

# **PREFIGURATIVE INFRASTRUCTURES**

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# introducing prefiguration: Neoliberal Infrastructures

Everyday life in the modern world both resembles and is simultaneously completely distinct from any other time in history. Densely packed cities teem with a multiplicity of people that are increasingly dis-arranged by origin, or by the social or cultural values that were once complicit in the formal layout and demography of the city. Globalised economic drivers that often laid the foundations for the initial occupation and development of vast swathes of land, routinely reverse, pulling the rug beneath entire cities at the whim of changing fashion or competition from half a world away. The city drove the production of infrastructures early on, encouraging a life dislocated from subsistent consumption of resources such as land, water and light as well as natural processes such as circulation and decomposition (Swyngedouw, 2006, 21). Increasingly, however, formalised soft infrastructures are becoming apparent although not overly moralised this time – coming not from the church but from the economy. They are being solidified in policy, or economic investment as necessities for life. A compromise has been struck between democratised government and the broad network of infrastructures that, originating in the city, have now expanded their hold as de facto agents of ‘civilisation’ across much of the western world. The compromise sees infrastructures, both hard and soft, that have been based on capacity and demand models are gradually being encroached by complex neoliberal economic factors that enact charges instead of bills.

Consumer economies, once rudimentary, have grown in both scale and complexity to become dominant modes of production in the of the world-leaders. GDP calculations used to measure national performance and wealth are underpinned by national consumption (Investopedia.com, acc. 11/16). Governments enact policy in generally economic terms, that operate by manipulation of fiscal incentives and budgetary constraints with the implication of cultivating economic growth in any way possible. Governments are frequently held to ransom over faltering performance in the domestic economy, and specific financial agents related to infrastructure (specifically housing) are generally blamed as the initiators of the current economic recession (IMF.org, acc. 11/16). Neo-liberal consumer economies continue their consolidation

