

Re-presenting the “Forgotten Estate”: participatory theatre, place and community identity

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Abstract

In this paper we discuss the work undertaken in the first phase of a participatory theatre project which took place on a council housing estate in the Midlands of England, in which residents were invited to share their memories for a production which would present the history of the estate. This community is often characterised as deficient, ageing, welfare-oriented, low in educational attainment and aspiration. Interviews and field notes suggest that there was not a great amount of hope within the community for the success of a participatory arts project such as this. However, the performance attracted a large number of participants who performed to full houses over five nights. Using a place-based approach, we argue that a model of open participation led to the presentation of alternative, more positive, narratives of this community as a place to live.

The benefits of community arts and their contribution to social justice agendas have been well documented (e.g. White, 2003; Daly, 2005; Harland, Kinder and Hartley, 1995). Many of these reports highlight the need to address the fragmentation and lack of collective voice experienced by those working class communities that have borne the brunt of deindustrialisation and neo-liberal market policy regimes (Gruenewald and Smith, 2008; Thomson, 2008). However, the very same studies of community arts acknowledge the empirically weak basis of their claims, with evaluations of single short-term projects offering limited insight into the potential for the longer-term impact of community arts (Heath, 2001;

Landry, Bianchini, Henry and Brookes, 2004). It is in this context that we have established a research partnership between university researchers (Susan, Chris and Pat) and a participatory theatre company (Andy and Julian). We discuss the initial phase of our first project together here. This saw the artists make contact with residents and community organisations in a council housing estate on the edge of a Midlands city, seeking their stories for a production that would involve residents in presenting the history of the place where they lived. This was the beginning of a process of engaging with the community not only in capturing its past, but also in negotiating its future at a time when many changes were taking place, including that the local comprehensive was being demolished and replaced by a brand new Academy.

We begin with a brief consideration of the key ideas we use to inform our understanding of 'place' as a concept. We then describe the context of the project before going on to outline the contrasts that emerged in the ways in which the estate was described both by its residents and by others. The estate was presented as a distinct place in the 'social memory' of its older residents (Hayden, 1996), characterised by the experience of collaboration and shared enterprise. This contrasts with the sense of place presented by those who live and work within it in the present. Using the notion of 'community narratives' (Rappaport, 2000), we explore the ways in which stories common among a group of people can be seen to contribute to the residents' experience of the estate as a place. As Rappaport argues, and as the artists themselves discovered during the project, community narratives can be 'resources that empower or impede' (ibid, p.6). Whilst drawing from the memories of the first residents as the basis for the play, the project faced challenges which were part of the contemporary context of a community greatly changed and affected by economic hardship. We contend that, through an 'assets-based' approach (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993; Cleveland, 2002), the artists' engagement in this initial phase with residents and their shared stories established a focus on agency and 'voice' at the outset, creating the potential for a *re*-presentation of dominant community narratives which can contribute to a changed conception of place, illustrating how 'a sense of place rooted in the past [can be] deployed as a resource to mobilise around the challenges of the present' (Corcoran, 2002: 1).

Place

Our understanding of place is as a 'meaningful location' (Cresswell, 2004: 7), which results from the 'interplay of people and the environment' (ibid, p. 11). This echoes the notion of 'social space' as described by Lefebvre (1991). The trialectic of space presented by Lefebvre offers a useful way of considering the interrelationship between the participants in the theatre project we describe and the place in which they live, as well as the possibilities for such engagement to be transformative. According to Lefebvre, the urban realities of places designed and assigned as those for work, leisure or private life are 'perceived space'. 'Conceived space' represents conceptualised spaces which impact on daily lives – a school curriculum, or a welfare system for example. The 'lived space' represents an individual's often passive experience of reality, dominated by conceived spaces. It is within this lived space, however, that individuals can use their imaginations to appropriate space and make living symbolic use of its objects.

