

Suzy Nelson Interview

February 20th 2018

Suzy Nelson- Are you going to get to interview the people that took over the women's centre ...

Stephen Brooke – No, and that's a really great question...

SN – And how much is that recorded...? I mean obviously you can't...

SB – It's a real difficulty because I think one of the things is I don't... I'm still sort of at the beginning of this research, and I talked to Manju, I'm not sure when and Helen Brown and I don't know the names of the people that took over. I know there's someone called Flo, and it's just going to be very difficult

SN – Yeah, I don't...

SB – And the other thing is that because the GLC is abolished in 1986 there's no paper records of any applications that that Centre may have made...

SN – Have you looked at the Metropolitan archive?

SB – Yeah, that's where most of my research has been, so I don't... it's a delicate... Were you working at the Children's Centre when...?

SN – No, no, no I was at Matrix then so I.. I lived with Helen Brown, so in a way that's sort of how... my memory isn't actually as good as it used to be, it's a bit shocking... [laughter]

SB – It's happening to all of us...

SN – I used to be so good on recall... but I can't quite remember the sequences. But I think Helen and Carol who I lived with initiated the women's centre as an idea, when I lived with them and then when they were looking for premises I got involved. And I'd sort of separately got to know some of the people that were subsequently involved with Matrix, which was Barbara McFarlane and Fran Bradshaw.

SB – Yeah, who I've spoken with...

SN – And through them being in a housing co-op that I was the architect for, that, so yeah, that's sort of how I got involved. It was more, I had kind of, initially we were involved in getting temporary premises and there were two lots of temporary premises... I've slightly lost the plot on why there were two lots...

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SB – As far as I can... there were four addresses – two on Sandringham Road and then another one on ...

SN - Greenwood Road

SB – Yeah, and there was one point where the childcare centre was sort of in one house and then the admin offices were in the other house, down the street...

SN – Yeah, they were both on Sandringham Road. They got Sandringham Road maybe before Greenwood Road...

SB – They did, yeah. And then there was sort of a...

SN – Because originally it was going to be Greenwood Road but then it needed work doing to it and it didn't...so they got Sandringham Road as a temporary thing, I think

SB – Yeah and I think they had made a bid on a, they had got money from Hackney Council to make a bid on a property and then that fell through and that's when the Shacklewell Land Baths came up, as a kind of long term lease and that's when they got the money from the GLC to renovate it and that's when Matrix were...

SN – But we were ... Matrix already...

SB – They were already...

SN – I think I was involved in Greenwood Road, which I think it was the very first thing, although actually ... I wouldn't swear that my recollection is right. My recollection is that Greenwood Road was the first premises that was offered but because it needed work they got Sandringham Road.

SB – Right

SN – And I definitely was involved in Greenwood Road and that was from a short-life from Hackney, and I was working for an organization called Solon Co-operative Housing Services, I was still there then and that I think helped because they know me in Hackney so it gave it more, kind of, credibility. Because I worked in Hackney before, with Hackney before and so I was more heavily involved in Greenwood Road although actually the detail is completely lost in the...

SB – Right, right...

SN – But then at this time Matrix had been, there had been a group of people around Matrix that presumably people like Fran have told you about, that came out of a Women in Space conference that I didn't go to...

SB – Yeah, I know *Making Space*, the book, I'm sort of interested in ...

SN – There was the book group and there was the practice, and the practice wasn't set up at the point when Greenwood Road came up, it was sort of nascent as I recall. And then it sort of, timing I'm not totally sure of ... it consolidated over that period where Greenwood Road was done up and then a feasibility study was done for Dalston Children's Centre.

SB – Yeah, yeah... And what are you're ... you got involved in both organizations, and how did you get involved in the DCC, though Helen or..?

SN – I wasn't involved really...

SB – You weren't involved...

SN – I was just a... kind of aware of what was going on because ...

SB – An observer...

SN – ... because I lived with people who were involved and I probably went to some events there and things, but I wasn't actively involved in it except through Matrix and I was more involved in the short-life than I was in the ... I was involved peripherally in the Children's Centre but because we worked in a collective way and we had discussions, so about the planning of it I was involved in it. And then the way Matrix worked was we had a support group and I was in the support group for quite a long time and then I worked for Matrix full time for probably just about a year and I wasn't one of the people ... Dalston Children's Centre was sort of quiet during that period, and the Shacklewell Lane Road premises and then it just was hotting up at the point that I was leaving...

