Marginality and the Third Space of Un-adopted Plotlander Roads

Abstract

This paper explores the characteristics and relationships of marginality in informal space and plotlander housing in the context of Homi K. Bhabha's cultural hybridity and Third Space. To illustrate and examine the processes of marginalisation that defined informal space in the UK this paper will critically analyse the previously undocumented plotlander community at Studd Hill on the North Kent coastline. Examining key aspects of this sites social origins and its marginal spatial context reveals the positive implications and challenges of informal space and social hybridisation. In this analysis issues of spatial vulnerability and marginality of plotlander communities are critically reframed as analogous to the socio-spatial characteristics and innovative practices highlighted by Bhabha in postcolonial hybrid space. Focusing specifically on the challenges of the un-adopted roads at Studd Hill this paper's comparisons reveal how the anarchistic emergence of plotlander housing in the UK has produced innovative solutions to their social marginality that reflect the spatial values of postcolonial hybrid spaces.

Marginality and the Third Space of Un-adopted Plotlander Roads

Written by frequent collaborators Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward, *Plotlanders* (1985) is a seminal documentation of the emergence of informal housing in the UK, focusing upon the story of Pagham Beach on the Sussex coast around 1907. Much like the analysis of Studd Hill posed in this paper, Ward and Hardy's compelling study of the small informal seaside community at Selsey Bill became a vehicle for their wider discussion of the plotlander movement as one of the last architectural and built representations of social marginality in the UK.

> *"The word 'plotlands' is used by town planners as a shorthand description for those areas where, in the first forty years of this century, land was divided into small plots and sold, often in unorthodox ways, to people wanting to build their holiday home, country retreat or would be smallholding. Sometimes they simply squatted and eventually gained title through 'adverse possession', the legal phrase for squatter's rights."* (Hardy & Ward, 1985, p. 63)

Throughout their respective careers Ward and Hardy collaborated to observe how the introduction of structured planning systems in the UK during the twentieth century came to define the formalisation of space and an inescapable process of *'tidying up'* informal housing communities across the UK. Ward's component of this analysis is reinforced by his extensive work on the positive potential of contemporary anarchist theory (1996, 1999, 2004). His political advocacy for such alternative housing reflects many of the same themes as Bernard Rudolfsky's *'Architecture Without Architects'* (1987), Hassan Fathy's *'Architecture for the Poor'* (1976), and particularly John Turner's *'Freedom to Build' (1972).* Yet whilst the architectural contexts of these books are derived from the space of *Other* (and culturally assumed as *'backward'* or *'primitive')* cultures, [1] Ward's collaborations with Hardy emerge from within a heartland of Western space and society: the English countryside (Hardy & Ward, 1984; 1976, 2002).

The plotlander movement coincided with an agricultural crisis in England and wider Europe during the late nineteenth and early Twentieth Century (Thompson, 2007). Combinations of flooding, bad soil, acid heathland, chalky uplands, and simply failed

rural mismanagement quickly became pervasive characteristics of unwanted and undervalued space that defined the peripheral edges of the English countryside landscape (Matless, 2013, pp. 38–41). Combined with historical macro economic conditions, the vulnerability of these marginal spaces led to the emergence of libertarian, anarchistic, and informal housing upon land that was conventionally assumed at the time to be worthless.

> *"The word 'plotlands' evokes a landscape of a gridiron of grassy tracks, sparsely filled with bungalows made from army huts, railway carriages, shanties, sheds, shacks and chalets, slowly evolving into ordinary suburban development."(Hardy & Ward, 1985, p. 63)*

The conditions that drove the emergence of plotlander housing offer a provocative point of comparison to marginal and informal housing around the world today. The same characteristics of marginalised and vulnerable land, and precarious social relationships and structures reflect many aspects of informal housing development in cities across The Global South that long outlasted plotlanders in the UK (Davis, 2007; Jiron, 2010; Kellett, 2005; Neuwirth, 2006). In contrast to contemporary views of global urbanisation and urban migration as an inevitability (Brenner & Theodore, 2002), places like Selsey, Peacehaven, and Jaywick, etc evoke a counter-narrative of *'ruralisation'.*[2] Driven in part by the impoverished conditions of city life in London,[3] plotlander culture was defined by a growing social desire to escape the city to an increasingly idealised cultural perception of the freedom and tranquillity offered by a seaside or countryside life: *'a space to live off the land and be free'.*[4]

Yet the context of late Victorian England the conditions of informality, freedom, and difference that intrinsically defined these emergent informal communities paradoxically prompted social outcry against plotlanders who came to be seen as a blight on the English landscape:

> *"... there is an irony in the fact that the simple life and the rural week-end also attracted the liberal intelligentsia who were the backbone of the preservation lobby ... [who] deplored the way in which 'the adventurous bungalow plants its foundation – a pink asbestos roof screaming its*

> *challenge – across a whole parish from the pleasant upland that it has lightheartedly defaced.'"(Hardy & Ward, 1985, p. 64)*

As ward notes, in retrospect it is easy see the odious relationship of class and politics in such un-critical and narrow minded outcry at *"[t]he wrong sort of people getting a place in the sun"(Hardy & Ward, 1985, p. 57)*. These sentiments emerged from the fortunate section of the population who had already come to take for granted that they alone should have access to a second home in the country or by the sea (Matless, 2013, pp. 41–43, 47–49). Thus, the informal and alternative communities of plotlanders were marginalised as much for their aspirations for freedom, socio-spatial equality, and arcadian liberty as for any supposed visual detriment they may have represented against the prescriptive limitations of the ideology of an unspoilt verdant English country landscape.