Individual engagement and appropriation of place at a cultural and symbolic level are subjective and involve emotional attachment. The sense of place, particularly in relation to where we live – described by Lippard (1997) as *The Lure of the Local* – is partly formed as a result of time spent there. As Tuan (1977: 8) states, 'what begins as undifferentiated space becomes a place as we get to know it better and endow it with value'. The theatre project used the memories of those who 'knew' the estate as resources in providing an opportunity for residents and those from 'outside' to take the time to make meaning from their surroundings and thus contribute to the creation of 'place'. The power of 'place memory' is described by Hayden (1995: 46), who cites Casey's claim that 'memory is naturally place-oriented or at least place-supported'. The expression and presentation of shared place memory in this project became a way for residents to engage with their lived space and begin to re-appropriate the place from the deficit discourses which define it.

The location and the project

The council housing estate in which our partnership work is based is located on the edge of a Midlands city. Official figures report high levels of deprivation and unemployment, and the area has a small range of welfare-oriented government services but little history of

participation in arts activities, at least in recent years. The local secondary school has been recently replaced by a new Academy co-sponsored by a local benefactor and the University for which Susan, Christine and Pat work. As part of its commitment to the new school and its community, the University funded a three-stage community arts project which aimed not only to establish a relationship in which local people could have a say in the services they were offered, but also to provide a basis on which the common stereotype of deficient, depressed and powerless people lacking in motivation, aspirations and skills might be challenged. As researchers with an interest in community arts, Christine and Pat are interested in developing understandings of the potential of longer-term projects such as this to directly address and engage with the notions of agency, identity and 'voice' (Hall and Thomson, 2010). The community artists, Andy and Julian, have extensive experience of working alongside residents in different localities to produce community arts events based on the history of the area and performed by the residents themselves, in a range of venues, including village halls, schools, train stations and pubs. They were also interested in exploring the impact of their work, and so a research collaboration was agreed whereby the artists were accompanied in their community activities by Susan, a recently postdoctoral ethnographer with an interest in research in communities. This paper is constructed as a result of the analysis of a dataset which consists of her field notes and semi-structured interviews with participants, as well as documents and images from the project. This data was analysed and thematised by the research team and, in regular meetings, emergent themes were presented and these developed as a result of the multiple perspectives within the team. Our responses to the data were validated by the synthesis of academic and community views. A subset of this data was about the representation of community and place and it is upon this particular data that the argument we present here is based.

The representation of a community

The first phase of the project involved an intensive research period during which Andy and Julian built a web of connections across the community with the aim of collecting people's memories of living in the area, building awareness of the project and enlisting participants for the performance. During this phase, the artists talked to residents, community groups and churches as well as to local authority professionals. They visited people in their homes and in their offices, in shops, doctors' surgeries, community halls and schools. They also invited people to come and talk to them in especially arranged public 'drop-in' sessions. The

research aimed to collect material upon which the play would be based, but the process of engagement with the community also led to greater understanding of the estate as a place for the artists coming to it as 'outsiders'. As Connerton notes, 'we all come to know each other by asking for accounts, by giving accounts, and by believing or disbelieving stories about each other's pasts and identities' (cited by Hayden, 1996: 46).

As more and more people shared their experiences during the research phase, the common threads of several 'community narratives' began to emerge (Rappaport, 2000). Older residents showed pride in a past where a buoyant community was established through collective solidarity. This contrasted with the estate as a place in the present day, presented by the residents themselves as well as by professionals working in the community, where the dominant discourse was that of lack – of resources, of skills and of participation.

The beginnings of the estate were established in the 1930s, as part of the city's 'slum clearance', the design of the earliest housing influenced by its philanthropic benefactor, with crescents of semi-detached homes focused around schools and other community hubs. Following the war, with the pressing need to house those bombed out of their inner-city homes, streets of steel-structured prefabricated housing were erected, in part from the labour of German detainees, to house the workforce of local industries and their families. Many of these first residents are still present in the increasingly elderly population of the area. Andy spoke to one resident, for example, who had been moved to the area with her young children after losing her home to bombing in the Second World War; she was still living in the same house, aged one hundred. Some of the original residents have moved to residential homes and sheltered housing, where Andy and Julian held reminiscence sessions during which there emerged a narrative of past community engagement and harmony, of a once thriving community, united in the common pursuit of building a new life and settling into newly built homes with young families. This was defined by the spirit of collective endeavour, having to 'make-do' and to share sparse resources. Among the memories were the pact to share a lawn mower, with the proviso that anyone who moved would leave it behind for the others and the hedge with a section cut out in order to push through the shared washing machine.