SB – Right...

SN – I think maybe the documentation had been done but the money wasn't ready or something.

SB – Right...

SN – And there were two phases to it as well, so it was just sort of going to become live as I left and I remember I did the [?] agreement...

SB – Oh wow, oh yeah...

SN – But I don't think I had... the documents were all done at that point, I had been involved in the early designs which we'd done sort of collectively in discussion...

SB – And that involved the model...?

SN – Yeah...

SB – There's a wonderful photograph I think in a Matrix publication of women designing buildings but it's obviously a kind of consultation moment where it seems that the workers from the DCC are there with the workers of Matrix and the model is there and they're discussing how to arrange things...

SN – So I think there was a good relationship between the women involved in Dalston Children's Centre and Anne Thorne was kind of the pivot in a way because she was involved in both...

SB – Yeah, I'm going straight from here to talk to her. And what was your politics at the time if you don't mind my asking... I guess one of the things...

SN – I think I'd been very involved in the women's movement for a decade by then and I'd also been involved in squatting as well so I was, I would have described myself as a socialist feminist, that had been very involved in Essex Road Women's Centre and I'd also been involved in Women in Manual Trades..

SB – Yeah, that's a fascinating organization...

SN – So I'd, I worked, I'd trained as an architect and then I worked in building co-operatives and I trained as a carpenter and then I went back to being an architect and now I'm [planning?] academic.

SB – Right, right.

SN – So I'd been very active in the women's movement prior to that but not really around architecture or planning.

SB – And with something like Matrix, I mean I guess one of the things I'm interested in is how that feminism found its way into particular organizations, whether grassroots organizations, like the DCC or initiatives like Matrix and talking to people like Jos Boys and Benedicte Foo and Fran Bradshaw I was struck in some ways how pioneering this is in the 1980s from a feminist point of view or in terms of working methods, and breaking down barriers along class lines over questions of buildings. I wonder how you saw that in the 80s or whether you were conscious of it being an original initiative.

SN – I'd been involved in lots of housing, working for housing cooperatives so I mean I guess it was in some ways with a narrower agenda but I'd been involved in lots of consultation that wasn't particularly feminist in its perspective but was very community focused prior to that. I think it was, I think the sort of ethos was that feminism was relevant to every aspect of our lives and I think in Women in Manual Trades it had been, it was very important, about taking physical

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control of our environment, I mean obviously architecture and planning are about that too, and I'd been much more involved in the 70s in Women and Manual Trades, around architecture and planning.

SB – And by that do you mean... one of the things that I was interested in *Making Space* was a view of the city that's a place that's hostile to women and whether it's about safety of whether it's about spaces that are inconvenient for mothers and children, was it part of that or was it actually kind of breaking...

SN – I've just given a lecture this morning about diversity [laughter] so it's a bit hard to think back. You know I obviously it kind of comes out of my... I've been lecturing planners about diversity this morning and talking about the emergence of identity politics and the impact of that so it's a bit hard for me not to see it through the lens of now.

SB – But actually I do think that that's what's really striking about that book. Is that it... I mean in history it kind of comes at a moment when there are a lot of feminist historians are looking at the city and saying well this is the way that public and private was written in gendered lines so there's a really interesting book in terms of the resonances in the early 80s in historical practice so I think it does resonant a lot with politics today too about claiming places in the city...

SN – I think it is important to ... and I think the gendered nature of space is important and I think we were aware of that. I think it was less focused on the city and more on buildings actually, that would be, in a way because I now do more the city. But I think then the focus was much more on buildings and making spaces for women, making spaces that women controlled. I think it wasn't, the agenda wasn't really about the city really, it was about buildings.

SB – Yeah, yeah. Because I know in... there's a really wonderful line in...

SN – Because it was architects as well...

SB – It was architects... and people in interested in materials and spaces. There's a wonderful line in *Making Space* about trying to think what a friendly space meant and how you could actually make somewhere feel less intimidating and more accessible and I'm thinking of the way that designs for the Stockwell Health Centre, which I know was never built, but that was really trying to think through how that space could be made less intimidating as a place where people went to [?] so yeah, that makes sense to me...

