

Yes in My Back Yard

John Myers demonstrates how we can easily build a fairer, better, more beautiful country, 'we just need to work together to do it'



John Myers is co-founder of yimbyalliance.org, a grassroots campaign to end the housing crisis with the support of local people

I went to the local school in a small town in a pretty part of Lancashire, with a loving and supportive family. It was a quiet life that left me with an appetite for bigger cities and an awareness that some places have better opportunities than others.

After studying maths and law, I ended up working as a competition litigator for a New York law firm, Sullivan & Cromwell. I never found a role model in the law that I wanted to be. One day a headhunter called asking if I wanted to be a financial analyst for George Soros. I'm afraid my initial response was: 'Who?'

Working in finance let me save to do more interesting things but I gradually realized that there was much more opportunity to make a difference in other fields.

One day in 2014, I read an article that changed my life.

It revealed the eye-watering scale of Britain's needless housing crisis.

Total house prices now exceed the cost of rebuilding those homes by some £4 trillion, or nearly two-fifths of the entire net worth of the nation. That is caused by an incredible scarcity of homes, particularly within reach of the best opportunities.

There are endless scapegoats, but if you do the work the ultimate problem is clearly our failure for decades to build enough of the right kinds of homes in the right places, even while everything else we make has got cheaper, better and more plentiful. Other countries, and the UK in times past, have built far more homes.

People try to blame empty homes, but on the highest estimates empty homes are only five per cent of London's housing – far lower than in other periods. We would still have a crisis if every home were full, which is impossible because of deaths, other life changes, and the time it takes to sell.

People also point to tax breaks for homeowners as a cause. Sensible tax reform would probably help, but ultimately it's like taxing food production in a famine: not a fundamental solution. Low interest rates are another scapegoat, but plenty of other places have no shortage despite the same low interest rates, because they built enough homes.

We just need to build a lot more. Since the Second World War, we have never grown the stock of homes as fast as in the 1830s when New Court was finished, let alone the much faster rate of the 1930s when the working class could afford to buy a London house with a garden, despite vastly lower incomes back then.

The shortage is not for want of land. Half of the homes in London are in buildings of only one or two floors. Most of London has one-fifth or one-tenth as much housing per acre as the most loved central parts like Bloomsbury that tourists fly around the world to see. We can do so much more with the land we have if we only improve the system.

The problem permeates everything we do, leading to massive

inequality and probably hurting average wages by 15 per cent or more, by keeping people away from high-wage jobs in places like Cambridge and by holding wages down in places like my home town with more workers than jobs. If that's right, it explains most of the 'productivity puzzle'. I'm all in favour of rebalancing the country – move the capital if you are serious about it – but a fake rebalancing that drives down wages for the young and the poor by pushing up house prices to keep them away from opportunity is immoral. Not to mention counterproductive.

We have forgotten how to build beautiful new heritage, like New Court. We have forgotten the ambition of our predecessors. We have forgotten how to get things done.

Good design need not be expensive. The stunning villas lining Regent's Park in London were rendered with stucco to disguise their shoddy structures of the cheapest bricks and rubble. Beauty is mainly a question of the right materials, details and proportions. The actual costs of construction are a small fraction of the final price in any place with a housing shortage.

We get so many ugly new buildings for many reasons, but they mainly stem from that needless scarcity. When most of the cost of a new home is the planning permission, which only gets more expensive, people know that appearance matters little for the long-term value. Also, people who are stretched to the max to afford a home will buy a box with windows and a door just to have somewhere to live. When houses were plentiful and priced more like furniture, the prettiest houses held their value for much longer and people cared much more about looks.

Under today's broken planning system, the Industrial Revolution and the incredible resulting increases in productivity, health and welfare might never have happened. Our planning system was never designed to encourage attractive growth in existing places with many homeowners. It needs an upgrade.

Of course that crisis is also an incredible opportunity. The beauty of something so broken is that there are win-win ways to make it better.

I left the hedge fund world to look at setting up an automated investing service that would strip out most of the costs and bad advice that consumers face. When I realized many others were working on the same thing, I decided to work on housing instead. With a group of friends, we launched London YIMBY in 2016.

The YIMBY movement – Yes in My Back Yard, the opposite of NIMBY – took off in California four years ago. Since then, California campaigns have secured multiple new laws to get more and better housing built, and helped elect the new Mayor of San Francisco and a California state senator.

In England, the core of one of the two main ideas from our 2017 report is now national planning policy: villages are now allowed to vote to approve homes in their own green belt, subject to limits and to the design and other conditions that they

WELCOME TO YIMBY

YIMBY ALLIANCE

Let's end the housing crisis and make better places with the support of local people.

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Brighton YIMBY



Bristol YIMBY



Cambridge YIMBY

choose to impose, if they want to. New Court was built on a field. The key is the quality of what you build.

The Government cited our work on the other idea in the consultation with the 2018 Budget. For many reasons, we think an obvious way forward is to give local people more power to approve things that they like. For example, why not let residents of a single street vote to set a design code and vote by a two-thirds majority to give each plot permission to extend or replace existing houses? That turns out to be wildly popular because it makes those existing homeowners better off, and over time it could add millions more homes with much less controversy, while creating an economic boom and reducing inequality.

The key was realizing that if you find more popular ways to get homes built, politicians are more likely to do them. Who could ever have guessed?

At the core, housing is a political problem. Governments know that. They pay lip service to ending the shortage while doing everything they can to drive up house prices, because that helps consumer confidence and increases their chances of getting re-elected.

Homeowners are two-thirds of voters, so if you want permanent change you have to bring at least some homeowners along with you.

Luckily, there are plenty of ways to do that, taking inspiration from systems in other countries and other fields that have worked far better around the world.

Part of the problem is people endlessly talking past each other in housing. It has gone round in circles since the 1970s. If we don't try new things, we will never end the crisis. To expect



Cheltenham Eastleigh



London YIMBY

London YIMBY

OXFORD YIMBY

HOUSING THE POWERHOUSE



Oxford YIMBY

Portsmouth YIMBY



UK YIMBY

No local group and don't want to start one? Join YIMBY Scotland or UK YIMBY to hear about local developments and speak up locally for more homes or BetterHomes4All to endorse their proposals.



YIMBY SCOTLAND



BetterHomes4All

otherwise is the definition of madness.

The most important thing I have learned in the last couple of years is how easy it is to achieve major change. All you need is a bloody-minded overriding determination and focus.

We spend a lot of time with volunteers, building a coalition and lobbying government for those kinds of reform: planners, local government, charities, and other groups. We'd especially love to hear from more big companies and organizations who care about housing costs and want to speak up for sensible steps to reduce them. The more voices pressing the government for change, the better.

I'm optimistic that we will get substantial progress in the UK. The way forward is clear; the only question is how quickly we can make it happen.

It turns out that these approaches probably apply in other countries too. We're talking with allies in New Zealand, California and elsewhere to see if we can help them solve their problems. Creating good, fair systems about land is a tough challenge that no place has solved perfectly, particularly where there are lots of existing homeowners. Planning gets little attention from lawyers in universities, but it is by far the most important part of the law affecting property in the real world. I want to keep working to improve it.

We can easily build a fairer, better, more beautiful country. We just need to work together to do it. If you are interested, please sign up for our newsletter, follow us on social media, and let us know if you would like to help. ■

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