

Let Loose the Loganberries of War: Making Noise and Occupying Space in Govanhill

James Benedict Brown and Tom Warren

In Govanhill it's getting grim,
The Cooncil says we cannae swim
But if they willnae dae oor biddin',
We'll pit the Cooncil in the midden
People Power is gonnae rule,
Gi'e us back oor swimmin' pool!¹

¹ 'It's Getting Grim' (key of E, to the tune of 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star'), *The Govanhill Pool Campaign Songbook*, (2001)

In the early hours of Tuesday 7 August 2001 approximately two hundred and fifty police officers - including mounted officers and an aerial surveillance unit - converged on Calder Street in the Glasgow neighbourhood of Govanhill. Accompanied by eight sheriff's officers bearing court orders for eviction, they had come to bring to an end the longest public occupation of a civic building in British history. For the previous 135 days up to seventy local residents at a time had occupied a building described by Historic Scotland as 'an architecturally and historically important part of the city's history ... particularly important culturally in that until recently they offered a valued and distinctive facility open to all members of the community.'²

² Historic Scotland, 'Govanhill Baths Statement of Significance', *Historic Scotland* (January 2005)

It took almost twenty hours to evict the protesters and seal the building with steel shutters. By late evening a crowd of approximately 200 people had gathered on the streets outside. Eggs, flour bombs and fruit were thrown at police officers, and the air was thick with the overpowering stench of garlic powder, three catering-sized tubs of which had been emptied around the building to confuse sniffer dogs sent into to locate the last of the protesters.

² Historic Scotland, 'Govanhill Baths Statement of Significance', *Historic Scotland* (January 2005)

⁴ David Eyre et al, 'Three Lord Provosts and a closed pool', *The Herald*, (02/04/2001): p15

Glasgow Corporation opened Govanhill Baths in 1917. In the words of Historic Scotland, 'baths and washhouses were often an adjunct to a public library or hall, at Parkhead for instance, providing a clear example of the City's paternalistic sense of social responsibility'.³ Govanhill Baths are just a block from the neighbourhood's branch of the city library, one of several thousand financed by Scottish-American businessman and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. Where libraries and schools represented the architectural manifestation of a philanthropic desire to provide education and knowledge, the baths demonstrate the city's early twentieth century obligation to provide its citizens with a reliable supply of hot water for exercise and hygiene, fundamental in the fight against typhus and cholera. One part of the building features private cubicles with bathtubs for washing, while a large washhouse was equipped with hot tubs, mangles and driers for the cleaning of clothes. At the time of the closure of the Baths, at least one hundred apartments in Govanhill's tenement blocks had no bathroom at all, and as many as four hundred had no hot water.⁴

Govanhill is one of Glasgow's only remaining neighbourhood of 'hard to the pavement' tenements; a tightly packed grid of three and four storey nineteenth century blocks. The basic tenement has two or sometimes three apartments on each floor, with front doors accessed off a shared staircase called a close. At ground floor level, the close serves both the street to the front and the back court to the rear. Slotted between shops on the busier streets or between ground floor apartments on the quieter roads, some closes have modern security doors with strong magnetic locks and noisy intercom systems. Others have limping doors that don't quite catch, either through age or deliberate vandalism. Generous ceiling heights and large windows, many still with the original counter-sunk windows that can be opened and folded into the apartment for cleaning, ensure these outwardly shabby apartments are still attractive homes. In the disowned and generally uncontested intermediate zone between close door and apartment door, the generally poor conditions of the shared stairwells, corridors and back courts is indicative of the problematic relationship between owner-occupiers and renting tenants, many itinerant or migrant workers. Govanhill suffers from the highest number of drug overdoses in the city, the greatest incidence of domestic abuse, the second greatest



Fig. 1. Tenements and shops, Allison Street, Govanhill.
Photo: James Benedict Brown

⁵ Official Report of the Scottish Parliament Petitions Committee, 7 October 2008

⁶ Derek Alexander, 'Govanhill declared Scotland's murder capital', *Sunday Mail*, (24/08/2008)

⁷ The 'A8' nations are those that joined the EU in 2004, namely the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. The 'A2' nations of Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007.

⁸ Marcela Adamova, Sarah Jeffery and Lydia Zelmanova, *Roma Evaluation 2007: Report on information collated between March and June 2007*, (Glasgow: Glasgow Braendam Link, 2007)

⁹ Official Report of the Scottish Parliament Petitions Committee, 7 October 2008.

¹⁰ John Couzin, *Rent strikes: Radical Glasgow*, (Glasgow: Glasgow Caledonian University, 2006) at: http://www.gcal.ac.uk/radicalglasgow/chapters/rent_strikes.html#Glasgow [accessed 2009].