SN – But I think it also was part of, and again I wasn't so involved, but there was a group called, which I'm sure other people have told you about, called [?] ...

SB- No, no...

SN – No, maybe it wasn't called that, I've got the wrong acronym. It's ACTAC.

SB – No, I don't think...

SN – It was an association of technical aid centres...

SB – Okay...

SN – Julia was quite involved in it, as I recall

SB – Okay, I'll ask her...

SN – So it wasn't like... Matrix was a feminist organization and they were community organizations but there was a movement toward a kind of community based practice so that Matrix sat within that. And I mean in a way, what I was saying about working in housing co-ops, although that was a bit different, that the community technical aid centres came a bit later and they weren't kind of linked to housing associations, but it was the same sort of ethos of working with grassroots communities to produce buildings that met their needs, was sort of a bigger movement that Matrix sat within...

SB – Was a part of...

SN – I think it's important to locate it in that...

SB – So that the feminism kind of rests within a larger idea about...

SN – Yeah, I think so. I think it was the Association of Community Technical Aid Centres, I'm terrible on acronyms, but... there was also the Women's Design Service, but the Women's Design Service never really was, it was sort of set up to be like Matrix in a way, be a practice but it didn't really do that so much. It ended up being more of an information service. But it was linked to a group called Support.

SB – I don't know that one...

SN – One of my colleagues here used to work for Support, we've retreated into academia... that Support also kind of did architectural projects for community groups. And Support pre-dated Matrix and it also got GLC funding. But there was also, I remember going with Julia to ... and there were also sort of academic links, because I think quite a few of the people in Support had one foot in academia and one foot in practice. But I remember going with Julia to give a talk in Hull and there was a kind of architectural co-op there that also had a link with, it may not have been a university then because you know how things change status, but whatever the architecture school, we went to the architecture school in Hull to talk about Matrix work but we also got shown all this co-operatives work when we went, so it wasn't... it was part of a wider practice of community engagement in architecture particularly. And also the other, and again, they weren't things that I was particularly involved in because I'd been more doing carpentry and more

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grassroots sort of housing politics prior to that. But there was also a move, a sort of publication called Slate, have you come across that?

SB – Yeah, yeah...

SN – I've forgotten what the organization was, but ...

SB – Yeah, I don't know...

SN – But for example, Marion, who is no longer here, she just retired, Marion Roberts...

SB – Marion Roberts... yeah

SN – She was involved and it was sort of linked to... sort of, you know with architecture... there are two structures in the UK – there's the Royal Institute of British Architects and there's a registration, so to be an arch you have to be registered. And so that, there were sort of independent people on the register who weren't from the RIBA and Marion was on that, for example. So there was sort of a grassroots movement of architects that weren't, who were sort of rejecting the kind of traditional profession in a way...

SB – Yeah...

SN – And Slate was a feature of that. And Barbara was involved in Slate as well...

SB – Right...

SN – So it didn't come out of nowhere...

SB – And your interest in carpentry and the building trades, that was something that sort of comes from the socialist aspect of socialist feminism presumably as well, that you're interested in kind of...

SN – Yeah, no ... when I was at architecture school we did a, three of us did a project where we built a real building, which is still there...

SB – Oh where is that?

SN – It's in Kentish Town. I think it's still there, it was there last time. It was on a temporary planning commission but it's sort of been there... it was still there last time I looked. It was a parent's workroom for a school, and it was, I don't know if you've ever come across but it was a technique that was developed out of building timber frame houses in the UK by an architect called Walter Segal...

SB – I know the name...

SN – He did... it's sort of been taken up by self-build people, sort of housing coops and things. But it's basically using very simple components that you bought together so we designed this building and build it. So I had kind of got into building and yeah, it felt kind of bizarre being an architect and in a way maybe even more so as a woman somehow, but you didn't really know what the nitty gritty and the technical things were so you wanted to actually have a grasp of technical things...

SB – Yeah... and how long did you do that for, how long did it take to acquire those skills?

SN – I went a bit backwards and forwards. I did, I worked in a building co-op for the first year after I left university and then I tried to get training as a carpenter because I had been in a building co-op which was mostly men and in a way they had sort of picked up skills... there was quite a lot of conflict in the group between men and women as well, and it was... Women were less skilled so I wanted to get trained but the main way of getting training then was through, it was called [TOPS?] which I have no idea if it was an acronym ... I don't think it was an acronym, it was just a sort of branding. Which was sort of a way you could get training but you had to be three years out of full time education so I couldn't do it...

