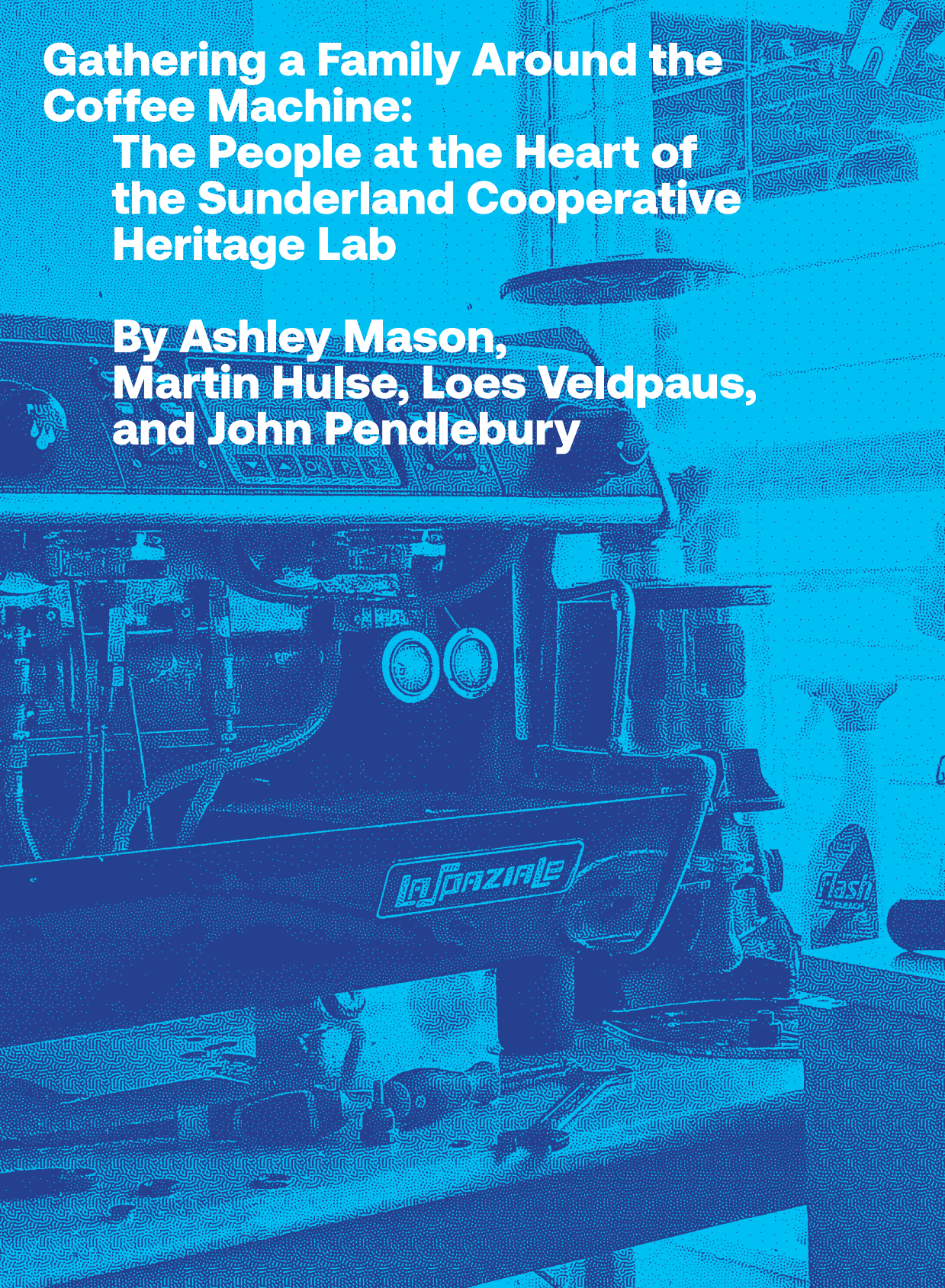


Gathering a Family Around the Coffee Machine:

The People at the Heart of the Sunderland Cooperative Heritage Lab

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On 1 June 2013, popular local indie band Frankie and the Heartstrings took over the former tourist information office in Sunderland city centre, North East England, to promote their new album and protest the disappearance of record shops from UK high streets. Intended as a two-week, temporary publicity exercise, Pop Recs swiftly became a pillar of the local community, offering much-needed space for cultural activities, including yoga classes, photography exhibitions, and gigs by both local upcoming artists and more established UK musicians. In 2015, Pop Recs' music venue, independent coffee shop, and community hub moved to its next location, on the west side of the city centre, continuing to provide invaluable support for the people of Sunderland through music and much more.

