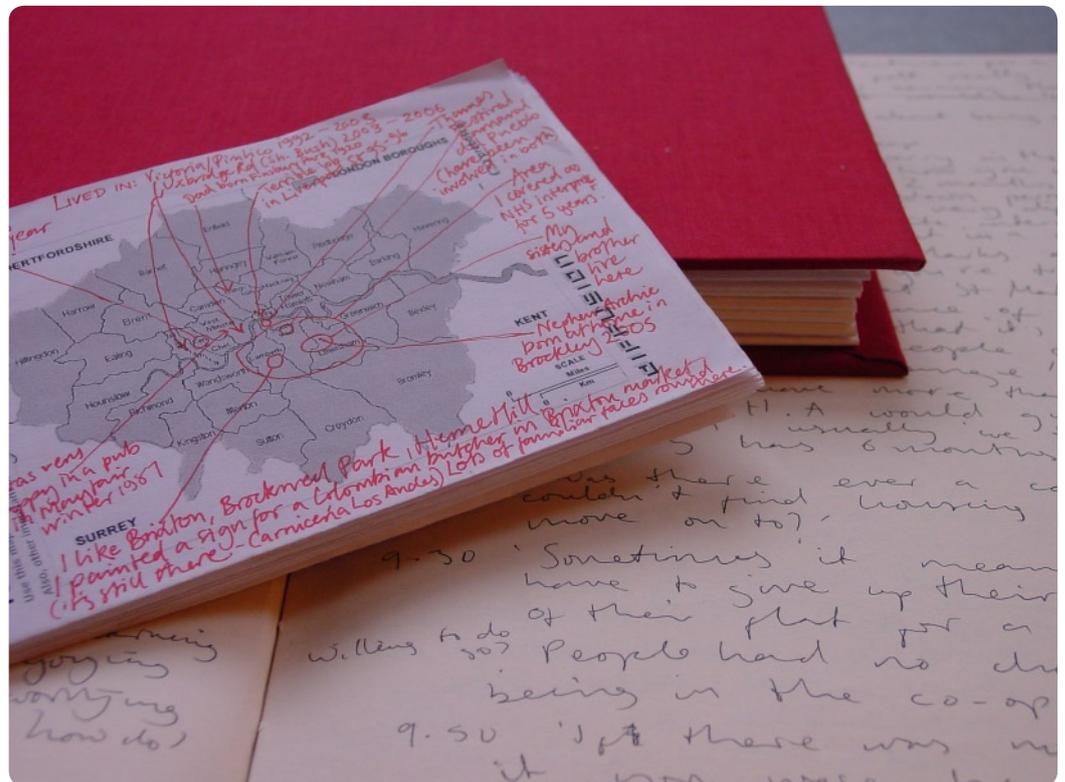


## SOCIAL TAPESTRIES

### St Marks Housing Co-op Project Report



October 2006

## **Contents**

### **3. Introduction**

### **4. Key Findings & Observations**

### **6. Conclusions**

### **7. Acknowledgements**

## **Appendices**

### **A. St Marks Short Life Housing Co-op**

### **B. Visual Timeline**

### **C. How has St Marks changed over the last 26 years?**



## Introduction

As part of Social Tapestries, a research programme investigating public authoring in specific community contexts, Proboscis has been working with St Marks Short Life Housing Co-op. This collaboration seeks to explore how a small transient community (brought together through a common need for affordable housing) can share and retain knowledge and experience. Proboscis has worked with St Marks to uncover the history of the co-op, lost over time, to begin to enable the co-op to retain and pass on knowledge more effectively and to look at how public authoring systems (such as Urban Tapestries) can be integrated to enable the retention of knowledge in the future.



## St Marks Short Life Housing Co-op

St Marks is run entirely by its members, for its members on a voluntary basis. Members are generally people who would not score well on a traditional housing scale (many members are professionals, but work in low paid areas such as the arts, complementary healthcare and social work). St Marks (and other housing co-ops) provide housing for their members by managing vacant properties (usually belonging to the council or a Housing Association) on a short term basis. These properties would otherwise be vacant due to poor repair, short term lease available or an uncertain future. Most members arrive with little or no experience of managing housing, working with Housing Associations or being a part of a co-operative.



## Process of Collaboration

Proboscis was invited to collaborate with St Marks through a then intermediary, Orlagh Woods (a St Marks member), who had joined Proboscis in mid 2004 to assist on another project we were running (Navigating History). During the second half of 2004 the Social Tapestries programme was being developed and Proboscis was beginning to develop the concepts and contacts for Social Tapestries experiments and projects with intermediaries. One of the key areas of interest was housing groups – St Marks offered an opportunity to work with a group that constituted a *community of need* rather than a geographic community (such as a housing estate).



The process of collaboration got under way in July 2005 when Proboscis organised and facilitated an introductory mapping workshop with some of St Marks' members. This workshop introduced members of the co-op to Proboscis's concept of public authoring and explored how it would be of use to the co-op.

