



## **Social housing and working class heritage**

*Fighting for survival perspective: Rodney Harrison*

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There's two different ways of understanding heritage, which are revealed in the video. In the first place we've got the rather top-down official practices of heritage conservation, which are represented by the English Heritage designation and listing process. On the other hand we can see the campaigns to conserve Carpenters Estate and Excalibur Estate as an unofficial form of heritage itself, in that they're in conflict with the sort of listing process of the State, so we can think of these campaigns as unofficial heritage in two ways. Firstly in the sense in which there's a campaign which is supported by a community to recognise the heritage value of a place which had not previously been considered to be heritage by English Heritage or by the State management agency. Perhaps more importantly the campaigns themselves generate an element of collective representation of community in the past, which helps people to connect with each other, and with the places in which they live, and I would see this as an example of performing or creating heritage. In this case it's the protests and the campaigns to save the estate, but it may be any other form of activity in a society. It's about the way in which thinking about heritage, defining something as heritage, and defining something particularly as your heritage means that you actually have to develop a sense of what you are, and what you are as a collective in terms of community, what the sort of core set of values which represent you as a community are, and how these values are represented through the place that you're attempting to save, and your activities that you're creating around trying to save that place.

One of the areas where this becomes very clear in the film is where you have Carmen Grimes who has been relocated off the estate, who actually sees it as so important in terms of her sense of who she is, and in terms of the sense of community, that she is actually coming back and involving herself in campaigns to save the buildings that remain on the estate, even though she now lives somewhere else. So we have this real sense of the kind of importance of the community and the way in which that community is actually played out and represented by the physical buildings that exist on the site. People that are involved in campaigns over heritage are very keyed in to how it is a sort of activity which is about the present, you know, because it has a very real imminence about it, usually because something's threatened with being demolished, so it makes people much more conscious of those things that they will lose, it focuses people on the sense of threat, and the sense of loss, and in that sense it is very nostalgic but it's a nostalgia for the present as much as it is for the past.

These aren't places which are only part of a sort of aesthetic environment which is kind of outside, which is somehow distinct from you, it's actually your home, it's the place in which you live, and one of the very distinctive qualities of social housing is the way in which housing estates represent the way in which the estate organises your life for you in particular ways, and I think in this case we can see the social action to save the estate as a sort of protest against the fact that a community has subscribed to a particular way of having their life organised by being moved on to the estate in the first place, and then the State attempting to reorganise it again by decanting them from their homes and resettling them. So it's about developing a sense of community within a place which gives you a sense of stability and which allows you to structure your life through your material and your social environment, and I think that's one of the things that people are also protesting about here.

The other really complicating factor in all of this is about how you actually maintain a certain standard of anonymity within public housing which is managed as heritage so most places become heritage when their function has finished and they're turned into something else, they

become fossilised or museumified, and they're managed in particular ways which are different from the way in which they managed whilst they were in operation, but when housing becomes heritage it needs to continue to function as social housing, even though it's now considered to be heritage, and so this means it probably can't be managed in the same way, for example, as a house museum might be managed. You don't have the liberty of fossilising it and presenting it in one way, you have to continue to manage it as housing which is viable, which allows it to grow, which allows it the function of buildings to continue to change within the community that acknowledges, which lives within it, and it's really a matter of acknowledging those things that the community hold dear in the place, and looking at the ways in which they can be accommodated within its ongoing function as housing.