These warmly remembered personal narratives were in stark contrast with narratives of the estate in the present day, which present a fragmented and changed community. The steel-structured pre-fab housing stock built for workers of the local mines and manufacturing industries are still homes to many families on the estate today, who are experiencing the impact of de-industrialisation and who struggle with serious economic disadvantage. Churches report declining numbers and residents mourn the loss of local resources and facilities. 'It's not like it used to be' became a common theme in conversation with older residents. The loss of industry within the community, along with the shared history associated with it, could be seen to have resulted in the 'weakening of the symbolic qualities of places' (Relph, 1976: 66).

The modern suburb which had offered such a bright future to their parents two decades previously proved unsustainable for many of the children of the first residents, who left the area in the 1960s and 1970s due to a lack of available housing and limited social and economic opportunity. Many of those who work within the community today, such as the vicar and the Catholic priest, speak of this as the 'lost generation'. In some ways, the building of the motorway at the edge of this community, having initially encapsulated the optimism and aspiration its residents held for their new lives in a modern Britain, in time came to represent the beginning of change in the community, symbolising as it did a new age of mobility, both social and geographic. The impact of the mobility of this 'lost generation' is still felt in the community today, with the area having a higher than average population of elderly residents living alone, alongside a much younger demographic of families, often welfare dependent and moved into the area from other social housing across the city.

Conversations with residents from across the estate revealed a tendency to maintain an exclusionary identity based on cultural essentialism rather than the social collectivism of past generations, by the marking of symbolic boundaries between areas, sometimes based on different sides of a road. Residents of the older part of the estate, built before the war, explained:

We've always felt separate; we've been treated as separate. The other side of [the estate] thought we were posh - brick houses, concrete.

(Member of Tenants and Residents' Association)

This part of the estate had recently experienced periods of anti-social behaviour which affected its reputation and compounded the sense of separation from the more modern parts:

Five years ago, this was one of the most deprived parts of the area, with 'problem families' and other social issues meaning that it had gone from being a 'lovely area' to being 'really quite rough' to now coming round again.

(Field notes, 3rd December 2008)

The changing socio-economic context of the estate affected the ways residents identify with where they lived:

Residents may have different opinions based on how long they've lived in the area: if they've lived here longer, they're more likely to see [the neighbouring borough] as a separate entity. [The Neighbourhood Action Officer] points out that many people in this area used to classify themselves as [another borough], until [that borough] came out quite low in a survey based on rates of deprivation.

(Field notes, 21st October, 2008)

This reflects a community that in many ways defines itself not by 'what we are' but rather by 'what we're not', reinforcing the sense of fragmentation reported by those who worked within the community.

The place presented by local authority professionals can be located within government agendas which position people as deficient and deprived: not only economically, but also in terms of skills, motivation and aspiration. Much of the significant local authority presence in the community was involved in delivering government initiatives around a 'community cohesion' agenda with a focus on increasing residents' sense of agency in their community through official consultation and encouragement of residents to engage in local politics.

The role of neighbourhood management, she explains, is all about empowerment, and is very much based on the government white paper 'Real People, Real Power'.

(Field notes, 21st October, 2008)

The local authority produces a community newsletter, for example, delivered to every home in the area. At the time the authority was contacted by Andy and Julian early in the project, however, no residents were involved on its editorial board. Several officially sanctioned residents' groups also exist to offer a voice to residents. These have varying levels of impact on the daily lives of individuals, with attendance at meetings low at the best of times and primarily consisting of those aged fifty plus. Issues nominated by residents reflect priorities such as the location of bus stops, rather than any matters the authority hopes will facilitate greater interaction between residents of different ages, backgrounds and experiences.