SB – Right, right...so an apprenticeship... for older...?

SN – It wasn't... it was an apprenticeship for older people, it was a route for older people in. So I did, I worked with co-ops then for awhile, I can't remember what I did but I architectural work with co-ops and then I did the training as a carpenter and I worked for a few years as a carpenter. And then I got asked to go back to a different bit of Solon than I'd been before. And I was doing very hands on work when I worked at Solon... that I did, I worked with a lot of self-help groups so it sort of met the two. In fact I had been working part of the time for... I had been working for a work force that was for a short-life housing group that was supervised by Solon. But I then went back to supervisor so I was, I had been one of the workforce and I think they had suggested, when another job came up, that I went, I became an architect supervising the work...

SB – And what kind of jobs did you work on as a carpenter, and how was that experience as a female carpenter?

SN – Well I worked for Islington Community Housing and we were doing short-life... so are you familiar with short-life? It was sort of one [?] on from squatting...

SB – Yeah, yeah...

SN – That it was through licenses, through local authorities...

SB – I knew there was a lot in Hackney I seem to remember that there were different stages...

SN – Well it wasn't just Hackney, it was all over London. Basically I guess we're talking ... what had happened was local government had started to buy a lot of remaining rented street properties and they then didn't have the money to do them up so they were empty, and so they were squatted. But then they decided to kind of license them to sort of regularize it. So groups that had held short-life licenses, for shorter or longer periods, so – I can't remember how big ICH was but it had quite, it was quite... there were hundreds of people who were re-housed. And it was getting money through the, it was called 'mini-HAG' – HAG is Housing Association Grant – used to be the system of funding housing associations. So there was some money for short-life housing, so the role of Solon was to provide and organize this money being spent. So I worked for the group originally that did the work. And I think I found it a little bit frustrating in terms of skills level because it was short-life, it was a bit rough and ready, but it was... it was fine. I then went and worked in the joinery shop for awhile, which was kind of strange, but I wanted to get more fine skills. It was quite a small joinery shop, there was maybe about 10 people. And there was an [orange?] man, an orange person...so they thought I was normal [laughter]

SB – Right, right... always nice when that happens...

SN – And actually I said I had to leave early every day, I lived in a shared household, I can't remember, you know, to collect my shared child – that was fine. So in a way they were quite nice to me actually. But in a way it was sort of a strange experience of feeling, well at least I wasn't as odd as the orange person [laughter]

SB – Right, right...

SN – But I think it was kind of a bit alienated as well. So then I think at that time somebody had told me that this job was coming up at Solon and encouraged me to apply. I can't remember who it was but I think it was probably connected with the fact that I'd been... well I'd both worked for Solon before and, but I think it was through ICH, they were saying why don't you apply... because I'd been working with the workforce. So I then worked for Solon and was doing that at the point that Matrix sort of started, but I didn't work with Matrix for awhile afterwards.

SB – And what year would you have started working with Matrix?

SN – Oh God...

SB – In the mid-1980s? 1984 or '85?

SN – I think so. What happened was that I went back, because I was only part trained as an architect. I don't know if you know how it works in the UK...

SB – Very [?] but...

SN – That you do a first degree which is generally three years and then you do a diploma sometimes with a year out in between in practice, probably generally with a year out in practice, then you do a diploma, or have they changed it now. But when I did it they were diplomas, now they're master and M.Arch and things, but you used to do a diploma which was two years, and then you do another year before you did your professional practice exams. So I, a lot of the early time that Matrix was doing it, I was stuck doing my diploma, because I had decided that I'd get qualified because I had been working without being qualified. And then when I finished there wasn't – we had the support group, which was bigger but there wasn't the work, so I didn't work there at that point. I worked in the local authority and then I went to Matrix later. So I would have thought it's probably around '86 by then.

SB – Okay, right...

SN – I'm not sure about the years, I mean I could check...

SB – And what was it like to work in Matrix...?