Meanwhile, the Tyne and Wear Building Preservation Trust (TWBPT) – an organisation engaged in the restoration of heritage properties across North East England – was wondering where it might find the magic that would help to steer a vision for three dilapidated properties at 170 to 175 High Street West, towards the East End of Sunderland. Following an impasse in which the Sunderland City Council refused permission to demolish the buildings, the council finally agreed their purchase from the previous owner. Once the site of the first Binns store in Sunderland (before the drapery became a famous department store both in Sunderland and across the north of England), but subsequently abandoned to squatters, copper thieves, pigeons, fire, and the elements for more than a decade, these buildings certainly needed a vision for their future reuse. Former occupier Henry Binns had also unwisely removed the entire first floor and supporting walls of number 172; as such, without sufficient structural support for the roof throughout the preceding 150 years, the building was slowly collapsing in on itself. With immediate emergency repairs and subsequent extensive restoration works required, it was clear from the beginning that this project would not be viable without support, trust, and a true partnership of people working together. And so, the buildings were acquired by TWBPT for the symbolic fee of one pound from the council in order to help rescue them, with early community consultation indicating a desired cultural and community-centered future for the spaces. Thus, the seeds were sown for a cooperative relationship between TWBPT and Pop Recs, in addition to many others.



Fig. 1
High Street, Sunderland. Map

Timeline

2015 – 2022

2015	Community outreach undertaken by TWBPT and Sunderland City Council to determine local needs and visions for 170–175 High Street West; search begins for anchor tenant
2016	Collaboration commences between Pop Recs and TWBPT
2017	Historic England’s Heritage Action Zone (HAZ) in Sunderland established
2018	TWBPT purchases 170–175 High Street West from Sunderland City Council for symbolic £; OpenHeritage project begins
2019	Immediate repairs and restoration works to 170–175 High Street West undertaken; meanwhile it begins to be used in 170 High Street West by Pop Recs, including Heritage Open Days 2019 with <i>Rebel Women</i> exhibition
2020	COVID-19 pandemic impacts plans; alternative financing opportunities tested through crowdfunding campaigns
2021	Major construction works are completed; the ground floors of 170 and 172–175 High Street West open; Heritage Open Days 2021 takes place with <i>Local Edible Heritage</i> exhibition; commemorative blue plaque installed at 172 High Street West
2022	Upper floors of 170–175 High Street West continue to be restored; 177 High Street West acquired by TWBPT and restoration works begin to roof and shell; Making Space / Keeping Space event begins looking at the project’s impact and legacy

Heritage Action Zone (HAZ)

The HAZ was a newly developed policy tool for Historic England to focus heritage expertise and funding towards marginalised areas; to work with the communities in these deprived areas; to enable long-term engagement and the building of trust; as well as to promote meanwhile uses and stimulate people to see opportunities in rescuing heritage properties. It came with some funding, but more important was the shift in focus by Historic England from 'Grade 1' and 'Grade 2*' listed buildings to marginalised places and people. Equally crucial was that the HAZ partnership was led by the local planning authority, which meant that it was committed to and invested in making the adaptive reuse projects within the HAZ a success. The High Street West project buildings were key in the local planning authority's application to Historic England for HAZ funding and, reciprocally, the HAZ was crucial in returning the buildings to use.

Taking risks

Beyond economic repair, the buildings were nevertheless of considerable and continued historic value due to their notable former Quaker occupants, as well as their prominent location at a key gateway into Sunderland city centre. The buildings are located within the Old Sunderland conservation area, all of which is designated by Historic England as Heritage at Risk, thereby connecting them to wider strategies as well as funding opportunities that would support their rescue and thus the regeneration and conservation of this neglected part of Sunderland. The project consequently became the catalyst for a Historic England Heritage Action Zone (HAZ). The HAZ partnership, which began in 2017 and continued until early autumn 2022, was formed of Sunderland City Council, Historic England, TWBPT, Sunderland Culture, Sunderland Heritage Forum, and the Churches Conservation Trust.

