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Research at Birmingham

Rescue Geography: research exhibition and photographic installation

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RESEARCH EXHIBITION AND PHOTOGRAPHIC INSTALLATION

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

MANCHESTER
1824
The University of Manchester

MADE*

E·S·R·C
ECONOMIC
& SOCIAL
RESEARCH
COUNCIL

Rescue Geography

Rescue Geography is a collaborative project run by Phil Jones from the University of Birmingham and James Evans from the University of Manchester. Our aim was to explore ways of recording people's understanding of an area before it undergoes redevelopment. We've been experimenting with a technique using walking interviews combined with sat-nav technology to allow us to connect what people say with the places where they say it. This has then been compared with what people say in a traditional 'sit down' interview.

The project is interested in how people understand and value places, which is why we were very excited to collaborate with Dan Burwood whose portraits feature in this exhibition. Dan took pictures of our interviewees in places within Digbeth that have particular meaning to them.

We'd like to thank everyone who took part in the project and the Economic and Social Research Council for funding it. We'd also like to thank MADE for helping organise the exhibition and for getting lots of people interested in the work. Last but not least we'd like to offer our immense gratitude to Kevin Burkhill at the University of Birmingham who helped us to put together all the materials for the exhibition.

www.rescuegeography.org.uk

Artist's Statement

In 2005 I started to make portraits of people in Digbeth, on the street and in pubs, pictures that evidenced a context visually, and interested me more and more in the place as I spoke to the people that allowed me to take their pictures. You could see how fast things might start to change in the area, and, as much as I was happy with some of the images, it was the stories and people I met that made a greater impression, and which seemed to be lost behind the surface of the prints, and my poor retelling of our meetings.

There's a visual texture and rhythm to the streets here that is particular and beguiling, and I started, 2006 maybe, to include excerpts of this in pictures where I attempted to make a perfect square with light, taken at dusk or night time. The photos are records of a practice, a performance for the camera's future eye, a meditation inside an imagined perspective, and a reflection on the abstracting languages of photography, and those of planning and redevelopment which traditionally, understandably, fail to account for the emergent human qualities of being in place.

These pictures try to integrate some of this thinking into a useful context. I hope they add to the Rescue Geography, make some sense visually.

I am a photographic artist based in Birmingham, UK, and make fine art images rooted in a documentary practice, which often reflect social and political, as well as conceptual concerns.

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Blair Kessler

Blair runs a charity dedicated to preventing youth homelessness through providing accommodation and support services. The St Basil's Centre runs out of the same former church that was used for the Double Zero club set up by the Reverend David Collier in the 1960s.

“The Deritend Fish and Chip shop was originally a general stores owned and run by my step-mother's grandmother, Ada Roper. General stores with the living accommodation at the back, and on Thursday night, it was faggots and peas. People would come from all the local area and walk down that passageway to the door at the back and pick up their faggots and

peas. Bring their own basins. If you couldn't pay for your faggots and peas, and there was a reason, not just that you were tight, you still got your faggots and peas. She knew everybody round here, well, you did in those days.”

Clare Short

Born and bred in Birmingham with Irish Catholic roots, Clare has the Member of Parliament for Ladywood since 1983.

“Of course we had the Birmingham pub bombings just down here by New Street Station, and then the wrong people convicted of those bombings, it was quite a long bitter period. People in Birmingham started feeling anti-Irish because of the pub bombings and the Irish feeling got at because they knew, or there was a growing awareness, that the wrong people had been convicted, but if you said so you were accused of being an IRA supporter and so on. The annual St Patrick's day parade stopped. And then it started again recently. So, there's this taking the Irish origin people back in to the celebrations. But I hope that it's sort of, got its own integrity and not done with leprechauns, you know, and plastic Irishness. It would have offended my father no end if it was that.”

