

Civic geographies of architectural enthusiasm

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Published Version

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Craggs, R., Geoghegan, H. and Neate, H. (2015) Civic geographies of architectural enthusiasm. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 14 (2). pp. 367-376. ISSN 1492-9732 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/49366/>

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Published version at: <http://ojs.unbc.ca/index.php/acme/article/view/1165>

Publisher: University of British Columbia, Okanagan

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Civic Geographies of Architectural Enthusiasm

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Exhibiting Architectural Enthusiasm at the RGS-IBG Annual Conference, Edinburgh

Our decision to take part in the civic geographies exhibition was motivated by a desire to explore some of the resonances between notions of what civic



geographies might look like in theory, but also in practice. We based our contribution upon our British Academy funded research that focuses on how twentieth century architecture is understood, valued, cared for and protected by members of The Twentieth Century Society². The group was initiated to safeguard Britain's post-1914 architectural heritage. At the end of 2012, the Society's membership stood just under 2000, made up of architects (retired and in practice), architecture students, builders, civil servants involved in planning, as well as other interested publics. Lobbying, campaigns and casework are central to the Society's activities, for example in the early nineties the Society persuaded the National Trust to take on the Hampstead house of the Hungarian émigré architect Erno Goldfinger at 2 Willow Road, London, NW3 (see Figure 1). Employing two full-time and two part-time staff, the Society has a statutory role in relation to twentieth century listed buildings in England. This means that local planning authorities have to consult the Society in relation to any threats of demolition or alterations.



Figure 1: 2 Willow Road, London. Source:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:1_2_3_Willow_Road_Hampstead_London_20050924.JPG

²For more information about our architectural enthusiasm project please visit www.conservingc20.wordpress.com. The website for The Twentieth Century Society can be found here <http://www.c20society.org.uk/about-us/>.

Our collaboration with the Society has been central to our efforts to contribute to on-going debates around geographies of architecture, specifically by focussing on enthusiasm as it is manifest in and by members of the Society. In particular, we have centred our study on the volunteers who organize, research and lead architectural tours, which form an integral part of the Society's educational and social programme. It was in the experiences and emotions of architectural enthusiasm revealed by our research participants that themes relevant to civic geographies began to emerge.

At the conference, our contribution to the civic geographies programme was twofold. First, we produced some banners containing a mixture of text and photographs from our research, and a stall showcasing Society leaflets and journals, in order to introduce our work in the exhibition space. Second, we echoed the methodology of our research, where we have been participating in the Society's volunteer-led architectural tours. This involved organizing a walking tour of the university area of Edinburgh which was led by Clive Fenton (see Figure 2). Clive is an architectural historian who has carried out extensive research on Modernist Edinburgh and is also an active member of DOCOMOMO Scotland³. In doing so, our aim was to engage others in the sorts of practices that our research explores, and to offer conference goers an opportunity to experience the architectural enthusiasm that motivates members to volunteer for, and engage with, the Society's activities.



Figure 2: Modernist Edinburgh Walking Tour, University of Edinburgh George Square. Photograph author's own.

³ DOCOMOMO is an organization that campaigns for the documentation and conservation of Scotland's twentieth century architecture <http://www.docomomoscotland.org.uk>.

Set amongst other contributions which reflected what Philo et al. (this volume) suggest are better understood as ‘counter-civics’, our ‘civic geographies’ exhibit highlighted the ‘establishment’ tenor of the work undertaken by The Twentieth Century Society. The civic geographies discussed in this paper therefore reflect what might be termed a conventional understanding of civic life, pertaining to an active engagement with the administration and organization of localities and related municipal affairs which manifest themselves in and through the built environment. We are thus engaging with the ambitions and the work that The Twentieth Century Society carries out in order to explore one particular take on what civic geographies might be.

This juxtaposition of ‘establishment’ and ‘counter-civics’ within our contribution to the exhibition enabled us to reflect on what this might mean for the shaping of civic geographies as discussed later in the article. Nevertheless, our research with the Society more broadly has also problematized the simple categorization of the Society as set against other more radical engagements with the built environment, helping to blur this binary distinction at the outset. For example, the practices that Society members engage in – such as the architectural tour – are better understood as part of a continuum of visiting buildings which includes architectural tourism, professional and educational architectural visits, and urban explorers undertaking recreational trespass (Craggs et al., 2013; see also Bennett, 2011). The Twentieth Century Society members often slip between these different categories. This suggests that ‘establishment’ and ‘alternative’ engagements with the built environment may not be so neatly divided, highlighting the need to think carefully about the consequences of a variety of different architectural enthusiasms.