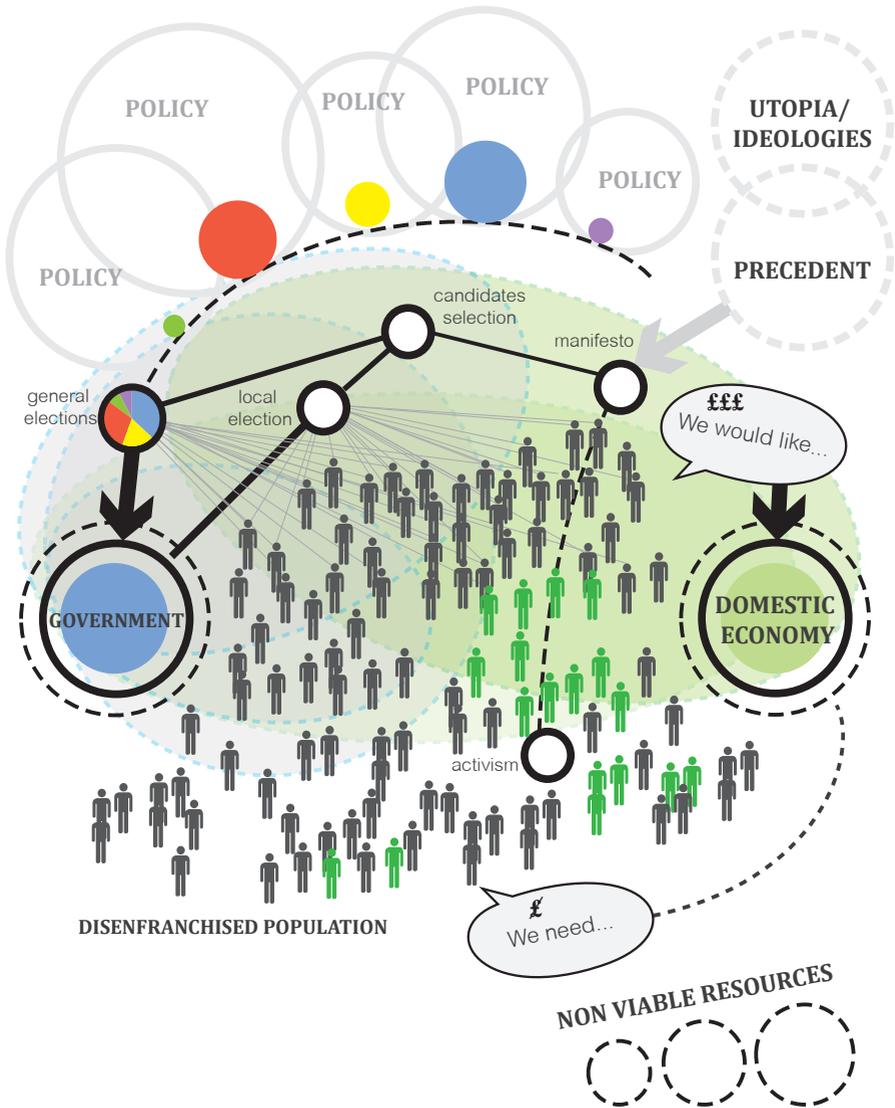


FIGURE 1: Diagram to demonstrate starting conditions, illustrating populations, relative infrastructure and prescribed feedback systems.

of influence on infrastructures by an ongoing process of acquisition and formalisation of physical resources and the absorption of alternative infrastructures. Concepts of intellectual property and copyright demonstrate a trend towards self-perpetuating 'rentier economies' whereby the creation and extraction of value is can only be sustained by challenging the principles of ownership and rights (to the the city / to modify) but by the imposition of myriad of small charges on the processes of living (BBC, 12/10/16)

While the processes of monopolisation continue, as long as this gradual incorporation of capital value has existed, it has always been mediated through government interventions which highlights a problem. The of a truly

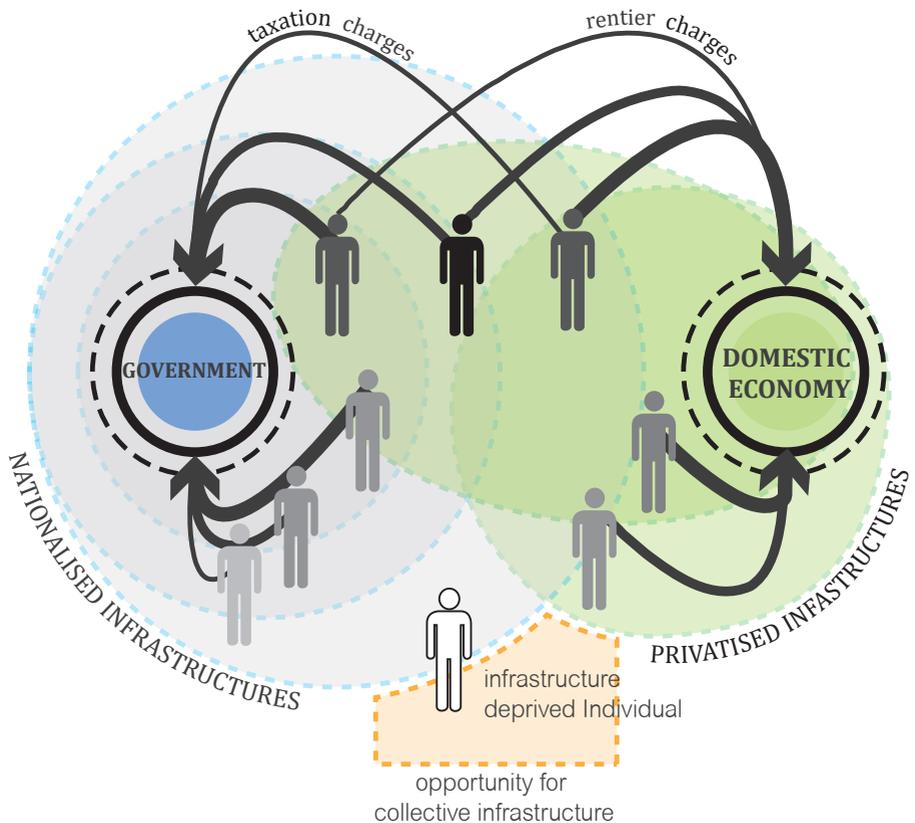


FIGURE 2: Diagram to demonstrate degrees of infrastructural provision, infrastructural 'gap' or edge highlighted in orange.

'free-market' ("omniscient") state as characterised by Adam Smith cannot exist due to whatever political checks and balances are imposed as trade tariffs or taxation or top down legislation, in the name of ideologies of 'fairness' within and between states (BBC, 2016). In present day democracies, such ideologies are tested in relation to dominant electoral groups and generally follow a predictable split between increasing and decreasing regulation (left and right). Although ideological institutions in the globalised world are generally centred on a neo-liberal economics (nationalisation of infrastructure is generally considered bad form) fair criticisms of the logic of supply and demand persist and neither governance, nor economy has proven successful in the avoidance of infrastructural gaps.

