THIS WAS
TOMORROW

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In conversation with Enrico Policardo
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Edited from the recorded conversation.

01 Who are you, where are we, and how would you describe this place to someone with no idea?

Rob Higgs, Trevone Quarry, Cornwall, south coast. What I originally wanted was just to buy a bit of land - a gorgeous bit of Cornwall - store scrap metal for sculpture, and get a load of people making sculptures. To replicate the freedom of the community I'd found in Ponsharden boatyard, which was: rent a bit of gravel by the water and do what you like with your life, as long as you pay the rent. Such a simple model, but so much creative freedom, and so many cool people came out of it. So, recreate that artist community, with very little thought for the environment beyond "plant trees everywhere, that'll be fine".

02 When was this?

2009. Then I became a lot more disillusioned with the art world. […] There was the environmental crisis and the refugee crisis - I was doing a lot in Calais - so my attention moved onto the system: the environmental crisis, biodiversity.

The practical model was: get a bit of land, possibly brownfield, like a derelict quarry. People build their own workshops - Trevone pays for the materials, they build it. "Apocaloptimists" was the phrase I had. I don't like the term Mad Max crew, but people understand it: if it all goes to pot, who do you want around? If you're building a village, who's there? It's not traditional craft, a carpenter and a potter - it's who can get stuff working. Power tool repair, the blacksmith, recording studios, musicians. How to have a lovely time with a bunch of people who can fix and sort out everything.

Then the environmental side grew. We found out the wet woodland was temperate rainforest, which is an incredibly rare habitat, so we started restoring it. Before anyone lived here, we did the main version: ten or fifteen

self-build business units. People don't pay rent for as long as it takes to pay off their labour on the building - six months, maybe five years, depending what they've done. Then they pay a really low rent, because they built it and it didn't cost much. That's the viability: a way to share it with lots of people, without money and without a big upfront cost.

Then we got planning enforcement - multiple times, and a big one five years ago that threatened to evict everyone. Nineteen eviction notices. We appealed on about 96 grounds, went to a public inquiry and represented ourselves, which was really stressful - and we won everything. The council said people were living everywhere and the units were too beautiful - they were homely, so they could be lived in, so they were residential. So we argued: if they're residential, they're live-work, which is allowed. And we ended up with residential planning permission for live-work units. […] The rent funds what had become much more important: nature restoration, species reintroduction, wetland creation, woodland work, orchards, food forests. By then we'd moved into full-time environmental activism.

The go-to-London-and-get-angry creative activism was very adversarial. Everything here was meant to be non-adversarial, until the council made it adversarial. Once that passed, the question was: how do you be the change you want to see? How do you create a model within the current land ownership system where landowners might be tempted to share their land and do okay out of it - a win-win, where the landowner is covered and doesn't get stuck with enforcement, and people can move in and have a nice time without being a nightmare for the person who's taken the risk […]. Which is a big problem for anyone trying it in the UK, because there's no sensible policy.

So I ended up a planning activist, in a way. In my opinion planning is one of the gatekeepers stopping a mass transition to a more sustainable way of life, the massive changes the climate and biodiversity crisis demand. Everyone

wants to buy a little bit of land, work a little, grow the veg. The lockdown dream. […]

So that's where we are: a nature reserve - though "reserve" sounds passive; it's conservation, restoration, food forest - combined with an intentional community trying to live lightly on the land, but not perfectly. Plus an industrial estate of nano-businesses. Nature, residential and industrial. Can those three, which planning keeps completely separate, happen in the same place? Can a beautiful nature reserve with biodiversity net gain also be an industrial estate? Can you put caravans inside a rewilding programme, instead of the usual us-or-them attitude? It doesn't need to be perfect. It just needs to be less bad than the alternative: intensive agriculture, a bit of industry, and everyone living in town, or in holiday homes round the edges.

