cannot keep being this way. It's that Rob Hopkins, Transition Towns approach: let's just do stuff, now. There's a phrase: think big, start small, act now. You can't make your whole vision at once. Jess has a vision of community-owned assets all across Hastings; we want to see a hundred LILACs across Leeds. You might not see them in your lifetime, but you might plant the seeds. It's a bit like Rebecca Solnit's Hope in the Dark: maybe all we're doing is creating the conditions for the next generation. But someone's got to prepare the soil. And then things take their course, because sometimes you can't make them happen, and you get frustrated. I'm personally really frustrated that LILAC was only one. How do you make more? How do you break through the deadlock of finance and land ownership and the volume builders - Barratt, Persimmon? Sometimes you just have to regroup and wait for better times.

## 03 Who are you, and how did LILAC come about?

LILAC is thirteen years old now. I'm an urban geographer - I've worked in universities all my life, at Leeds University for over 25 years. I'm currently Professor of Urban Futures, which is quite a grand title, but it just means I've done lots of civic activism for years, and LILAC is one of those projects.

The great thing about LILAC is that it was genuinely co-produced by a bunch of us who, fifteen years ago, thought: there's got to be more to life than this. We wanted to bring up our kids somewhere really cool, and show there's a different way to live. So we sat around, visited projects, gathered our thoughts. That took two or three years, which isn't that long - lots of groups doing utopian projects stay in the thinking stage and never get past it. But we wanted to bring our kids up here, so there was a lot of work.

## 04 What made it happen?

A lot of hard work and perseverance, and a bit of luck. At the end of the Labour government we got a grant, we found a builder who used straw bale, we found this site, and after the 2008 financial crisis everything was a bit cheaper. We were the right people at the right time. Co-housing was starting to be a big thing and everyone was aware of the housing crisis, so we became the poster child of the movement. Government ministers came asking how to get more of these; people were throwing money at us. When the coalition came in in 2010 with its big localism agenda, they saw us as local communities doing localism.

But a lot of it is storytelling. We told our story well. The planning committee was used to men in suits telling them a story just to get something through and make a buck. With us they said: this is amazing, this is different. Afterwards they came up and said, we want one of these in our ward. We'd done a lot of work telling them who we were and why: we want to tackle climate change, we want a really good community, we want something

genuinely affordable. We told them about our financial model - homes whose value is linked to wages, not house prices - and they thought, that's different, that's risky for you, that's cool.

### 05 So the lesson for others is: tell your story to the right people?

Like anything that succeeds, you've got to tell a good story about what you're doing and why. This is about utopia - so describe that utopia to people, and how it'll be great for them. Show them the vision, in pictures, in words. In these quite unhopeful times people want inspiring examples. Now we exist, people love coming here, because they can see: oh, this is what you mean. It's not actually that difficult.

And we're quite different from a lot of places you've probably visited, because we're right in the middle of a very ordinary urban area. You can jump out of something very traditional into something very different. Often the really nice examples are remote, or rural. I think it's good to do inspiring projects in quite low-income areas - there are lots of overlooked towns in the UK where you could do really great things. Pioneers tend to be a bit middle-class and want to live in nice places, so there's still a bit of gentrification. We need to make sure utopia isn't just about gentrifying, because that's the easy route: a bunch of pioneers with some money do something nice in a nice area.

### 06 Do you feel the weight of being an example?

Understandably, for a lot of people - me too, sometimes - it's: we've done it, we've got a nice place to live. Many people bought into it just because they wanted to live here, and that's fine. But in the collaborative housing sector we've spent years asking what stops us scaling up. A lot of it is practical: land and finance. There isn't land available, and there isn't access to development

finance or mortgages - high street banks won't lend on this. Then there's the wider culture of how people see themselves, though I think that would shift if there were different products on the market. Most of what's on the market is Barratt or Persimmon estates, with a space for your car outside your front door.

For me it's the political economy. It's the corporate lock-in of a few firms that control how housing is provided. They're not really interested in providing housing. They're interested in creating a product that makes money, and that product happens to be a house. And the effects on our wellbeing of poor housing and poor places - lack of services, public transport, green space - are huge.

And when we built LILAC it was genuinely more affordable. Build costs were about £1,000 a square metre. Now, with all the crises piling up, it's about £3,000 or £4,000. I honestly don't know how you'd build an affordable product now, in 2026, without a lot of grants. I'm a bit stuck. Unless there's a magic money tree. Supply chains, materials, labour - everything's got very expensive.

### 07 If you could move a few pieces on the board, what would you do?

Community wealth building. You create a circular economy in a place - which I think Jess is doing in Hastings - with local manufacturing, local supply chains, local labour. That's how you bring costs down. Leeds is quite expensive now, so there aren't many cheap buildings. But if you start creating local labour, local products, local materials, you almost create a parallel, community economy. That's the exciting bit. As soon as you engage with the mainstream economy, it's super expensive: global supply chains, corporate profits.

You can't change a house by changing a house. You change a house by changing the city. You need a broader municipal strategy - you've got to take over the city council. A citywide plan for releasing land, creating local labour.

### 08 That feels paralysing for an ordinary person.

It's a massive task. The Overton window is getting smaller - or shifting baseline syndrome - there aren't enough good examples around, so people don't even know there's an alternative for them. People who come here do lobby their council. As an individual you can go to your councillors and say, we want one of these, make some land available. But we can't underestimate how broken the UK political sphere is. There are probably more openings in other countries. Vienna is the classic brilliant example, but that took decades of left-leaning parties running the city with a plan for changing the whole city. You need that kind of municipal battle to change how housing is provided at scale. Otherwise you get these little projects - not even micro, nano projects. We can network and connect, like a many-headed hydra popping up. But.