An ongoing relationship over a period of 12 months between Proboscis and St Marks was established to explore its history and key requirements regarding the retention and sharing of knowledge. Contact was made with both current and former members by; the distribution of DIFFUSION eNotebooks to gather information; conducting informal interviews to explore individuals' experiences of being part of St Marks; a second group mapping workshop looked specifically at St Marks relationship with the area of North West London and the key themes and issues facing members.



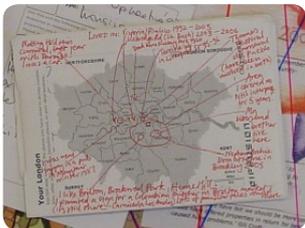
Information gathered through these processes has not only enabled the history of St Marks to be re-established, but also the logging of information, key themes, memories, data into a public authoring system for adoption and sharing by St Marks.



**Key Findings & Observations**

**Democracy in action**

Collaborating with St Marks has given Proboscis the opportunity to observe how a small voluntary housing co-op interacts. Working on a small scale (membership is currently seventeen) most members of St Marks are actively involved in the running of the co-op and the decision-making processes (one member, one vote). However even an organisation as small as this has a minority of members who don't engage with this process. Scratch the surface of St Marks' history and it becomes apparent that this has always been the case and, that this is part of the nature of how a group of people operate. According to current and past members, at any point in time there has usually been four to six really active members who initiate and drive the direction of the co-op; the majority who support this work but are less active; and then there is a small number who do not contribute at all.



**The arena within which St Marks Operates**

Whilst uncovering the history of St Marks it's important to consider the housing system which St Marks operates within. The benefits to both parties (the co-op and the Housing Associations it works with) in this exchange have largely remained the same throughout the 26-year life of St Marks. However the political and social surroundings within which the co-op (and society at large) operates have changed dramatically.

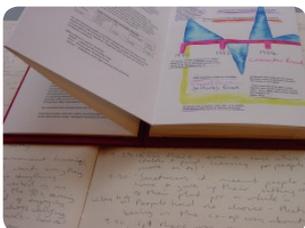


Short life housing takes advantage of slack within the housing system and turns this 'slack' into a positive. In 1980, when St Marks was founded, this 'slack' was huge, with many council and housing association properties across London lying empty and in poor states of repair. Fast forward to 2006 and on the whole London presents a very different landscape, one of high property prices, and a thriving private rental market where "property is too valuable to be left to rot".



**Being Small is an Asset**

As one member put it "it's amazing it's kept going so long – there are a number of times when it could have spontaneously combusted". Part of St Marks strength lies in its size. Being small allows the organisation to be responsive and flexible to the needs of members, but also to the current housing situation. Most of St Mark's strength lies in its membership, in their energy, determination and hard work. In fact the co-op only exists because of the diligence and willingness of individuals to get involved and learn how to work with Housing Associations, how to operate co-operatively and be self regulating. Enabling and facilitating the retention of knowledge within St Marks will help the co-op continue to function as a provider of short life housing within an ever changing social housing arena.



**Chance Meetings**

A hello on the stairs or in the street, a simple exchange. Members seem to like living in close proximity to each other because of the natural sense of community this fosters. Seeing others regularly, often by chance helps members to develop relationships outside of meetings (where disagreements can occur) and feel like they actively participate in their community. Many members living in close proximity can cause problems for the



co-op, as they tend to be housed with the same Housing Association. When a Housing Association asks for several properties (in the same block or location) to be returned at the same time the co-op can be put under a lot of pressure to rehouse its members.

**Retaining Knowledge**

Proboscis has facilitated the gathering of St Marks’ twenty-six year history and an analysis of how the organisation has changed and evolved in response to internal and external factors. This resulted in the production and publication of a timeline and accompanying text providing St Marks with a quantifiable and tangible history.



The timeline and text were produced in three formats:

- As a bespoke object in the form of a handmade book (edition of two) which colourfully illustrates the twenty six year history of the St Marks (1 edition being held by St Marks, the other by Proboscis).
- As a printed A4 version for all current members and former members who participated in research to receive.
- In digital format (a *scavenged* Social Tapestry) to enable St Marks to reproduce the knowledge and share it with outside agencies and new members as seen fit, thus allowing St Marks ownership of its history and the ability to continue sharing this knowledge.

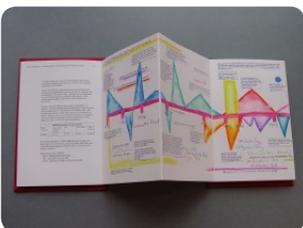


**A Tool for Public Authoring**

Proboscis experimented with entering data about the physical and social history of St Marks into the Urban Tapestries public authoring platform and also into Google Earth. Urban Tapestries allows people to map and share knowledge and information by linking them to geography – buildings, streets and open spaces. Users of the platform can create ‘threads’ or themes which link one place, person or thing to others. The threads are then grounded to geographic places by ‘pockets’ – spatial annotations that can contain text, images, sound or video. The database of knowledge this builds up can be searched in many different ways to reveal underlying as well as unexpected connections and relationships. This organic layering of the city with knowledge could be used by the co-op as a resource to inform future decision-making and direction.