Perceived gaps or shortfalls in service, pockets of isolation from or deprived access to specific infrastructures is enough to generate grievances (Puig, Dec 2016) or some form of disenfranchisement, although it need not be equal to have an effect. A marxist analysis as defined by Althusser, anticipates the formation of a recursive relationship between individuals involved in the mode of production ('Base') and those involved in non-productive socio/cultural element ('Superstructure') (Hall, 29). Demonstrations of this fail routinely to generate a clear demographic (demonstration of a self-declared lumpen proletariat seems like a stretch of the imagination) and yet they have, to a large extent, underpinned ideologies and manifestos for political change in most places in the world for the last 100 years. Although not necessarily invalid they are obscure frames for active criticism of the status quo. In contrast participatory activism of reductive elements which has employed to greater success in the past 100 years acting under banners of anarchism, women's suffrage, counter-culture, civil rights and anti-war demonstrations even up to the protests of the Arab Spring in 2011. However, even in instances of effective protest, where legislation has been modified in response to the action taken, few societies have achieved broad, sustainable levels of satisfaction based purely upon on the government enacting something of these ideologies.

Naturally, the practice of demonstration has been in continuous evolution in this time, iterating from protest to protest, from situation to situation. While general rules might struggle to fit each individual instance of political motivation, implicit aims and objectives, arguably the "craft of protest", have been handed down the generations of protesters, in order to deal with the inherent slowness of the political system. Prefiguration is one of these tactics – born out of

likes of feminist activism in combination with an active drive to directly affect circumstances at the point of contact. It differs in that it bypasses traditional routes of change (party activism / formalisation of the movement and petitioning to political ideologies) in order to realise a prototype for change. Marianne Maeckelbergh discusses key elements of prefigurative practice in her essay 'Doing is Believing – Prefiguration as Strategic Practice in the Alterglobalization Movement', calling process into account instead of a more political scheme (2011). She asserts: 'prefigurative strategy involves two crucial practices: that of confrontation with existing political structures and that of developing alternatives, neither of which could achieve the desired structural changes without the other' (ibid. 15). The conceptual dualism between challenging and experimentation differs from other elements of demonstration due to the latter. Experimentation in the development of alternatives is a conceptual flourish that guarantee's the continued relevance and coherence of actors involved – it allows responses to be generated by a polyvalent community of individuals, so long as the goal, which may be either specific or broad in its scope is built on a common grievance (Puig, Dec 2016).

Necessarily relevant creations, instantiations of Prefiguration are going to become infrastructural. Alberto Corsin Jimenez states in his book 'The Right to Infrastructure: a Prototype for Open-Source Urbanism', that "[t]he process of infrastructuring makes visible and legible the languages, media, inscriptions, artefacts, devices, and relations... through which political and social agencies are endowed with... expressive capacity" (2014, 357). This is truly the exercising of a right to speech and voice, and more so, to live in a certain way that negates the grievance, and demonstrates its negation – the prototype clearly trumps the banner waving of movement politics and the compromise of party politics.

*Democracy, in other words, as a real 'infra-structure': an ongoing and deepening search, reinvention, and reappropriation—'autogestion', in Lefebvre's terms... of the radical and receding sources of political conviviality. There is therefore quite literally an infra-structure to every right to the city.*

(Jimenez, 357)

