



## open house

THERE ARE 380,000 HOUSEHOLDS ON COUNCIL WAITING LISTS IN LONDON, YET IN SOUTHWARK ALONE, MORE THAN 2,000 PRIVATELY OWNED HOMES LIE EMPTY. *A Peckham charity is mustering an army of volunteers to help renovate run-down vacant properties and offer them to those in need*

WORDS NUALA CALVI PHOTO DAVID CLARE

On a cold winter's day, a house on King's Grove is thronging with visitors. Walking up the stairs of the pretty Victorian facade and through a smart wrought iron gate, I'm ushered into a front room with tall sash windows, an original marble fireplace and magnolia walls with period coving. It's an enviably large, attractive room, and it's full of people with glasses of wine in their hands, talking animatedly.

But the crowd attending this party are not well-heeled friends at the housewarming of someone lucky enough to be able to afford a two-storey period home in Peckham. Instead, they are a mixture of local craftsmen, unskilled volunteers and construction workers, celebrating their success in transforming what used to be an empty, decaying wreck into the first real home for two families who have been rescued by the charity Housing For Women, which helps women fleeing domestic violence and trafficking.

The unique concept is the brainchild of Peckham charity Southwark Habitat for Humanity, which since 2010 has been finding empty, derelict buildings and turning them back into liveable homes for those in housing need.

"This is what it used to look like," says site manager Chris Thomas, showing me the grim "before" pictures. "It's a 19<sup>th</sup> century building, and it was in a terrible state. Basically it'd been left for five or six years and it'd got really down at heel and unloved. The walls in the back addition all had to be replaced – they had a curve in them as big as my belly – and we had to deal with some damp problems in the back there and replace the roof up here..."

It sounds like a job for the experts – but the people who have been ripping up floors, knocking down walls, clambering about on the roof and hacking at the jungle of weeds in the garden are anything but. Among their number have been accountants, IT professionals, healthcare workers and fund managers. HR professional Joanne Perry-Spinks, of PineBridge Investments, was among their number.

"We had to sort out all the bricks, so all the ones that weren't broken we piled in the back room ready for them to be used on the outside of the house, and then the broken ones we had to take down in buckets to the tip, two by two," she says, proudly. "It was very physical – lots of heavy work. I was really tired when I got home – I just wanted to go to bed!"

So why are they doing it? "There's a lot of volunteering that goes on elsewhere, and a lot of charity giving that goes on elsewhere, but to actually do something a bit closer to home is more meaningful," replies her colleague, Kathy Wade. "And... it's nice to get out of the office."

"If you were stuck staring at a computer screen all day – which you probably are – you'd want to get away and drive a few nails in," adds Chris – who, with the rest of the Southwark Habitat for Humanity construction team, had the job of managing the army of 350 volunteers who came streaming in over the course of seven

months. "We try to get them to do the actual work – paint the walls or do the demolition. They all love the demolition."

As well as the volunteers, well-known interior designer Cassandra Ellis offered her services pro bono, while the charity used local tradesmen wherever possible. "Ian Butcher is one – he's a local electrician," says Chris. "Then there's Laz, the local plumber. Even yesterday, a local painter just came along and said, 'Do you need a hand?' and volunteered to paint the front. This is how it works."

It sounds simple, but behind the scenes a lot of time has been spent laying the groundwork for this, Southwark Habitat for Humanity's first Empty Houses to Homes project in Peckham. It begins at Southwark Council, where Celia Esimaje and her Empty Homes team do the job of detectives, scoping out uninhabited properties. According to Celia, there are around 2,100 empty private homes in Southwark, some of which are "rolling empty" – empty most of the time, but tenanted on and off. "The longer-term empty properties, we estimate there are about 300, and some of those are hidden," she says. "Literally, you could walk down the street and you wouldn't know, until you go in and you find it's been empty for 20 years. The owners might come and maintain the façade, they'll collect the mail, talk to the neighbours, but no one has been living there."

The majority of such "hidden" empty homes are in Peckham and Nunhead, Celia says, and once she's identified them, she then has the difficult task of tracking down the owner and untangling what's going on. "People may see a property and think, 'Oh, why is that empty?', but each one has a history behind it. It could be sibling rivalry, families not getting on with each other, charges on the property which stop them doing anything – often a myriad of things we have to try and sort out and unravel before we can even get to this stage." To sort out family disputes and find a way of bringing properties back into use, Celia finds herself playing a mixture of "psychologist, parent and construction supervisor".

It was her department that alerted Southwark Habitat for Humanity to the property on King's Grove, having got a phone call from Monetta Williams, the daughter of its 87-year-old owner. "My mum bought the house in 1959 and it was the family home – I grew up here," says Monetta. "But then we all moved out, and Mum now lives in Jamaica, so there was nobody living here and the property was getting cold and damp and run down. She didn't want to sell it because she wanted to hand it down to us eventually, but she couldn't afford the renovation costs – she just didn't have that kind of capital."

Thanks to Southwark Habitat for Humanity, Monetta's mother got a £100,000 renovation of her property, turning it into a smart two-storey maisonette and a one-bedroom basement flat. In return, she leases the building to the charity for free for several years, during which time it is inhabited by social housing tenants, with the money from their Housing Benefit going back to the charity

to help pay off the cost of the renovation. Further funding for the project comes from Southwark Council, which has a grant stream to help do up homes, from the government, and from fundraising – including donations from the companies who supply many of the volunteers.

With so many empty houses in the area, it seems incredible that more property owners aren't jumping on board, but many don't know such a scheme exists. "We should have people queuing up at our door, but we haven't been out there telling people – we're only a small team of six," says Southwark Habitat for Humanity's corporate relations manager, Diane Regan.

The charity has renovated 29 other empty homes since the scheme started, including two flats above a shop on Nunhead Green. "We'd love to do more in Peckham, because we started off here," says Diane. "We were so close to clinching a deal with another homeowner, but he got cold feet. People think they can do it all themselves, but not being building experts they don't put the money in the right place. They might get a brand new boiler, but they don't know the ceiling's about to fall apart, and then it does fall apart and they've got no money left."

Monetta and her family, however, seem almost as thrilled by the results at King's Grove as the women and children whose home it will soon be. "I'm so happy it's been restored," she says. "These kind of old houses that still exist in Peckham are quite precious, and to let them go is such a shame. It's really good to bring them into the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and to help other people at the same time."

[www.habitatforhumanity.org.uk](http://www.habitatforhumanity.org.uk)

*Pictured are volunteers from Haskoll Architects outside the house they helped renovate on King's Grove*

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