# Audio file

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Tom Ratcliffe

Welcome to York Central, children are playing on the streets. You can hear birdsong. It is vibrant and peaceful. Many different ways of life coexist. It is a community made through exchange. York Central works with the failures in York's unequal economy to circulate community wealth and make housing forever affordable. It offers a new social contract for tourism in York using Co-owned accommodation and attractions to reinvest profits for community benefit. It makes all of this possible through dynamic and powerful connectedness, where activities are organised to be mutually supporting in order to create thriving and happy neighbourhoods. Welcome to the conversations in Social Justice podcast. My name is Tom Radcliffe and I'm a lecturer in the Business School at York St. John, and on today's podcast, we're talking to Doctor Helen Graham and Phil Bixby from York Central Co, also known as Yoco, about the vision for York. Central York Central is one of the largest developments on Brownfield site in the UK, located near to the city's railway station, this 45 hectare mixed-use site will change the City of York. Yoco is the organization behind the democratically created community plan for York Central with an emphasis on tackling. York's housing inequalities welcome to the podcast Helen and Phil. Hi. And yeah, and thanks so much for, for coming along today and just a bit of background to yourselves. And Helen works at the University of Leeds and and Phil is is an architect. So I started with the opening visionary paragraphs from the local community plan for for York Central and my first question today is quite a big one. How are you going to go about achieving this?

Helen Graham

I guess just to take a few steps back, Phil and I were involved in facilitating My York Central. Which was the public engagement process in 2018 commissioned by York Central Partnerships. That's homes England, Network Rail, City of York Council and National Railway Museum, and through around 40 events over a month hosted at the National Railway Museum. Out of all of those conversations, we generated 8 big ideas and the vision for York Central and. As we often say, not every element of that public vision made its way into the outline, planning consent, and that was passed through the following year and we always kind of had this question, do we just, like, leave it on the shelf and just say, well, we've tried and that's that and go away or which is what we choose to do, do we make connections with many people we met along the way and think about how we can steward that public vision to reality on the ground. And Yoco came out of that.

Phil Bixby

So yeah, what we did was the the idea. So I mean, much of this coincided with the pandemic. So I spent a couple of years really just trying to make sure that the big ideas that we were talking about to do with how cities do good stuff, how they connect with their communities and allow their communities to have that kind of leverage and to do good stuff. And towards the end of that, we started trying to ask the question how do we take the the public version and the big idea is to kind of set of stuff which is. About what people would like to see. And start to see how we make it happen. What's the process? So it's effectively turning. The public vision and the eight big ideas into a plan for York Central. And so we spent about three months at the back end of 2020. Do workshops with the variety of people we kind of asking, well, if you want the good stuff that came in from and that, that, that opening paragraph you used that it's kind of it's. Vision of this. Car has a idyllic place where you fling open your bedroom window. There's birdsong out there. There are children. Playing happily in the street and we. Started our squishing. What does it take in order to make that? Because it's not straightforward.

Otherwise we'd all be living in places like that and we started to kind of drill down through the layers of structure which create the places that they live. And realise that one of the key elements that was economy is how do you create an economy for a place which enables that good stuff to happen? So for example, you know if you want kids playing in the street, first of all, you get rid of the cars in the street. But that's not straightforward in itself. You know, how do you deal with centralized parking arrangements, which enable everybody to sign up to that? And if you learn that with empty streets, is that necessarily a kind of place where you want kids to be able to go and play? And if there's nobody out there and it's just a a deserted no. But so how do you start to create a mixed-use neighbourhood where there is activity at street level where people are walking and cycling between places where people feel they have some co-ownership of the streets and spaces and places there. Where they do things like growing food in the in the neighborhoods where you know businesses can spill out and make use of out. So we came outside with this Community plan, which looked at the economic structures needed and looked at the government structures you needed and started to put together a framework to the beginnings of it because it's complicated stuff to say this is what we need to do there.

Helen Graham

And to return to your question about how we're going to make it happen when. One of the elements in the outline planning consent for York Central is 5%. For custom and self-build and community- led housing, so what we're proposing to do is work with that affordance within the outline planning consent to propose a mixed-use neighbourhood of around 120 homes and commercial space in order to enable the economic structure Phil’s just been talking about.

Tom Ratcliffe

And you talked about some of the consultation work you did along the way, what sort of innovative methodologies did you use to kind of speak to and connect with a wide range of perhaps York and the wider kind of regional audiences who might be using York Central?

Helen Graham

So to go back to my York Central that was run as a kind of festival of York Central that coincided with an exhibition that York Central Partnership had organised which set out the emerging master plan as it was at that time. And alongside that we ran around 40 events during that month-long period they were seen to explore. Key issues that were there within the master plan from homes, movement, work and also you know leisure and what people might want to do there from a social perspective. And many of the events were Co-produced with community groups within the city who've got a strong stake in those issues. So for example, when we looked at bike paths, we've Co organized a bike ride with York cycling campaign in order to really experience, and I guess live some of the challenges. That are there. With bike paths within the city, but also to then imagine what a really fantastic sort of cycling routes and cycle infrastructure might be like and equally work. Because it was a Railway Museum and it was Easter. Lots of families there. So we developed a series of family workshops where parents and children could collaboratively work together to explore some of the main issues about this new part of York, you know, from what a home might be like to what a fantastic route to school might be like. So we tried to find ways in into the conversation that would work for a wide variety of different people. And really recognise the expertise of lived experience and knowledge there is within the city to inform those conversations.