Exploring ‘the civic’ through enthusiasm

Understood as ‘an emotional affiliation that influences our passions, performances and actions in space’ (Geoghegan, 2013, 45), enthusiasm is a particular mode by which our research participants, namely volunteer architectural tour guides, their followers and group members, engage with architecture, and with each other, forming a broader community of knowledge and enthusiasm. We argue that an often shared emotional affiliation, namely enthusiasm, motivates civic engagement, enabling long-term participation and transforming relationships between people, place and others. In turn, our research reveals some of the embodied and emotional practices of being civic (Smith et al., 2010), contending how the civic is manifest for some people through their enthusiasm.

Enthusiasts as civic geographers

For us, this kind of ‘non-academic’ but nonetheless highly engaged, and often very knowledgeable form of architectural experience, exemplifies a particular type of civic engagement. In many ways, the workings and ambitions of The Twentieth Century Society have affiliations with the likes of family historians, museum volunteers, local history clubs, metal detectorists, DIY enthusiasts and

steam preservation societies (Samuel, 1994; Wright, 2009; Geoghegan, 2009). What links such endeavour is what has elsewhere been referred to as ‘serious leisure’ (Stebbins, 2012, 2), namely the ‘systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial, interesting and fulfilling for the participant to find a (leisure) career there acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience’. What interests us is the way in which this type of civic-minded activity, motivated by what may, on the surface, appear to be specialist interests and hobbies, enables us to identify the individuals who participate in such activities as the invisible hands of geographical enquiry.

Following on from Samuel’s description of the activities of the historically-minded lay people of Britain, multiple civic geographies (and an active citizenry) are enacted and promoted in the name of enthusiast pursuits, for example local gardening clubs competing for best village in bloom titles, conservation volunteers preserving local habitats, microbreweries producing and serving local beers, parish councils serving local communities, all in their various ways researching, understanding and championing their respective localities – fuelled by an attachment to place. Our work and the notion of civic geographies, thus speaks to not only the public history movement, but also the extension of what we mean by ‘public geographies’, which becomes not so much a question of ‘how do geographers engage publics?’ (Fuller and Askins, 2010, 665), but rather how do publics engage with geography. Picking up here on a comment made by Askins: ‘what about those people doing geography without us? Non-academics (as Duncan put it, ‘a bunch of brilliant amateurs’) going around doing a whole gamut of projects/research/community engagement at the grassroots level, specifically geographically focused ...*public, yes, but is it public geography?*’ (Fuller and Askins, 2010, 666, italics in original). We wonder if it might be ‘civic geography’. As Fuller himself suggested, there are ‘other types of geographies, be they ‘folk’, ‘community’, ‘populist’, ‘school’” (2008, 7).

The effects and implications of enthusiasms

Our research has shown how the action, practice and performance of the architectural tour allows those taking part to become architectural agents themselves, from identifying buildings for listing and subsequent casework to raising the profile of buildings through small interventions such as their walking tours (Craggs et al., 2013). Enthusiasts, through The Twentieth Century Society, are linked into other official networks of care and conservation, influencing the practices of conservation officers, planners and other professionals. Their work intervenes directly in the care for and reconstruction of ‘landscapes that appear to embody civics’, specifically those of municipal, public and philanthropic buildings such as council housing, public libraries, town halls, bus stations and churches produced in the middle years of the twentieth century (see Figure 3) – a high point for the construction of such spaces (Philo et al., this volume). Drawing on the discussion of Patrick Geddes in the introduction to this special issue, we suggest that the work of the Society embodies both ‘a positivity about what places can be

and become’ and ‘a refusal to allow that retreat of economic, political and social concern from certain places (and their peoples) now viewed as somehow ‘surplus’ to requirements’ (Philo et al., this volume).



Figure 3: Hallfield Estate, London, built 1951-1958. Photograph author’s own.

At a moment when disinvestment in these buildings (and their associated civic projects) is pervasive, the campaigning of bodies such as The Twentieth Century Society intersects with and contributes to broader movements to protect such spaces from privatisation and/or demolition (see Toogood and Neate, 2013, on on-going debates surrounding the fate of Preston Bus Station). Of course, campaigning around heritage often also contributes to regeneration agendas which often actively exclude local communities and alternative uses of buildings (Philo and Kearns, 1993), as well as championing elite values over those of a wider public (Pendlebury, 2009). Thus the civic engagement exhibited by The Twentieth Century Society can be seen as multifaceted and contradictory. Drawing on local knowledge and enthusiasms and often defending public and community spaces which themselves represent a particular mid-twentieth century utopian vision for the future of civic life, it is possible to suggest that the Society offers an important counterpoint to pervasive neoliberal agendas that are reshaping our built environment. On the other hand, a different type of interpretation could argue that amenity societies such as The Twentieth Century Society and others such as the Victorian Society and SAVE Britain’s Heritage, with their niche interests and

broader national remit, are involved in producing a particular regime of value surrounding the architectural landscape which is unrepresentative of the population as a whole, and which can contribute to the gentrification and privatisation of these same spaces. As Pendlebury (2009, 123) has commented:

In practice, the processes of transformation, of which conservation is part, will sometimes be socially progressive, or benign, or sometimes socially regressive. What can be dispiriting is the unwillingness of the conservation sector to move beyond a magpie-like acquisition of the benefits of association with regeneration. The sector has steadfastly avoided more critical discourses over issues such as gentrification, with which it has, like it or not, a relationship.