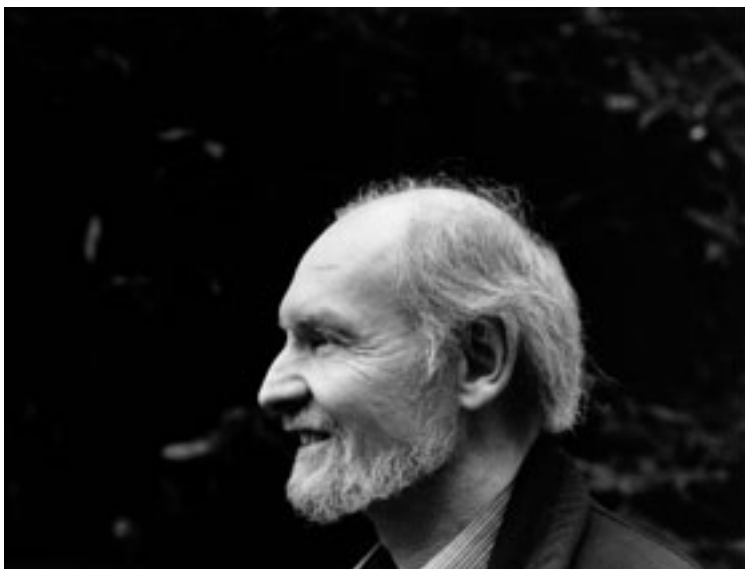


Dave Allen

Dave is responsible for the Birmingham Photographic Grid project, which has tried to systematically photograph the city, using map grid squares to record points within the number 11 bus route.

“We used to explore as youngsters. Getting lost is a very important process when you're walking around places.

We got lost on Great Barr Street. I knew that Great Barr was an area in north Birmingham, a long way away from home. I thought we'd got as far as that area when we were lost. This was strangely scary thing to have done on a very hot summer's day as an eight or ten year old. I think that's where the image that remains in my head of this part of the city comes from. I think we could almost say that it must have been around this spot that it all started. That feeling of disorientation.”



Dave Clare

Dave had been involved with Birmingham Friends of the Earth since the 1980s before coming to work for them full time in 1990. He was involved in helping to establish the Eastside Community Group, before retiring in 2007.

“About a year before I retired the previous owner of the Warehouse Café left by mutual agreement. And for six months I managed

it 'cause we had to keep the café going. Anyway, I had to go shopping and so I started going in the wholesale markets, but they close at eleven. So, you've gotta be in at five 'til eleven, or something like that otherwise that's it! I used to get off the train and go shopping. I'd get wholefoods, cheeses, various other things. Opposite the Friends of the Earth, there was a little greengrocery warehouse, Brett's. There's a lot of warehouses like this near to the markets. I don't know how many more greengrocery warehouses there are within a few hundred yards round there. What would happen to them in any future developments?”



Dermot Winston

Dermot has followed a career in teaching with one of his first posts being at St Michael's, the same Digbeth school his father had taught in. Some of the old St Michael's buildings have now been taken over by South Birmingham College, but Dermot's first school, St Anne's on Allcock Street has since been demolished and replaced by a metal coatings plant.

"...if there were no meetings or activities that we were involved in at lunchtime, after we'd had our lunch and done whatever we needed to do we were free to go for a walk and sometimes across to the pub for a pint and a cigarette. Things that we just wouldn't dream of doing now, apart from

the fact that I no longer smoke, and very few people do, but the thought of having booze half way through the day and then going back and teaching in the afternoon! But it was a different world, and no-one tutted, even the most straight-laced people wouldn't be offended, you know. It was only a couple of halves of bitter and, maybe, read the newspaper or a couple of us would have a chat. But, of course, it would be unthinkable now. You'd probably be sent home for the rest of the afternoon if you went back smelling of drink."

Joe Mattiello MBE

Joe grew up between the wars in the Italian quarter, close to where Millennium Point now stands. He went to school at St Michael's and served in the Army during the Second World War. Joe later became Birmingham's first community caretaker, looking after south Aston.

"Next door to Higgins' coffee house was the blacksmith. And then along here, it's a warehouse now, was where they brought the sheep and killed them for the market. And cows. The cows come from off the railway down there. There's a private road and they used to drive them round here. And the pigs. The pigs would come out the same wharf and go up Andover Street and come up there. Straight up past the Italian quarter and many of us would say, 'come on pinch a pig!'"





Joan Budden

During the Second World War Joan worked as a secretary in the accounts department of the LMS railway. For a time she worked out of Curzon Street Station and remembers the busy residential and manufacturing area that surrounds what is now Millennium Point.

