

Artist-Led Housing: Summary and Recommendations Report

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Dr Jonathan Orlek (Senior Lecturer in Architecture, Liverpool John Moores University; Director, Studio Polpo)

About this Report

This report summarises outcomes from a collaborative PhD undertaken with The University of Huddersfield and East Street Arts, Leeds, between 2016 and 2020.¹ The research explored the provision of housing by arts and artist-led organisations, termed ‘artist-led housing’. This research involved an in-depth investigation of one case study (Artist House 45 in Leeds) over several phases and years, as well as a wider analysis of artist-led housing, encompassing historical and theoretical analysis, and a review of contemporary examples/practices. This summary and recommendations report is also an extension of a collective manifesto writing process for artist-led housing which involved iterative workshops with staff at East Street Arts and participants of ‘Out and About: The Future of Artist-Led Housing’ workshop, Site Gallery, CIQ Square, Sheffield, 2 July 2022. This report makes several recommendations based on the research summary and outcomes, directed towards at policymakers and project initiators/commissioners.

“A lot of the feedback [from artists] was that [both] living and working spaces were really important. So, we were looking at an array: what is the offer for workspaces that are professionalising artists? What is the offer for people on low income in Leeds as far as housing is concerned? And what is the option for mixing it so there is more possibility for having spaces that can do both – that adds to practice, adds to audiences but equally adds to artists livelihoods?”

Karen Watson MBE, Co-founder East Street Arts

Introduction to Artist-Led Housing

1. Groups of artists who have typically run studio, gallery and learning spaces are extending their spatial provision to include housing

Within the arts and artist-led sector it is common to discuss artist-led studios, artist-led publishing, artist-led education and artist-led project spaces. These terms describe the occupation and production of spaces outside of, or in addition to, existing commercial, state or cultural institutional provision, by groups of artists. The emergence of numerous housing projects by groups of artists within the last 20 years suggests that it is useful to add ‘artist-led housing’ to this (non-exhaustive) list.²

Recommendation: Artist-led housing should be recognised alongside other types of spatial provision by groups of artists.

2. Artist-Led organisations are providing housing for both pragmatic and creative reasons

Motivations for undertaking housing projects, expressed by artist-led organisations, relate to pragmatic needs, such as housing unaffordability, difficulties moving out of student style accommodation, and the challenges of paying both rent and studio space. Additionally, artist-led organisations are motivated by critical and creative opportunities which engaging with housing provision creates, including the creation of wider, or more visible, roles for artists rooted within communities; opportunities for supporting new practices which are made possible from deliberately blurring living and working spaces; and the direction of critical art practices towards the housing sector and crisis.

Recommendation: Both pragmatic and creative benefits of artist-led housing should be promoted and critiqued.

The 'Dual Status' of Artist-Led Housing

3. Artist-Led Organisations are conceptualising their housing projects as both houses and collective artworks

Artist-led housing projects exist as both collective artworks and interventions within the housing market and sector.

Recommendation: Because of their dual status artist-led housing projects can be thought about and commissioned as '1:1 artworks' or inhabited sculptures.

4. This dual status differentiates artist-led housing from other community-led and participatory housing projects

Current artist-led housing projects do not coalesce into a coherent housing movement with shared characteristics, demands and goals. Artistic strategies – such as open-ended processes, chance encounters and improvisation – aim to foster a permanent process of questioning rather than align or slot into pre-determined models and structures.

Recommendation: Processes of open-endedness, continual experimentation, chance, improvisation, and so forth, should be supported within artist-led housing projects.

Design, Management and Programming of Artist-Led Housing

5. Artist-led housing can allow artists to live in an area for an extended duration of time

The length of time artists live in an artist-led housing project varies. In some instances, residents stay for around a month at a time, in others they live in perpetuity. When initiating organisations support artists to be resident within neighbourhoods for extended periods of time, this can create opportunities for occupants to act as engaged residents within local communities and urban transformations as well as practicing artists.