Tom Ratcliffe

Were there audiences, which you found difficult to engage with within within that process and which particular ones were they?

Helen Graham

So I think we always know that not everyone wants to come to a public event only a certain echelon of you know, York society want to spend their evenings and weekends engaged in, you know, conversation about the future of the city. If it's framed in that way. But one of the key things we've always tried to do is find multiple ways of thinking about what that way, in whether it's photography walks or things that people care about anyway, in terms of their own passions and interests, heritage works very well in that regard as well, because people know a lot about the places they care about and want to connect. But we've also always said that, while we organise events and bring people together. We also always need to go where people are on their own terms and open up conversations in ways that are meaningful to them. So we've always taken that multiplicity of approaches to having the public conversation.

Phil Bixby

There's also a kind of step back to some of the earlier work that we did, which is about how you shift beyond conventional consultation. I'm doing the little air things there at the start and end of consultation, which is how you engage people in the creative process. If you simply go to people with a precooked idea and ask for their views on it, all people can really do is agree or disagree. And if you start the. Process early enough. People can engage in a creative way. It becomes fun, it becomes something that's actually good to be involved with, not simply because you feel that what you're doing may make a difference, but because the whole process is a creative one and one that's fun to be involved. So when we started developing our ideas some years previously, we started looking at how you can do that thing they tell you you can't do, which is go out with a blank sheet of paper. If you go out with a blank sheet of paper with the right questions, then you can engage people in really fundamental issues around and what's important to you about the place, what you want to be able to do here? What does it mean? And if you do that, then it's much easier to involve people and generally engage people, so it shifts from being consultation where you're asking people questions and it becomes engagement where you're inviting people to be part of the process.

Helen Graham

It’s about asking the right question at the right time at the right scale? Too often consultation again I'm using the air quotes that Phil introduced into the podcast. Is often asking about really specific things quite late on within a process, where a democratic approach is to really think about public agenda setting and that's really the approach we used in York Central.

Tom Ratcliffe

And I think this is really interesting for our members of staff who are active researchers in our in our students, who are perhaps even doing dissertations or PHD's and might be doing projects, projects locally. To hear about these, these different types of types of methods, you guys that are implementing and I just wanted to move on to the next kind of theme for our conversation around community wealth and and ownership. And I know you touched on the kind of financial system the and the economic system at the heart of the the Yoco Community plan. But I was just wondering if you could talk a bit more about Community wealth building

Helen Graham

So you should know that the biggest issue. That came out of My York Central was homes. It was housing. Speaking to the enormous housing inequality within the city, in fact, they had to keep adding extra boards into the exhibition so that people could add additional post it notes. So many people wanted to comment on our systemic failure of housing within. The city. So we knew that whatever we were looking at in terms of evolving My York Central's big ideas and vision into a community plan, we have to think quite carefully about the question of genuinely affordable homes and in particular, which was one of the big ideas of My York Central homes for living and not for investment. So not. For air BNB's not for. You know, buy to let's where the profit just gets extracted from the city. So at the heart of what we knew we had to address was that question of systemic inequality around homes within the city.

Phil Bixby

But there's also alongside that recognition that the inequality we have in York is something which isn't going to go away immediately. However much we try and address it and we therefore needed to try and think of. Data ways of working with it we have a very different kind of housing market here to, you know, Barnsley or somewhere like that it's you know it's not rural poverty across the. It's inequality, so there are resources in the city there are. And we had them. Coming along to our and were invloved with our public engagement process. People who through pure chance have ended up with 3/4 of a million quids worth of. House, you know. People who are in their 50s or 60s or or beyond, who have brought up kids, kids have now. They're rattling around in a house which is fundamentally unsuited for them, but don't want to move because there's no way they would want to move. That would be better. So the notion came out of that about how do you, yeah, we talked about how do you create a community made through exchange how do you bring people into a place like York Central where they bring resources with them in terms of capital in terms of time in terms of experience of life and use that as a transactional thing with other people. Who lack capital, who lack, you know, lack opportunity to create a place which then works for everybody.

How do you create the opportunity for people to come in to live somewhere, which is easy to look after and comfortable and central to the City but then, you know, make sure that some of that investment goes to make sure that the neighborhood is a vibrant one. That street is a safe St. that there are businesses locally which thrives. There are students and young people living locally. Who can you know help with shopping, Who can make sure the place is somewhere where they know their neighbours, that it feels like a safe place. To be so it's really addressing this issue about how do you deal with inequality and shuffle the resources around create some kind of circular economy where it benefits everybody

Tom Ratcliffe

And you've been using the ideas of Guinan and O’Neill who wrote a book about the case for community wealth building, and you've been kind of putting those ideas into practice.