Today similar political reactions to the success of informal space are observable across the contemporary cities of *'The Global South.'* Thus we might provoke a critical comparison of Ward and Hardy's remarks to Fernández-Maldonado's observations of urban slum growth in the Global South, and the reactions of an entitled political few against urban migrants innovating *"new practices [that are] altering the conventional social, political, economic and cultural 'rules of the game."* (2007, p. 5)

Yet whilst across the Global South the slow intergenerational development of informal housing is increasingly recognised as a key part of sustainable urban upgrading (Andavarapu & Edelman, 2013), in the UK spaces of informality, marginality, and difference were often unable to follow a process of slow cultural hybridisation and innovation. Existing outside of the burgeoning control and conventional hierarchies of formal planning, plotlander sites came to suffer extremes of socio-political marginalisation. This notably led to the isolation, fragmentation, or at best gentrification of almost all original plotlander sites (Hardy & Ward, 1984, pp. 47–52). Today, having been institutionally marginalised for decades the remaining plotlander communities have been demolished, redeveloped, or simply forgotten. The authority and control of formal planning mechanisms has either erased, isolated, or pacified the heterogeneity of informal spaces and the innovative communities who produced them.

Third Space and Informality

In contrast to the conventional formality of Westernised space in the UK, spaces of informality and difference remain pervasive across the postcolonial Global South (Davis, 2007). Within the cultural and spatial discussions that emerged through engagements with such explicitly informal, unconventional, and *'non-western'* space, Homi K. Bhabha is widely acknowledged as having defined the concept of *'Third Space'* in his critical examinations of postcolonial contexts and discourse (1988, 2004, p. 55; Rutherford, 1990). Building on the work of theorists Franz Fanon and Edward Said, Bhabha's concept of Third Space was crucial in the evolutionary development of postcolonial theory. It provides a conceptual mechanism with which to value the uniqueness of each person, actor, or context as engaged in continuous processes of *'hybridisation'*. The spatial process that produces these hybrid identities were recognised by observing the textuality and enunciation of each individual's use of language (Bhabha, 2006, p. 156). Bhabha appropriated linguistic concepts from post-structural theory in his spatial and cultural analysis, recognising how people were defining their own unique perspective on their identity, environments, and contexts.

The complexities of postcolonial contexts allowed Bhabha to define the notion of Third Space as the ambiguous place and social agency created when individuals connect, interact, and react with one another (Hernández, 2010, pp. 122–125). Contrary to the slow gentrification and formalisation of plotlanders in the UK, the hybrid spaces and cultures this complexity produced in the postcolonial Global South were recognised and valued by Bhabha in terms of localised difference and distinctiveness: as a product of the true textual nature of space and social relations (Bhabha, 2004, pp. 5–6).

Subsequently the idea of hybrid space being a positive social process has been widely appropriated into Western architectural and urban discourse (Hernández, 2010), but perhaps most notably by Edward Soja in his observations of Los Angeles, explicitly titled *'Thirdpsace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-imagined Places'* (1996). In addition to Bhabha's Third Space, Soja appropriated concepts of socio-spatial trialectics from Henri Lefebvre (1991) and the concepts of heterotopia from Michel Foucault (1986), generating an explicitly spatialised Western conception of Third Space that sought to be somewhat overwhelmingly all-encompassing.

> *"[T]hirding produces what might best be called a cumulative trialectics that is radically open to additional otherness, to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge." (Soja, 1996, p. 61)*

In proposing a form of socio-spatial analysis that is intentionally radically inclusive and open to otherness, Soja advocated the potential of transcending beyond the dichotomy and dualism of identity towards. Instead his theory posed the challenge of *'an-Other'* and the subsequent continuous contestation and re-negotiation of socio-spatial boundaries and thresholds that such radically continuous *'Otherness'* presupposes.

Yet in spite of Soja's Western appropriation of Third Space, in the context of plotlanders and Studd Hill specifically it is Bhabha's original concept of Third Space and the textual production of socio-spatial hybridity that provides the most valuable opportunity for our critical analysis. Fundamentally, Bhabha's Third Space theory provided a mechanism to critically analyse and understand some of the complexity of poverty, social exclusion, and marginality in The Global South. Yet these conditions and contexts that are defined by social and cultural exclusion can be perceived as reflections of wider symbolic conditions, resonating with Ward's observations of the opportunities for critical analysis and comparisons of plotlanders in the UK:

> *"At first sight it seems absurd to compare the English Plotlands of the first half of this century with the explosion of self-built shanty-towns in the cities of the Third World in the second half. In the English example it was a marginal phenomenon, whereas in the cities of Latin America, Africa and Asia, the unofficial self-housed inhabitants outnumber those of the official cities. But our investigation of the plotlanders and the homes they made got themselves has reminded us continually of the findings of Third World self-build settlements who see them as a triumph of popular initiative and ingenuity." (Hardy & Ward, 1985, p. 67)*

Bhabha's principles of *'cultural hybridisation'* can thus be appropriated to recontextualise Studd Hill within a theoretical framework where *"all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity,"* that *"displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiative." (Rutherford, 1990, p. 211).* This recognition of cultural hybridity as a socio-political process is crucial for

a contemporary analysis of plotlanders. If spaces and identities of cultural hybridity are produced by, and subsequently continue to produce difference, alterneity, and heterogeneity, then the dialectical identity of plotlanders as both inherently marginalised and innovative would seem to resonate with these concepts drawn originally from postcolonial theory. Thus, Bhabha's original engagement with the inherent identity politics of marginality, inequality, and difference in The Global South are vital when examining the marginal and informal spaces of plotlanders.