And we were in the media all the time. Big front pages: LILAC is the housing of the future, why doesn't everybody live like this? That's nice. But ultimately four or five big companies - Taylor Wimpey, Persimmon, Barratt - control housing. And then there are second homes, private renting, right to buy. Look at Leeds city centre - all the cranes. That's international, speculative finance building build-to-rent flats.

### 09 What's the missing step?

Connecting people with the structures of power. People have to organise, to be collective. We've lost that art in Britain, to an extent - it's been forty or fifty years since Thatcher. It took a long time to erode those connections, and

I don't know what the road back is - or the road forward - because people have become so atomised and disenfranchised. I think these little examples plant the seed, but then we have to connect them to a strategy.

The Gramscian approach is really interesting, because we haven't got those counter-hegemonic institutions any more, putting forward a counter-narrative. Even colleagues in the housing world are a bit entranced by the prospect of corporate investment. But for me, we're building a housing movement. That's quite a big thing: politicising housing. Not everybody at LILAC wants to do that - we're not a political party - but we're all political with a small p. All the institutions that would have been on our side - the church, community groups, the trade unions - created those counter-narratives. It makes me think we should try harder. It's good to be reminded. I've been trying to do this for ten years and I'm still asking: how do we break through nationally? There's the Community Land Trust movement, the co-housing network, everyone's lobbying for change, grassroots groups fighting for resources.

### 10 And it all seems to rely on individuals, who burn out. Do you know any better?

Let's break it down. There's a strategy for change. On the people side, we've got to collectivise and organise - and that takes community organisers. Whenever it's happened - Italy in the seventies - it relied on people organising. So we need some of those. Then we need people inside institutions changing the rules and the funding to support those demands. We need to get people into power. It worked a little with Ada Colau in Barcelona, but it took a long time to build a social movement and get people elected, so you could do that dual-power thing. And if it all rests on one personality without a proper strategy, she'll burn out. So: organise your communities, get some people into power so demands become resources and policy, and then build local infrastructure. I mean literally firms that build houses, energy

companies, food producers. Then you start to create a parallel, community economy that can provide for people. There's all this thinking about universal basic services. It's what we had a few decades ago: the welfare state protected you, and that allowed you to be creative. But there's a lot of surveillance now, a lot of misinformation, a lot of oppression.

### 11 People seem more stuck and fearful than ten years ago.

Look at what we're dealing with since Covid: Israel and Palestine, Iran. It's polycrisis - climate and ecological breakdown, militarisation, surveillance. You only just recover from one crisis when the next one hits. The tail end of one collides with the start of the next, and there's no space in between to regather. It's not permanent crisis yet, but it's chronic. You don't have time to recover, to strategise, to think about what to do next. You move from strategising to just surviving. We've never really had that in the West. […] The West is becoming like the rest of the world - finally. And politicians will be slow to catch up with that reality, because we're "the West", we're "developed".

People are understandably very anxious. Scientists talk about tipping points. There's a sense that the next thing is going to happen - food collapse, a pandemic - but we don't know what it means.

### 12 How does it come back to housing?

Quite importantly. Housing is the fundamental shelter that keeps us human. If you have a place where you feel safe, you can go out into the world and explore.

## 13 Is this the future you were dreaming of?

In terms of a community - this place - yes. But the future I was dreaming of was being part of a big national housing movement, changing places, with hundreds of projects like this. That was the dream. And it is one parallel future - it's out there. Maybe what you've seen on your travels is that future, connecting us all. But from one single point you don't see it. There aren't enough points on the map - maybe thirty. We need three thousand, three hundred thousand. Like co-housing in Denmark - everywhere.

I suppose I've got another ten years of working at this, and I've got a bit of a plan. In ten years I'd like to see major civic infrastructure, a local circular community economy that can deliver these projects. Reclaiming some space. And I think crisis provides opportunity, because people are more receptive to big ideas now. Ten years ago, if you said things weren't working, people said, things are fine. And all the solutions are out there - technical and social. We know how to organise, we know how to build. So why aren't things better?

It's a good time to make change, but also a bad time, with AI and misinformation. Generative AI is a game-changer. We could use it for things like WikiHouse - open-source housing, democratic decision-making. But we're also entering a phase where we don't know what's real any more. For a lot of young people, life is a high-rise flat, not leaving the house, food delivered, gaming or scrolling - what Yanis Varoufakis calls cloud capitalism, everything mediated by four or five tech giants. That's very dystopian. But he also sees potential: using their own systems, hacking them from within. Aaron Bastani calls it fully automated luxury communism. It goes back to the Italian workerists, Hardt and Negri, the commons. All of us doing this creates a common pool of resources and knowledge, and if we keep it open source and keep sharing, something must come of it. It hasn't yet. It's as if we've got the hardware but not the operating system to connect it all. Community

governance is really difficult. Lots of people are organising, but we're not very good at making decisions together. There are new methods like sociocracy, but they're hard to manage.

### 14 What would you tell people who want to do something like this tomorrow?

Think big, start small, act now. We've all got our big dreams. What's the first step towards that dream? Get together with some people and work out what that first step is. Everyone can do that, online or offline. Dig out some alternatives, visit some projects, ask people what a good example would be, and start planning: what would a five-year strategy look like? People can visit all the places you've been and say, how could we have one of these? And advocate for it. Demand it. Be realistic - demand the impossible. That's the nice thing about these times: the boundaries are being breached everywhere, so you can just ask for something else.

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