Despite this effort to provide residents with a voice (albeit an officially sanctioned, government mandated voice), many residents who spoke to Andy and Julian described living in 'the forgotten estate'. This description portrays a sense of powerlessness and passivity amongst residents, their existence defined not by their own actions, but rather by a perceived lack of action from others. When asked to talk about their lives on the estate, for example, some residents used the opportunity to list grievances regarding public services and the quality of housing.

A lady comes to join us who starts talking about her history [on the estate] – she moved here to have a bigger house. She takes the opportunity to give us her (seemingly well rehearsed) list of what needs to be done to the houses in the area – she feels the council should not rebuild them, but add onto them. She is also concerned about bus services and facilities for kids, the lack of good shops. She refers to [the area] as 'the forgotten estate'.

(Field notes, 6th November, 2008)

This discourse of the 'forgotten estate' emerges from the broader narrative of lack that exists in attitudes towards the community. It also serves to compound that narrative: residents are not only positioned by official discourses as deficient and deprived, they too define themselves as dependent upon the actions of others, without which they feel 'forgotten': silenced and powerless. As Rose (1997) states:

[...] to be produced by power as lacking is to be so deprived as to have nothing, so devalued as to be silenced, so marginalized as to be nothing (p.8).

From the early days of the community theatre project, Andy and Julian were warned by professionals and those involved in voluntary groups that they would meet with suspicion and some cynicism regarding the nature of the project and its funding.

A key concern within the community is that more money is spent on the police, and so an arts project may be greeted with suspicion in that regard. This is a response Andy and Julian have mentioned to me before – 'how many kidney machines would that buy then?'

[The Neighbourhood Action Officer] warns that some individuals may feel that their benefits would be at risk if they volunteered to take part in such work.

(Field notes, 21st October, 2008)

Andy and Julian were also led to believe, based on experience in the community of dwindling church numbers and under-utilised community resources, that it was unlikely that people would be willing to take part, or even come to see the final performance.

The [public] meeting is due to start at 7:00pm. At 7:10, A rings [the councillor who has arranged it] to tell him there's no-one here. The response is 'I'm not bloody surprised'. [The councillor] turns up and echoes the sentiment on the phone – 'you've got to knock 'em on the head with the information'.

(Field notes, 11th November, 2008)

As we prepare to leave, the lady who has come to lock up overhears Andy and Julian discuss the potential audience. She suggests that they'd be lucky to get many, 'it's the community, they can't be bothered to go to anything'. They had a health day last month, attended by 5 people. As we leave, she wishes them luck: 'I won't see it as I'm away this weekend'. Reminded that it's on next week at the [new] Community Centre, she says she doesn't like it, 'It's not like here', and is rather noncommittal about venturing over there.

(Field notes, 21st April, 2009)

As the artists' engagement with the residents of the estate developed, it appeared that a community narrative of collective spirit had changed dramatically into a feeling of being fragmented and forgotten, the sense of empowerment articulated in shared stories of solidarity replaced by the themes of loss and lack. In many ways, this change can be attributed to the experience of those working class communities who have struggled with the effects of de-industrialisation, marginalized and segregated from sources of power, both geographically (by being located on the edges of cities, for example) and by their lack of direct access to cultural and economic resources (Rose, 1997).

We now outline the ways in which the first phase of the participatory theatre project engaged directly with the conflicting narratives that emerged about residents and the estate, as well as with those who articulated them. The estate as 'lived space' is presented in these narratives, which tell of residents' experiences of the conceived spaces represented by the systems and structures which affect their lives (Lefebvre, 1991). We argue that, by drawing on the funds of knowledge within the estate (Moll et al, 1992) and engaging directly with these narratives, this participatory theatre project began a process of *re-presentation*.