In the context of Bhabha's Thirdspace plotlanders are revealed as examples of marginality, exclusion, and cultural hybridity within the English Landscape. They offer a platform to reconsider the positive opportunities offered by the intersection of informal space and Thirdspace in a Westernised context. Perceiving plotlander sites as a landscape of both marginiality and hybridity is supported by Wendy Joy Darby's explorations of the interconnected relationships of visual and poetic aesthetics, political and cultural movements, and the production of the English landscape as a core element of a national sense of identity (2000, pp. 51–63). Darby's exploration of the complexity of cultural and political perspectives of landscape is similarly explored by David Matless, who notes the implications of moral and political clashes between preservationists and libertarians that have been played out in the formal planning of an informal English Landscape (1996, 2013). These expansive discourses highlight the complex contestations of identity that unfolded throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in a historical process that drove the formalisation of social, political, and landscape.

This discourses also help to frame Jason Orton and Ken Worpole's renewed engagement with the informal and alternative landscapes of East Anglia and Essex as spaces of surviving arcadian ideals (2013). Reflecting many of the architectural observations of this paper, Orton and Worpole note the continued pull of marginal and informal spaces for citizens seeking alternative and artistic ways of life. Yet this renewed interest in territories of disruption and peripheral landscape of difference and informality offered by Orton and Worpole retains a sense of isolation and exclusion to such spaces that seems to only intensify and glory in cultural isolation and marginality. Such a resistance to the challenge that we face in pursuing a discussion of positive hybridity and the implications of encounters in an English Thirdspace suffer the same

sense of abstraction that plotlander sites have faced since the formalisation of town and country planning policy after the second world-war.

As with informal space in the Global South, both forgetting or fetishizing the historical marginality of plotlanders in the UK is a relinquishment of a social responsibility to the principles of cultural hybridity. More damagingly the marginalisation of informal space has also diminished and devalued the social opportunity and ability to negotiate with other and different people – even when those others are our neighbours. Today, if communities like Studd Hill can be re-read and re-contextualised as being defined by their textual and enunciatory negotiation of space and identity, then what might be learnt from the various social and spatial mechanisms that they have employed to positively engage with the informality and cultural hybridity of their homes and community?

Conversely, what critical analysis can be brought to bear upon the impacts of political and social isolation heaped upon Studd Hill, plotlanders, and lost informal communities across the UK who have been victimised for their difference and informality in ways that resonate with so many postcolonial histories?

A Local Story of Marginalised Informality
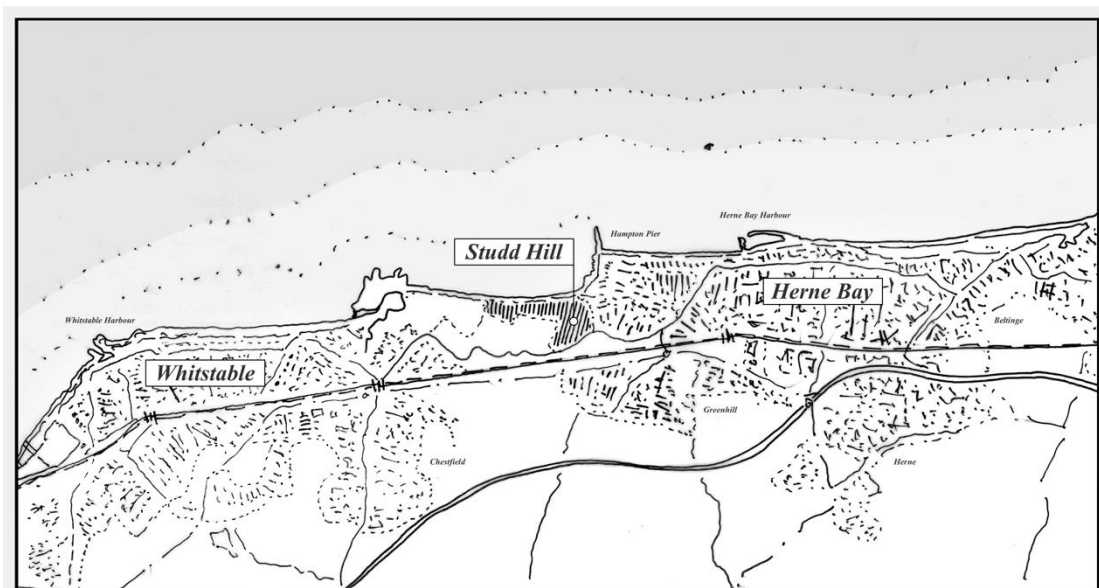
The location of Studd Hill is important. It sits on the Western edge of the small town of Herne Bay in an area with a history that reflects much of Ward's observations of the socio-spatial characteristics of marginality that define informal and plotlander sites.[5] Much of the land that formed the original Studds Hill Farm was lost in 1879 to sea erosion. Concurrently, a thriving local oyster fishery coupled with speculative land agents led to the development of 124 houses, shops, hotels, and a resort that would take advantage of the new railway infrastructure and the success of the burgeoning oyster market. However, development on the site stalled as competition from the rival Whistable Oysters Company and construction problems with the pier meant that only the bandstand and a single terrace of Victorian housing – Hernecliffe Gardens – were ever completed. Then, devastatingly this new was lost to further sea erosion when part of the street collapsed into the sea leading to its demolition in 1911.

This loss of land was never reclaimed and it was not till the completion of a substantial sea wall in 1959 that the coastline would be formally 'protected' by the conventions of post-war concrete sea walls. Notably, this protection from the sea was achieved decades after the original Studd Hill development had already lost many plotlander homes to erosion themselves,[6] and by this time the inherent vulnerability of the area was engrained on local memory.