SN – It was terribly paid [laughter] which was a problem for me and I think that was a source of tension, because I think for some people the money wasn't such an issue. That ...and I got a job that was in a complete mess to run. It had been sent out to tender on a completely inadequate documentation so I was working around the clock to get the job up to speed so it was, both I was getting terrible pay and doing 80 hour weeks .. which was unsustainable [laughter].

SB – That's a nice mix...

SN – And the work wasn't totally evenly divided either... so it wasn't totally a happy experience...

SB – What was it like working in an all-female environment, because that is, I think, one of the distinguishing features of Matrix at that time. But did you see that as a great opportunity, or was it different from working in a sort of all-gendered environment?

SN – I think it was a bit... [pause]... I had rather mixed feelings about it. I felt over-worked and struggling financially. I think I was committed to a feminist practice but the reality of it fell a bit short [laughter].

SB – Right, yeah, yeah... And that comes up a bit I think with the DCC as well that there is this attempt to realize these particular goals but the actual work on the ground is really, really difficult, lots of meetings...

SN – Yeah I think I had been used to lots of meetings, because I'd worked in... Solon was run as a cooperative as well, and you know, wasn't without conflicts as well. So I was used to that, that was very much the ethos of the time, having lots of meetings... Yeah we used to have weekly

meetings when I worked on the ICH workforce as well, that was the ethos... you had meetings all the time. I lived in a collective house, so you had meetings all the time. My life was like that... It wasn't new to me, that way of working. I had done a lot being involved in collectives and co-operatives before and that was very much the ethos of the time. It didn't feel so different... I mean I guess.... Maybe that's being a bit negative about it... maybe there were some more positive things...

SB – I think, again from other interviews with people, especially with the DCC there were, the positive side of it was collaboration and the attempt to be collective but that was also the ... I mean there were practical difficulties about that...

SN – I think that also, there were unstated tensions quite often within Matrix that particular people were quite controlling and that sort of unstated and quite difficult...

SB – And were those political tensions or tensions about class, or tensions... just personal, not just personal tensions, but you know what I mean...

SN – I think there were... about professionalism probably. I think the thing ... I think there was a difference about money, I mean it wasn't about class really... but in a way... well some women were in relationships with men, who were the main economic providers within their household. I wasn't in that position. And that was sort of unstated...

SB – Yeah, yeah...

SN – So they were less concerned about making money...

SB – And how long did you stay with Matrix?

SN – I wasn't there that long, I mean I got that building finished and I wasn't prepared to do that again, so I stayed about a year in working full time.

SB – one of the other questions I had was about...

SN – The building I worked on was a nursery in Suffolk...

SB – I think I read about that one... and was that an entire building?

SN – It was a refurbishment of a building...

SB – Because I was trying to make a list of the buildings that I knew had been finished and the ones that sort of were planned and not finished like the Stockwell Health Centre, but this other one was done?

SN – Yeah, that was done...

SB – Was there a people’s farm, as well, or am I getting this wrong?

SN – No, Julia worked on a project which was for, oh what was it called, it’s near King’s Cross, it starts with a ‘c’...

SB – Calthorpe Gardens...

SN – It did happen but Matrix didn’t do it ... I might have lost the plot...

SB – That’s right, that’s right

SN – I think their building might have been too expensive, that was after I left. But it did get built...

SB – Yeah, there’s an amazing little plaque at Calthorpe Gardens that is basically about the role of local government in funding this and that sort of thing, and actually that was one of my other questions, was how much can this be tied to the period of the GLC...

SN – Well it was certainly a period where, which I think came out of a broader left politics, of supporting sort of voluntary sector initiatives more broadly, not just women’s projects and grassroots projects. And it wasn’t just the GLC, it was partly housing association funding was used for co-operatives in a way... that what’s happened with housing associations was they got bigger and bigger and more like businesses, and much less public money. So it was just a very different era, yeah. But it was also in a way that the alternative left was into alternative projects... that were sort of not anti-state but kind of loosely linked to the state.

SB – Yeah...

SN – With more local autonomy...

SB – Yeah... I know the work of people like, I think her name is Cynthia Cockburn, but Sheila Rowbotham and Stuart Hall in the 70s, about that critique of the corporate state and the left alternative is a kind of deconstructed democracy where state money is given to local organizations, grassroots initiatives so I think that...

SN – And there were things like ... we used to call it Partnership, but it was called the ‘urban program’ really...