¹¹ Govan Hill Baths, <http://www.govanhillbaths.com/> [accessed 2009].

incidence of alcohol abuse and the highest level of serious crime in the city.⁵ The district's murder rate is five times that of Glasgow's average, and more than twelve times that of Scotland overall.⁶

Govanhill's tenements have become home to generation upon generation of both Scots and immigrants. By 1850 there were some 300,000 Irish in Glasgow, and they were to be followed by large communities of Jewish, Polish and Russian immigrants that by the First World War only one Glaswegian in five had been born in the city. After the second world war families arrived from India, Pakistan and China. With the recent arrival of A8 and A2 immigrants, the local population in Govanhill has swelled to about 15,000.⁷ In 2007 there were thought to be around 2-3,000 Roma in Govanhill.⁸ The most excluded of all economic migrants in Glasgow, due to their ineligibility to claim financial and social support from state services, the only work available for many Roma is through unlicensed employment agencies and gang masters. In many instances these agencies provide accommodation tied to their employment, frequently of a substandard quality and for grossly inflated rents.⁹

The campaign to re-open Govanhill Baths is one in a long history of public protests that have seen Glaswegians acting collectively to resist threats to their built environment. During the first world war, as men and women came to the city to work in the factories and shipyards, demand for housing outstripped supply. Many private landlords dramatically increased rents on their tenement properties, particularly affecting those families who had seen their adult men go to war. The fabric of the tenements became a fundamental tool in the defence of homes against Sheriffs collecting unpaid rent. All manner of communication was used to summon help, everything from drums, bells, trumpets and anything that could be used to create a warning sound to rally the supporters who were mainly women as the men were at work in the yards and factories at these times. They would then indulge in cramming into closes and stairs to prevent the entry of the Sheriff's officers and so prevent them from carrying out their evictions. They also used little paper bags of flour, peasmeal and whiting as missiles directed at the bowler hatted officers.¹⁰

The same tactics of improvised communication and denial of entrance were to re-appear some seventy-five years later, when tenants in Govanhill joined the popular refusal to pay the Community Charge (or 'Poll Tax') introduced by the Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. Trialled in Scotland a year ahead of England and Wales, the tax was designed to fund local services by calculating a domestic charge on the number of people living in a property rather than the notional rental value. This favoured the wealthiest and penalised the poorest, especially in Govanhill where many large families lived in unmodernised apartments. Bailiffs tried to gain access to residential properties in pursuit of unpaid charges, but once again the collective defence of Govanhill's closes and the use of domestic cooking ingredients as missiles emphasised the sturdy resilience of the neighbourhood's architecture.

Two decades later, Govanhill Baths Community Trust, the charitable body established to re-open Govanhill Baths has met every fortnight since 2001¹¹. A charity shop and events such as the Soup, Song and Swallie night in a local pub continue to raise funds for the campaign. In 2009 the Trust formed the subsidiary Art Regeneration Team who, that year, curated an exhibition entitled *Deep Breaths* during the Baths' participation in Glasgow's 'Doors Open Day'.¹² Govanhill-based artist Marielle MacLeman created a piece for the semi-derelict Turkish Baths Suite entitled *Immediate Extract / Passive Resistance*, an intricate collage of hand-drawn and digitally manipulated words and images forming an illustrated

¹² *Deep Breaths* artists included: Becky Campbell; Malcolm Dobson; Pamela Doherty; Hazel Donaldson; Vicki Fleck; Christine Gibson; Olivia Guertler; Annie Gray; Danielle Heath; Rebecca Lindsay; Katie Lowery; Susan MacAskill; Marielle MacLeman; Iain McLean; Nikki McWilliams; Jeni Pearson; Hugh Pizey; Lucie Potter; Louise Schmidt; Ally Wallace; Chris Wallace; Andrew Wild; Lynn Wray

daydo rail. Inspired by the faded Edwardian Baroque grandeur of the room, in which eight years of neglect had caused paint and wallpaper to peel, MacLeman set out to respond to the rich history of the 'Save our Pool' campaign. Onto a repeating pattern derived from key architectural features of the baths, such as the bright red cast iron balustrade and concrete roof beams of the main pool, and an overlapping Pay up for Glasgow motif (the motto of the city's council tax campaign), MacLeman layered drawings and prints of architectural details with silhouettes of mounted police officers and the fruits that were hurled at them.



Fig. 3. Immediate Extract / Passive Resistance (general view).
Photo: Marielle MacLeman, 2009

Extracts from press reports, diaries and protest song lyrics written during the occupation are inscribed on ribbons that flutter over the pattern.

As a terrified police spokesman recalled: 'A section of the crowd became particularly violent towards police officers and started throwing whole pineapples.'

'Anti-capitalist protesters take note. Stock up on apricots. Arm your battalions with bananas. Let loose the loganberries of war.'¹³

¹³ Robert McNeil, 'Robert McNeil's Week', *The Scotsman*, (12/08/2001)

MacLeman's work playfully recollects the improbable words spoken and sung as the local community came together to fight for the preservation of a public service. The narrative of *Immediate Extract / Passive Resistance* reminds us that this protest by occupation was not limited to the Baths themselves. Denied access to space and services felt to be theirs, the campaigners playfully attracted sympathetic media attention with other acts of spatial occupation.