DISAPPEARING HAMPTON-ON-SEA 1910.

Near to the sea edge the waterlogged clay soil drove the creation of a local brickworks industry that continued in Studd Hill up until the early part of the twentieth century. In 1916 the army took over much of the remaining nearby land for training, erecting army huts that are to this day remain a part of the caravan holiday park that exists to the west of Studd Hill.[7] Years later, during the Second World War these same huts would become refuge for the Jewish Aid Society – *'Mentor Homes for Poor Jewish Children'* – likely further adding to the perceived identity of social marginality that the area still bears today.

In the early 1930s a certain Mr Stedman[8] purchased a large coastal stretch of now heavily devalued agricultural land at Studds Hill Farm before advertising for first 80, and then later a further 40 *'holiday home'* plots for sale in London daily papers, selling them from £50 a plot – which included a timber chalet building![9] In contrast to earlier and more classically anarchic and organically emergent plotland developments like that at Selsey, Stedman does appear to have submitted some form of plans to the local council.[10] Yet these first formal engagement with the local council only occurred to facilitate the development of basic sewers and services that were built in 1933-34, and (like many plotlander sites) planning and installation of these services was only obtained well after many informal homes had been built.

In further strange socio-spatial twists of unconventionality and marginality, throughout the Second World War years the Studd Hill site was largely taken over by the British Army who installed defensive pillboxes along the seashore. Stedman died whilst on active service in the R.A.F. during the Second World War in 1942. Subsequently, and like many other plotlander sites, the territory of Studd Hill was left in a state of legal and political ambiguity and uncertainty that remains to this day.

In the immediate postwar period the advent of the 1947 'Town and Country Planning Act' coincided with the development of highways agency approved service roads that now surrounded the estate. This brought new street-lighting and improved services, but also formally marked the physical realisation of continuing political and social isolation of the Studd Hill community who were now surrounded by infrastructure that to this day remains unattainable to their community. Crucially, Stedman had always remained the legal owner of the roads that connected each home and street to the increasingly formal surrounding world. Originally Studd Hill's roads had been maintained and repaired by levees on the residents organized by Stedman, but in his absence this system would fail leading to the haphazard condition of the un-adopted roads that has marginalised the site to this day.

The ambiguous ownership of the roads became a crucial spatial, social, and political definition of the informal and marginal identity of this island territory and plotlander community. These informal roads, thresholds, and boundaries are emblematic of the nonconformity and difference of Studd Hill, and the political inability to engage in dialogue with informal and alternative spaces and identities. Yet they also highlight the positive innovation and social responsibility that informality has empowered within community members. Un-adopted roads, boundaries, and thresholds have come to define a unique spatial language and textuality at Studd Hill. This informal and marginalised community thrives on an impromptu process of social enunciation and spatial agency, generating a unique cultural process of localized hybridization, akin in many ways to Bhabha's conception of postcolonial Third Space.

Yet today Studd Hill is changing rapidly. Local house prices in surrounding neighbourhoods are so high that outside buyers are increasingly willing to *'overlook'* the long held socio-cultural isolation that afflicts the Studd Hill community, and the

historical marginality of its location. Located in between the two contrasting towns of Herne Bay and Whitstable,[11] Studd Hill is revealed as a cultural hybrid of both these towns – working class, honest, and humble, yet offering an alternative social identity of individuality and difference.

Studd Hill is dominated by an architectural and spatial language which could be colloquially described as reflecting a *'shabby chic'* aesthetic. Reflecting the original tenets of the plotlander movement, it is the individuality and uniqueness of Studd Hill that now sets it apart from the sterility of the surrounding conventional formal housing developments. The historical informal origins and persistent cultural marginality of the community has led to the production of an architectural language that does not adhere to conventional expectations and assumptions of taste and value (Bourdieu, 2010, pp. 156–162). Instead it offers spaces with the latent potential to be vibrant, rich, and alive.

The rich variety of adaptations, extensions, and over-cladding that define informal and alternative spaces like that of Studd Hill reflect a broad socio-spatial spectrum: from conventional to quirky, boring to whimsical, dilapidated to spectacularly charming. Very few houses look or feel the same, each seeming to reflect the uniqueness of the homeowners and rendering the whole community with a humble textuality and enunciation only found in informal architecture and space.

This variety of adaptation can be read as the physical representation of the community's cultural hybridity. By the very nature of their informal origins, plotlander territories like Studd Hill have come to define a unique architectural and cultural hybridity: not formal or conventional, but no longer informal or vulnerable; marginal yet with a sense of purpose and collective community meaning. This richness and variety also reinforces a spatial and architectural sense of marginality and difference that contrasts abruptly against conventional housing development models that predominate contemporary housing in Herne Bay, and the collective wider everyday architectural landscape of Westernised space (Brenner & Theodore, 2002, pp. 353–356).[12]

Plotlander Third Space Innovations at Studd Hill

In the context of such a rich and unusual architectural language it might seem strange not to focus upon the specific details and history of the buildings themselves, but

instead to look closely at the roads, boundaries, and spatial thresholds that define the neighbourhood. Yet concentrating upon other aspects of the space and territory of Studd Hill is perhaps reflective of the different perception of value and meaning that informality reveals. Thus, instead of analyzing the architectural variety at Studd Hill,[13] in the context of Bhabha and the rich concept of Third Space it is intrinsically more revealing to focus upon the innovative solutions developed by the community to the challenges of informal plotland thresholds and shared spaces.