The ways in which a representation of a place can be transformed into a re- presentation

Shared stories as resources

The project was based on a model of participation that involved the residents in every stage of the production of a play about the history of the place where they lived. During the research phase, the connections established by Andy and Julian within the community gave them access to a rich vein of shared memories. In a diversion from the usual pattern of engagement with residents by 'outsiders' (Hayden, 1996), Andy and Julian sought not to consult, but to listen. They had a clearly stated objective for the project, the outcome of which - a play - relied more or less wholly upon the information gathered from residents themselves. Many of those who shared their memories were marginalized from community activities because of infirmity or decreasing mobility. The model of participation within the project meant that the contributions of people such as these were just as vital to its success as those of the actors in the final performance. One resident of a care home for those with Alzheimer's, for example, shared a vivid and very specific memory of her first prefabricated metal home on the estate: 'you couldn't get a nail in the wall'. This story, and others like it, formed the basis of the script. This particular detail was used to conclude the monologue of a young woman describing her first years on the estate - a character with whom a large proportion of the audience was able to identify as representing their own experience. In its reliance on personal memories, the script valorises the individual and shared histories of the estate's first residents whilst also emphasising the potential for shared activity in the present.

The play features a fictitious government department in the 1950s, which secretly observes the estate as part of a social experiment. They recruit a 'typical' local family to spy on their neighbours and report back their findings. The family are rewarded lucratively with modern conveniences, including copious amounts of tinned pink salmon. Punctuating the action onstage are four monologues delivered by actors from within the audience, giving personal accounts of moving to the estate. Alongside the 1950s storyline is one of a modern government department seeking to replicate the 'neighbourliness' of the post-war era in the contemporary context. Two government officials are shown brainstorming increasingly absurd ideas about the ways in which community spirit can be regained. These include the

introduction of rhubarb growing competitions, holding a Monte Carlo-style race with the mobility scooters residents felt were ubiquitous on the streets of the estate, and presenting the estate as a tourist attraction, where the trappings of modernity are to be relinquished by residents if they are to avoid a compulsory purchase order. At the end of the play, the cast offer raw potatoes to the audience – such as those once baked on bonfires on the streets of the estate - to take home as a symbol of the estate’s community spirit.

The authenticity of the detail in the play was clear from the laughter and enthusiastic nods of recognition amongst the older members of the audience during each performance, witnessing the past they had shared being presented to them: the names, the streets, the shops, the workplaces and the fields recalled from times gone by; recollections of tinned salmon as the height of luxury, the smell of bonfires burning on each street and the feel of the flooring in their newly built homes.

During the final tableau, and the [local football team] reference, [an audience member] says to his wife rather proudly, ‘I told them that.’

(Field notes, 24th April 2008)

The play presented in many ways, therefore, the ‘difficult to convey’ body memory described by Hayden (1995: 48) as arising from ‘the shared experience of dwellings, public spaces, and workplaces’. Body memory such as this, argues Casey, ‘moves us directly into place’ (cited by Hayden, *ibid.*).

Arts genres and open participation

As they were warned, Andy and Julian encountered some difficulty in finding people willing to take part in the play on stage. A larger group of people, however, were willing to be filmed as part of the project. The play presents three short films, shown on a screen at the back of the stage. Two of these are in the style of spoof 1950s documentaries, based on events on the estate during that decade. For the first of these, a local women’s social club agreed to re-enact their early meetings, and were filmed knitting, crocheting and drinking tea. Some of those featured in the film had been involved with the group since the time

they were re-enacting. The accompanying voice-over relays, in characteristically cut glass Received Pronunciation, information the group had shared about their history, such as the fact that members received a cup and saucer for each new recruit they brought along, and the fact that their husbands graciously looked after the children so that the women had the opportunity to socialise. The second film, again in jerky black and white, shows regimented lines of star-jumping local primary school children re-enacting a Physical Education lesson 1950s-style. A third film, supposedly created by the modern government agents, is set in a contemporary context and shows an increasingly surreal list of ways current residents could engage in 'neighbourliness'.

The films opened up the performance to many of those who may have felt uncomfortable with the idea of standing on stage in front of an audience. It also engaged a greater number of participants. For example, fifty school children were involved in the PE film – a number which would have been hard to replicate in a live performance held in a small space over five evenings. Of course, the films also provided an audience, as many of those who came to see the show knew people who had taken part in a film, or had heard of the show from such participants. Many of those who appeared in films also committed to greater involvement in the next performances, either as actors or in helping with the production. The involvement of the primary school and the women's social group, for example, was to continue into the next project, with individuals involved this time as actors on stage and, by the third production, as co-researchers gathering resources for the play.

