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# Learning through Architecture and Successful Capital Projects in the Post-Capitalist Co-operative Economy of Northern England

Stephen McCusker

Through the lens of architecture and empirical research, this paper demonstrates how successful, award-winning capital projects are not the preserve of the economically privileged in a post-capitalist UK. Considering a background of professional and academic theory it links the 2011 Localism Act with a growing Social & Solidarity Economy and draws on the author's historic research on the architectural heritage of the co-operative movement and how co-operative societies have approached this in the past. The discussion reflects on the author's direct experience of working on three architectural co-operative projects (Unicorn Grocery, Bamford Community Society's Public House, and Stretford Public Hall) with themes of community asset transfer, funding, co-operative business models, implementation of the 6th co-operative principle; sustainable capital projects, evolution of a business plan, and the potential role of the architect as an educator within that to inform decisions on such projects including responsible specification and recycling of waste materials from site.

## The Background

As this paper developed, it became clear that it was about more than buildings, more than economics, and more than co-operatives. While preparing the conference presentation from which this paper emerges, this author realised that in setting the context for the empirical studies it would be essential to challenge the delegates' image of the architect. This is an alternative view of the profession that unfolds a story of research and testing of ideas, revealing how a small architecture practice in the North of England is transferring knowledge within the co-operative economy on what are, on the surface, capital(ist) projects.

The noun *Architect* is often weighted down with prejudice. The image many have in mind is the chiselled profile of Gary Cooper in Warner Brothers' 1949 screen adaptation of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (1943); Cooper stands proudly admiring a model of his own creative effort; a presentation model of a thoroughly modern 40 storey skyscraper in the international style with a New York cityscape stretching out below them in the window behind.

Rand's novel (1943) explores themes of individualism versus collectivism using the architect Howard Roark (played by Gary Cooper in the film) as an exemplary challenger of democracy (represented as Design by Committee in this instance). In a court case Roark, naturally defending himself, speaks thus:

No work is ever done collectively, by a majority decision. Every creative job is achieved under the guidance of a single individual thought. An architect requires a great many men to erect his building. But he does not ask them to vote on his design. They work together by free agreement and each is free in his proper function. An architect uses steel, glass, concrete, produced by others. But the materials remain just so much steel, glass, and concrete until he touches them. What he does with them is his individual product and his individual property. This is the only pattern for proper co-operation among men (Rand, 1943).

A rousing speech in defence of the creative individual, without whom things would remain as materials in the hands of mere mortals. Is this sheer arrogance or truth? Roark refuses to compromise the integrity of his buildings as a man might defend the integrity of his soul? There is no room for altruism here. But this is not an accurate portrayal of the world of architecture.

Leaping forwards to 2010 we find two young architects at Loop Systems watching newly elected Prime Minister David Cameron and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg merrily announcing their coalition government in the rose garden of No. 10 Downing Street (O'Donoghue, 2010). Within a few days the coalition announced a five-year programme for change in May 2010 that, among other things, promised to promote the radical devolution of power and greater financial autonomy to local government and community groups alongside the introduction of new powers that would help communities save local facilities and services threatened with closure (Cameron & Clegg, 2010a: 11-12). This seemed to echo the founding principles of Loop Systems' approach to architectural practice as discussed in previously published research (McCusker, 2016). A refreshingly welcome sound amid the noise created by the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), the programme (Cameron & Clegg, 2010a) continued to champion social responsibility and the creation of mutuals, co-operatives, charities and social enterprises that would give rise to a new generation of community organisers and neighbourhood groups (Cameron & Clegg, 2010a: 29). Having formally converted to a co-operative structure in 2009 this seemed only too fitting for the architects who were working with like-minded organisations and groups that shared their values and principles (McCusker, 2016). The 2010 coalition government evolved these promises under the banner of The Big Society (Cameron & Clegg, 2010b) and delivered community empowerment in 2011 with Part 5 of The Localism Act. This Act created the opportunity to transfer the management and/or ownership of community assets (e.g. land, buildings) from its owner (usually a public body such as a local authority) to a community-interest organisation (e.g. Development Trust, Community Interest Company, Social Enterprise) at less than market value on condition that it furthers the social wellbeing or social interests of the local community (Stationery Office, 2011). Because it seemed to emerge at the same time as government spending cuts and the austerity phase of the GFC that started in late 2008 (Financial Times, 2010), there is a degree of cynicism about who was driving asset transfer and whether it is really about a quick way for local authorities to make savings and for government to reduce or withdraw certain provision (Murtagh, 2012; Alakeson, 2016). However, it was not an entirely new concept since asset transfer to local communities had been investigated by the previous government and a subsequent proposal was made white paper published in 2008 (Brown & Blears, 2008). While it may reduce expenditure and responsibilities for one party, that doesn't disappear but instead transfers the burden to the community interest groups and while some may have pure altruism at their heart, as we will discuss later in this paper, it does not prevent the use of these assets to develop and/or host a viable business with social values and a contribution to our growing social solidarity economy.