SB – Yeah, it is Partnership... it became, it went through a number of names but I think that’s actually the first grant that the Dalston Children’s Centre ever got was from them. And it’s really striking how much money is involved...

SN – And that was partly the recognition that ... of inner city problems as well...

SB – Like housing aid programmes and things like that...

SN – So there was money around through other sources for grassroots type projects that you could apply for money for were quiet small scale. Like later when I worked for Islington, I worked for an Afro-Caribbean community school so that was the kind of project. I mean I was their architect, I worked for the local authority, but I was their architect. So there were lots of those grassroots projects that were funded in a way that kind of completely... it went as Thatcherism deepened, and then the kind of model that came with New Labour was different...

SB – Was sort of public-private, but mostly private I would assume...

SN – But in a way there was a big initiative on children's centres actually, so in some ways Dalston Children's Centre was a model. I mean I don't think explicitly but ...

SB – Yeah, Helen was suggesting that one of the people that advised the New Labour government was someone that had been peripherally involved at the DCC and I can't remember her name...

SN – Was she talking about Sue Finch?

SB – Pardon me?

SN – Was it Sue Finch??

SB – No... it was a different name and I don't have the notebook... but yeah, there was that connection, it did

SN – I think it was a sort of model, a kind of children's centre that provided things for women and provided...

SB – Yeah, that it was sort of a network as much as a ... but I think it's interesting at that moment that...

SN – But it wasn't ... it was a top down initiative, but a really good initiative in lots of ways, although maybe it didn't get to the most needy all the time, but it was a real ...

SB – This is Sure Start?

SN – Yeah, I think lots of the things the Labour government did, they didn't get the credit for. I mean, they got the war in Iraq instead...

SB – Yeah and I think sometimes they didn't want to take credit for things because they were frightened of scaring taxpayers...

SN – Of being socialist...

SB – Of being socialist, yeah... I mean I think that that's very sad, but they didn't... I won't take up too much more of your time but I guess one thing that I was going to ask is exactly that – once the GLC is gone in '86 and you have more of Thatcherite neo-liberal agenda, do you see, I mean I may come back to you to ask about housing cooperatives a later date, but do you see a change happening in the way architecture work...

SN – Yeah there was, there was a big change... I mean Matrix kept going for quite a long time because it did a lot of nurseries and there was a push for nurseries, and they managed to get quite a bit of work doing that. But I think the longer term what's happened with housing associations – there was there was a housing act in 1988 which changed the basis on which housing associations were funded and that was sort of a real turning point – that housing associations were forced to become more commercial. That meant they needed a bigger asset base. So that the smaller ones were, the co-ops, were sort of, they could only kind of be under the umbrella of something bigger. It was moving to a much... less public subsidy to a bigger business-based model, so there was a whole movement... it made a big difference. So that sort of community practice wasn't really possible anymore I think. Matrix did a bit of work for housing associations. There was a lesbian and gay co-op in Hackney that was called April... I didn't do that work but some other people did ...

SB – I don't know that one ... April... okay...

SN – I'm pretty sure it was called April. And we did do some other work for housing associations as well. I think it was... it wasn't the only base for... but it was one of the sources of work for community based groups was working for housing associations. But that sort of changed and became much more business oriented...

SB – So thank you very much, that's...

SN – There was something else I was thinking to say but I can't remember it.. oh yeah, what I did and I think in a way what happened with quite a lot of people who'd been on the sort of, involved in these sort of alternative projects that were sort of on the edge of the state, so to speak, I actually went, taking those ideas into working in the state as well, so that happened for awhile. And well I worked at Islington for... and that was much more then open to alternative ways of working and alternative ideas at that point, so ... and there were far more women working there too. Not that it wasn't male dominated, but there were women who were both working there and in positions of authority as well.

SB – I know when the GLC is abolished there is a lot of movement of their workers into local boroughs that absorbed some of that workforce...

SN – But I think it had been happening in parallel a bit as well... the architectural practice in local authorities has been completely decimated, from having 50% of architects in the period I qualified or was training worked in the public sector to virtually none there now. So it's a huge change from architecture being a kind of... concerned with the public good in the post war period, you know building council housing and other public sector projects to being a [private?] practice. It's a huge change...