Recommendation: Initiating organisations of artist-led housing should support a range of temporal living arrangements, including long-term occupation.

6. Initiating organisations are actively involved in the programming of artist-led housing activities and managing 'handover' processes between residents

Artist-led housing project often involve multiple phases and consecutive artists in residence. This requires strategies for retaining and building on previous knowledge, practices, and community-based collaborations to be developed. These strategies are specific to each artist-led housing project and context and form part of the project.

Recommendation: Mechanisms for retaining and 'handing over' knowledge, practices and community-based relationships between residents/phases should be established by the initiating or commissioning arts organisation.

7. Experimental living and hosting arrangements connect to and support artistic practices

An integration of alternative/experimental forms of living into artistic work is often actively supported by initiating organisations. Experimentation with living arrangements can support art practices which involve the hosting of social encounters. Co-living arrangements can also have wider (non-art-specific) benefits, such as the sharing of childcare.

Recommendation: Initiating organisations of artist-led housing should support a range of spatial living arrangements, including co-living opportunities.

8. Artist-led housing projects support and produce a wide range of social, participatory and economic practices

This can include the provision of a long-term stipend to residents, irrespective of formal creative outputs and the establishment of mutual exchange systems to create public programmes within local communities.

Recommendation: The economic models used to develop and sustain artist-led housing should be designed to present an alternative to private financial speculation on housing.

9a. Artist-led housing can arise from new build developments as well as the occupation/adaption of existing housing stock

In some projects, arts organisations have built new bespoke housing (or aspire to do so). In other examples arts organisations have occupied and modified existing, often vacant, housing stock.

9b. Some artist-led organisations have ambitions to provide mass housing

Recent artist-led housing projects have often been pilots and/or limited to individual houses, usually accommodating a range of creative practitioners, such as visual artists, sound artists, writers, performers, architects, sociologists and researchers. The ambitions of some arts and artist-led organisations are not limited to this and opportunities for larger scale projects are being explored, to allow for a wider range of tenancy and residency options/combinations.

9c. Artist-led housing provision does not need to be in competition with social housing provision

In some projects social housing providers make housing available for artists in residence, in collaboration with arts and artist-led organisations. In this scenario initiating organisations are often, and should be, required to continually justify the rationale and social benefits of this. There are many other models for developing artist-led housing projects. For example, organisations can establish agreements with local authorities to occupy and renovate vacant housing, with the aim of returning it to social housing after a fixed period of time. New permanent (and permanently affordable) artist-led housing projects can also arise through community land trust (CLT) mechanisms and collaborations.

Recommendation: Management/occupation models which put artists-in-residence in tension with social housing tenants should be avoided.

Evaluating and Critiquing Artist-Led Housing

10a. Existing frameworks for evaluating/critiquing artist-led housing projects are limited

It is difficult to evaluate or critique artist-led housing projects from a distance. Doing so has a tendency to artificially separate artist-led housing projects, analysing them as either social processes or material objects, in contradistinction to the dual status described above.

10b. Embedded ethnographic approaches are a way forward for evaluating and critiquing artist-led housing projects

Embedded evaluations and criticisms of artist-led housing projects can involve following artist-led housing projects over an extended duration of time to allow live and reflexive methods to influence future activity. While researchers/evaluators should not be directly responsible for the delivery of core tasks, their work can evolve alongside and feed into project/programme development.

Recommendation: The evaluation and critique of artist-led housing projects should involve embedded research approaches.³

Notes

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Comments and feedback on this report are welcome.
Please email: j.l.orklek@ljmu.ac.uk

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1. Jonathan Orlek, 'Moving in and Out, or Staying in Bed: Using Multiple Ethnographic Positions and Methods to Study Artist-Led Housing as a Critical Spatial Practice' (PhD Thesis, University of Huddersfield, 2021), <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/35521/>.

2. For a map of past, present and proposed artist-led housing projects in the UK and Ireland, see: <https://artistlivework.net/map/>

3. For more information on embedded research within arts contexts, see: <https://plant-er.net>