“It was a cantilevered staircase, no sort of visible means of support. It just was built into the walls of the building. I don’t know quite how, but it just jutted out from the wall, but no pillars or anything underneath. Anyway, it survived and I walked up them last year sometime when I went to the picture exhibition. I was disappointed when they said I couldn’t go upstairs, so I said, really I hadn’t come to look at the pictures actually! But I did look at them and they were very good actually. So, they went and asked someone in charge, and he took me up and I found my office. Just the same, really, except completely empty and very dusty and what have you, but otherwise, it was exactly the same as I remember it.”

Joe Holyoak

Joe is an architect and urban designer based in Digbeth. He’s got a particular interest in urban regeneration and urban conservation as well as education and community participation in design.



“And I think philosophically I’m always drawn to the ordinary parts of towns. I’m always interested in the places where ordinary activities take place, whether they’re living or working or whatever. And I’m very interested in places that are kind of gritty, to kind of pick a word, places that don’t have immediately attractive environmental qualities, but where there are qualities that have to be sought out, rather than immediately presenting themselves, not the places that get on tourist maps and tourist trails and so on. Last year for National Architecture Week, I wrote an architectural trail. The buildings I selected for my trail were more ordinary buildings, all of some interest architecturally but the kind of things that get overlooked. Moreover they were all buildings that were all either empty or threatened, all of which need investment and a new use bringing to them. So, I was trying to draw people’s attention through the trail to buildings which they would probably normally just walk past and not notice”



Mustafa Yalluri

Mus grew up in the area and eventually took over the family chip shop. As a child he remembers the Double Zero which used to operate out of St Basil's church. It was set up by the Reverend David Collier trying to reach out to alienated young people and proved a mecca for local bikers.

"I was only a really little fella in them days and everyone just sort of adopted me. Plus the fact I used to take the lads some chips and stuff round whenever they wanted. It would've been a place of interest for a child my sort of age, as there wasn't that much to do around here, to be quite honest. Some of the band members in the Boys' Brigade got

a shock on one Sunday. We were actually all getting ready outside the club and this Hell's Angel came roaring past. It happened to be one of the boys from here and I've seen him, and I've shouted, "Hey mate!", and he just, like, screeched round and come roaring up to me, like, and he stopped, he says, "Hello, how are you? Are you having a good time?", blah, blah, blah, and after he left I had so much credibility with my friends!"

Pete Bennett

Pete undertook a survey of local businesses in Digbeth for the City Council in the 1990s. His walk took place on a very cold February day and headed down onto the canal.

"It's complete contrast isn't it, this? And you could be anywhere, well no, you couldn't be anywhere. You've got the sound there and you come down here and it's just quiet. Some of the graffiti work is absolutely superb, they've really got talent some of them, haven't they. I mean, the meaningless name-tagging is just, well... I can support people that do those panels and all that artistic work, but not just scribbling your name on it."





Richard Green

Richard became Director of Economic Development for Birmingham City Council in 1990 and in 1999 took over responsibility for the Eastside initiative. He was heavily involved in the Bullring initiative and the reconfiguration of the inner ring road around Masshouse Circus.

“Someone once asked me, ‘So Richard, who are your champions of Eastside? Because you aren’t going to achieve it without champions’ and I thought a lot about that, and I thought, ‘Actually, maybe I don’t have enough’. But at least I was one and within the Council that’s what my job was, so that’s all I ever talked about. You know, people would say, ‘What do you do with this?’ and I’d say, ‘Well, I think we should do it in Eastside’, to the point where they got bored of me saying it really. I remember once grumbling to the Head of Planning saying, you know, ‘You’re not giving enough support for my Eastside work from your guys’ and he said, ‘Everyone’s doing Eastside anyway, Richard’.”

Richard Trengrouse

Richard helped found the Friends of the Earth Warehouse on Alison Street in the late 1970s. He’s now involved with the Digbeth Business Forum and South Birmingham College.



“It was full of decaying lentils, it was hideous inside and outside didn’t look much better. So thirty years ago last year we took possession of The Warehouse. I turned the key on the first day and we went in and spent weeks just clearing away decaying lentils and scrubbing down. The Friends of the Earth building has become a little icon for me in a sense. It’s something that I did thirty years ago which is still there, it has that amazing feel, something has endured. I also think it’s part of the defining of Digbeth in that quirkiness, we added to that and gave it something. My kids go down there and there’s pictures of me as a teenager with long hair up, doing work on the building in the late 70s.”