Helen Graham

Really interested in the Community wealth building debate, which obviously. A main reference point in the UK of Preston that has a longer history in the states. I guess one of the challenges that we've. Been talking to. Martin O’Neill about. Is the fact that a lot of the conventional ways of thinking about community wealth building, especially in the context of the Preston model, relies on public organisations as anchor institutions who use procurement to create supply chains that then support local Business and keep wealth local and we work would be absolutely delighted if the new administration with the City of York Council or some of the big public sector bodies that are gonna be on York Central, not least the National Railway Museum and the government hub, explored that Preston model type of community wealth building. But we’re also very aware that they may not. And we're also really keen that we don't rely on that kind of way of kicking off a community wealth building model for York Central and in the way that Phil’s talked about one of the resources that perhaps York has its at its disposal that other cities might not is a population of people who have capital and might be interested in. Community investment vehicles like community share issues or community bonds, and that there also might be a way of bringing capital into the scheme through. People moving in. And living there, but with a high level of equity that enables money to be circulated around the design and also the use of commercial space as well within the scheme in order to create income. So in a way, we're trying to take the ethos of community wealth building and looking at it from a community-lead perspective and not one that is reliant on public institutions creating procurement chains.

Tom Ratcliffe

OK. And how would you get buy in for some the culture and values of of Yoco, which you've just just discussed from from these organisations and and these people, how would you, how would you see yourselves getting by in do you think?

Phil Bixby

And do you think I think, I mean there are that that that works at various levels, doesn't it? So the point of view of of how do you get you know the Person the couple in the in the outskirts of York, who want we want to move into the city and and bring. Money with them. That's how do you work with them to create the kind of community that they want to live in. And we're starting with a clean sheet of paper. This is a completely new neighborhood that's being built. So there has to be a way of setting up the initial structures which enable those kind of conversations to happen. I think with some of the, the bigger stakeholders though, those kind of anchor institutions Helen talked about. Yeah, we have two universities in the city, we're. Sat in one of. Them now you know 'cause the so the conventional. Way thinking as well. What about if you bought your paper clips more locally? But I think we're talking something very different that it's saying, how do we enable your graduate students to stay in the city and develop businesses, which then create local wealth and employ local people. How do you use your ability to work with knowledge as a tool which enables economic activity to work within York central in a distributed, democratic way which brings benefit. How do you as a university or how does the University of York think about rather than plunking A glitzy building on York Central saying we've done a Business incubator on York Central how do we Think about you having a. Broader impact so that you the knowledge, the skills, the students that you have create economic wealth there and create a place which other people want to be part of.

Tom Ratcliffe

I was just also I'm interested in finding out a bit more about how this kind of idea of a local economy, a local democratic economy. You could probably probably say with with York Central, with the ideas that you're you're proposing would work with the kind of neoliberal. Capitalist economic structures, but also cultural structures in in, in the city, how would it kind of connect with those types of of of structures and and their values as well?

Helen Graham

Well, one thing I've been really inspired by engaging with the groups who have been doing this and we have an event couple of weeks ago called don't extract, redistribute, how to carry on your local economy, which really gave us a chance to hear in quite a lot of depth from different organisations across the country who have been doing this in quite different. Circumstances and slightly different intentions in some ways, but nevertheless really pragmatic, practical interventions. And I think that's the kind of key thing for me is. That what we're seeking to do is in less than ideal circumstances, so none of us would write, you know, on a blank sheet of paper and economic system that is so unequal, which is actually in the case of ownership of York's economy, not even within the city. If you look at the some of the kind of. Land ownership questions and the. In the property ownership questions in the city centre. So inevitably, what we're not doing is creating. We're not starting from a point of a perfect utopia. What we're doing is working in complex, entrenched circumstances and trying to do things that loosen up those structures in some way that creates transformation. And I think that's the key thing for me. I think we're often trained in a kind of humanities or social science undergraduate degree context of thinking highly critical terms. And those modes of thinking can be incredibly powerful, but it can also be a little bit disabling in terms of agency. Like if all you see is a very thick stretch of neoliberalism, then it's very difficult to know what you can do that will make any difference at all. And I think part of what we're seeking to do along with the movement across the country and the world is saying it does matter what you do and actually small and growing interventions that can really be transformatory not least because they create different economic models locally in small ways initially, but they actually create different kind of conceptual and emotional arcs that can have also changed the potential for the future.

Phil Bixby

One of the projects who were involved in the event a couple of weeks back, was a Coin Street But cooperative in in London on the South Bank. Coin streets been running 40 years now and it's, you know, it started off as a kind of very kind of wonderfully lefty kind of banner carrying kind of, you know, community project. And it's now 40 years later, being very kind of economically savvy in terms of finding ways of shuffling money around. So they own and run quite a few commercial premises. The income from those commercial premises, which accounts for about 70% of their income, goes to fund housing, goes to fund community activities, goes to fund facilities on the site for the people that live there and live around it. It's an absolute model of redistributive economy which, as say, is thriving where there are ideas are becoming. In many ways. Bolder and bolder as they go along and where it's kind of proved positive that this approach to you know how you do, design A redistributive economy, be bold enough about it. Look at it. Yeah, in a carefully thought through way it works. How do you do revolutionary stuff, but kind of acknowledging your working within the kind of economy you describe.

Helen Graham

I think often redistribution you're it's assuming there's a big state solution to that, like we have to get a government that's in a position where they are, you know, interested in and enabled by the electorate to redistribute. And I suppose what we're interested in is how can we do local redistribution through economic design?