A key example of this innovation and creativity is the variety of unassuming ways residents have found to deal with the informal distinctions of public and private space caused by the lack of formal roads, curbs, and pavements. In essence, the individual plots simply end at the threshold to neighbouring properties and the un-adopted roads. As Dovey and King note (2011, p. 16) such spatial ambiguities are commonly mistaken as unimportant, yet Studd Hill reveals a number of novel solutions to the unplanned reality of informal everyday spatial conditions.

It is easy to underestimate the significance of paths, curbs, and clear private boundaries in defining the spatial experience of conventional formal housing developments. Yet, as in sites and services housing communities across the Global South, at Studd Hill it is explicitly clear that the roads, curbs, and pavements are a defining characteristic of the isolation of the community and their informal island of territory. This condition of marginality is further reinforced by the recent completion of a dozen new build developer houses within the heart of the community. As is expected with all new housing developments these new properties are supplied with fully modern roads and pavements that abruptly end where they meet the existing un-adopted roads.[14]

These new houses and roads are an abrupt intervention of formalised space within the informal plotlander territory. Their spatial conventions of formality exist as an alien island of conventionality within a previously makeshift and textual local landscape. Beyond being a blatant and self-referential intrusion of neoliberal speculative development into the Studd Hill community, this new housing does help to exemplify

the apparent inability of contemporary capitalist planning and political formality to engage in dialogue with existing communities (Bruton & Nicholson, 1984; Dovey & Sandercock, 2002).

Thus, whilst it appears that whilst a variety of financial contributions to the local council were garnered as part of the planning approval negotiations and the financial offsetting of responsibilities for these new houses, precisely none of this money was allocated to specifically serve the existing Studd Hill community. Whilst the owners of the new formal houses have to drive over the plotlander communities un-adopted roads in order to reach their new island of perfect (and characterless) tarmac, no money has been allocated to support the maintenance or rebuilding of the informal roads.[15] The opportunity and perhaps even democratic necessity of the planning process to engage with the Studd Hill community in a dialogue could have led to the community's roads acting as a Third Space of encounter between formal politicised planners, and informal local residents. Yet the marginalisation of Studd Hill persisted; the roads remain un-adopted, and the residents remain isolated in a territory of informality.

The lack of dialogue and engagement with the local community is apparently institutionally accepted, demonstrated by the complete lack of any historical analysis of Studd Hill as an important example of plotlander history, or meaningful community participation process in the approved planning documentation for this development. Perhaps expectations of a Third Space dialogue with the existing plotlander community is foolish given the decades of political isolation and abandonment subjected upon this community by the planning powers. As Ward noted extensively, the passive isolation and neglect of plotlander territories was to become an almost institutionally recognised as so-called *"selfish acts of individualism"* at the expense of the *"common good"*. This mantra and dictate of institutional planning response to the unplanned communities has time and time again led to the slow decline and eventual gentrification towards acceptable formality (Hardy & Ward, 1984, pp. 47–49).

In the context of Bhabha's theoretical dissection of the prescriptive authority of colonial spaces, the lack of any pretense of dialogue from the democratic and public mandated planning authority at Studd Hill is tantamount to an ideological myopia to that which differs from the norm – *'the Other'*. Much as with experiences of *'gypsy'* and *'traveller'*

communities in the UK (Niner, 2004; Smith & Greenfields, 2012), the impasse of dialogue between informal communities and formal planning authorities suggests that the critical comparisons to postcolonial theory proposed by this paper have yet to intersect practically with planning discourse or everyday policy.

Yet in spite of the recent formal planning and speculation housing developments at Studd Hill there remains a number of spatial innovations regards the un-adopted roads that deserve documentation and critical analysis. The historical absence of formal spatial conventions of boundaries and roads has necessitated and empowered the residents of Studd Hill to produce their own unique spatial bricolage with which to define the thresholds of their space. As with many plotlander housing neighbourhoods, at Studd Hill there are noticeably fewer fences, boundary walls, or conventional demarcations of land divisions and ownership than would be expected in conventional housing developments. Low fences and hedges define many border between properties, and those with more solid formal walls are almost universally recognisable as being modern interventions by recent incomers to the community.

These ambiguous and informal thresholds at Studd Hill can be perceived as a model of Third Space and as a process of negotiation and hybridity. Formal developer housing in the west has conditioned home-owners to exist in isolation behind fences and walls that reinforce the acceptability of not knowing your neighbours beyond casual acknowledgements. Yet at Studd Hill neighbours appear to know one-another out of choice. Disagreements between residents are part of the texture of the space, and are unavoidable. The dialogue needed to resolve, arbitrate, and negotiate across thresholds and boundaries are crucial to knitting the community together. And it is this realisation of a form of Third Space that is crucial in understanding how Studd Hill's informal and marginal origins have not only survived, but continue to define a unique community identity to this day.

The sense of open and interconnected space produced by these intangible and informal delineations of public and private thresholds in Studd Hill feels highly unorthodox and almost culturally uncomfortable in comparison to commercial housing developments. You walk on pathways (that are in effect extensions of peoples gardens) made variously of grass, tarmac, gravel, mud, shingle, and paving. Many of these simple spatial conditions and relationships appear insignificant and perhaps even crude, yet this socio-spatial production of informal thresholds reveals a positive contrast to the conventional isolation produced by overt formalism.

The path constantly changes leading to an experience of wandering through a community whilst simultaneously dodging the oncoming cars who attempt to avoid potholes with vehicular acrobatics. This dance with cars takes place on roads without edges, pavement, or definition. It forces a dialogue of exchange between pedestrians, residents, and drivers; almost a textuality of movement and spatial communication between actors dodging puddles and muddy verges (wellies needed more often than not). And these kinds of unconventional spatial experiences force you to notice the variety of different human stories written in the homes and gardens that line the streets.