SB – It's an extraordinary change, yeah...

SN – And not much is written about it, I think [Chris?] is interested in it, in doing some work on it...

SB – Yeah I know probably from that side, and I don't but I think a lot of, and I'm more of a mainstream British historian but I think that tracking the kind of shrinking boundaries of the state is cracked in certain areas but not in things like housing... even though it is one of the primary issues.

SN – Well in housing I think it is, but it isn't in architecture... I mean maybe a little bit but not in terms of the practice of arch really and where people work and how they work...

SB – It's a fascinating point...

SN – And so in a way you get this blossoming period and then it does carry on for a bit and spreads out into public sector practice more widely but then the public sector is completely decimated...

SB – Well that's fascinating... well I wonder if you don't mind if I can follow up, because some of the things you mentioned about housing associations and cooperatives [?] in your email. I mean I would like to follow up it's just that I don't know that much about it right now, so I'd like to do some reading...

SN – Well you know it's just, I was just trying to figure out why you focused on this bit...

SB – Well because in some ways, it was sort of the evidence, you know, that's a really interesting application and that's a really interesting work, you know because the applications are sort of the organizations describing themselves and but it leads in interesting ways about architecture but also about childcare and one of the things I'm also interested in is, I did work on feminism and sexual politics and it struck me that, what happens when those sort of groups actually get some sort of power, as they do in the 80s, what happens on the ground?

SN – But I think it's also interesting seeing the waves afterwards, so in a way, not... it's difficult to assess actually...

SB – And it is very shadowy, kind of early 90s, because there's this kind of transition period when the big metropolitan structure is not there and as a historian that means there's a big hole in what records there are. But I would like to think about, because I'm not as familiar with the housing question and that does strike me as something that is so critical in cities, particularly in London...

SN – It was very very different though, it's so different that it's sort of hard to imagine. There were lots of empty houses and there were council houses, you could kind of just queue up and get one in an area that was not favoured...

SB – Well I was just looking, before I came to see you, I was at the British Library looking at the Hackney Gazette just to sort of get a flavour of 1984 and you look at the property pages and you also look at the pages dealing with, you know, they have an entire two pages dealing with news from the council estates... just a completely different world...

SN – Well basically, London was de-populating at that time...

SB – Yeah...

SN - ... at that point, until 1990 London was depopulating...

SB – Well I was actually in England at that point, I was doing my PhD and I remember coming to London, places like Hackney and the place that I remember more was Spitalfields and just, as you say, it was depopulated, things were boarded up there which are now million pound properties.

SN – Where did you do your PhD?

SB – I did my PhD at Oxford, which was a very... I was lucky to be Canadian there, and have this accent because it exempted me from the class...

SN – You don't hear my accent do you??

SB – No I hear it a little bit but Oxford...

SN – But you don't know what it is... it's Canadian...

SB – Are you Canadian??

SN – No I'm not Canadian but I grew up in Canada.

SB – Where?

SN – In Montreal, So I do have a very slight accent and people can't place me in class terms because I ...

SB – No I would have, I would not have placed you in Canada. I would have placed you, not in London obviously, but ... Montreal is a lovely city, have you been back?

SN – Yeah my sister lives in Ottawa and I've got... my nieces live in Toronto so I have been back but I haven't been to Montreal for awhile, which is a lovely city...

SB – So when did you move?

SB – My Dad worked for a UN agency that was based there, so we were never, we were never Canadian. So I spent my early years there, went when I was three and went to boarding school when I was thirteen so I spent ten years of my life there, but I never quite lost my accent. People just don't... I was interviewing somebody Irish and somebody came up to talk, it was in a community centre and said oh you're Irish, because they know my accent's not British...

SB – Well to me you sound like, my friend Helen from Oxford who's Cornish, so I might have thought that...

SN – Yeah people often think I'm West Country, so people know it's not kind of... but it's great because it means you're not placed.

SB – I grew up on the east coast of Canada, my parents are English, and Montreal was the first big city I ever lived in and I just loved it, it was a wonderful place. But Oxford was so class.. I mean I had a good time there but...

SN – No, no, it is a difficult place... I think lots of people have difficult experiences, Chris being one of them actually...

SB – Yeah, yeah...

SN – That... oh I've lost my thread, but nice to talk to you and good luck with your research...