Tom Ratcliffe

And I think that leads quite nicely into a conversation about Community power, community ownership and community decision making. It would be quite interesting to hear about how the Community will have ownership over the decisions made at York Central with your vision in the Yoco. Community plan, who will be making these decisions and what will the role of the expert be?

Phil Bixby

That the I'll just kick off with a kind of a a bit of background. So much of the work at home I've been doing over the last few years. You've been around engagement, but it's broadly about citizenship. It's about how do you really make a a city where people, the people who live there, work on the basis that? They they don't simply act. Yeah, they're not somebody residents who once every four years voted in an election. As citizens, you take an active role in what goes on in the city and you become. Out of it and the structures that are set up to know about happen have to make that a process which is a lot more fun than going along to God awful meetings. So how do you set up local democracy in ways which engage with people which engage with people of all ages and enable them to do the stuff that living in cities should require us to do to. Negotiate to listen to occasionally make mistakes and learn from them to say sorry and to not need to. Always those kind of things.

Tom Ratcliffe

And did you have any thoughts on Community influence over the decisions at at at your central Helen at all?

Helen Graham

Well, I guess we remain actively optimistic about the ways in which Yoco can, being part of the ongoing conversation about the future of the site. We certainly are in touch with all of the major stakeholders talking to them in a variety of different ways, both formally through the strategic board that's chaired by make it York. And through having really positive conversations with people, for example in homes England, you have particular policy briefs like around self commissioned and and custom led and Community Housing. So I think there are multiple ways in which we can ensure that there is. You know, the community led voice in that conversation and and I think one of the things we know we need to understand better in our ideas is how a governance model could work for the whole of the site that has a Co element to it. Like what is a Co governance model for York Central that recognises. The scale and inevitable influence of some of the large organisations, but also enables a power leveling process with community groups of different kinds, which would include the Co-own neighbourhood in our imaginary but also many other groups who want to be part of shaping what happens there.

Tom Ratcliffe

And what stage are we at with the decisions around the developer and what is their kind of thoughts on on the Community kind of influence discussions we're just having?

Phil Bixby

We are currently in a situation where the homes England as the kind of lead partner within the Central Partnership have been whittling down a short list of potential master developers, so the master developer will be appointed to broadly do the entire development to to brief which homes England provide them with. So they’re down to two, We've been speaking. Both of them we are actually off for a meeting in a pub with one and after this very podcast I can't tell you who. So it's been, you know, we we are being as fast on our feet as we possibly can in trying to make sure that we have conversations and the conversations very much around the the notions of reality. So you know incoming developers. We'll have to at some point work to do custom custom built, you know, community led housing on the site. We know it's going to have to be fairly high density. It's not simply a case of flogging off some plots to self builders. I mean, if that's going to be the case, then what would make that easier for them is having some locally rooted body which brings that project together and makes it happen. And that's what we're aiming to try and do. So we're trying to have conversations. Which which you know. Make engaging with the community the sensible thing to do.

Tom Ratcliffe

OK. That’s very interesting. I just wanted to go back to affordable housing, which you've you've mentioned you've touched on and we live in a a very expensive and as you mentioned very unequal type of City and I just wanted to understand a bit more from your perspectives how this project. Will really benefit the poorest people in York can really tackle York's inequalities? Will it actually be affordable housing, which the most deprived parts of society can afford?

Phil Bixby

Yes. You want more than that though don’t you? There are very good examples where where we've just been set up so they enable different sorts of people would come into the project and therefore enable others to. So there's a project called Chacko over in Leeds in Chapeltown which is a. The Co owned housing scheme, which has been set up on a way that while people can ultimately they people buy shares in the ownership and ultimately you could have up to an almost 100% owner. Ship or you can come in having virtually no ownership. If you have no capital. So the more people that come into the scheme who bring capital with them, the more they can allow people in who don't or they can look at how they can subsidise rents through that that process to make it as affordable as possible.

So I think what we're trying to do with the kind of housing you'd like to see on the site, we, you know, do the outline planning consent requires there to be a proportion of of of social rented housing within it. Affordable housing was in it. What we're trying to do is to say how can we work with that, but also how can we work on the margins of that? There are many people in York who are on fairly reasonable incomes but are still unable to live in the city and are now shifting out to Selby or Malton or wherever, and you have a space as a local housing. The Co housing project has been trying for years to look at how do you work to try and shuffle money around to enable you to, you know, broaden access to housing within the city. So, yeah, they're not necessarily trying to do social rented housing, but they're trying to do something for which there is still need within the city. And it's about accepting that the affordability is not just a problem for the very poorest in our society, but it's a problem for a whole range of people. And that doing that kind of housing starts to avoid the kind of ghettoing the cities. That you get. You know you end up with, you know, a book of upmarket apartments and the social rented chunk of it and the board or gets you to that bit, you know what we want to try and do is housing. Which is really mixed in terms of the kind of community that lives there, where everyone is signed up to that and is part of that and where it works for everybody.