At the most basic level, in place of pavements and boundaries residents have created their own thresholds with a variety of homemade bollards, posts, marker stones, and concrete filled tyres painted white, each carefully placed in order to informally define property thresholds and to stop cars parking on their garden verges. Seeming to echo the historical second world-war pill-boxes that dot the Kent coastline, these markers are porous and permeable; impermanent yet solid; simple yet innovative and purposeful. And whilst each resident's unique solution may appear to be merely unremarkable spatial oddities, collectively they can also be seen to exemplify the active production and maintenance of the informal social and spatial relations that exist in plotlander communities. Together they represent the textual characteristics of this informal space, and the individuality of these solutions represent the cultural hybridity of the community writ large in small spatial innovations.

These distinctive spatial improvisations of housing thresholds at Studd Hill help to explicitly define the social identity of this unconventional community. Such simple and idiosyncratic spatial solutions to the challenges (and conversely opportunities) of informality are emblematic of a wider community engagement and socio-spatial identity (Ferguson & Gupta, 1992, p. 18). Albeit forced by necessity, the inventiveness

of informal spaces reflect an engagement with a collective (if perhaps largely unconscious) social production of space and community identity that is in many instances missing from conventional formal housing developments (Shields, 1999, p. 84).

Yet it must be acknowledged that, as with many original plotlander sites, the un-adopted roads remain a constant challenge to the community. Reflecting Mr Stedman's original methods of community financing and organisation, the Studd Hill Residents Association requests (notably not demands) a £20 annual donation from home owners to finance repairs to the ever-changing patchwork landscape of concrete and tarmac roads. Sitting on marginal clay soil and lacking proper substructure, the roads require continual annual maintenance. In a compelling example of community organization road-works are undertaken by a team of community volunteers in a what has become an annual ritual of post-Winter repairs.[16]

The textuality and enunciation advocated by Bhabha as emerging from the dialogue found in Third Space is writ large at Studd Hill in the narrative of pensioners fixing a patchwork quilt of un-adopted roads with money willingly payed by some but not all. The lack of any legal covenant afforded to the Residents Association[17] makes formally levying any legally binding charges onto residents effectively impossible. Thus the Residents Association runs on a voluntary and volunteer basis that, as with many things in life, is open to exploitation by some at the expense of others.[18] This leads to the local discontinuity of committed residents being somewhat understandably disenfranchised towards others who fail to engage productively with the collective agency of Studd Hill's community spirit. This issue also reflects the social implications of the slow influx of *'outsiders'* who are increasingly engaging in speculative development and commercialisation of the valuable original homes and their (compared to contemporary developments) oversized plots.[19]

Yet it would be too easy and convenient to categorise the Studd Hill community as being introspective and isolationist. Whilst the community is defined by the long-term population characteristics of the original post-war exodus from London, the white, working class, and pensioner age identity is too easy a stereotype to fall back upon. The local sense of defensiveness is a product of political alienation and isolation and should

not be reduced to political or racial pejoratives. Much the same population model exists across the North Kent coastline, but the working class roots of the retirees at Studd Hill are unique because of their community agency which bypasses simplistic political definitions.

To date, collectively this alternative and makeshift community continues to maintain an unconventional and fragile cohesion that stands in abject contrast to the isolation projected upon them by the formal planning authorities. Recent communication between the Residents Association and the local council and planning authority have set a seemingly unbelievable figure of £2.25 million as the cost posed to adopt the roads at Studd Hill – an estimated £20-30k per home that is simply inconceivable for many of the elderly and low-income residents. Similar issues have been faced at moments of interactions with the highways agency who quoted approximately £2000 for an initial consultation into the design of a much needed roundabout outside the Studd Hill community centre. The impossibility and institutionalized inhumanity of such a rejection of dialogue is startlingly representative of the now destructive formality of Westernised space, planning, and political bureaucracy.

The socio-spatial relations of positive informality and marginality at Studd Hill are fragile. They have been maintained and negotiated over a significant period of time by a community dialectically producing their own socio-spatial relations (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 48). As a buoyant market drives the slow encroachment of formality on a previously isolated and strong community, the unique socio-spatial relations at Studd Hill are exposed for their inability to be bought and sold in the same way that property is so readily reified by a destructively buoyant housing market.

Learning from Studd Hill

There is a form of Third Space, textuality, and innovative socio-spatial dialogue at Studd Hill. Yet it does not exist between people and planners or politicians as we might expect of democratic institutions like a local planning authority or county council. Instead it is a dialogue of spaces and relationships produced by and between people already marginalised by the history of their homes, community, and their island territory of informality.

Ward and Hardy titled their most extensive collective study of plotlander and informal space *"Arcadia for All: The legacy of a makeshift Landscape".* Their titular choice of words is both exquisite and telling; most notably the use of the word '*all'.* Yet this inclusive (and anarchistic) notion of everyone being entitled to engage in the production of their own space, lives, and social relations feels increasingly abstract against the conventionality and assumed inevitability of formal and abstract Westernised space.

(When) Were '*we'* ever informal? That doesn't sound like '*us'.* It is certainly a part of '*our'* past that has been successfully removed from cultural perceptions of Westernised space and appears unlikely to be recognised as bearing the same social and historical importance as we so readily afforded to culturally accepted spaces, landscapes, and architectures of merit. In the UK listed building status and the preservation it assures is a potentially fantastic social mechanism to highlight and value our architectural and socio-spatial history. Yet such social recognition and status is seemingly reserved for spaces that document an accepted and acceptable history of the space and culture with which we are surrounded: the countryside retreats of the historical landed gentry, the house where an author or scientist once lived, or other built monuments to an agreed idea of centralised power and acceptable social formality.