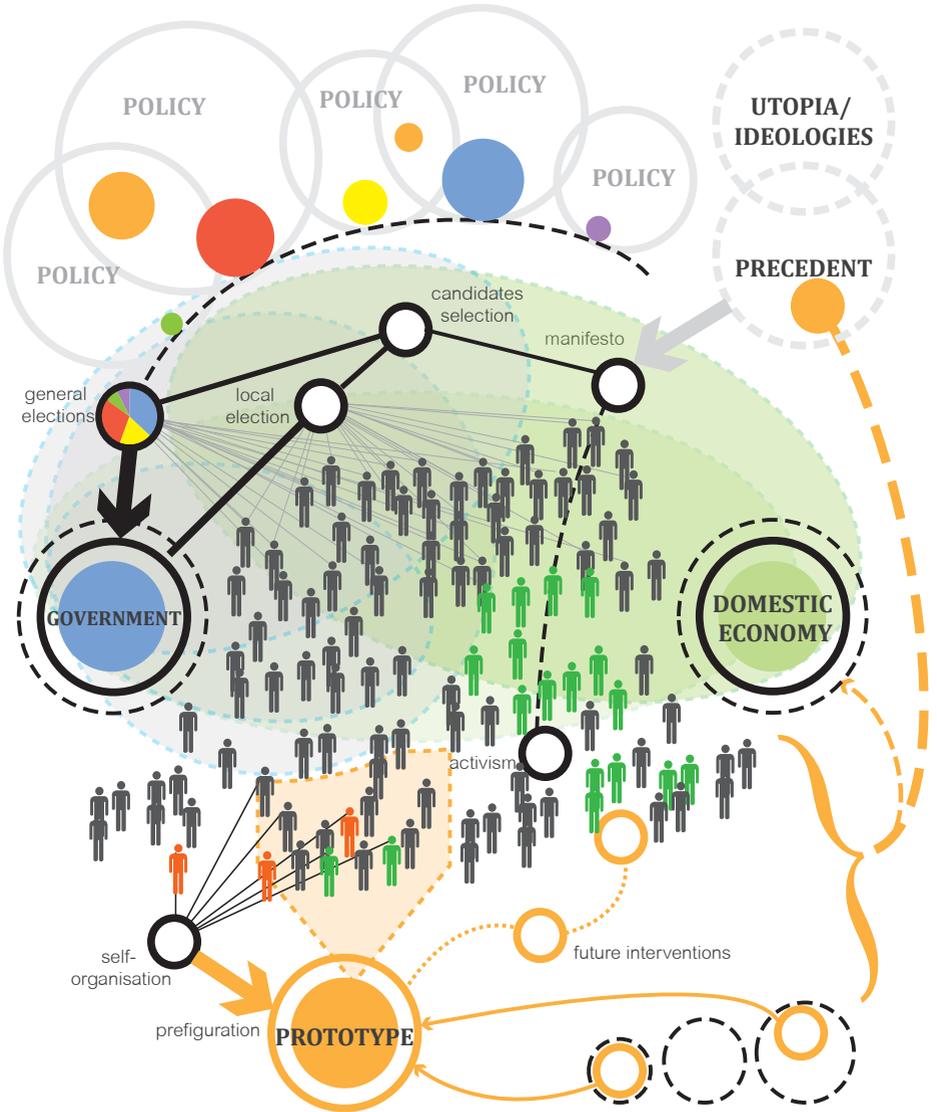


FIGURE 3: Diagram to demonstrate prefigurative action establishing a prototype infrastructure adjacent to starting conditions.