Helen Graham

I think it does go to what we as a community led group can do as well. So there's something here about. Potential and capacity and sort of legitimacy and actually what a community led group can do and the kind of per view and approach is different from what a Council could do or a government could do. And it actually what we're thinking is that if a if if there was a commitment to doing more. Social housing. We would be very supportive and committed to that and we can take the affordance of the 5% and do something different in the way that Phil’s talked about and in a ideal scenario they could be very complementary and it would be using the political capacities both of a community LED contribution. And a state led contribution in a productive way. So I guess it's just recognising that difference in what a community led group can do and what a Council or a government can do.

Tom Ratcliffe

Absolutely. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Phil Bixby

One of my favourite cities for to look at as a housing is Vienna. So if you look at Vienna, incredible social housing, you know very thoroughly built up over decades by, you know, Red Vienna, thoroughly kind of left wing local authority. And yet the city dials huge quantities of community led housing. There are literally books written on. You know, there's the schemes that get done out there because there's so much going on and they don't do that just because they're bored. You know they do that because they recognise that community led projects have a value in terms of connecting with the local communities. They effectively can provide the kind of the, you know, the soap. That gets between the kind of different. Components that brings brings everything together. Whether you can do you know there are schemes there which are community led, schemes which involve homes for people who are, who are on reasonable incomes, with refugee accommodation, working with, you know, specific marginalized groups, I think, and others within communities who need support, all of that kind of stuff acts as the connecting threads. Within, within the community and and also to create communities which work together.

Tom Ratcliffe

And it's all of this trying to to put value to the word community over over profit and within within economies

Helen Graham

There's one way of thinking about place making, which is the traditional way developers think about it, which is it's kind of creating a sort of skeleton of buildings and places and then of places created. But I think we all know that commute that places are really made by people that live there, that care about it, that hang out there. That, that make music there, that grow things there, the set of businesses there that have parties there that, you know argue there is not like not not bucolic you know it's like just live there and all of the richness of human life and actually that's the value that off. Is getting extracted when there's, you know, buy to let or holiday lets or big chain businesses that aren't in the city. They're almost taking the value that we will create and extracting that profit part of what we want to do is integrate. All of that. What might be seen as kind of fuzzy lived stuff. But actually it's also the stuff of economy. If you think about economy and the way we’re thinking about it.

Tom Ratcliffe

Absolutely. I just wanted to ask a bit more about we've we've touched on the kind of social justices of of, of, of the site just then. I just wanted to kind of shift the conversation now towards ecological justice and thinking about we talked about how humans are represented and have influenced. On on this on this on this site, and how communities have ownership over some of the decisions at York Central. I just wanted to know a bit more about how non humans are represented, Bruno Latour, the great anthropologist proposes the emergence of a collective democratic assembly in which humans and non humans are a are a community. They come to come together, so therefore have have organizations. Which represent non human actors being consulted. Have we given the the ecologist of voice? Are we going to do that in the future?

Helen Graham

That's interesting question. I think one of the challenges of the notorious idea of assembly is how do you assemble? People like how do you think about the relationship between the non human and the human in the democratic context when democracy has been so predicated on the ideas of voice and dialogue and deliberation? So I guess all the things we've always done in our engagement processes is also do a lot of walking and a lot of being in place. Of being attentive to place, noticing place, listening to place, and being with people who have an attunement to those local environments. I mean, we've done midnight walks with people who knew about the Otter activity and the Foss in the past, for example, but actually just this weekend we spent. A walk with Jai Sandhu from wild streets, where through a very. Like a very. Beautiful, quiet, slow engagement with the Leeming Road are. We basically were given the opportunity to notice figs for example on a tree in a relatively suburban estate all the way through to really notice the difference of type of birdsong when you walked into a a more the Wilder area or to, you know, recall memories of people talking about deer sightings within the area or to notice. You know how some of the some of the infrastructure that's going in is is interacting with Millennium Green, for example So I think there's something in what you're saying about what are the methods we can use to change human relations with non humans in a way they can start to have different sorts of power and presence within democratic conversations.

Phil Bixby

Jai talked about the different models that we use for thinking about living things and landscape in the rural setting and in the urban setting, and the fact that in the urban setting we assume that everything is going to be entirely fixed. You design it tree there, planting there, curb there, hard stuff there. Whereas in rural setting we think about it as being entirely dynamic, you know a field may have one thing in one year or another would be completely different. Woodland might grow or shrink, and that we need to start applying that kind of rural view of of, of, of landscape and living things within the city that we need to allow space for dynamic stuff to happen, for, you know. Populations to change and shift for planting patterns to change and shift for, you know, climax vegetation to happen and move on.So it's it's really how we how we do that and I mean. Yes, during the you know the publication process, yeah, we talk to people like Edible York, we talked to people involved with ecology. We involve your environment for them. I think we need to ultimately we we we're at an interesting time aren't we where we're starting to kind of think more about what sustainability actually is and so the nature of a sustainable community becomes a much richer thing than simply saying where all the houses of the BCA, or whatever else it’s kind of starting to look much more holistically at you know, the the relationship between building spaces, nature and people, and to try and create a A framework which enables that relationship to develop over time.

Tom Ratcliffe

And is that a conversation you will be having with the with the developers, do you think around?

Phil Bixby

They're already having.

Tom Ratcliffe

With all nature, yeah.