Enthusiasm for twentieth century architecture – in common with all enthusiasms – is embedded in particular aesthetic, political and cultural judgements. Moreover, the ability to act on enthusiasms is shaped by issues of free time and social capital. Our research, and that of many others, highlights that particular sorts of people get involved with volunteering (Mohan and Bulloch, 2011; Yarwood and Edwards, 1995). Often reflecting the niche interests of the groups in question, there are particular biases evident between members in terms of class, educational background, ethnicity and age. For example, many of the volunteer guides and members of The Twentieth Century Society are white, middle-class and middle-aged or retired (this is something the Society is keenly aware of). Whilst the dedicated work of the Society does safeguard what its members feel are vitally important examples of twentieth century built heritage and is undoubtedly invaluable in terms of protecting and promoting a significant part of Britain's architectural history, we also need to ask: if these are the people engaging with and shaping our civic geographies – what are the impacts? As Pendlebury et al. (2004) have noted, the conservation sector, via its modes of operation and politics of practice may, albeit inadvertently, be promoting agendas that exclude as well as include. In a changing policy environment where both voluntary and local action is valorised, and becomes more important given cuts to professional, local and national government services, enthusiasm and enthusiasts could take an increasingly important role in shaping the geographies of the city, making a critical understanding of their role even more pressing. Indeed, the precarious nature of civic spaces and the risks emerging from competing political and economic drivers is a theme that is reflected in other papers in this collection.

Enthusiasm and shifting policy contexts

In our research, we have been particularly interested in questioning what an increased power vested on these local constituencies of enthusiasts might mean for the future of architectural conservation. Such questions are of particular pertinence in light of on-going and by no means concluded debates around the Localism Act and the introduction of the National Planning Policy Framework. As English Heritage recently argued in their report entitled *Heritage Counts*: 'heritage

organisations provide invaluable support to local people, and civic societies are well placed to represent community views to local authorities and others', quoting the following statistics, '85% of civic societies currently respond to planning applications and just under half (46%) of The Heritage Alliance members provide advice on planning issues' (English Heritage, 2011). Whilst civic societies play an important role in providing advice and opinion on a range of issues from architectural conservation to museum provision, it is important to acknowledge that within a backdrop where the 'local' is being prioritised, tensions are rising between expert enthusiasts who may be operating at a national scale, such as The Twentieth Century Society, and locals, for example members of parish councils. What this touches upon are the strains that may occur between different forms of civic engagement – the national expert butting against the local interest group. Within the case of architectural conservation, it is likely that this will result in different sorts of outcome for buildings depending upon the balance of power. This predicament is made more complicated in the case of twentieth century architecture where enthusiasm for the period still lags behind Victorian or Georgian styles which are more readily accepted as 'heritage'.

Such concerns are particularly sensitive when public spending cuts and policy shifts are eroding the capacity and function of individuals like conservation officers within local authorities, with wider implications relating to the impacts of full-time professionals being replaced by enthusiasts in decision-making and safeguarding roles. Moreover, heritage groups and amenity societies have been publicly voicing concern about the implications of cuts to funding and the political repackaging of their work under the vestiges of the 'Big Society'. Many in The Twentieth Century Society are ambivalent or antagonistic towards being characterised as part of this agenda.

Civic Geographies of Enthusiasm

In sum, through our example of architectural enthusiasm, this short intervention calls for further discussion and mapping of the emergent and shifting practices of amenity societies – and other enthusiast groups – in doing and making civic geographies. Such groups play an often overlooked, yet increasingly important role in (re)making the built environment and our civic spaces. We therefore need to engage critically with the consequences of this challenge to conventional notions of expert, professional and lay-person and shifts in future trajectories for heritage and preservation. Such an engagement will further illuminate the valuable production of geographical knowledge beyond the academy.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by a British Academy Small Grant (ref: ERI020794). We would like to thank The Twentieth Century Society, their employees, volunteers, and members for their help, time, and support with this

research. We are also grateful to Chris Philo, Kye Askins and Ian Cook, as well as the anonymous reviewers, for their helpful comments and interest in our work.

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