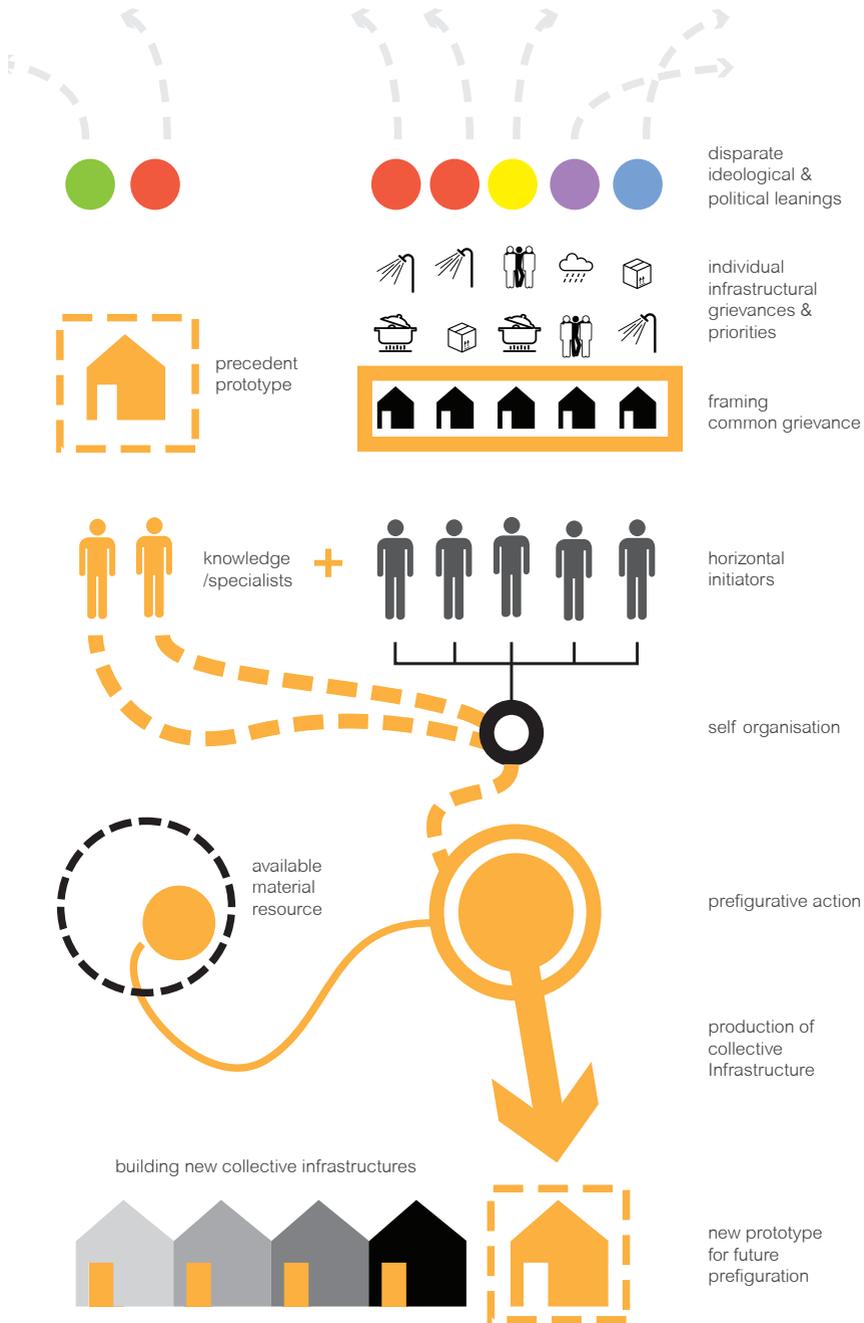
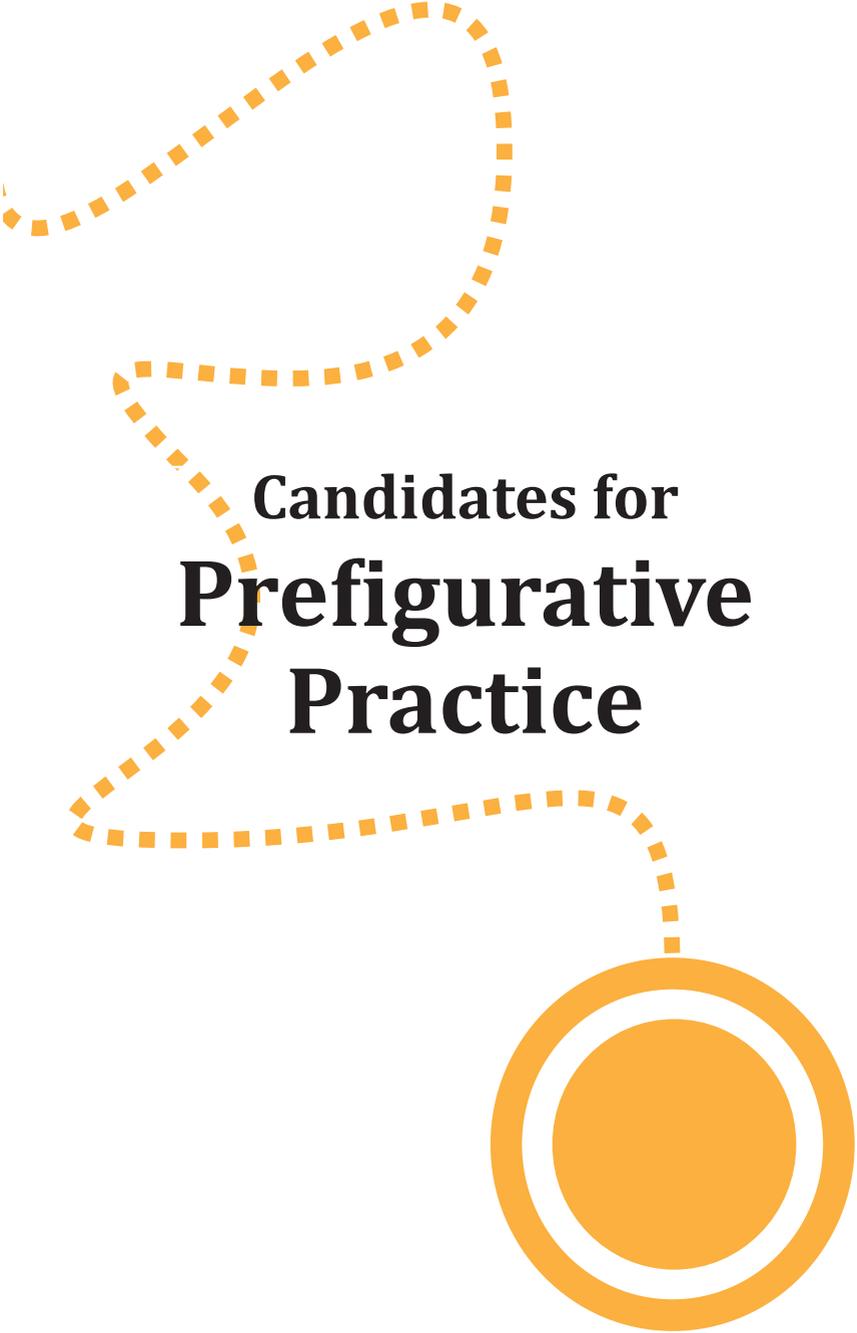