Phil Bixby

There, there, there, is an interesting conversation with one of the Nameless developers where, you know, they, they've reported on a scheme they have done where there were some open space as essential to the scheme they had deliberately left a load form trees there to try and create the kind of habitat for for whatever wildlife there was around, and they looked after it carefully for the six months period that they had to kind of take responsibility on completion of the scheme and then at the end of they handed over to the Council the first thing they discovered was the Council had moved on to site. Cleared the trees away and seeded the grass so they could mow it more easily. So it's kind of, you know there there are developers out there who are ahead of the game in thinking about those those issues and and we need to kind of continue those conversations and try and work with them to ensure that.

Tom Ratcliffe

And you mentioned the green and and world spaces and you mentioned in the in vision about about the, the the bird song as as as as well. But then we're also talking about? You know, housing and and and having lots of housing, we need more housing in in, in York there is demand for housing. So how do you see the two kind of coinciding and and working together?

Phil Bixby

I think, well the the the key question we need to ask as part of the design process, what are our outdoor spaces? If, as traditionally has been the case, there are for moving cars around and for parking cars and for segregating people and cars, then we've got a problem. There's very little space for anything else. If we think of outdoor space as being predominantly about creating external environment which people want to be in and want to use, then that gives us a completely different range of options. And so thinking about how we make that fundamental shift and it's been done elsewhere, it's. Been done on.mainland Europe, so we shift cars out of it. We can then create spaces which are green, which are wild, which are far more pleasant places for humans to be, but also far richer places for other species to be way back in the early stages of the the discussions on this and the former project director for the the the project commented he would love to see York Central essentially being like woodland, which we then built houses within rather than it being a housing design scheme that we then peppered a few trees around. And I think that's a nice vision to start with.

Tom Ratcliffe

That would be a wonderful vision and amazing. I was just wanting to move on to talk about the role the relationship between York St. John and and and Yoco and and York Central. And because as a as a university, we're excited in in collaborating with with York Central in the future and looking at different ways and different different opportunities for collaboration, especially as as the vision for your central develops and and and changes over. Next 20-30 years, that type of framework, so and and perhaps even exploring how how York St. John could potentially be an anchor institution. If if there is a is a role for that within within the Community plan. So I know we've been involved at York St. John. Our interior design students involved in the proposed economic incubator scheme for for the site and there's also the proposal of a learning hub, cultural and learning hub within within the site, so it just be great to hear a bit more about. The the potential involvement for for York St. John and if if it's we could have a space within within York Central

Phil Bixby

Well, we've certainly been involved in working with your interior design students. We've now done, I think, three years have done projects on different different buildings on the. Site and looking at them but notjust in terms of one of the the narrow interior design, but also thinking about how how use and activity kind of steers what a building building needs to be.

Helen Graham

I’ve also worked with geography students to look at questions of cities and the generation, haven't we? So we do. I've I've done a walk a number of years now with geography students, so there's already those kind of exciting connections with students where we're exploring some of the core ideas within what Yoco's doing.

Phil Bixby

But I think it is really kind of how we're broaden. I mean, we're engaging in and we'll be continuing to engage in a very complex, subtle design process over the the coming years about how we design the economic and government structures and it would be fabulous thinking of ways of working with you and your students to bring their creativity and and expertise to bear on those kind of questions.

Helen Graham

I think within our Community plan, we've always really wanted to see this is a place where ideas, knowledge obviously, maybe as well as exchange, you know, got that kind of rich sense of what exchange might be within York Central. So the idea of working with our educational institutions as part of that would be extremely exciting. Long term, short term there is that way which we're seeing Yoco as an action research initiative like we don't know exactly what this coed neighbourhood will be like. We haven't bottomed out entirely how the economic model will work. We still don't know how a Co governance model might work for the neighbourhood, but also for the whole site, so we're really keen on research collaborations that will help us draw in different perspectives and expertise to help us in collaboration with people who know and care about the place to shape those things. So I think there's also very strong kind of research potential collaboration as well.

Tom Ratcliffe

And you have other researchers on on the the Yoco Directorate at the at the moment, is that?

Helen Graham

Well, I think we sort of see what we're doing as research that all of us are part of and see research in a very open and democratic way as being about asking questions. And trying to work out. How to address them, how to make change happen through experimentation. So a lot of what we do, whether it's kind of. At an event level or through, you know, figuring out this vision for the community plan in effect, it's an open research process where we're asking questions. We're exploring what different people might think about those questions as we do about the questions change. We're trying practical ways of opening up potential we couldn't see if we haven't done something. So is that kind of action research cycle of like you know of of planning, doing, observing and reflecting in the ongoing cycle that we do? And I think that's a very much always being an extra institutional research practice one that many people use without conceiving it in those terms within their everyday lives, so we sort of see it very much as a participatory and open knowledge gaining process and that's very much at the heart of what Yoco is.

Tom Ratcliffe

And at at. York St. John University, we obviously work with a range of community partners from our church community to the NHS, to mental health institutions and hopefully we could bring some of those partnerships to to the table as. As as as. As well, which would be, yeah. Which would be fantastic. And also I guess in terms of students and staff, I'm sure they would be students and and staff interested in in researching some of these social inequalities. Obviously, we have the Institute for Social Justice at York St. University researching into sustainability of of the development those type of of of subjects. There will be staff and students who will potentially be interested in in those themes.