The films also work to decentre perceptions of theatre as 'highbrow' art. The mix of 'live action' spy story, dramatic monologues and film creates a performance which is contemporary in style, if based on history. Photographs are also used effectively in the show, many of which were contributed by residents themselves. These images are examples of the way the play is rooted in the shared memories of the audience. During one performance, for example, an audience member was pleased to have recognised himself as the bridegroom in a wedding photo given to Julian by a member of the local church. The photographs also support the dislocation of reality – moving the performance beyond a mere telling of facts to a theatrical experience which, despite its subject matter of everyday lives and events, is far from kitchen-sink mundanity. Images of local events and buildings were photo-shopped to include cast members as if they were there at the time (sometimes clad in 'spy' Mac, glasses and moustache). A particularly popular image was

that of a prominent local councillor made-over in the 1950s style with 'Teddy Boy' quiff and shades. Others showed 1950s stars such as Elizabeth Taylor and James Dean emerging from local shops. Although produced on a modest scale, the use of technology and multimedia applied to the people and places of the estate lent credibility to the arts company and the project, as these were techniques appreciated by the audience as part of a wider popular cultural repertoire from film and television. One of the biggest laughs of the night often came from the computer-generated image of the newly built community centre exploding. The building was controversial in many quarters because of the amount of money spent on it (which was not perceived to have been matched elsewhere on the estate) as well as its contemporary design. The amusement was in part drawn from the surreal sight of this building being blown up as part of the government's plan to return the estate to the 1950s; however, it can also be attributed to its symbolism as being 'out-of-place' (Cresswell, 2004: 140). The subversion of local places and their established meanings, through such use of images, can be seen as an example of the ways in which 'people are able to resist the construction of expectations about practice through place' (Cresswell, 2004: 27).

The paradox of a community whose narrative is of being unable to come together, but which comes together for performances of the narrative

The success of the project relied on a network of people brought together by Andy and Julian to produce a representation of the history of where they lived. These people contributed in a range of ways, from sharing stories, to being filmed as a 'good neighbour', to getting up on stage and performing in front of what turned out to be a series of packed out venues across the estate. In all, over a hundred participants performed to over three hundred people, a fact which surprised many involved in community work in the area, such as a member of the Baptist Church, who hadn't seen the church as full as it was on the night of the performance since the 1960s. At the outset of the longer-term project, it also profoundly contradicted the narrative of non-participation and lack of engagement in cultural resources.

As has been described, the structure of the project enabled the participation of people from a range of backgrounds, from the research gathering period, through to the final

performances. As part of building awareness of the project, Andy and Julian worked with drama students from the sixth form college located on the outskirts of the estate – an institution with a successful reputation, which draws from a city-wide catchment. The college has very few students from the estate itself, however, and attitudes on the estate towards students (and vice versa) are less than hospitable.

[The students] have had to walk the long way round because of a college rule forbidding them from traversing the narrow pathway that connects the college site and the centre of [the estate]. This is ostensibly because of previous incidents involving students being attacked on this pathway.

Staff at the college had approached [the drama teacher] with their concerns about the safety of the students in the market [...] He had also invited some of the senior staff along [...] Nobody came, however.

(Field notes, 18th December 2008)

In the initial meeting with Andy and Julian, the A Level drama students from the college explained what they felt the estate was like:

It's stereotyped as rough.

We're told not to go down to [the shops] alone. Someone got stabbed there.

Girls don't go anywhere alone.

My mate got started on waiting for a bus, just 'cos he had coloured laces on.

I think it's because they see us at college and they haven't got the skills themselves to come here, so they're jealous.

(Field notes, 18th November, 2008)

A small group of these students performed street theatre, which took them into the heart of the estate's commercial area on market day. Dressed in 1950s costume, they approached shoppers to discuss an imminent government scheme to return the area back to its 1950s glory. They met with mixed responses.

During their performance, however, the students found themselves modifying their attitudes towards the people they met:

[Two of the students] decided early on to tone down their approach once they realised that the older ladies they spoke to actually represented the era that they were parodying, and recalled the 1950s fondly. As a result, the girls felt uncomfortable with such 'big' characters, and took to listening to the ladies' stories and noting them on their clipboards.