It is perhaps far easier to sell the idea of the UK and Western society as the apex of successful neoliberal capitalist society with an image of the historically empowered landed gentry that is defined by say Chatsworth or Blenheim, than the social abandonment that defines Studd Hill, or its more notorious sister, Jaywick Sands. Yet are both not representative of the history (and present day) of the English landscape and identity? How would one go about selling national trust gift shop mugs with pictures of Jaywick Sands on them? Instead the honour of documenting that aspect of our social history is left to mediums like channel 5's poverty porn/fetish TV: *'Benefits Britain: Life on the dole'* ('Episode 5 | Benefits Britain', n.d.); the isolation of marginality writ large in a sudo-documentary form designed for popular consumption and gleeful living room disinterest and derision.

Today, the history of alternative housing in the UK remains a forgotten narrative that exists outside of both conventional architecture theory and discourse, and also the wider cultural imaginations of the UK social identity.[20] Finding a lost plotlander site should

mark a valuable contribution to architectural history, yet there is almost no critical engagement with informal society, space, and housing in the UK today.[21] Whilst Ward and Hardy documented the existence of many informal plotlander sites across the South East (and wider UK) the lack of any critical contemporary study of such sites seems to reflect not only the cultural disengagement with our informal past, but more worryingly, a lack of critical academic engagement with the rich (and increasingly forgotten) history of alternative housing in the UK.

This social and political isolation and marginalisation is exemplified in the story of Studd Hill. Perhaps the opportunity to learn from the positive political achievement of Bhabha's post-colonial Third Space dialogues seem so distant that no critical purchase can be brought to bear on the continued social rejection of informality that defines Westernised space and society. However, the need to contextualise and learn from informal development practices is perhaps more pressing than ever before (Neuwirth, 2006).

The historic socio-economic conditions that led to the emergence of informal housing are a distant and long forgotten memory in the UK. Marginal farming land with implausibly low economic value no longer exist, and if and where they still do, they are now subject to planning laws that (perhaps rightly) *'protect'* the English countryside. Peripheral and left-over spaces that were the basis of the organic emergence of plotlander sites now exist only in The Global South where informal land ownership and planning policies are themselves expressions of the necessity of informality to solve real-world problems.

Today at Studd Hill a narrative of marginalisation and abandonment continues to be played out that exemplifies the inability of Western space and society to see itself in others and to learn from informal spaces and discourse. The lack of a productive Third Space dialogue between formal and informal space at Studd Hill and in contemporary Western contexts more widely reflects a staggeringly short-sighted ambivalence to other ways of seeing and producing our spaces, communities, and social relationships. The simple story of a community who continue to be marginalised by a simple informal spatial condition seems contrary to the workings of any valid democratic society. The humble case of un-adopted roads portrays a far wider inability of formal space and

society to perceive both it's own weaknesses and prejudices, and also the opportunities to meet others half-way, in a dialogue. A post-colonial Third Space is needed in the heart of supposedly socially developed Westernised space.

Studd Hill has a thriving local community, the likes of is no longer to be found abundant in UK society today. This is not by chance. It is a product of the social relationships required to survive as an informal housing community in the midst of abstract Westernised space. It is a necessity of being outsiders and *others;* of producing the space and relationship that define your homes and lives. It is a facet of living that is increasingly rare in the twenty-first century, and is likely to get ever rarer if we continue to produce spaces and houses (not homes) in the way we are currently.

The history and contemporary survival of plotlander sites must be valued and studied as part of any future attempts to reimagine architecture and housing as a part of a society that produces the space around it with critical and reflective social agency. Housing as a verb not a noun. As a process not a quick fix. Housing as process of social relations, not an economic asset.

Endnotes

[1] Such exploration of culturally negative conceptions of *'Otherness'* abound: (Fabian, 2002; Moore-Gilbert, 2000; Said, 2003; Spivak, 1985).

[2] This reversed urbanisation (or ruralisation) has been discussed elsewhere by myself and other proponents of a critical engagement with the production of space and social relationships. (Boano, 2013; Brenner, 2015; Dovey, 2011)

[3] Noted *'moralists'* such as William Morris or Richard Jefferies were crucial in exploring such ideas of freedom and nature as counters to urbanisation (Faulkner, 1995; Jefferies, 2008; Morris, 2009), and these conditions for urban exodus increased exponentially in the aftermath of the bombing of London during the Second World-War.

[4] The historical logic and cultural questions of this urban/rural paradox are not apart of this study, but they do offer the tantalising beginnings of a critique on the inevitability of contemporary urbanisation trends globally and locally. For more on this topic we might begin to engage with discussions of urban/rural dialectics in the work of Henri Lefebvre (Elden & Morton, 2015).

[5] Much of the historical information that follows is adapted from the Studd Hill Residents Association website which documents the history of the site. See: www.studdhillra.org

[6] It is noticeable on a contemporary map of Studd Hill that roads seem to end abruptly at the coastline where previously they would have formed a classic plotlander grid layout. Anecdotal evidence from interviews with the members of the Studd Hill Residents Association suggest that a number of homes were lost to land erosion prior to the completion of the sea defense wall.

[7] The caravan site came into existence after the second world-war when in 1956 it was sold by the army.