03 What went to plan, what didn't, what's amazing and what's hard?

What went to plan was blending the free creative community of the boatyard with another one next door, where a guy on a big old farm rents twenty or so little sheds - do what you like. The skill and creativity he's let coalesce there is incredible. That's worked. Nature, I thought, just leave it to it - as long as you don't farm it, it gets better. It turned out to be much more hands-on. We're a keystone species. People talk about bringing back wolves, bison, megafauna - we can get on with that work ourselves, use the tractor as a mechanical mammoth, emulate the lost animals. Woodland management takes a lot more than I expected, but it's lovely and good fun, and it brings the community together in work days and volunteering and deep nature connection, which is what Sophie is working on. Doing stuff, and falling in love with it.

What's rarer here: I don't even like the phrase "intentional community" - it has that cult overtone, as if we've all agreed on some intention. What about just loads of people living lightly and having a nice time? Community is a fundamental need, and if you don't meet it, because you want an island and a fortress, you'll be unhappy. What I'd like to think is unique here is not being so uptight about shared ideology, collective decision-making, endless meetings, bickering about whether we can have a trampoline or what colour to paint the common room - all those long entrenched feuds you hear about. The boatyard model is: pay your rent and do what you like. It's an industrial area - if someone wants to grind all night because they're fixing up a boat, everyone can say "can you stop?", but it's an industrial unit. There was a very free element to that.

What I find hard is ending up being the landlord, the naysayer - "could you move your car, please". I'm not assertive about asking for what I want person to person. In activism I'm fine - demanding things of the UN, I feel comfortable and self-righteous. But "would you mind doing this, because it's mine and I'm the boss" - that hierarchical stuff is horrible. Calling yourself the custodian or caretaker is nonsense: you're not acknowledging that if you want people there, they're there, and if you don't, you say so. That's not fair to people who don't have that power. I don't like the power imbalance, but I don't dislike it enough to say, you lot do what you want. So it's a benign dictatorship, which is uncomfortable. I consult everyone, I try to work out what's best for "the good of the village" - a phrase people here use, which is lovely - but it's still my say-so.

Everyone pays £6 a week into a pot, including us, and that's spent on what needs doing for the good of the village, including the more-than-human: the temperate rainforest restoration. But I end up managing it. So I'm the boss,

the landlord, the naysayer, the owner, the social engineer and the benign dictator. It's a lot of work, it's tiring, and I want to work out how to make myself obsolete - how the thing can run without us.

04 How do you get there?

Skill-sharing as much as possible. In Calais we talked to an anarchist about a hierarchy of obsolescence. There's no such thing as zero hierarchy: whoever knows how stuff works and puts the effort in runs it - but everyone who knows how it works is desperately trying to find someone to skill up and pass it on to. So it's whether you cling to power or really try to train others. For me, the answer is to train up as many people as possible through the work and volunteering, see who steps up, and as my grip loosens, whoever has the passion comes in. Hopefully someone, or a collective, with similar values, and I think I can trust that. Pass on as much skill and knowledge to as many people as possible, so they either go off and start their own communities, or step up and run this one - with a bunch of elders, recreating that village thing.

05 Lots of people feel intimidated by building things. How do you get them to a level where they can?

At first, people build their own infrastructure: their power, their water, a compost toilet or long drop, a little shower, a porch on the caravan, fixing their bike. Some people smash that out straight away because they're already skilled, like Oli, and then there's paid work if they want it, helping others or doing communal things - a bike shed, the borehole, chainsaw tickets. People who are less confident skill up by doing their own stuff until they're ready. If I need help with scaffolding, I put a shout out on the WhatsApp group: scaffolding work, a couple of hours paid - or come along and I'll teach you, free training. The individual decides when volunteering becomes chargeable work. In practice, people don't often take up voluntary labouring. Nature

connection, they're much more likely to. Everyone's busy and tired and in a cost-of-living, everything crisis. Free time is a luxury young people just don't have.

And the motivation comes with the seasons. A load of people move up in March - oh my God, heaven, the quarry, the sun, the caravan. Last year I told quite a few: you might want to think about firewood, because in October and November it'll rain every day for three months and be miserable, and logs cost a fortune. Then I thought, why am I stressing on their behalf when they're not stressed? They'll stress about it in November. And they did - they all fitted burners frantically in November. Once it's raining, it's a terrible time to fit a burner, but it all got done. There's a need, you meet the need. I've run out of gas - how do you change a gas bottle? Squirrels are eating through my cable - I didn't know there was such a thing as braided hose. As soon as you want cheese on toast, you're immediately interested in squirrel-proof braided gas hose. The nerdery comes through necessity.