## Architecture Reduced to Buildings

Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) have written extensively about the relationships within such an economy recognising that, just as property ownership is one of the foundations of modern economies, so too it can be the underpinning of a community economy. Drawing on Grieg de Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witheford's *Commons and Co-operatives* (de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2010), Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) explore and demonstrate through real examples, how interconnecting different elements of common ownership can be for the benefit of all (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013: 148). But not everyone shares that optimism. In response to Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Piketty, 2014) Reinier de Graaf's essay in the *Architectural Review* (2015) considers that, if Piketty's argument holds true, the 20th century will have been no more than an anomaly: this era of post-capitalism is over — a brief interruption in the systemic logic of capitalism. De Graaf goes on to state that once it is recognised as a form of capital, architecture will only operate according to the logic of capital from that point forwards; the value of a building is reduced to an asset. Design becomes real estate in the same way that personnel has been replaced with human resources (James, 2007):

The logic of a building no longer primarily reflects its intended use but instead serves mostly to promote a 'generic' desirability in economic terms. Judgement of architecture is deferred to the market. The 'architectural style' of buildings no longer conveys an ideological choice but a commercial one: architecture is worth whatever others are willing to pay for it (de Graaf, 2015).

This makes for a bleak future where architecture is reduced to the mere assemblage of the materials it is made from. Howard Roark would surely be disappointed. And yet, if we accept the notion that buildings are a capital asset and also accept that the inherent accretion of capital through capital remains an unbreakable cycle (de Graaf, 2015) then why not accept too that this can be something that those who do not yet have wealth can exploit if they do have property?

Piketty (2014) discusses the inevitable inequality that is maintained by those who have wealth accumulating further wealth. It's undisputable — money attracts money; capital attracts capital. And, in a parallel and linked post-capitalist economy, a capital asset can create opportunities to get access to other funds/finance and sustain a business plan using the same processes that capitalism does but for a different purpose. As Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) put it:

If we want to take back the economy for people and the planet, we must reclaim finance as an enabler of futures not as an end in itself that is liable to self-destruction. We must consider how individual interest and social interest can be combined as funds are stored and circulated (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013: 161).