By linking information to geographical locations St Marks can ‘map’ future history, storing information on properties and members housed by St Marks (where and how long for, which housing associations worked with) allowing St Marks to accurately quantify the extent and experience it has of managing properties which could be especially useful when engaging with new partners. Proboscis has recently introduced St Mark’s members to a custom public authoring platform based on our ‘scavenging’ approach adopting and adapting free online services. This ‘scavenged’ system borrows concepts from Urban Tapestries but is not a single solution, rather it is a methodology of stitching together a variety of familiar services (online spreadsheet, web forum, photosharing, lightweight mapping tools etc) to enable knowledge to be collected and shared between co-op members. This approach has a shallower learning curve than a custom system such as Urban Tapestries – enabling its users to build on existing skills and competencies incrementally rather than learn a whole new concept *and* system.

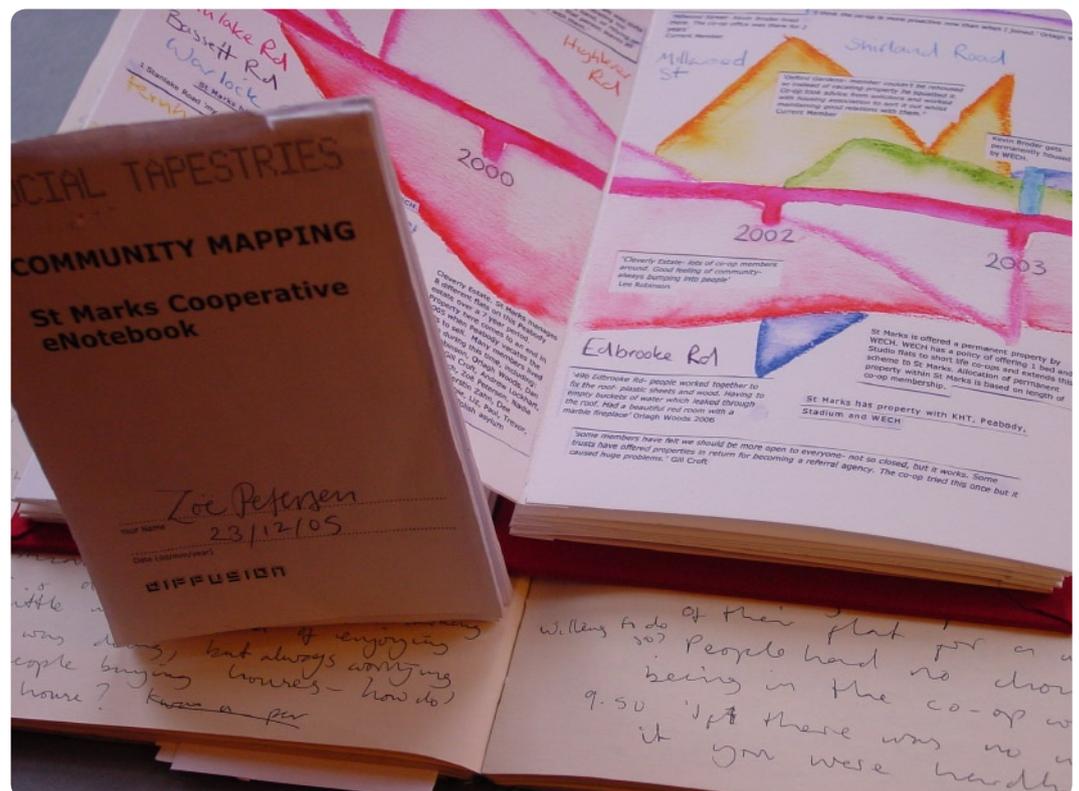


## Conclusions

Working with St Marks has been a successful partnership within Social Tapestries. Proboscis has had the opportunity to work with a small organisation working along co-operative principles, setting it apart from the wildly commercial property market and the reflected increasing emphasis on market values within the public sector and social housing. It is an interesting model, especially when placed within its historical context, revealing much about the nature of groups of people working together to satisfy a common need.

St Marks has benefited not only by having their history rediscovered, but also the experience and now ownership of using creative information gathering tools designed by Proboscis which can facilitate future retaining and sharing of knowledge. This is especially important as over the last few years long term members have been permanently housed. This is something St Marks hope will continue to happen but naturally leads to the loss of experience and expertise in working with Housing Associations (most members have little or no experience of this when they join). It is therefore more important than ever for St Marks to be able to author and retain its history.

