



Social housing and working class heritage

Sense of place perspective: Rodney Harrison

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One of the issues which is raised in this video is how we define heritage, so one of the ways in which we might choose to define heritage is in terms of a sense of place, in terms of people's special relationship with the environments in which they live, and that's what we really wanted to explore with this particular film. So what we see in the interviews is not so much a focus on the built environment, tangible heritage places, but more on the intangible aspects of heritage, on people's cultural landscape and their relationship with the place in which they live, and the way in which this relationship is expressed through the lived environment. And it's really interesting to me to hear the slippage between the description of places and the communities which inhabit them, it's very much as if for the people interviewed these two things are so closely intertwined as to be indistinguishable. I mean I think people were very clear and very articulate on their attachments to place, and I think it's always very interesting to hear that, it's always very interesting to be confronted with somebody that's able to articulate so clearly their very intimate sense of place, and their very special attachment to a place in which they live or a place that they hold special, so that was something that I was very pleased to see on the video because it's something that I think not a lot of people will have had exposure to, and people will find interesting.

I mean I think there is a sense of remove because people are talking about themselves as expressed through something else, through the place in which they live. There's also a remove which makes it safer to speak about these intimate attachments because there is a sense of threat and loss, and that allows people to articulate and think about what it is that they'll lose if those places are threatened or demolished. It allows them to speak about the things that they fear most about losing the place, and those reflections are very intimate and very personal. When we made the film we really wanted to try to capture some of the similarities and differences in a way in which a sense of place was felt by different members of the community, so one of the things we made sure that we did was to speak with people from different generations and I think one of the really stark contrasts here is between the recollections of Violet Sloane who grew up on the original Carpenters Estate and subsequently moved into the new Carpenters Estate when it was built in the 1960's, and Paul Akinrinlola and Ben Soyemi who were born on the estate and who had lived on the estate for their whole lives before they were recently relocated. Violet's recollections reflect the sense of having to create heritage in a sense of place in a new space, to having to make a sense of community and make a sense of attachment to a place. By contrast with this, Ben and Paul very much see the estate as part of their inheritance, as part of something that they were born into, and the community in that place as something which has almost always existed, it's always been there, it's something which they feel is a part of them and belongs to the buildings themselves, so I think that generational difference between having to make a new sense of community, and having to make new attachments to a place as opposed to the sense of having been born into a place that's already filled with a sense of community, were very interesting and quite stark in the videos.

I mean I think there's two things here, that there is a very clear sense of community at Carpenters partially because it's such a big estate. On the other hand, it's also an estate that has a lot of social housing in it which means that it has a lot of people moving through it, so it's not very different to a lot of other housing estates. I think in this sense it's very typical, I think that we're just used to different portrayals of communities, working class communities in the media which tend to be portrayals which don't emphasise people's sense of collective identity and people's sense of community, so in that sense although Carpenters is a special place to the people that live there I think Carpenters is actually quite ordinary, it's probably a

place like any other place, it's just that we're not used to seeing these kind of portrayals of community collective vision in the same way that we are at Carpenters. I mean it's not a place that would enter the ordinary person's psyche as a heritage place, nor as a place that would be worth arguing to conserve.

There's been a lot of negative press for tower blocks in particular, and one of the things we were interested in doing in this video was speaking to people who lived in tower blocks about their sense of community in high-rise developments. There've been a number of quite famous critiques of high-rise architecture which we've looked at, the sort of negative aspects of living in high-rise and the sort of effect on the social environment. But we also knew that there were a number of residents of this estate in particular that really valued the tower blocks. There had been some work done on the estate before but by some other researchers, so we were really interested in exploring these attachments to high-rise in the film, and in the film we see Mick Aldridge speaking of his love for 'living in the sky', and we also see Ben and Paul speak of their really deep social attachment to James Riley Point in the way in which they use it as a sort of a shorthand, as a kind of brand for their sense of identity, and their sense of friendship in the way they sort of talk about, you know, we're from James Riley Point, and I think that's really special and I hope that it's quite surprising to people because, you know, there was a sense of surprise in that for me to see that quite so clearly articulated, people really loving, you know, their sort of high-rise council block.

I've worked as an archaeologist with aboriginal people in Australia on land rights' determinations and I've also worked with non-indigenous Australian communities in rural settings on their sense of place in rural environments, and I think most people are able to accept the idea that people who live in rural areas might have special attachments to the places in which they live, that they might be able to form these quite deep feelings of attachment to the natural environment, but I think it's a much more radical notion that people who live in urban environments might form these similar deep emotional attachments to the places in which they live, so when I saw Ben and Paul speak about their memories of Carpenters Estate and their sort of real sense of sadness at having been relocated from it, it didn't seem all that dissimilar to me to speaking with aboriginal people in the western desert, for example, or cattle ranches in western New South Wales about their attachments to the environments in which they lived, and I think this particular video helps challenge our assumptions that heritage is necessarily aesthetically beautiful or architecturally grand, and that the environments that matter to people are sort of wonderful, wild, distant and under-developed places. I think this film provides an argument for the ways in which heritage exists in the very everyday communities, everyday environments of communities around the world, and that as members of such communities, we've got the right to have the values of these places acknowledged and managed accordingly.