Leon Trimble

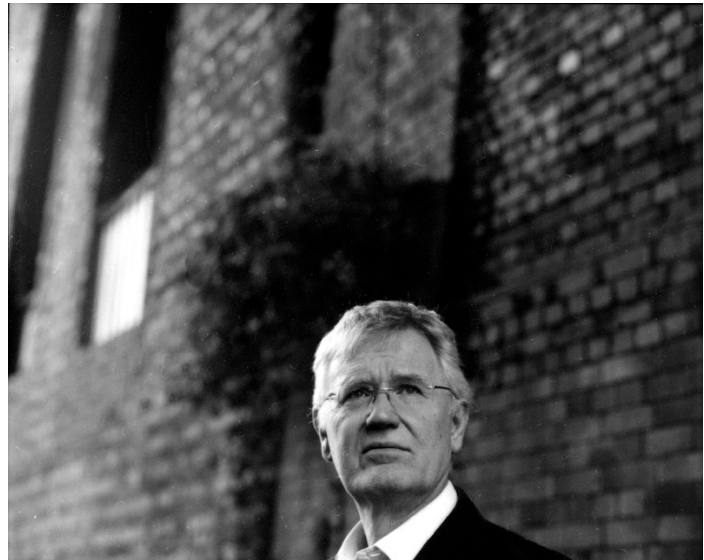
Leon is a video artist, visualist and photographer based in Birmingham. He's built a reputation for innovative visuals and the use of cutting edge technologies including immersive environments, HDR imaging and body movement capture.

“The first gig we ever did was the first Drop Beats Not Bombs, which has become a big Digbeth event and

I coordinated the visuals for that. But the first gig I ever did was in the Sanctuary. I built up my reputation in the Custard Factory itself and the Medicine Bar. We organised the Avit Festival in the Custard Factory as well, which is a big VJ festival. We had people from Tokyo, New York, Texas, from all around Europe. It was great. So yes, it really happened in Digbeth I suppose. Now I'm more widespread, I go out to festivals and stuff, but the reputation I built was all around here really.”

Richard Hammersley

Richard has lived in Birmingham for nearly 20 years and used to work in the School of Planning at what is now Birmingham City University. He is now a Community Planner with West Midlands Planning Aid, based in the Custard Factory, Digbeth.



“Bennie Gray hit upon this idea of developing the Custard Factory, but of course this was something which was very different from and in some ways contradictory to the traditional industries of Digbeth, which are largely to do with metal-bashing in one way or another. It's very indicative of the decline of British industry that so many companies have disappeared. However, of course, when companies do disappear out of a place like Digbeth, they don't fit into a nice simple pattern. It'd be very nice if all the companies at that end gradually folded and the wave had sort of worked its way down southwards from the city centre in a nice orderly fashion. But it doesn't.”



Teresa Babicz

Teresa came to Britain in 1947 as a refugee from Poland having passed through Siberia and India along the way. She went into teaching after experiences helping out the Reverend David Collier running the Double Zero out of St Basil's church. Teresa has also been involved with the Polish club in Digbeth since the 1950s.

“My mother came in to get some Polish sausage and we saw our priest, Father Kacki, sweeping the stairs of the house with a shovel. My mother looked at him she went up to him. We got to know him because he got to know everybody. ‘Why are you doing this?’ ‘Because there’s nobody else to do it’ and my mother said to me, ‘right, okay, you go, you do it’. And that was the beginning. Throughout my holidays this is where I would spend the rest of my days. Sweeping up. The Father wasn’t very keen on paperwork, he didn’t like it. Just as well because his handwriting was atrocious, nobody could read it. But he had to fill in all the births, the whole births and the weddings, which were one after the other at the time. So he said, ‘well, you’re at school aren’t you?’ ‘Yes’ ‘Okay, I’ve got a pile of these papers which need to be entered in the books, will you come and do it?’ So I became his secretary. Somebody else was doing the sweeping up, unless they didn’t come and I had to do it.”