Phil Bixby

We're very aware that what we're talking about in terms of York Central reflects on the city as a whole. We're kind of very keen to try and make sure that the kind of big ideas that need talking through get talked through and get explored and that we use this not just simply as an opportunity to bang a load of buildings onto York Central which. Works then to ask questions about the kind of neighborhoods which work, the kind of structures which work and the kind of processes. Redistributed processes which work for the city. As a whole, so. How can we learn from doing a 15 minute sustained more neighborhood on York Central to think about how we might create more sustainable neighborhoods within existing communities. So, you know, we look at those areas which are kind of absolutely kind of. Housing how do we put new uses back into those communities to make them more sustainable. And so having the capacity to look at not just the central kind of direction of travel, but to look at the interesting stuff that comes out of it would be really great. And I think working with the you know the, the, the our higher education bodies within the city would be a fabulous thing to be able to.

Tom Ratcliffe

We can hopefully take this forward with an event on the 15th of September where we we have have more discussions and and more conversations about this. So thank you. Just gonna gonna start to to wrap up today’s podcast. It's been very so insightful and and very interesting. So thanks so much for your time, Helen, and and and Phil. We are a city. Which sometimes finds change quite difficult. Sometimes finds diversity quite, quite difficult and you could say perhaps lacks the innovation of, say, Manchester and and and Leeds. I was just wondering how the project will bring diversity and innovation to to a city which is sometimes averse. To change possibly just your thoughts around that would be would be very good

Helen Graham

I guess one thing we've always said is that we want to create creative means by which we can have a conversation about the future of York. This is long before we even did My Castle Gateway public engagement process and recognizing that that is a process that needs to be radically democratized. Like there needs to be many different voices involved in that conversation and in order for it to be really democratized, needs to not just be a conversation. It needs to be an enablement of action and activity across the city as well. I think if you look across York now, actually there is an enormous amount of really fantastic innovation happening, often at a local level, often every small or voluntary or just activist contacts, you know from York Community Energy, for example, to the Groves Heritage project that's been happening very close to where we are now.

Tom Ratcliffe

Spark as well.

Helen Graham

We are the we are the Groves. Spark and then these are all just to name 3 examples of which we could name 30-40 just you know immediately in a way the key issue for the city is how we connect and we learn from each other as we do this work, how we connect beyond to be able to draw in fantastic work from other places and we work that for this particular local context. I think the challenge is it's not always very visible. At from a distance like from the perspective of our large institutions, I'm not sure this enormous activity and innovation and and passion and enthusiasm is that palpable. So there is maybe a disconnect there and I think we've always been keen to try and you know, really amplify that and any chance we have to be in those kind of rooms and those kinds of conversations. So I think one of the things we've often played around with in moving from engagement as being a marginal practice to local democracy, to trying to think in a systemic way about democratic.

So to use some of that literature that exists in a politics context of deliberative or democratic systems, and so to see that actually community based action. You know the kind of engagement process we were involved in and the kinds of decisions that are made formally within a Council context, the actions that large public institutions take, as well as the activity that local businesses generate are all part of what makes a place and at the moment, the connections between those different entities are often fractured, leading to unintended consequences that do cause system failure in lots of ways, not least around the housing issue that we've been talking about. So one of the things we have always been interested to do is think in more systemic ways about how the connection points between those different types of activities could be enlivened in a way that actually creates a transformative democratic system that would enable the kind of whole system change we need to deal with the emergencies that we're facing around climate and around economic inequality. So I guess that's, yeah, what what we might say to that based on the work we’ve been doing.

Phil Bixby

There, there's I think you're right in in terms of the scale of organisations who are involved here, we have a city where there are some big players and they're cruising around often doing good things. But where this kind of innovative stuff done by small organizations that you mentioned kind of scores around between them trying to do good things and we could do with joining that whole thing up. Better I think that is about how you create those vertical connections between really good innovative work that's going on and the bigger players and the opportunities that they have to to kind of really make the scale that to you know to change at scale.

Tom Ratcliffe

OK and do you think it's York City council's job to improve some of those relationships which you've been you've been talking about. Would it be their their role? You know they have working groups around sustainability? There's a York sustainability group there's a climate mitigation adaptation working group within within York Council?

Helen Graham

Yeah, I think the Council of course has a crucial role here it's the body we elect. We, you know, there is democratic accountability. We all live in wards where they're ward councillors who are really engaged in the best cases on the ground. They certainly are in Holgate. So I think there is lots of potential for the Council to grasp that role. We've often had really fantastic conversations with local area coordinate coordination team and what they've been doing. I think seeing how that kind of community based asset based community development works, for example, that the Council's doing fantastic working relates to this democratic system. Question is I think something that we've we've always been really interested to to sort of work on and to think about

Phil Bixby

I think mentioned earlier about, yeah, there's only a certain sort of person wants to turn up at an evening meeting and spend 2 hours talking about something but there are many more people out there would be prepared to get engaged if it's done in ways which are more engaging. So one of the things that we did, I'm involved with your environment for them last year when we ran your environment week, we tried to do events which were participative and engaging, but where people could then talk about, discuss and develop ideas around the kind of ideas that you're talking around that. And so I think it's maybe how we do that, you know the having you know kind of focus groups or strategy groups or whatever always slightly makes my heart sink because I kind of feel there's another bunch of people authority invested locked in a room, coming out with cracking ideas, which they're gonna struggle to get out there. So it's how do we create a kind of richer environment of discourse out there where again, going back to this kind of thing about what is citizenship, where citizenship involves being engaged with that kind of stuff rather than simply waiting for leaflet to prop through your door, telling you the Council going t do it.