[8] Mr Fred Stedman was a notorious serial plotland developer (Hardy & Ward, 1984, pp. 138–142) and is known to have developed over a dozen plotland sites, many of which are now lost and forgotten. He was also the originator of the now (in)famous Jaywick plotland site near Clacton on Sea in Essex. This almost identically marginal site, is situated almost directly North of Studd Hill, and is well known as an example of the potentially disastrous outcome of an isolated plotlander site. Jaywick today is decidedly less resilient and actively buoyant for reasons that must remain, at this time, merely speculative. However, it likely that when compared to Studd Hill key factors include the travel distance, and lack of transport infrastructure contributed to the lack of sustainable agency by the plotlander community. Jaywick also suffers with even more pronounced marginalisation and stigma, perhaps in no small part linked to the sad deaths of 35 residents of Jaywick in the 1953 great flood, whereas in comparison Studd

Hill suffered no loss of life. These factors, along with an apparent lack of local employment opportunities and socio-political failures in this isolated Essex coastline appear to have led to the slow and inevitable breakdown of the social values and community cohesion at Jaywick. Today whereas Studd Hill is largely prospering with property values at worryingly high levels it is stunning to note that you can currently buy a plot (with accompanying original and undeveloped chalet) in Jaywick for £25,000.

[9] Details taken from the original sales pamphlet materials owned by the Studd Hill Residents Association.

[10] This information once again provided by the Studd Hill Residents Association's significant historical documentation and archive of their community's origins.

[11] The north Kent coast has historically only ever grown as a product of the success of London and the paradoxical need of its citizens to seek refuge from the challenges of city life. To the east of Studd Hill, Herne Bay is the quintessential Victorian seaside town – a smaller version of the much better known Margate. Today both Margate and Herne Bay suffer from the same identity crisis: former working class holiday/retirement destinations that are not capable of simply adopting the contemporary cultural regeneration model of gentrification by means of art galleries and delicatessens.

In contrast, Whitstable, a small fishing village which still famous for its local oysters, was never previously a recognised London seaside town or diasporic refuge. However, since the 1990s it has acquired and adopted the classic gentrification process and identity as a trendy artistic cultural town. A housing boom is buoyed by London commuters and second home owners seeking the *'better life'* as the themselves plotlanders once sought, but now being sold as a commoditised and packaged lifestyle choice. This rapid influx of new residents seeking the charm of a quaint seaside town has produced dramatic socio-economic changes in the local area. The irony of the situation is easy to comprehend. Plotlander history is in many ways repeating itself, but this time as an inversion or paradox of the original humble working class Londoner escaping to the seaside, with now the extreme wealth of London raising the house prices some 60 miles away to almost comical levels.

[12] The vast swathes of conventional, commercial, developer led housing are notable for dominating the proportion of housing being produced in the UK, and being the dominant source of work for much the architectural profession. Yet this vast production of architecture is almost entirely absent from the popular architectural journals, most likely due to the harsh reflection that developer housing would have on the professional identity of the architect as hero artist. The contemptible lack of journalistic and professional engagement with anything but the microscopic fraction of expensive, glossy, and socio-economically fictional architecture that we like to present to the world remains startling.

[13] Studd Hill's informal planning history is extensively documented in a companion paper in the Housing, Theory and Society journal (Bower, 2016). This analysis also explores the contemporary implications of informal housing as an alternative model of development within a Western context.

[14] The story of the new housing development at Studd Hill is explored in detail in the companion paper noted above (Bower, 2016). The roads that support the new housing

development have not been adopted by the council but are to be managed by a development management company that will *'maintain'* the roads using the same model of corporate management that exploited in conventional modern housing developments to remove nay possibility of shared community ownership of leftover, in-between, and green spaces.

[15] This despite 7 fantastically intriguing yet unnamed appendix documents within the planning documentation that extensively (60 photos of potholed roads) documents the poor state and patchwork nature of the un-adopted roads that surround the new island development, yet offer no discussion of an ongoing plan to engage with the problem. Evidence of this commitment to repave the roads as part of the development is once again anecdotal, but this in itself is highly suggestive of the lack of planning support given to the local community even when issues that directly affect its residents are being decided by political agencies apparently without care or thought for issues facing residents of informal spaces.

[16] Astonishingly some volunteers are over 70 years old yet still contribute time and sweat equity to maintaining their community's roads.

[17] The roads are still something of a legal grey area being theoretically still owned by the descendants of Mr Stedman, though no family are thought to survive. Thus the Residents Association as a non-profit organisation has taken ownership in order to maintain roads that the council will only agree to adopt and fix if the cost of approximately £2.5million is covered by the residents – a cost of over £25,000 pounds that many local residents have no ability to even contemplate paying.

[18] A recent policy change enacted by the new chairman of the Residents Association was to stop legally pursuing people who were not contributing and instead seeking a voluntary based system. At time of writing this appears to be actually increasing contribution levels, and is also far more emblematic of the positive community attitude that informal housing thrives upon.

[19] Many original home plots are bought, the house demolished, then two new houses with poor modern space standards and bland formal architectural aesthetics are erected. Whilst these developments are individually largely harmless, the overall affect on the density and identity of the site is increasingly evident.

[20] This seems a reasonable point of discussion to raise. The notable lack of engagement with informal space in the UK remains self-evident. Despite the extensive career and academic study of the now sadly late Colin Ward, today there remains almost no ongoing documentation and study of this much undervalued niche of architectural and cultural questions in the UK.

[21] To be pedantic it is a previously unidentified not lost plotlander site. The Studd Hill Residents Association have long known their connection to what they describe as the sister site at Jaywick, though perhaps they do not overly publicise this fact for obvious reasons.

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