FIGURE 4: Breakdown of the prefigurative process applied to a housing infrastructure.,.



**Candidates for  
Prefigurative  
Practice**

# candidate for prefigurative practice: BaumanLyons Architects

PROJECT: Emmaus Leeds  
FRASTRUCTURE: Homeless Rehab., Shop, Cafe  
APPROACH: Single Actor / Limited Grant Funding.

Traditional architectural project with extremely tight budget for the reappropriation of an existing building to suit established processes of generating charity funding.





FIGURE 5,6,7: Existing Architecture before renovation took place.



Emmaus is a secular homeless charity with a focus on housing and re-skilling homeless individuals named as 'companions'. Companions follow an established model of repairing or reappropriating old furniture, as well as working in a cafe on site, to form revenue streams towards the upkeep of the buildings. BaumanLyons renovated a delapidated building under a traditional contract framework, but working with 1 third of the anticipated budget, achieving very high value for money as necessary.



FIGURE 8,9: New Cafe space provided, along with establishment of commercial / production facilities to facilitate generation of value as per the existing funding model for the charity.





FIGURE 10,11: Participatory action and construction were used to maintain minimal costs, consistent with the trust and responsibility given to new 'companions', following a process of repoliticisation and reintegration.

Aside from taking 'direct action' to make the scheme financially viable, Irene Bauman described the rigorous ethical values of the practice (resolved to maintain a stable permanent team such that zero lay-offs were made during the recession) being transcribed into the work, especially by process of coproduction. She described the architect "making tools rather than delivering buildings", in such a way that processes can be taught and learned in a non exclusive fashion - encouraging open source development of these items.



FIGURE 12,13: Experienced 'companion' furniture makers were employed on site to learn production process of building and participated in the layout of the production / repair facilities.

# potential prefigurative modification: 'Mass Bespoke Mk2'

While socially-minded traditional architectural projects do not necessarily qualify as prefigurative, BaumanLyons are noteworthy because they are working simultaneously to develop adaptive prototypes for a CNC milled framework for dwelling unit that, being extremely low-skilled to construct would crucially makes it possible to avoid the contractor in a contract, simply 'printing' the buildings out in a direct manner and assembling like a flat pack piece of furniture. Further development would see detailed designs becoming instantly scaleable and adapted to suit different locations as required.



FIGURE 14,15 : Future prototype interventions might use furniture-skilled companions to manufacture spaces from this method of bespoke framing as developed in house.



FIGURE 16 : The earliest example of the mass bespoke archetype, produced using a DIY cnc mill , for total cost of £30,000. Omission of contractors from the construction process created considerable budgetary savings over traditional contract forms.



# candidate for prefigurative practice: **Granby 4 Streets C.L.T.**

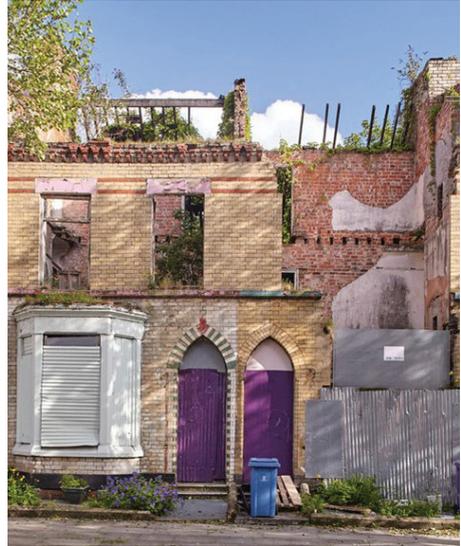
PROJECT: Granby 4 Streets Redevelopment Area  
INFRASTRUCTURE: Affordable Housing / Street Market  
APPROACH: Multiple Actor / Multiple Funding Channels

Establishment of a Community Land Trust for the urban regeneration of an abandoned neighbourhood in Liverpool, including the commission of Assemble architects who subsequently won the Turner Prize in 2015 for their work.