Helen Graham

We also need democracy. It's not only about language and about words and dialogue and deliberation because that massively favours a certain group of people over another group of people, and I think you can see people are are making meaningful like senses of what the city is doing, what they're doing across the city right now you know whether it's around food exchanges or whether it's around litter picking or whether it's. Around, you know, growing or whether it's around, you know, doing kids activities after school so in a way, if you start to be attentive to what people are putting their energy activity and they are also saying something about what they want the city to be. So I think part of what thinking in a more systemic way about democracy. Also needs to take really close attention to what people are saying without saying it without requiring them to say it. Give it words because that is basically massively privileging people who are comfortable with words who don't mind putting their hand up in meetings who want to write long letters to the person, to their counsellor, who want to fill in consultation the Community will take part in inquiries, you know, planning inquiries and if we only think of democracies in those terms it will always be an exclusionary democracy.

Tom Ratcliffe

Hmm. That's so, so interesting. Thank you. One, I've got two two two final questions as we as we wrap up, what is the future for Yoco and and the Community plan? Where where are we going next? You said you're meeting the developers in the in a pub today. Where are we going next? I think you know, we're talking about a 20-30 year time span. How does how does it evolve? How does it change? How is it dynamic? With that, with that framework

Phil Bixby

I wish I knew obviously, but I think we're going through it with with glad heart and hope. You know, you kind of, I think we're going to. It's we're in the interesting situation where the master plan and therefore the outline consent for the site was made about four years ago and since that time there have been major changes in the city. It's declared a climate emergency. It's said it's going to be zero carbon by 2030, its passed various other kinds of specific policies which showed quite considerable shifts which the master plan are out on planning so to some extent now lag behind. So it could well be that there would be a revisiting of the outline consent and some thinking about how we wanted to change going forward and that's certainly been something that's cropped up in conversations with the developers and with with the homes England. So I think we'll have to wait and see.

But I think the key to that working is going to be that the largest number of people within the city are in some way involved with that conversation, and that's not to be receiving a questionnaire with a load of tick boxes and tick, but it's through getting involved with. And so one of the things we would love Yoco to be able to do is to engage people, bring them on board to those kind of conversations and somehow try and do what we've done along the way, which is to try and steal the real kind of public sphere within which discussion, ideas and potential directions are are all kind of active components and where we admit that we don't have all the answers right now, but we want to have a conversation which heads, heads forwards and involves people.

Tom Ratcliffe

Thank you. If anyone's if, if our listeners are interested in reading up in some of the ideas and and themes and I know we've covered a wide range of ideas in today's podcast. And do you have any suggestions for any any literature for our listeners? And I know I mentioned the Guinon and O’Neill. The case for community wealth building book, perhaps some of the deliberative democracy literature as as as as well, I don't know if you have any recommendations, Helen and and Phil?

Helen Graham

I find Gibson Graham’s take back the economy book incredibly inspiring, so it really shows how we often think about the economy as being this thing that we can't control. But actually, we're all part of it we're making it all the time so the choices we make matter in terms of making the transformation we've been talking about. I mean the democratic system and deliberative system debtes are associated with people like Jane Mansbridge and Archon Fung and Michael Seward from political theory perspective, but we've also been drawing on a wide range of other things I guess we've been counted in.

Phil Bixby

Yeah, I'll come at you with given I'm an architect to come out with some which is building related. There's a fabulous book out there called soft City by David Sim, who used to work with Jan Gayle's office, who've done all sorts of fantastic stuff around thinking about cities and soft city talks about how we create neighbourhoods which allow for the kind of full variety of human life, and it's just a very different way of thinking about things that they know the city building to the way we normally go about it, which puts at its heart what people do and want to be able to do rather than simply yeah, creating a world class environment with lovely paving and seeing that, yeah, good stuff will happen.

Tom Ratcliffe

Thank you so much for coming in and giving sight full conversations today. It's been thoroughly interesting listening to your approach and putting community at the very heart of of of York Central, I think at York St John, we can learn from some of the ideas, you know around 15 minute neighbourhoods. I think universities can learn from that about community ownership, about listening to to to wider voices, I think universities, like I say, York St. John can take those learnings forward. And it's also been really interesting to think about how you can you're inspiring others to to shift their thinking about York. York central as as well with these kind of different creative types of alternative futures that you're proposing with the Yoco Community Community plan is going to most certainly be a really interesting future. For the City of Yor and that particular area and how it connects with with other areas as as with we've we've discussed, especially if if the project is to tackle the social inequalities of of the city and aim to ultimately achieve social and ecological justice.

 I'll just finish with the final paragraphs of the Yoco Community Plan. Another York Central is possible a York Central of forever affordable housing startup spaces for local business, community learning, growing and allotments, a place of trees and birdsong and of all play for all ages.