Camilla Brueton & Giles Lane  
 October 2006



## Acknowledgements

### Mapping Workshop July 2005

Participants: Christopher, Gill, Sarah, Andrew, Jimmi, Julian, Orlagh & Kerstin  
Facilitators: Giles Lane, Sarah Thelwall

### Mapping Workshop February 2006

Participants: Christopher, Laurent, Liam, Zoe, Jules, Lee, Orlagh, Nadia & Kerstin  
Facilitators: Alice Angus, Camilla Brueton

### Individual conversations with

Gill, Andrew, Gordon, Alison & Orlagh

### DIFFUSION eNotebooks submitted by

Christopher, Laurent, Liam, Sharon, Zoe, Daniel, Orlagh, Nadia & Kerstin

### Proboscis

Camilla Brueton – Project Researcher  
Alice Angus, Giles Lane, Sarah Thelwall and Orlagh Woods

### Social Tapestries

A research programme exploring the potential benefits and costs of local knowledge mapping and sharing (public authoring). Since 2004 Proboscis has developed a series of experimental uses of public authoring with local communities to demonstrate the social and cultural benefits of local knowledge sharing enabled by mobile and network technologies. These playful and challenging experiments build upon the Urban Tapestries framework and software platform developed by Proboscis and its partners.

<http://socialtapestries.net>

Published by Proboscis, October 2006

<http://proboscis.org.uk>

Proboscis is funded by Arts Council England



## A. St Marks Short Life Housing Co-op

St Marks Short Life Housing Co-op is based in West London with a current membership of seventeen (May 2006). The co-op, (run by its members) has been managing short life property in West London since 1980. This project aims to provide a snapshot of the life of St Marks over the last twenty-six years; to uncover the origins of the co-op and record its varied history in an attempt to begin to gather and retain knowledge to inform the future direction of St Marks. Proboscis has collaborated with St Marks on this project as part of Social Tapestries; a research programme exploring the potential benefits and costs of local knowledge mapping and sharing.

Trying to capture the history of a transient body, transient in terms of its constituent parts – the members and the properties they inhabit which are constantly moving and readjusting due to outside forces – is destined to be an awkward task. The history of an organisation such as St Marks is bound up with the individual stories of the members, the properties occupied, the Housing Associations worked with and the underlying political and social housing policies laid down by Government and implemented by relevant Local Authorities and NGOs. The effect these policies have on the availability and condition of social housing stock creates the field within which St Marks and other short life co-op's operate.

How do you accurately reflect the history of an organisation, which has had (at an informed estimate) one hundred and fifty-plus members, over twenty six years, with a structure where no one is leader and everyone, in theory, is equal? As time passes it becomes easier. Selective memories focus on those who contributed a lot and edit out the members who were only around for a short amount of time, or who were just not very memorable. The narrative timeline offered is a short and selective one, built on conversation and mapping exercises with current and former members, relying on memory and opinion, often contradictory in nature.

The essentials have changed little over twenty six years:

Short life housing creatively makes use of housing stock which would otherwise be empty. Managed voluntarily by the co-op, in return members who would not score well on a conventional housing needs scale gain access to affordable housing (although on a temporary basis). Members are brought together through need for affordable housing. Traditionally St Marks' members have mainly been single (when they joined) and have worked in areas which are not particularly well paid (for example, but by no means exclusively – the arts and alternative health care professions).

Short Life Housing Co-ops also benefit the owners of properties (Housing Associations) by acting as safe custodians whilst a property is unable to be occupied by an assured tenant, due to its poor state of repair or the short time left on its lease if a property is awaiting renovation or is soon to be sold off. Short Life Housing Co-ops ensure the state of these properties do not degenerate by being left empty or become occupied by squatters. Through the self regulating nature of a co-op, the Housing Association can be assured tenants are responsible and thus have a positive impact on the communities they are embedded within, clearly preferable to the alternative of boarding up property and leaving it vacant.

The benefits to both parties in this exchange have largely remained the same throughout the twenty six-year life of St Marks. However the political and social surroundings within which the co-op (and society at large) operates have changed dramatically.

Short life housing takes advantage of slack within the housing system and turns this 'slack' into a positive. In 1980, when St Marks was founded, this 'slack' was huge, with many council and housing association properties across London lying empty and in poor states of repair. Fast forward to 2006 and on the whole London presents a very different landscape, one of high property prices, and a thriving private rental market where *'property is too valuable to be left to rot'*<sup>1</sup>.

Thatcherism in the 1980s offered the 'right to buy' thus removing large amounts of social housing properties out of circulation. Changes in the law brought in by the current Labour government allow Councils to sell off properties to the highest bidder and keep the receipts (these formerly went straight to central government). Social Housing stock is under huge pressure, most Councils are no longer building and many new developments with Housing Association involvement are 'part buy' schemes, often targeted specifically at 'key workers'.

Against this backdrop, with property prices soaring and social housing stock diminishing it is easy to see there is a definite need for accessible, affordable housing – but how does an organisation such as St Marks continue to operate? As the 'slack' in social housing becomes tighter, there is less room for St Marks to manoeuvre.