Without this and invaluable heritage funding from the Architectural Heritage Fund, repair and reuse of the badly damaged project buildings would not have been feasible. It is thus, as Historic England Historic Places Adviser Jules Brown notes, 'a really important example of how partnership can work for historic buildings [where] no player in this project could have worked alone [... and where] most importantly, working in partnership allows people to make bold decisions' (InvestSundUK, 2022). It is this trust between actors that is essential in enabling projects to take risks beyond what would otherwise be possible.

Following footsteps

Nothing ever arises in isolation. Visiting other projects, similar to what we (all those connected to the Sunderland Cooperative Heritage Lab between 2018 and 2022) imagined High Street West could become, was so much more important than initially anticipated. At the Granby Four Streets project in Liverpool, for example, we saw their winter garden set within two terraced houses in the middle of the street. The project was conceived with the Assemble collective and in 2015 became the first architectural entry to win the UK's Turner Prize for art. We also heard from the residents, about their fight against demolition, and gained an understanding of the moments, organisation, and governance models involved in bringing the project to fruition. This and other project visits to Berlin and London provided inspiration, in both the material and design senses, and in demonstrating what is possible, especially if everyone involved works together towards shared goals. Hopefully, we are now passing on that same message and inspiration to other projects that are following in our footsteps, as we have followed in others.

It was through community consultation that Pop Recs' name was first mentioned. For co-founder and then director Dave Harper, it was the highest compliment. Indeed, Pop Recs CIC (Community Interest Company) had the magic that TWBPT was seeking, which would transform this adaptive heritage reuse project. It may have been a relatively small operation in business terms, but its reach and impacts within Sunderland's

communities and far beyond are immeasurable. In the words of Dave Harper, Pop Recs could 'circumnavigate a lot of the bureaucracy that prevents creative people in Sunderland getting to the point where they've got a product and are doing something; [Pop Recs] could be the antidote to that [...] and try to support people, because we didn't have that support when we were younger, [...] When I was growing up, the support would have been greatly welcomed'. (TWBPT, 2019b)

The people of the East End consulted during the early stages of the project did not want the buildings to be converted into affordable housing (although this is equally needed within the area); instead, they wanted something with a community focus. And so, with Pop Recs fully on board, the process began of transforming number 170 to make it suitable and safe for meanwhile use, working with Sunderland College apprentices to patch the building back together through the establishment of the Living Classroom project. The first concert at the venue opened as scheduled at 7:30 pm, despite the electricity only being reconnected (thanks to an electrician, standing in a hole in the road) 15 minutes earlier. Only Pop Recs could do that: everyone could feel that they had the ability to develop a vision for the site, and to see it through.

Acknowledging the overlooked

While more extensive works began to repair Pop Recs' intended home at 172–175 High Street West, reconnection of electricity to number 170 meant that more people could begin to gather around a kindly donated coffee machine (Fig. 2). Gatherings drew from far-reaching communities, re-welcoming those already part of the family through Pop Recs' pre-existing socio-cultural initiatives (from gigs to exhibitions), but also new additions. Indeed, support and collaboration among many different actors (including national organisations such as the Arts Council, and local cultural organisations such as Sunderland Culture and We Make Culture) has helped to build strong partnerships through cultural community outreach throughout the duration of the project. As part of a variety of activities and events organised as meanwhile uses at number 170 for Heritage Open Days 2019, the Rebel Women of Sunderland project was born and shared with the community. It included an exhibition, a Mini Manifestoes workshop for children, and a lecture on Marion Phillips (Sunderland's first female member of parliament). Led by Laura Brewis from Sunderland Culture, and funded through the Great Place scheme, it was an immensely rewarding collaboration between Sunderland Culture, OpenHeritage, and the HAZ, with local illustrator Kathryn Robertson and author Jessica Andrews commissioned to illustrate and tell the stories of Sunderland's inspirational yet previously overlooked women.

For Laura Brewis, also founder and director of We Make Culture, it was 'fantastic to profile these untold stories of women from Sunderland, and I think it'll go on and on'. (TWBPT, 2019b) Since its first showing, the project has indeed been extended, re-exhibited, and shared both locally and nationally. The con-



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Fig. 2
The coffee machine

Fig. 3
Rescuing Heritage at Risk



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tributions made by the city's women have continued to be acknowledged, with a blue plaque installed on the facade of the former Binns store at number 172 recognising the role played by Sunderland's Quaker women in opposing the slave trade. The recognition of overlooked heritage, too, was furthered through Heritage Open Days 2021 and the Local Edible Heritage project, where this time food (rather than coffee) was a means of bringing everyone back together, following a period of global precarity and uncertainty.

