

Reflections on community action by Toby Laurent Belson

I was born in the Shepherd's Bush Baby Factory (the former Queen Charlotte's Maternity Ward on Goldhawk Road) the month before Maxilla's management committee came together and Mike Locke became its first Chair. If I were a believer in providence I may take that as a sign of some sort! It is another thing that encourages me to look closer at the Westway.

I was always interested in the Westway. I grew up beside the Shepherd's Bush roundabout and I could see sections of its Brutalist form from my building. I have grown up around red brick mansion blocks and concrete tower blocks feeling the vibrations and sounds of the trains and vehicles every day. I have grown up around rich, poor, Black, White, English, non-English, gay, straight, the interminably happy and the incurably sad. I am mentally and emotionally attached to my West London environment and it feels like an extension of me. I know that I share that connection with many others.

The area in and around Ladbroke Grove has a history that the people feed off. It enriches their lives in countless ways and many rely on it for their identity and sense of purpose, in much the same way as people often do with their families. It is a heritage that has been claimed as an asset and has been monetised and sold by many people at many levels of our society. Artists and socially-minded people, including myself, trade on its genuine value and do what we can to engage with it and support it. But I've also read the estate agents spiel and heard the politicians patter taking advantage of anything that excites buyers and developers, even as they do little themselves to support or engage with the community. They sell what we have. They sell the culture, the heritage and the community that has been built by the generations before us and is maintained by the people today.

The energy the people put into their community is encapsulated in the spaces as well as the people, as Maxilla can attest to. When the spaces are closed, closure is met with an outpouring of grief. A family member has passed. The community has lost something that made it who it is. Family grief is sometimes tempered by the knowledge that a younger generation is carrying on the family energy and its traditions. However, Maxilla was closed with no replacement. Local pubs and bars, community arts venues and learning centres used by generations have been closed or are under current threat of closure, leaving locals less able to find social space. These are the very places I have engaged with my community. These are the spaces in which I have held workshops and found affordable space, attended community meetings, events and festivals. They are the spaces where I have learnt more about my community than any museum could ever hope to teach me. They are the places in which student and teacher are equals and learn from each other. These places hold the memories of thousands upon thousands of good people who have given their lives to building this community.

It is not difficult to understand why people see this as a "cleansing" or a "killing" of culture and heritage. There is no apparent younger generation of this community family being given a chance to grow up. The processes behind it all are distinctly smoky and reflective and provide only the most superficial consultation. The 'family home' is being boarded up and cleared out in preparation for new tenants, even whilst the family still lives in it!

This community is not short of people with ideas or people with the skills, passion and creativity to carry out those ideas. The proof of that is everywhere you look, with countless cultural contributions, many of them groundbreaking. This is how the North Kensington Amenity Trust came about. This is how Notting Hill Housing Association began. It is the spirit in which Notting Hill Carnival was born and Frestonia (still a thriving block of community housing) came into being. And yet this same community with a CV to die for and a worldwide reputation continues to struggle to be heard above its local Conservative-controlled authority.

And so I ask... Is it worth the fight to stop your neighbours from being evicted? Is it worth the fight to keep your local community centre open? Is it worth the fight to keep your libraries as public buildings? Is it worth the fight to protect a culture and heritage that has made North Kensington what it is?

Is it worth the fight to make democracy work for the people...?