However we are moving into an era when 'sustainability' is a keyword – and short life effectively maximises the ability of housing stock to house people, reducing waste and meeting needs. Self-regulated short life is a model which could also work with private owners- although this is not something St Marks has yet explored. The figures below on ownership of empty properties in London clearly show this is an avenue worth investigating.

2005 Ownership of Empty Homes <sup>2</sup>				
Local Authority	Total Number of Empty Homes	RSL	Other public	Other private
London	91,219	9,619	5,826	74,811

On the following pages a timeline details the first twenty six years of St Marks Short Life Housing Co-op. All direct quotes were taken from conversations and research conducted with current and former St Marks members.

Abbreviations used in timeline:

- NHHT – Notting Hill Housing Trust,
- KHT – Kensington Housing Trust,
- WECH – Waltherton and Elgin Community Housing.

70s - early 80s. Squatting scene is huge in London. There are lots of homeless young people and lots of empty council and housing association property.

# 35 Bassett Rd

St Marks is born... Alison is squatting a house on Bassett Rd with Suzie (amongst others). They approach owners (NHHT) with a view to setting up a short life co-op to license the property. NHHT are very helpful and assist with the paper work.

St Marks are given 6 weeks notice to leave Oxford Gardens with no offer of alternative accommodation. Alison has 2 children under 3, her partner is in Sudan She decides it's time to leave, stays with friends and then travels to Sudan for a year.

Members are mainly in their mid 20s

Properties are large and communally lived in.

1980

1982

1984

Lancaster Road

The names 'Bassett Road Co-op' or 'Oxford Gardens Co-op' are unavailable, hence the choice of 'St Marks Short Life Housing Co-op' with St Marks Rd being close by.

Other property is taken on including:

Oxford Gardens  
St Marks Road

35 Bassett Road lasts for two years. Members move on to Oxford Gardens. The house is very damp.

'There were lots of us then- Lizzie Haylock and Carmen who were nurses, John.. Larry, Belle, and various friends and hangers on'  
Alison

St Marks has property with KHT and NHHT. Properties are often found by roaming the streets

'When 73's [Lancaster Road] life came to an end, KHT had no short life property to give us so I approached Notting Hill Housing Trust, (amongst others), and they came up with a 2 bed flat. The 3 of us plus dog and rabbit moved in!' Chris

**The co-op begins to grow.**

Alison returns from Sudan with partner and children and continues to be involved in co-op until 1986, when she and her partner buy a garage and convert it themselves into the house where they now live. Some ex members of St Marks help with conversion.

Vespan Rd

Chris lives at 64 Vespan Rd for 4 years. Shares with many others during this time including Tim Philip, Emily, Anna and Gill. The co-op grows during this time.

**The co-op has 3 members.**

1986

1991

St Marks has property with KHT and NHHT.

Gill moves into Vespan Rd. Invited to live there though a chance meeting with Emily (who is a cellist). Chris also lives there and has a large workspace with a kiln in it.

Chris squats 73a Lancaster Rd with Elizabeth - a property formerly occupied by Julie and Kevin (members of St Marks who had moved onto council housing). Through talking to Alison, Chris becomes a member of St Marks and takes over the running of it. At that point there were only 3 other members of St Marks- Sue who lived on the first floor at No. 73, Satushi and his wife.