And you want to learn, at the point where you're cold and your mate's installed a burner and you think, oh my God, I could do that. Sophie said the other day she thought she could clad a Luton van with a scaffold frame and a roof garden. Just that she could imagine the concept and the workflow is, to me, a real success of empowerment. People at different stages, years in, aged from sixty-something down to their twenties - so many skills and so many ways it's been done that you can pick what seems attainable. If something's beyond you, someone else can help, labour for labour, or Trevone can pay someone a few hours to mentor you - not do it for you. Step one: bring in twelve breeze blocks. Phone the tin place for a curved sheet. Then wait till they come back. If it takes six months because they're daunted, it doesn't matter. There's no time limit.

06 So it works as a model?

Very much. The only problem - and it's a big only - is that it doesn't fit the current legal framework. […] Development is either material development or change of use, and both need planning. Change agricultural land to residential, educational, industrial - you're in contravention immediately. Build anything permanent - even a caravan that looks like it hasn't moved for a while - same.

07 Why is there so much resistance?

The single major reason: if anyone can get a bit of agricultural land, build a house and live on it, why would anyone spend their life paying a 25-year mortgage? It messes up everything. The whole system is based on the value added to a house. The land this building is on cost maybe £400 or £500, freehold, once, at agricultural rates - and that's at the top end, because we're in posh Cornwall. The building cost about two grand, out of skips, plus a new fibre-cement farm roof so it wouldn't leak. Call it five grand all in. Get planning by appeal and it's worth a quarter of a million, half a million, because it's a house in the country. That's £245,000 added by a legislative fact. That's what's at stake. The fear is no one would need a job or a mortgage and there'd be no farmland left - contradicted by the fact that about 1% of the UK is built on by housing. Include gardens and it's 4 or 5%. Golf courses are about the same. […]

Yes, there'd be some sprawl. But you could argue an urbanised countryside would have far higher biodiversity than an industrial agricultural one, because it would. But that's the resistance. Everyone wants their bucolic rolling green fields. There's still the attitude that if we let the public into the countryside, they'd ruin it - Nick Hayes's Book of Trespass. Whereas in Scotland you've got the right to roam, and Scandinavia has similar.

The other big one is building control, which, not unreasonably, sets minimum standards so people don't get slum landlords or blocks of flats collapsing on them. But it's a very broad brush. There are already exemptions - boats, all agricultural buildings. Farmers are trusted: if you build a barn that falls down and kills someone, there's already enough law to do you for manslaughter. So the solution is capping size, and requiring an independent structural engineer to say it won't fall down, or doing your own calcs, as I've had to for these guys.

08 What would a better system look like?

Have you heard of the Bologna pact? Rob Hopkins writes about it. Someone wanted to paint a park bench in Bologna and it took nine government departments to approve it. So they thought, this is nonsense, and set up something like a department of civic imagination. So imagine: I want to live on the land, create an artist community and a nature restoration project, here's what I'll do within so many years, can five people live on it? You set up a pact and nominate five independent guarantors you pay annually. They come for a day and write a simple traffic-light report: these people are lovely but they're procrastinating, though doing no harm; or they're smashing it; or they're speculative property developers; or they just wanted to live on the land with no plan and blagged the pact.

I'd have the Rivers Trust, the Woodland Trust, the Beaver Trust, a small business alliance, and someone from the arts - not Arts Council, it's too big, more like the head of the local art gallery or the university. Someone who can vouch: Jesus, everyone goes up there, our students are back and forth. Like a GP signing a passport. Like an MOT. And if your brief changes after five years - you've given up on rewetting and moved on to heritage pigs - you change your judges. It's no more open to abuse than an MOT or farm payments. You wouldn't have to restructure the planning system.