As we will learn in the examples that are to follow, reclaiming buildings as community assets can be a significant stage and can happen at various points along the journey. But before we look at those it is worth looking back to the origins of the modern co-operative movement. In considering this narrative in the context of the GFC it is perhaps not coincidental that Robert Owen's promotional paper in the 1830s was entitled *The Crisis* and was no doubt partly responsible for spreading the thoughts and ideas that spawned the successful co-operative model developed by the Rochdale Pioneers. Like many co-operative stores, the original shop was, of course, rented since the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society could not legally own land. Surplus capital accumulated as the success of the Pioneers' store went from strength to strength but the manner in which they could invest was severely restricted until the Industrial & Provident Societies Act of 1862 enabled them to own land and property. And so these central and/or shop premises evolved for many co-operative societies, co-locating services/wares that may also include a dividend collection point near to where the members could also spend it<sup>1</sup>. And so, the idea of a capital asset through which money could flow and return has been a feature of the co-operative economy for some time with such buildings often becoming the hub of some communities and, though they may have been borne of functional necessity, there was also the gradual realisation of the aspirational too. When the Rochdale Pioneers opened their new central premises in 1867 (in Rochdale) it was reported that they emerged from historical scorn to arrive at success, acknowledged by the notable attendance of MPs and other local dignitaries. It has been said that on that day they had "obtained acknowledged ascendancy" in Rochdale, had become "the greatest trading body in it" and that "... their Central Store, towered, like Saul, head and shoulders above every other establishment about it" (Holyoake, 1893: 146). The Co-operative Insurance Society (CIS) Tower echoed this, decades later, marking the centenary of the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) and over 100 years of successful co-operation:

We wanted to impress an "image" on the people of Manchester and elsewhere of the strength and size of the CIS through the medium of a modern office building. Very few people see our balance sheet or read our Chairman's report but this new building will be a constant reminder that the CIS is a large and first-class insurance office (Dinnage, 1961).

The CIS had deliberately appointed architects known for modern, prestige office developments. Following a trip to the USA and Canada to contemporary international office buildings the brief was refreshed with clear instruction to adopt this commercial international style of a tall building with curtain walling to produce the first true skyscraper in Britain and providing a symbol of progress at a time when others struggled to finance and realise their visions of the future — not too dissimilar from the skyscraper that Howard Roark stood beside in our opening sequence! (McCusker, 2018)

## The Reality

While the examples we are about to discuss may not have quite the same capitalist aesthetic, they certainly mimic the business acumen and careful investment of those early co-operative societies. Within weeks of winning the RIBA's Stirling Prize (the most prestigious architectural prize in the UK), Hastings Pier, a successful Community Benefit Society comprising 3,000 shareholders, went into administration in November 2017 citing difficulties in securing another £800,000 to support their three-year business plan (BBC News, 2017). National recognition on one hand, but less positive promotion for community businesses on the other. By way of contrast, Unicorn Grocery, a vegan workers co-operative trading in Manchester since 1995 won Best Food Retailer of the year in the BBC's Food and Farming Awards and at the same time, Loop Systems Architects Co-operative won the Retail Retrofit prize from the *Architect's Journal* for the refurbishment and extension. Proof that co-operatives can run successful businesses and maintain quality assets that are recognised by their peers. The Retrofit Jury stated:

The team has achieved amazing reductions in carbon and gone far beyond the normal standards in retail. What has been achieved is a very thoughtful Retrofit which has had a real impact on the community (Waite, 2017).

This *thoughtful impact* didn't happen overnight. It took five years of careful and methodical planning and building a trusting relationship between client and architect, not as individuals but as a team. It was through their work with the Co-operative Heritage Trust on the Rochdale Pioneers' Museum that Loop Systems developed an understanding of co-operative models of business and that this was actually a good match for the social and ethical position from which the three architects wanted to build their business. To date Loop has delivered architectural projects with seven co-operative organisations. While this might simply appear to be implementation of the 6th co-operative principle (Co-operation among co-operatives), it is much deeper than a business-to-business pact (McCusker, 2016). The working methods of both organisations (in their internal operation and outward-facing interactions) reflect the same values and principles with each committed to education and outreach so that others may benefit from the knowledge they have gained. This is particularly prevalent in Loop as their architect-directors also teach at the Manchester School of Architecture. Recognising their practice as part of a knowledge transfer network both in formal education and a tangible economy, the term *Educator* is perhaps more appropriate than *Lecturer*. This less hierarchical, co-operative approach to pedagogy recognises the skill and knowledge in each party, contrary to Rand's (1943) perception of architecture with the architect at the top of a cascading pyramid of knowledge. Loop often work on prototypic projects with clients who have little or no experience of capital/building projects and embrace this role, transferring experience they have gained with one client to another, whether that is a co-operative, a community group or a home-owner. Taking on building ownership is not something that everyone can manage and, we will see that the architects are sometimes approached before a building has been obtained or, as was the case with Unicorn Grocery, sometime after.