Taking care

Sometimes, events outside our control reminded us of what was important. The adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to energy and cost of living crises, on both finance and community engagement could be keenly felt at times during the project's journey. Obvious and immediate detrimental impacts of the pandemic were seen in lengthy delays and rising material costs that hampered the progress of on-site construction works considerably throughout 2020 and into 2021. But more significant were the longer-term impacts on both the individuals affiliated with the project and the wider public supporting it, in terms of the limits placed on their access and participation. During periods of social distancing measures introduced by the UK Government, collective resilience was fostered through numerous mutual aid initiatives that enabled people to voluntarily support each other in solidarity. Post-pandemic, many of these initiatives are still vital and in ever-increasing use. Yet, these measures also kept communities spatially separated and forced many interactions to migrate to online spaces, thus somewhat dampening the project's community-nurturing momentum. Online tools were an invaluable means of maintaining connections and were widely implemented by both the tenants and ourselves, but they could not entirely replace the more serendipitous opportunities of being somewhere in-person and chatting over coffee. From the moment that restrictions were eased, the project has been able to grow and flourish.

It is difficult to comprehend just how close the buildings once were to collapse (Fig. 3). Now, with the light pooling in from the skylight above, the double-height venue space of Pop Recs is an undeniably special setting for musical and community activities. Saved by a steel support structure, it is a truly communal space for people to gather and share their lives and stories, through food, music, and more. Plans for Pop Recs' relocation next door progressed swiftly in 2019, working carefully and closely with key members of the council's regeneration and conservation teams, as well as the lead architect and contractor; indeed, the council was key in its support of a restoration that, while sympathetic and respectful of the historic importance of the properties (number 172 is Grade II listed), was still open to their creative, adaptive reuse. Certain elements were subsequently maintained, including wallpaper fragments, stairs to nowhere, and the bow in the roofline of 172 that speaks of its near-collapse (Fig. 4). The process was not

easy, and funding paths were not always straightforward, resulting in a softer and step-by-step approach based on need and luck. Much of the funding was obtained through mobilising TWBPT's collaboration with Pop Recs, and the importance of this partnership was recently recognised in its shortlisting for the North East Culture Awards 2022. Different options to financially support the works were also explored, including through the 'Buy a Brick for Sunderland' crowdfunding campaign. Beyond stimulating funding, these mechanisms sought to generate buy-in from the local community, understanding that the more people that are emotionally invested in a place, the more support it will receive from those communities going forward, and therefore the more sustainable it will be. The ground floor spaces were the first to be completed and were tested in July 2021 for the Summer Streets Festival – a local music festival organised annually by musician Ross Millard, who played an instrumental role in connecting Pop Recs to TWBPT and is also a member of Frankie and the Heartstrings. Following the official opening of Pop Recs in autumn 2021, more of the upper floor spaces across the buildings have gradually been brought into use, with the remaining rooms to follow when the time is right.

Growing the family

The project is perhaps a story of adaptive heritage reuse, of salvaging buildings, but it is more so a tale of collaboration, community, and cultivating local pride (Fig. 5). Pop Recs' new venue space has a capacity beyond that of their previous locations, bringing more people around (and onto) their stage through the care, vision, and dedication of co-founder and director (and Frankie and the Heartstrings guitarist) Michael McKnight. Midnight Pizza Crù – a pandemic success story – is now fully part of the menu of Pop Recs' meat-free kitchen, with founder Dan Shannon coming on board as an equally dedicated director of Pop Recs in autumn 2021. The directorial team has since further expanded, with Naomi Griffin joining in mid 2022. Pop Recs has hosted the Young Musicians Project run by We Make Culture, and continues to host the Teenage Market run by Washington Mind, attentively recognising the lack of support and opportunity for youth within the area and providing a space for them to thrive. The increased turnover for Pop Recs has been remarkable. By reinvesting any profits made from sales and larger events, Pop Recs can provide a low-cost (often 'pay what you can') venue for many social activities, including for Little Pops, long-term residents Stitch and Bitch, King Ink, Sunderland Book Club, Sunderland Shorts Film Festival, and many others. In 2023, Pop Recs is also celebrating its ten-year anniversary with a series of what will undoubtedly be poignant gigs, including by the band of its founders, Frankie and the Heartstrings.