Kensal Rd  
Bolling broke Rd  
Agate Rd

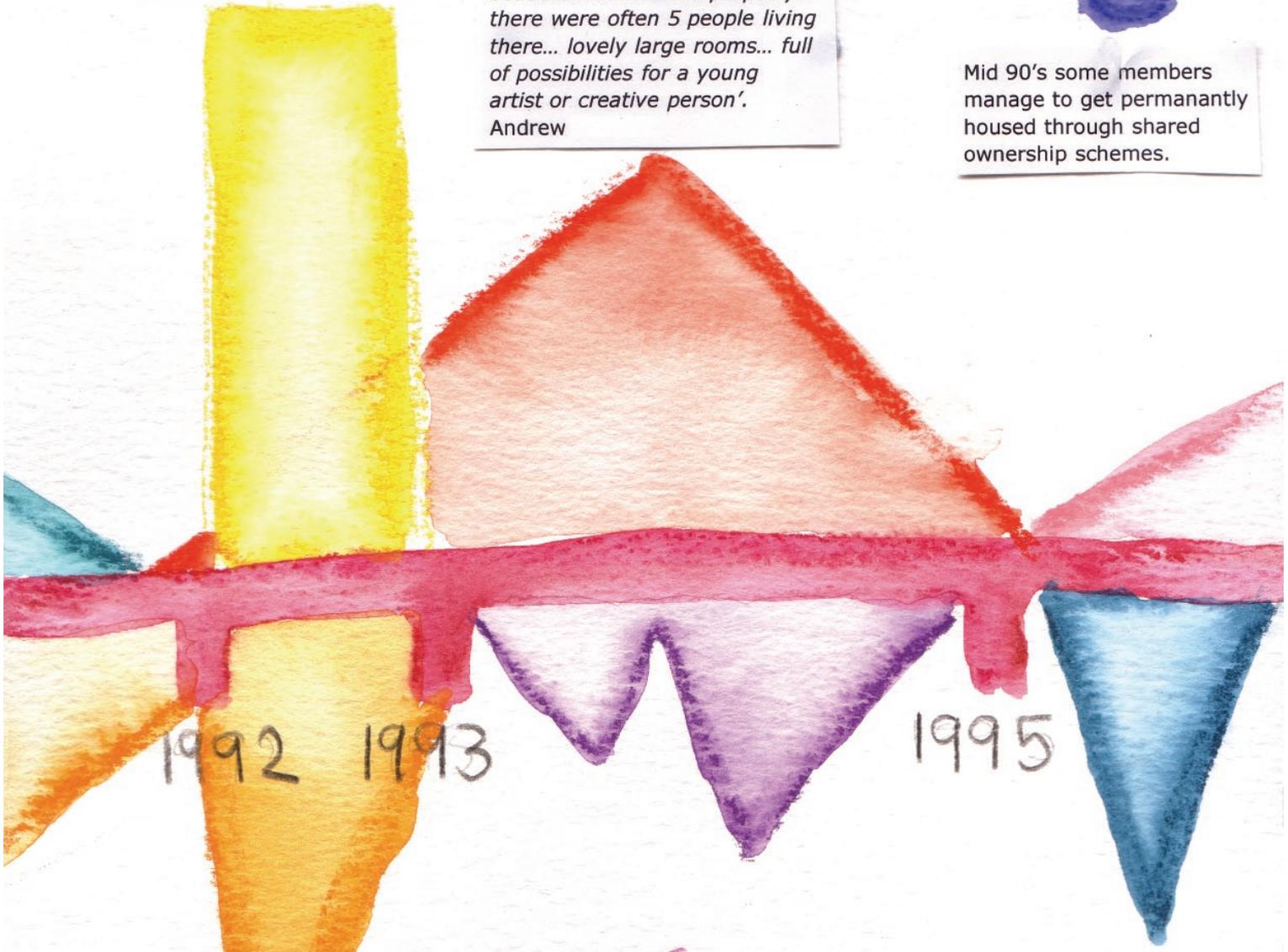
'when properties were being handed back we would phone up all the contacts at Housing Associations and really push to get more accommodation sorted, pronto. Usually that worked- occasionally it didn't and people were left staying with friends on sofas. People had to be prepared to share even a 1 bed flat.' Andrew

A stressful time for the co-op. Lots of properties get handed back with no alternatives offered. Members end up sleeping on others floors.

'St Charles Square was a beautiful ramshackle property... there were often 5 people living there... lovely large rooms... full of possibilities for a young artist or creative person'.  
Andrew



Mid 90's some members manage to get permanently housed through shared ownership schemes.



1992

1993

1995

St Charles Sq  
Delgano Way

'100 Walterton Road was a complete wreck. It took 10 members a whole day to sort out- we got a skip from the council.' Gill

Gill moves to St Charles Square. Lives in a large property with Andrew Shozo and others. Gill is studying Shiatsu at time.

Robinson House, Aston Rd

St Marks has property with KHT, WECH and possibly others.

St Quinten's Ave  
Walterton Rd

'the co-op was mostly run by women at that time- strong feisty women.' Gill

'there was a mad scramble when WECH asked for a lot of properties back at once- the co-op's last real crisis. In the future, with several people on Lancaster Road, if they all go at once the co-op could be struggling.' Gordon



Co-op acquires properties in WALTERTON Rd- part of the WECH estate. St Marks builds up good relationship with WECH and has several properties until 98/99 when WECH completes this phase of refurbishment and all properties have to be handed back.

After a 6 month gap with no property from WECH, Liz gets housed by them.

'when I first joined [St Marks] morale was quite low... there's a danger of concentrating too much power in one person's hand, or relying on one person too much. If that person leaves all that knowledge goes with them.' Gordon

Hightlever Rd

Stanlake Rd

2000

Bassett Rd

Warlock Rd

St Marks has property with KHT, Peabody and WECH.

1 Stanlake Road 'my first co-op flat, felt great. My own flat.' Lee

Fernhead Rd

Cleverly Estate

Membership is around 20- 25 individuals

Cleverly Estate. St Marks manages 8 different flats on this Peabody estate over a 7 year period. Property here comes to an end in 2005 when Peabody vacates the flats to sell. Many members lived there during this time, including: Lee, Orlagh, Dan, Gill, Andrew, Clare, Zoë, Nadia, Kerstin, Dee, Debbie, Liz, Paul, Trevor, Ronnie and 2 Polish asylum seekers.