From an initial turnover of £250,000 Unicorn's sales exceeded £5 million a year. Their success meant they had outgrown their premises and the 1960s concrete warehouse building had not really been improved by much more than essential maintenance since it was bought by the co-operative in 2003. Unicorn approached Loop about expanding the delicatessen kitchen to produce more food on site thereby reducing the carbon footprint of deliveries and increasing profits inside the organisation. During extensive consultation with Unicorn's co-operative membership, it became clear that the upgrade was also an opportunity to improve staff welfare facilities, refurbish customer toilets, improve warehouse provision, and make it more energy efficient, but referring to Unicorn's business plan at every point along the process to ensure that it was benefitting the business, not just the appearance:

Loop made us feel included in every decision. The design not only supports the further growth of the Unicorn, but has also created a building that perfectly reflects our ethos of supporting sustainability (Unicorn feedback).

Sustainability at the heart of every decision. Instead of replacing features, they were recycled. Old fire escapes were treated and fixed, rather than discarded. Ethically-sourced materials were used throughout the project and decisions to use UK larch rather than imported cedar were a better reflection of Unicorn's values; left unfinished, its natural beauty softens over time, reducing the need for expensive maintenance. Maintaining the smooth, uninterrupted operations of the business required careful planning of pre-construction phases but just as much effort was invested in considering what would happen once it was completed. This was best exemplified by Unicorn's pre-emptive plan to recycle the scaffold netting by turning it into shopping bags that they could sell at the end of the project, engaging the architects, contractor and suppliers as well as another local co-operative to reduce waste arising from the project — a truly collaborate and considered effort. While the cost figures and energy data are subject to further research and study by the author, it is clear that energy costs did not increase despite increasing profits and resulting in a kitchen area five times larger than it had been. Whilst Unicorn already owned the building and had a viable business operating, they had previously raised the finance to purchase it through a community share offer, ensuring that they could maintain their location, operational and, not-to-be-underestimated social base. The Community Asset Transfer system exists for similar reasons.

As construction work was commencing at Unicorn, Loop systems started working with Bamford Community Society (BCS) in 2014 after tendering for a role to support them on expenditure of a Power to Change trailblazer project grant and have continued to work with them on other phases of work. BCS was established in 2012, intent on purchasing what eventually became the last pub in the village — The Angler's Rest. In this particular scenario the purpose of the capital asset was already clear — to maintain the social and community hub that was the village pub. After a very quick campaign, local residents managed to get the Angler's Rest listed as an Asset of Community Value (ACV) through the mechanisms set up by the Localism Bill (2011) and raised £263,000 via a community share offer to purchase it. This has been an ongoing challenge for Pubs across the UK and eventually culminated in 2016 with CAMRA (Campaign for Real Ale) mobilising its members to nominate their local pub as ACVs and offering advice and guidance to other community groups looking to do the same after pubs with ACV status became protected by planning laws (CAMRA, 2014).

In terms of finance, the first stage of this model is clear — the purchase of a building and an occupying business that can generate turnover. And, though it may not have seemed so at the time, the announcement of the closure of the local post office in Bamford was timely and fortuitous, providing a long-term tenant under the same roof as the pub (Power-to-Change, 2016). However there are other financial challenges in the ongoing maintenance and running costs of such a building; this can be a struggle for any pub and a contributing factor to the success, or not of a business that may already be struggling against other factors. But this is not a struggle restricted to Public Houses. In a newspaper article in 2011, New Philanthropy Capital's senior analyst Angela Kail suggested that grass-roots organisations can lack the resources to tackle the process and are experts in service delivery — not at being landlords:

Owning a property is a big task ... It's not just the management time but the transfer process is complicated the process is not for the faint-hearted. It's difficult, a huge commitment of time and money, so you have to think carefully is it the right thing for you? (Salman, 2011)

This can be successfully managed through careful business planning. At the Angler's Rest, BCS' trustees have been able to sustain and grow the business, expanding it to include a cafe and demonstrating that they can invest wisely to support such growth. With a very active board the society have been able to use this to attract further funding; *money begets money*. But this money is reinvested in the business and certainly upholds the social purpose set out by Gibson-Graham et al. (2013) and, by being open and transparent with advisers and other parties, they have also been able to use these funds as efficient as possible. For example, in considering BCS' long-term aims of having overnight accommodation, the architects (Loop Systems) worked with the trustees to repair and replace roof structures in a way that could permit conversion in the future. This was not an essential part of their initial refurbishment brief but seemed a rational

opportunity that needed to be considered when re-roofing and though it required some further investment in the fabric, it was no doubt cheaper than that it would have been in the future. The Angler's Rest is a successful business, it has won a number of business and co-operative awards but most importantly it is a social hub. But they don't rest on that success. They carry on building on it and have extended their share offers further, attracting more local investment gaining their confidence through the evidence of what they have done before to fund a new layout for the pub, better toilets, and a photovoltaic installation to reduce their running costs.

All the while, working with both Unicorn and BCS, the architects were looking for new office premises, keen to maintain what had now become a tradition of renting space from, and thereby re-investing in, organisations that shared their ethos. Before the office space was available, before the group had even secured the building, Loop Systems were invited to tender for a role supporting the Friends of Stretford Public Hall (FoSPH). FoSPH had started as a conversation between local parents at Victoria Park School. Once they became aware that the building was available they had a vision of how it could be restored as a community-focused facility and the more that the detail of that vision was clarified, the more excited and driven they became. Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council was looking to release an asset they had gained from John Rylands' family.

To appreciate the significance of this ACV it is worth considering its origins and history. John Rylands, a philanthropic contemporary of those Rochdale Pioneers, purchased the previous Town Hall building in 1878 with philanthropic intentions and commissioned a new Town Hall building design from W. A. Lofthouse. It was opened in 1879 with the intention of supporting uses of local character and discouraging sectarian or political purposes, expanding to comprise a library. The building was eventually rented to the then Local Board by Rylands' widow and upon her death in 1888, was bought by Stretford Urban District Council that had been established as the local municipality. As Stretford and its population grew so too did the Hall's function, building on its public and civic origins. In January 1925 the Stretford Town Hall & Baths Committee resolved that the free use of the Town Hall should be granted to the Education Committee for the holding of a series of school orchestral events. In February of the same year lettings were agreed for the Manchester Unity of Oddfellows for a fee but use of Town Hall at reduced terms was granted to other associations within the same month, as the performances to be held were charitable fundraisers. As time progressed, the Town Hall was clearly used by a wide range of groups for dramatic performances, worship services, recitals, choral events, boxing tournaments, carnivals, dances/dancing displays and music festivals. Users of the building complex included local Boy Scout and Girl Guide groups, Stretford Amateur Operatic Society, Stretford Symphony Orchestral Society (Which appears to have had an association with the Royal Manchester College of Music) and local schools who used the building and pool facilities for events including swimming galas, maintaining the municipal interest in healthy bodies and well-being for local residents. The hall underwent extensive refurbishment in the post-war years and re-opened in 1949 as Stretford Civic Theatre surviving for many decades until the end of the 1980s/early 1990s when the adjacent swimming baths were demolished and the Civic Theatre building was extensively refurbished and converted into offices by and for Trafford Council and remained in use as offices and training rooms. In 2012 TMBC estimated that the premises might require investment of nearly £200,000 over the next five years but ultimately would require in excess of £650,000 after that to fully address all its issues. Therefore, When TMBC refurbished and extended their nearby Trafford Town Hall, they took the opportunity to centralise and relocate many of the services that had been located elsewhere and vacated Stretford Public Hall in 2014. Concerned that this beautiful listed building would be lost to the community and developed by others, FoSPH gathered local support, raised awareness and made it to the shortlist of those and invited to submit a business plan to TMBC to demonstrate how they would use and develop the building if transferred as ACV rather than sold at its market value.