FIGURE 18,19: The triangular area of the 4 streets from Granby Street( in the centre) had been in decline for 50 years and had been utterly abandoned in the 1990. There are even rumours of its subjecteion to civic vandalism in the removal of windows and dormer roofs to accelerate the process of decay and urgency of redevelopment of this entire area.



A number of residents, some of whome had lived in the area their entire lives had long petitioned the council for regeneration funds but found it withheld due to the area having been allocated for full demolition. The CLT was formed after a prolonged search for initial deposits, that now has purchased 7 properties with funding for an additional 3. The Land Trust model requires overage clauses in contracts to prevent profiteering at their expense. The investment subsequently sparked redevelopment from 3 other Housing Associations.



FIGURE 20,21 Assemble assisted in the narrative of the scheme and demonstrated the ability to produce desirable, cost-efficient community-built prototypes from the derelict housing infrastructure.





FIGURE 22,23 Working on a method of generating 'valuable' elements for sale to fund workshop and community activities. These also found their way into the CLT houses which are otherwise spartan, but with spectacular attention to detail.

Lewis Jones of Assemble has noted that the irony of winning the Turner prize has been that it has spoilt the quiet activity of the workshop and construction offices (staffed by a single local handcraftswoman) and 1-2 members of assemble at any one time. I would argue that it has also spoilt the project as an example of prefiguration due to the infeasible amount of investment and interest generated in the short time after it was awarded. Before it was in the national spotlight, it performed very well as a prototype for future action.



FIGURE 24,25 The workshop formed the crux of the production of value, Assemble argue that it catalyses activity in the area, while the reinvigorated market on Granby Street developed awareness of the scheme and attracted further capital.

# failed prefiguration: Welsh Streets Housing Group



FIGURE 26,27,28 Artist and Activist Nina Edge of the 'WSHG' Project is effectively adjacent to the Granby Street projects. The Welsh Streets contain 450 houses in derelict streets that were similarly systematically abandoned by the council in the past 10 years. Despite the success on Granby, Nina is the last resident on her street and the situation has remained static for the past 3 years.



# candidate for prefigurative practice: **TransitionNetwork.ORG**

PROJECT: Transition Towns - Multiple Projects  
INFRASTRUCTURE: Multiple Infrastructures  
APPROACH Multiple - Networked Experimentation

An ongoing network project linking a large number of different actors around the world with the explicit aim of resolving problems of globalisation, peak oil, climate change and related social issues as they arise by implementing so-called 'transition towns'. The Network informs and organises a variety of localised bottom-up infrastructures such as local currencies, urban agriculture, community energy, social cafes and public events.





The Transition Network project is an open-ended community of actors around the world joining in a collaborative efforts of “just doing stuff” to establish new infrastructures, and economies to complement ideas of locality, low carbon emissions and solutions to social problems, in accordance with it’s aim of bottom-up development of urban areas all over the world from South America to Australia to Scotland. Local elements are self-organised and frequently experiment with new and varying scales and contexts.



FIGURE 31,32 The Totnes Pound has featured in TED lectures and has helped Totnes gain a reputation for this sort of (relatively middle class) activism. £t12,000 are now in circulation in and around Totnes.



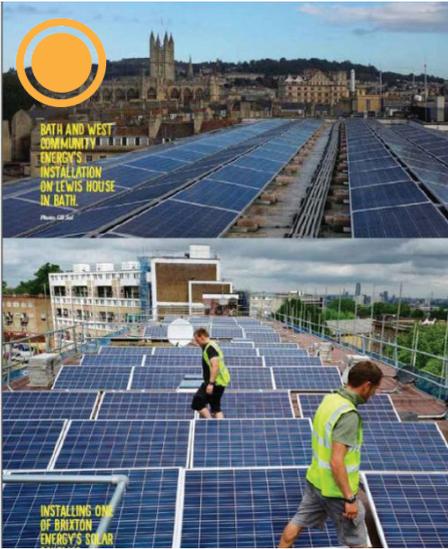


FIGURE 33,34 Community Solar Energy generation in Bath, and Street Potager (raised food-growing) beds in Liege, Belgium, demonstrate impressive situational relevance, indicating an effective bottom up approach is making good use of local intelligences.



