

Leadership-in-Action Project Report: Helping Community-Led Housing Move Forward

Katrina Eilender

August 31, 2026



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

For my Leadership in Action project, I interned at Yorspace, a community-led affordable housing developer and community land trust in York, England. My role was to help them move their projects forward in a myriad of ways, do housing market research, contribute to public outreach and engagement, and meet with local organizations hoping to work with Yorspace. Yorspace has a unique model of delivering housing: with every development, they also create a co-op, which then takes over and manages the housing, keeping it affordable and democratically run in the long-term.

I am an urban planning student who plans to go into housing development, and I have a strong interest in nonmarket housing, especially cooperatives. I believe that the housing crisis, with its complex trade-offs and boom-and-bust cycles, simply will not be solved until we significantly expand non-market housing. Yes, we need to build like crazy, but a "build build build" mentality will only contribute to a real solution if there is a mechanism to keep the housing affordable in the long term and ensure that it is high quality and matches local needs. As you can imagine, interning at Yorspace was a dream come true for me. It is an organization doing exactly what needs to be done to solve the housing crisis, and having incredible success in doing it.

When I began my LiA, Yorspace had received significant media attention for finishing its first project, Lowfield Green Phase 1, which consisted of 19 affordable and environmentally sustainable homes. The organization is looking to understand what lessons could be carried forward from that project and engage in conversation with the local community to understand what they needed from the next project as they embarked on early planning stages.

The plan was for my role to be assisting in this transition by:

- Delivering a comprehensive impact report on the first project, Lowfield Green, including the housing policy and market context in York, the unique challenges faced in that region and how Yorspace is responding with locally specific solutions. This report can potentially be submitted to future funders to demonstrate impact
- Helping with community engagement sessions to narrow down goals for the next project; documenting community priorities and feedback
- Helping identify and/or reach out to potential community partners for future projects

In a sentence, my goal was to help to document the impact Yorspace has had so far, analyze how that can be carried into the future based on what the community wants, and help do the legwork of preparing for the next project.

To help us think through the details of our projects and come up with a workable plan before arriving at our destinations, the Laidlaw program also asks scholars to translate this overarching goals into SMART goals. My SMART goals were as follows:

1. Delivering a comprehensive impact report on the first project, Lowfield Green, including the housing policy and market context in York, the unique challenges faced in that region and how Yorspace is responding with locally specific solutions. This report can potentially be submitted to future funders to demonstrate impact.
2. Helping with at least one community engagement session to inform goals for the next project during my last three weeks of my LiA; documenting community feedback and priorities.
3. Helping identify and reach out to potential community partners for future projects; with a goal of offering three potential partnerships ideas by the time I leave.

As I imagine is the case with every LiA, what I actually ended up doing shifted significantly during my time there, growing and changing in unexpected ways. It is hard to know what exactly is needed at an organization as a complete outsider, and so these shifts are inevitable. Happily, however, in my case it was mostly a matter of "yes, and": I was able to execute these SMART goals and assist with many other things I hadn't anticipated.

Beginning with the impact report, I did deliver it (attached here), and it will hopefully be a useful tool to present to funders and other stakeholders. However, it ended up being more of a background task that I did a few minutes of each day rather than a main project, because there was so much else going on!

In terms of the community engagement session, I did in fact do this! I helped lead a workshop called Building for Community: Ownership & Land, which was part of the larger York Festival of Ideas and had more than 30 attendees! The purpose of it was to identify what projects would be high priorities for community ownership, and I helped prepare case studies to show how community ownership has been successful in similar contexts. I also had the participants simulate being community investors and decide what they would invest their capital in. This was one area in which I encountered a cultural difference, because community engagement events for development projects here in Toronto are typically hosted in community centres, schools, libraries, or churches, and this one was hosted at a pub! Pubs and bars are not environments I tend to feel super comfortable in, but I had learned that pubs are a key third space in most British cities, and once the event began the value of holding it in a beloved and familiar space became clear. It even inspired me to wonder if it could be feasible to hold more engagement events in casual spaces like bars or parks in Toronto, taking a page out of the British playbook.

In terms of identifying new community partners, I did not need to do that, because we had so many community partners reaching out to us! Meeting with them was one of my favorite parts of my LiA. Yorspace doesn't just work in housing; as a community land trust, is also develops community spaces. Diverse organizations, from people hoping to start a community farm to the local LGBT bookstore/cafe, which wanted to buy its building through a community ownership scheme, asked for Yorspace's help in enabling

their development projects. It was in these conversations that I could most strongly feel the mission of Yorspace and that I felt I learned the most about who the people in York were and what they wanted.

I also assisted in many ways beyond my SMART goals. I began a directory of potential funding sources so that they could be easily searchable in one place, saving time in the future. I did a lot of research about the local housing market by scraping listings websites, which both helped to make the case about the need for the work that Yorspace is doing and helped them ground-truth their affordability benchmarks. I helped with social media outreach and the transition from an old website to a new one. I created a form for existing tenants to more easily report complaints or service requests on for units. I drafted a proposal of the next project, Morrell House, to send to a local group of social enterprises who were considering getting involved.

Of course, there were challenges. One was that there were simply so many projects worth working on and not enough time in the six weeks, so prioritizing and managing my time was difficult at certain points. Another was that the staff member who had been my main point of contact before my arrival was leaving just as I was arriving, which made things more challenging for both me and the team. Most of all, my own nervousness was a challenge, especially at first. However, I remembered what we had learned in our leadership seminars about impostor syndrome, and over time I became a lot more confident in asking questions and contributing my own ideas.

My main supervisor, James, was a really helpful role model for leadership. Not only was he incredibly generous with his time and expertise in integrating me into the team, he also purposely shared his own knowledge about leadership skills. He talked about how he had at times struggled with taking everything on himself, but had more recently learned to distribute work and to accept the reality that even he has human limits to how much he can do. The need for a work-life balance and good boundaries were issues he cared about a lot, and it showed in how he treated me as an intern. He also talked about the need for flexibility, as the design of the housing development had to change as financial circumstances changed over the course of developments, and how leaders need to make tough calls about when to jettison an idea for the sake of practicality and when to keep it because it is key to the integrity of a project.

I learned more in my LiA than I could possibly articulate here, but I do have a few key lessons in mind that relate to leadership.

- 1) Plan for the long term: good things take time. Yorspace's current success is more than a decade in the coming, a decade in which there were many setbacks. Planning on a long timescale and being proactive rather than reactive were key to achieving what many thought was impossible: housing that is sustainable, affordable, and community-led without sacrificing any of those aspects. Now they are planning how to scale up over the next decade, continuing to look to the long term.

2) Social relationships are crucial to successful leadership. This might seem obvious, but Yorspace is successful in large part because of the relationships within the small team, who really enjoy working together and complement each other's strengths and weaknesses. This is also true of their many relationships with community partners. Putting effort into getting to know other people and building trust with them is always a priority.

3) Much can be gained from partnerships with other organizations. Structural change doesn't come from one organization becoming wildly successful; it comes from an ecosystem of organizations that feed into each other and build each other up. With Yorspace, this came in the form of co-ops supporting co-ops: Yorspace rents office space from a co-op, for example, and partners with a community energy co-op to install solar on its housing developments. These relationships strengthen the organizations bidirectionally.

Overall, I could not have asked for a better experience, and I feel that I will be a better leader in whatever realm I am leading in because of this LiA.