Same with building control. […] There's a desperate thirst for common sense. If those changes happened, it would be replicable. And imagine an obligation on big farms - if you can show you've got five affordable, creative nano-businesses in your workshops, a carpenter, a shipwright, someone fixing up boats, you get a tax break. There's no problem with the existing planning structure if there were the will. We're just irrelevant. We're fluff. It's broad-stroke legislation and we're caught as collateral.

09 What will it take to reach critical mass?

There are islands of cohesion happening everywhere already. People just doing it. That's my main thing: do it. We have this wonderful opportunity. […] But we're in one of the most privileged countries in the world. They don't beat you or tear-gas you. They don't threaten your family. […] You get polite, bureaucratic letters: you have 14 days to respond, here's a fee to appeal. […] The rights of the landowner are enshrined. […]

10 Is this the future you were dreaming of?

Me? Yeah, it's great. I'm so lucky to be in a position to do this. It feels like a guilty pleasure that I mustn't be too public about - we do what we want every day, we bimble about, it's paradise. We're living in absolute paradise, doing our creative stuff and getting by. It doesn't make money. That came from sculpture. […] bimbling about making totally unsellable stuff that everyone said would never work - and then, the ten thousand hours or a decade, whichever comes first, you get really good at it. Steampunk trended for a few years. So what still funds this, fifteen years on, is the money from loads of films and adverts - selling out for five years, quite deliberately.

11 Do you feel bad about it?

A little bit, both ways. But it was a real decision at the time. My punk twenty-year-old self had a very simplistic view of where money comes from. […] It was a really interesting ride, and in the end it was reassuring to know I'd been right: it's art as social washing, like greenwashing, buying kudos. I ended it. And all the waste in film, everything binned at the end.

12 Does art have a responsibility for the state of the world?

You can't separate it. You have to have an artistic, creative response to the climate crisis, the housing crisis, the mental health crisis, the loneliness crisis, the economic crisis, species loss, the more-than-human world. Everywhere you go it's creativity and freedom and storytelling. There's a lovely guy at the Woodland Trust who's taught me a lot about temperate rainforests, and he says society is split into gatekeepers and badgers. The badgers dig tunnels, ignore the boundaries, and everything happens underground. The gatekeepers stand at the gates on top: you can't come in. The NGOs, the bureaucracy, the farm payment scheme. But the gatekeepers are being tunnelled under the whole time, and half of them are now doing deals with the badgers. Art spans that. Creativity spans that. It's the end of that neoliberal, siloed view. Every organisation you look at is looking at complex chains of interconnection - in science, biology, mental health, the social. Everyone's saying, it's not quite as simple as that. So there's real hope.

Art just means creative, dynamic thinking. How could the solution not be creative? We'd like to think we move with our frontal cortex, our reasoning, but we don't. We move through our gut and our heart and our soul. That was always our activism: open the heart, and then they might listen to some facts. That's the purpose of art.

13 What makes you really happy?

It used to be scrap metal - rusty bits of metal. I loved the beauty of them, that's why I made things out of them. Then I realised it was oaks. I'm a bit embarrassed - I'm kind of in love with oaks. They're the most biodiverse, they're the best timber. I'd always spent my time in oak trees, lived on a boat made of oak, moved to an oak forest, and hadn't really noticed. I'd skive off from whatever I was doing to spend time in the woods, nurturing oaks, haloing them, bringing them on, admiring them. So the woods make me happiest, and serving them - not out of penance. […] - I feel I have to work every day to earn my place, which is a bit dysfunctional, but also lovely. Someone said activism is the rent you pay for living on this beautiful planet. Serving nature, and sharing that and inspiring others to do the same, is what really makes me happy. It feels like passing it on.

14 Anything else you'd like to say - a shout out to the nation?

Just do it. Get on with it. […] On a practical level, if you want to live communally, find a bit of land and get on it. You'll get eviction notices […]. People say, I want to do it, but how do I afford it? Find the loveliest bit of land, find out who owns it, ask them. Could we do this? Make a little leaflet and put it through the door. […] It can take five, ten, fifteen years of bureaucratic fighting, but it's getting easier. So get on with it. […] Life's too short not to. And skill-share with all the other people doing it.

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