FIGURE 35,36 Repair Cafe in Detroit features staff who are trained to repair certain items to minimize waste, while Totnes holds events for the awareness of issues of mental health and social care, in order to possibly generate bottom-up solutions.



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FIGURE 37.38 The Transition Research Network is dedicated to the recording and transfer of knowledge, as well as providing a formal conduit to enable the generation of new research and information to collective effectiveness of the groups. Guides are produced to facilitate bottom up establishment of new networks at specific levels, these contain everything from etiquette to general overviews of the aims of the movement.

## The Essential Guide to Doing Transition

Getting Transition started in your street, community, town or organisation.

By the Transition Network team



# Prefigurative Practice Discussion: Considerations and Concerns

The selection of projects I have collected demonstrate a variety of scales, importances and embodied aims and values. It is clear that, while the strictly architectural first project by Bauman Lyons appear to deviate from more rigid definitions of prefiguration due to the effect of professional expectations and restrictions (as a traditional appointment), BaumanLyons are still able to legitimate themselves due to the emphasis on ethics and social justice implicit in their own practice, which they exercised in their production of a prototype within the parameters afforded them. The relationship between actions of an architect who is commissioned, one who volunteers, or even just a creative user to alude to Jonathan Hill (2003) deserves to be explored in greater detail. The charity Emmaus itself exercises practices that are themselves prefigurative, the instantiation of a new infrastructure , but this in itself is limited owing to the lack of potential for experimentation. I stick to my inclination that the BaumanLyons “Mass Bespoke Mk2” combined with the expertise of the furniture restorers could serve an interesting challenge to their existing infrastructure, but again the legislative framework of the charity would perhaps delinates a limit in this possibility.

The Granby 4 Streets Community Land Trust are truly prefigurative, as has been related by Erika Rushton - The Chair of the Granby 4 Street Community Land Trust at a recent seminar (2016), the CLT fought for an extended period against stagnant planning policy that had deemed the area beyond repair. But a persistent few were able to hang on, and by prefigurative actions such as guerilla gardeniing and the Granby Street Market, as well as the astute action of involving the award winning Assemble Collective, were able to instantiate a substantial and lasting change from the most miserable of circumstances. A subtle parallel is illustrated by Nina Edge in an earlier tour of the area, who is now the last remaining occupant of Kelvin Grove on the nearby Welsh Streets - an area of 450 - now empty - houses (2016). The fact that, despite the massively raised influence upon scheme being awarded the Turner prize of all things, the CLT was still paralysed to extend beyond the narrow geographical constraints that separates both sites (the 2 sites are less than 200m apart) illustrates a potential flaw of the direct action method, in that it requires an embedded

population and a slower timescale in order to prefer wider infrastructural benefits, at least using the CLT finance model.

Of the 3 examples I have analysed the Transition Network stands out. It is not a strictly spatial practice of intervention and it does allude to a 'utopia' - or at least a pragmatic utopian 'Transition Town' - which, as has been discussed tends to stultify movement activism due to ideological disparities. However the dynamic practices it has encouraged, the series of bottom-up experiments in a variety of different contexts, and the prototype infrastructures it has instantiated - from local currencies, to social clubs, to urban farms to energy generation - demonstrates the versatility that is in common with prefigurative practice. A consideration that should be tested is the target demographic, which appears to be of a certain middling, educated class. It is arguable that locations such as Totnes in Devon, or perhaps other related locations in the UK (Todmoden for example) in this way would tend to effect change to specific - not necessarily deprived demographic - over others, especially for more technically challenging prefigurations. However the wealth of bottom-up experiments combined could, ironically, reveal more suitable practices, using perhaps something of a bottom-up-top-down analysis of the results. Perhaps the most important addendum to the project however is the integration of research into the practice, as with this element of empiricism it opens itself up to much wider audiences such that prototypes could quite easily be translated to perhaps even inform governmental approaches to land.

Generally, the horizontal relationship between who I have deemed 'Knowledge Specialists' (on page 10) is a concern, as information may easily be misused to manipulate action to a certain end - the architects ego perhaps. A prerequisite to successful prefiguration would be a degree of criticality of forethought. Also a further avenue of research would be to investigate the impact of prototype infrastructures on the Neo-liberal economic systems of control, as there is a tendency for capitalism to subsume elements of alternative or antithetical practices into itself, which may be counter to the intentions of the prefigurators.

In summary, prefiguration is an extremely interesting lens through which to view nascent political action, how it relates directly the politics of architecture and the production of space will be an interesting area of research in the coming years.

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