'Campaigners fighting to save the Govanhill swimming pool took their protest to the Glasgow City Council headquarters today by staging an 'aerobics raid' on the City Chambers ... As staff and people paying their council tax looked on, protesters switched on a portable music system and launched into an aerobics session.'¹⁴

¹⁴ 'Pool Protesters Exercise the Right to Demonstrate', *The Evening Times*, (10/05/2001)



Fig. 5. Immediate Extract / Passive Resistance (detail).
Photo: Marielle MacLeman, 2009

of £15,000 per month, costing the city more to keep the baths shut than it had to keep them open.

"The pool is not going to reopen. It could be operated by other people but not by us. I do not know if the protesters will be consulted about the use of the building. If they want to stay that's up to them but we'd rather they got on with the rest of their lives."¹⁸

¹⁸ Glasgow City Council Labour Party spokesman. Quoted by Ross, S. *The Herald*, 2 April 2001.

¹⁹ *Sunday Herald* 15/04/2001

A minute from the (Labour controlled) City Council during the occupation noted that 'we don't like the word community [as] it makes the area sound like a ghetto.'¹⁹ Such derogatory attitudes to society and the public realm in Glasgow were, in part, to inspire GLAS, a cooperative of architects, designers, teachers and activists centred around the University of Strathclyde Department of Architecture, that from 2001-4 curated a sequence of urban interventions that critiqued the capitalist production and appropriation of the city. Bravely entering some of Glasgow's more troubled neighbourhoods in a diminutive three wheeled van, their 'Urban Cabaret' sought to provoke reactions and debate about an increasingly privatised and managed public realm.

'Urban Cabaret promotes your rights to the city. That you should have a right not to be continually monitored by CCTV cameras. That you should have a right to affordable housing. That you should have a right to sufficient community facilities. That you should have a right to protest and congregate everywhere in the city.'²⁰

²⁰ GLAS. *GLASpaper no. 1*, September 2001. Available: <http://www.glaspaper.com/>

Their actions were documented in *GLASpaper*, the first issue of which drew parallels between the ongoing fights to save Govanhill Baths and to oppose the privatisation of public housing stock. Glasgow Housing Association, a not-for-profit private company, is the largest social residential landlord in Europe, a title it inherited from Glasgow City Council when it assumed control of thousands of residential properties in 2003. The 1980 Housing Act obliged cities such as Glasgow not to invest in social housing, and ultimately to transfer their social housing stock from public to private ownership. While housing associations had existed



Fig. 6. Main pool, Govanhill Baths, 2008. Photo: James Benedict Brown

in Scotland since the nineteenth century, they were normally voluntary organisations that sought to campaign for tenants' rights. Govanhill Housing Association was founded in 1974, not with the intention of building new homes, but of preventing further demolition and encouraging the improvement of existing residences. It was established with the assistance of ASSIST Architects, at the time a young community-based architectural research unit at the Strathclyde Department of Architecture. Developed from the degree theses of Peter Robinson and Raymond Young, ASSIST rejected the professional description of the architect as author-artist, establishing itself in shop units in Govan and Govanhill and acting as facilitators for residents to improve their own tenements. In 1984, ASSIST was spun off from the university as ASSIST Architects Limited.²¹

In 2004 Govanhill Baths Community Trust were to re-establish that link with Strathclyde, when it started working with NORD, a Glasgow based practice co-founded by GLAS-member and Strathclyde tutor Alan Pert. Effectively working 'pro bono' until complete funding was secured, NORD developed a feasibility study for the redevelopment of the pool. NORD produced the option appraisals necessary for the Trust to secure further funding. In partnership with the university, a vacant shop opposite the Baths has re-opened as the Govanhill Centre for Community Practice (CCP), a social enterprise dedicated to continuing action research in the community.²²

After eight years, Govanhill Baths remain closed. It is still too soon to tell whether the occupation, the singing, the aerobics and hurled fruit have contributed to the improvement of an impoverished neighbourhood. But by valuing the existing, engaging in sustained and respectful research, and reflecting the glimpses of good humour that have sustained stakeholders through difficulties and setbacks, Govanhill is a site of extreme richness for those interested in the urban built environment. There is no place for the arrogance of an author-architect and a blank canvas solution, and Govanhill has already been lucky enough to avoid complete demolition once. With the *Deep Breaths* exhibition and the opening of the Govanhill CCP, the popular campaign to re-open them has moved beyond a simple protest, and become a generator of creative practice and sustained research.

²¹ Phil McCafferty, 'Organisation Case Study: ASSIST Architect'. (Edinburgh: eca, 2008) available: <http://wiki.eca.ac.uk/index.php/ASSIST> ; see also: ASSIST Architects Office Brochure, 2009

²² Govanhill Baths Community Trust. *Centre for Community Practice Info Sheet*. (2009) available: <http://www.govanhillbaths.com/downloads/GBCT%20CCP%20Info%20sheet.doc>