Are people more self sufficient? Some older/ex members suggest that people rely on each other less. Is this a shift in the way St Marks members live or just a reflection of society as a whole?

**The co-op has mainly single properties.**

*'I think the co-op is more proactive now than when I joined.'* Orlagh

*'Millwood Street- Kevin lived there. The co-op office was there for 2 years'*  
Current Member

Shirland Road

Millwood St

*'Oxford Gardens- member couldn't be rehoused so instead of vacating property he squatted it. Co-op took advice from solicitors and worked with housing association to sort it out whilst maintaining good relations with them.'*  
Current Member

Kevin gets permanently housed by WECH.

2002

2003

*'Cleverly Estate- lots of co-op members around. Good feeling of community- always bumping into people'*  
Lee

St Marks is offered a permanent property by WECH. WECH has a policy of offering 1 bed and Studio flats to short life co-ops and extends this scheme to St Marks. Allocation of permanent property within St Marks is based on length of co-op membership.

Edbrooke Rd

*'49b Edbrooke Rd- people worked together to fix the roof- plastic sheets and wood. Having to empty buckets of water which leaked through the roof. Had a beautiful red room with a marble fireplace'* Orlagh 2006

St Marks has property with KHT, Peabody, Stadium and WECH

*'some members have felt we should be more open to everyone- not so closed, but it works. Some trusts have offered properties in return for becoming a referral agency. The co-op tried this once but it caused huge problems.'* Gill

Government's 'Decent Homes Standards' legislation impacts on Short Life. Renovation to bring properties up to standard creates opportunities for short life. However, no extra funding is made available for the work leading some housing associations to sell off vacant stock to finance it and pay off other debts.

Bravington Rd Chipperham Rd Portnall Rd  
Oxford Gardens Lydford Rd

Andrew gets permanently housed by WECH.

Gordon and Rob leave St Marks to take part in a self build project managed by WECH leading to permanent housing.

Shozo gets permanently housed by WECH.

Gill gets permanently housed by WECH.

'70 Cleverly Estate- Cleverly Ladies; Cherry Blossom; Zoë' Nadia

2004

2005

St Marks has property with KHT, NHHT, Peabody and Stadium.

Lorne Gardens- 2 members were discovered subletting their co-op flat and were subsequently asked to vacate the property and leave the co-op.

Co-op takes on a property in Barnet- this is the first time St Marks has stretched outside of West London.

Acklington Drive

'Antonia took a great leap of faith moving up to Barnet... I believe taking on this property has led to that Housing Association [NHHT] offering us other properties- we now have 6 flats with them in Holland Park. This is how the co-op grows- building bridges [with housing associations] and being willing- never refusing a property without going to see it' Gill

Squatting is virtually unheard of in London.

'it [belonging to St Marks] is a counterbalance to the prevailing view that owning things and properties is the most important goal in life, It gives me the opportunity to follow my own (low paid) path. I feel more confident that I am not alone in my approach to life.' Current Member

St Helens Gdns  
Lancaster Rd

'6 members have been housed permanently in the last 3 years. This has given a real focus in the last 3 years- permanent housing is now a reality.'  
Gordon

'166 Lancaster Road. Great community. Whole building is occupied by co-op.' Jules

Paul gets permanently housed by WECH.

Liz gets permanently housed by WECH.

2006  
'for me what makes St Marks work is because it's so small- everyone gets involved. As older members leave there is a need to educate newer members to co-ops principles'.  
Current Member

Norland Rd

Under pressure to house members from Cleverly, St Marks takes on several studio flats at Norland Road not fully realising the security problems in the block. Some members don't feel safe enough to move in. St Marks successfully resolves the initial security problems by working with local police, NHHT and the local community.

St Marks has property with KHT, NHHT, and Stadium.

Membership is around 16

'WECH has no short life at the moment because the modernisation of the WECH estate is nearly completed, but the relationship with St Marks continues. There are future options- WECH is trying to take over 17 properties on the estate owned by the council. Some will need modernisation so there could be short life opportunities.' Gordon

## B. How has St Marks changed over the last 26 years?

St Marks has evolved from its origins in the 1980s where most members were in their mid twenties, living communally in large houses, co-op meetings were held when needed in the pub, to now; where meetings are held once a month at the co-op office, the membership is older (spanning twenties to forties) mainly living alone and there is a real opportunity of permanent housing through the co-op's relationship with the Waltherton and Elgin Community Housing association (WECH).

St Marks has been described by many as a 'stepping stone' enabling members to live in London at an affordable rent for a period of time whilst establishing oneself before moving on to other things. This model for many is true, some move on out of London to follow job opportunities, others have managed to enter the housing market; through shared ownership schemes, by saving money whilst renting with the co-op or through career progression enabled by having the 'breathing space' the co-op allows. Permanent social housing is also now a reality for several ex-members through the link with WECH. It has also been suggested by some that whilst acting as a stepping stone for most, St Marks has the potential to become a rut for others; by never having to push one's self to pay a market rent, individuals sometimes don't work as hard or seek opportunities as they might.