In early 2020, Sunshine Co-operative – a sustainable food company that had previously operated online, delivering food boxes – joined the family to occupy the ground floor of 170. The company has a community room, hosts a stall as part of the Teenage Market, and is beginning to transform its external



Fig. 4
170–175 High Street West

Fig. 5
In loving memory of Dave Harper

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space into a food-growing garden. It is also part of the Sunderland Community-Led Local Development Programme. Washington Mind, a local mental health charity that already offered sessions to young people at Pop Recs' previous location, now occupies an upper-storey office above Pop Recs, offering sessions to support Sunderland's youth. Global Teacher CIC, which provides off-grid access to education for marginalised communities, has moved into the upper floors of 170 and has since established a further CIC called Good Habits, a sustainable non-profit focused around wellbeing. Through gathering like-minded and mutually supportive cultural organisations across the tenancies of the restored buildings, the current, forthcoming, and wider High Street West family will hopefully continue to gather around the coffee machine. The buildings are but a backdrop, a space to allow things to happen. As this collection of wonderful groups shows, it is the people who really matter.

Facilitating possible futures

Not only is the family of users within 170–175 High Street West increasing, but the family of buildings has since expanded to include 177, with discussions over the fate of 176 ongoing. While works to the shell of 177 are under way, the interiors will be refurbished in due course ready for new occupants. The entire High Street West project has evolved through genuine cooperative effort, and its future will depend on that same type of partnership working towards mutual benefit – ideally with a governance structure developed to facilitate collaboration between partners, as well as to support the collective maintenance of the buildings. This could be between the tenants and owners of the buildings, or possibly through a wider local land-trust including even more land and buildings in the area. Adding additional buildings to the complex – and thus the family of cultural users – along High Street West will consolidate the occupation of this location as a cultural hub for the community; indeed, perhaps for a new or extended community, should the proposed 'Living Arts Hub' development happen on a vacant adjacent site (a feasibility study was led by a resident steering group established by local housing charity Back on the Map; developer TOWN and social enterprise Create Streets have since been leading the 'Living Arts Hub' development and are now working with the local authority to develop a master-plan for the Sunnyside area as a whole). The restored buildings are thus becoming a catalyst for the further regeneration of the area; as such, a strong area partnership, building upon the foundations of the HAZ, will remain crucial. It is key that the relationships nurtured over the preceding years do not dissipate, and that those collaborations continue and be strengthened by follow-on work, as creating truly meaningful impact within a place and within a community is undoubtedly only possible with long-term commitment.

Significant sums have been invested in these buildings, money which is unlikely to be recouped if assessing the project solely in narrow monetary terms. The value of the properties remains low, due to land-value depression in the area; never-

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Jules Brown

theless, this can be a great advantage. For the project's ultimate value lies not in its financial metrics (although the resident businesses now provide significant economic benefits); rather, its value lies in its commitment to local people – whether that is the capacity to bring joy and to change the narrative of a previously neglected area of the city, or to make people aware of the area's rich heritage once more. Indeed, spinning tales acknowledging the area's overlooked histories or telling of the area's possible futures, together with the people who are spending time in the East End of Sunderland, remains important. We hope this chapter captures only the very beginnings of a tale that will continue for many years to come.

Dave's vision

The story of the Sunderland Cooperative Heritage Lab has been tough in places, but most especially when Pop Recs founder and director Dave Harper died unexpectedly on 25 August 2021. The immense stress that comes with projects like this undoubtedly impacted his health, although we also know that he would have stopped at nothing. Everything that has been achieved is amazing, yet, at the same time, such achievements are never worth this. The impact within the project team was immeasurable and personal, and responding to his death was both urgent yet impossible. It meant that Dave's vision for the venue had to be taken over by others, who were also grieving, and who became more determined than ever to make things work in his legacy. It meant stepping back as researchers, and stepping up as friends, allowing the amazing community built around Pop Recs to come together and support each other.

A memorial gig at the Pop Recs venue was held in Dave's memory on 3 December 2021. The Dave Harper Music Award sessions, held with groups of 16–24-year-old SEN (special educational needs) students and run in conjunction with training provider Springboard, culminated in Pop Recs winning the award for Supporting Partner of the Year at the Springboard North East Annual Awards in late autumn 2022.

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