After a furious few months of surveys, drawings, business planning, and a huge amount of philanthropic investment of time from local community volunteers, FoSPH managed to secure

the building in 2015, gaining an asset that was worth in excess of £6 million pounds for £10 — but with all the liability that came with it. FoSPH re-opened the building later that year, once all the relevant paperwork was completed and immediately started to rent out spaces with the board setting out from the start what kind of organisations they would host there. Though it has been slow to develop it has been careful and the business has become incrementally stronger while all the while restoring those community events and uses that filled its rooms in the previous century; it gradually moved from volunteers to paid workers for key roles; starting with grants and growing in income streams — when opportunities arise they are tested and reviewed before implementation. This is also reflected in the successful share offer of 2017 where more than £150,000 was invested by local communities and businesses in eight weeks. As with the other projects, FoSPH have attracted that investment by demonstrating what they are capable of and exploring options with advisers including Loop Systems. However, with building work about to commence in 2018 it seems that by following the business plan, these architects have designed themselves out of the building and may have to forfeit their architects-in-residence role and will have to search for another like-minded organisation in this local solidarity economy to whom they can contribute.

## Architecture — Not Just Buildings

And so, we return to the image of the architect, not as a sharp-dressed man frustrated by his client's lack of appreciation for his talent but as an actor within a network of skilled people who work together for mutual aims and for wider benefit — whilst still maintaining quality that is recognised by their professional peers. When Howard Roark (Rand, 1943) is on the cusp of expulsion from architecture school, he is offered some advice from the Dean:

There is something for you to consider, particularly for a boy in your position. There's the practical side of an architect's career to think about. An architect is not an end to himself. He is only a small part of a great social whole. Co-operation is the key word to our modern world and to the profession of architecture in particular. Have you thought of your potential clients? (Rand, 1943: 14)

Whilst the words of Howard Roark may resonate with and inspire any blossoming architect, one can certainly not dispute the Dean's words and surely, as we have discussed before, the potential clients and work of an architect is surely a reflection of their principles (McCusker, 2016). Success in architecture, or indeed capital projects does not mean sacrificing co-operative values or principles. Quality and integrity are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Capital projects and national architecture awards are not the preserve of the economically privileged in a post-capitalist UK. It's a rare occasion when capital projects have flexible timescales, unlimited funds and a desire for the utmost quality; It's even rarer for this to happen within the Third Sector or ethical businesses like those discussed in this paper. But, that's what makes these projects so challenging and consequently, so interesting — by working together we balance the objectives set by the team at the start with the parameters that emerge through the process to produce sustainable projects that embrace capitalist conventions and put them to work to grow the social and solidarity economy through co-operation.

A building may be a capital asset, but architecture can be so much more.

## The Author

Stephen McCusker RIBA RIAS is Co-leader of the BA 3rd year at the Manchester School of Architecture but continues to practice as an Architect-Director at Loop Systems Co-operative — an award-winning, Manchester-based practice delivering projects based on social, economic and environmental sustainability. He has worked and studied in a number of European locations on a broad range of project types ranging from furniture to museums but primarily supports community-led projects and enjoys developing responses to existing buildings and responsible material selection. This has included new-build and working with listed buildings



or historic contexts. An experienced ARB prescribed examiner, Part 3 examiner and teacher of Architecture & Design Thinking, Stephen has been appointed part-time as a Senior Lecturer at the Manchester School of Architecture where he combines his research interests with his ongoing practice.

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## Note

- 1 The origins, purpose and evolution of these premises is the central subject of other research on the Architectural Heritage of the co-operative movement undertaken by the author and funded by the RIBA — currently awaiting publication.