Since 2003 six members have been offered permanent housing through WECH (plus two members who are taking part in a self build scheme). This offers St Marks members a real outcome for their years spent in short life, which whilst "*better than the alternative*"<sup>3</sup> (renting privately) it can be quite stressful, living with the knowledge that your housing is not secure.

It will be interesting to see how the possibility of permanent housing impacts on the membership of the co-op and the way the co-op functions in the long term. Will it encourage more people to stay longer with St Marks in the hope of attaining permanent social housing, when perhaps before they might have moved on? Will the membership continue to get older? Should a 'pecking order' for the allocation of permanent properties be decided annually, so if a property comes up, everyone knows who will get it? What happens if WECH become unable to offer St Marks any more permanent properties?

The nature of St Marks and the way it functions has changed according to the individuals and personalities of the membership. Some older and ex members have suggested that members are now more self sufficient and less reliant on each other than they once were. Considering the shift from the co-op's communal living in the 1980s to the current majority of single occupancies, on the surface it may appear that there is less sense of community within the co-op. However many current members have emphasised positively the help others in the co-op give with moving and the natural feelings of community which are fostered when members live in close proximity. One current member pointed out how this kind of activity helps to bond members together, outside of formal meeting situations where conflicts and disagreements can take place.

It is easy to believe that in the past people were more co-operative, that people got on better, that there were fewer problems. Talking to current and ex members reveals this not to be the case; in fact one of the founder members remarked, "*Groups of people are not immediate paradise*"<sup>4</sup>. It is true at certain times the dynamic between co-op members has had high points and low points; that there have always been people who

don't pull their weight, as well as times when too much knowledge and power has fallen into one person's hands.

Co-operative values run though to the core of how St Marks operates and manages to provide affordable housing for its members. As a small housing co-op it really does exist on the energy and impetus of its members working together, most of whom have little or no previous knowledge of housing before they join.

*" – is a good example of someone who has no prior knowledge of housing but took it upon herself to learn and get involved and is now one of the most knowledgeable people in the co-op."*<sup>5</sup>

Co-operative values also set St Marks apart from the increasing emphasis on market values within the public sector and social housing. Members have always paid the same rent, per head, whether residing in a single occupancy or shared property. These rates are set by the agreement of members. This is in direct contrast to the increased free market values of social housing where rents are now being encouraged to reflect property size, bedroom size, location and access to local amenities.

This notion of equality between members is also reflected in the way the co-op is run and decisions are made. The importance of group decision-making and whilst sometimes time consuming, is key to the democratic principles of the co-op. Each member has an equal vote and voice on all issues.

Over the last five years, St Marks has shrunk from an average of twenty-five full members to an average of fifteen to seventeen. This is due in part to members moving on the permanent housing through WECH, but also reflects the diminishing pool of housing St Marks is being offered. This high turnover, especially of experienced members impacts of how the co-op runs, the expertise retained within the co-op membership and the knowledge of how St Marks has tackled specific situations in the past. There are several strategies, which the co-op could take on board to encourage the retention of knowledge and an active history of St Marks.

It may be useful for St Marks to continue the timeline presented in this document, in a way which suits the needs of current members. This could be done annually, pulling out the key themes, progress made and problems faced by St Marks over the past year, presented in a visual way as an easy and tactile way of maintaining an active history.

Google Earth and later, the Urban Tapestries platform being developed by Proboscis could also be used by St Marks as a tool to help retain knowledge and experience. By linking information to geographical locations St Marks can 'map' future history. On a basic level this could function as a database to store information on properties and members housed by St Marks (where and how long for, which housing associations worked with) allowing St Marks to accurately quantify the extent and experience it has of managing properties which could be especially useful when engaging with new partners.

More interestingly, the Urban Tapestries platform also allows 'pockets' to be created which are 'tagged' according to the kind of information they contain. The 'database' can then be searched by 'tag' creating an interactive archive which can be used by the co-op as a resource to inform future decision-making and direction.

As one member put it *"it's amazing it's kept going so long – there are a number of times when it could have spontaneously combusted"*<sup>6</sup>. Part of St Marks strength lies in its size. Being small allows the organisation to be responsive and flexible to the needs of members, but also to the current housing situation. Most of St Mark's strength lies in its membership, in their energy, determination and hard work. In fact the co-op only exists because of the diligence and willingness of individuals to get involved and learn how to work with Housing Associations, how to operate co-operatively and be self regulating. Enabling and facilitating the retention of knowledge within St Marks will help the co-op continue to function as a provider of short life housing within an ever changing social housing arena.

Camilla Brueton  
May 2006

### Notes

1. Gordon, former St Mark's member.
2. Source <http://www.emptyhomes.com/whatwedo/shortlife/shortlife.htm>
3. Gill, former St Marks Member.
4. Alison, founder member.
5. Gordon.
6. Gordon.