(Field notes, 18th December, 2008)

Those who volunteered to perform on stage also came with different reasons for taking part and varied levels of experience. A young woman who attended a part-time acting course at a local college was encouraged to come along by her mother, who had seen an advert in the local paper for the public read-through. Another performer was a widow who had been advised to take up a hobby, and who saw a poster in the local doctor's surgery. A member of the local writer's group got involved, never having performed publicly before, as he was interested in seeing how such a project came together. The youngest member of the cast was a nine year old girl who lived on the outskirts of the estate, but who had close family ties with the area.

These individuals worked alongside other performers who were not residents of the estate, but joined the project because of their involvement in previous productions staged by Julian and Andy. The more experienced performers shared advice with the 'first-timers'; those from 'outside' admitted to having had their own perceptions of the estate changed by the experience.

I didn't even know them and they still talked to me and, like, had conversations with me, which was really nice. And just made everyone feel included and just all one together, which was really nice. [...] They didn't make me feel weird or outcast or anything like that. They made me feel really welcome. And the thing with, like, acting is that if you feel silly in front of someone, you can't do it, you've got to feel really comfortable around them to be able to act with them and I got that.

(Louise, a first-time performer who lives on the estate)

I did have an opinion of [the estate] that's been changed now. I mean, [it] had a certain notoriety for being a no go area. But, y'know, having done this production, I've changed my attitude somewhat towards that.

(Rob, an experienced actor who lives in a nearby village)

You get the impression again from reading the papers and I've got a son twenty-six and he says 'ooh, no I wouldn't go and live [there], there's drug culture, crime and drink and so on', but this particular part of [the estate], and [the shops] and everything looks completely different. It's quite opened my eyes in some ways, yes.

(Phil, an experience performer who lives in a nearby town)

The play was staged in five venues across the estate. These locations were important in drawing audiences, given the way residents and others had described the nature of their engagement with the place as being defined by relatively small geographic loci. The play came to them in their own spaces, and jokes about territorial rivalries within the area went down well with each audience. It recognised the way in which these spaces, and the values ascribed to them, are part of what makes the 'place', whilst presenting a history of the estate which was shaped and characterised by shared experience.

The response of participants and audiences from a range of backgrounds highlights a paradox, therefore, whereby a community defined in many ways according to narratives of apathy, isolation and fragmentation comes together for a performance of their narratives. This paradox can be seen to illustrate the way in which presenting imaginative responses to the systemic and structural impact of conceived spaces in and around the estate (Lefebvre, 1991) can begin a process in which these are opened up to be challenged and re-appropriated.

Conclusion

As we outlined earlier, like Cresswell (2004), we see 'place' to be a result of the interplay between people and environment. It is in its impact on the nature and context of this interplay that we see the transformative potential of the community theatre project we discuss here. The narratives of residents and those who work on the estate suggest that this is an environment where lived experiences can be particularly constrained by structures and discourses which reinforce deficit models. For a community which has, throughout its relatively short history, seen a succession of movement and change, the project could be seen to have created a 'pause' in the sense described by Tuan (1977), where residents and participants had an opportunity to re-evaluate their attachment to place and the symbolic meanings which define it.

Contrary to the narrative of fragmentation encountered at the outset of the project, participants at each stage of the process formed a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), united in the shared enterprise of putting on a series of performances about the place where they lived. Those from 'outside' also made an important contribution to the project, with individuals working together in the interstices of difference (Bhaba, 1994; Rose, 1997), sharing their histories, knowledge and skills. The artists themselves were also from 'outside' and took a position which did not assume knowledge of the lived experience of residents, whilst also not assuming to take up the welfare agenda of government agencies operating on the estate, with whom residents would more commonly engage. As such, the project can be conceptualised as an 'in-between space' (Bhabha, 1994:2), a space which was neither within the discourse of government agenda nor part of the everyday lived experience of residents. According to Bhabha, such a space can 'provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular and communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation'. Within such a space, 'the symbols of culture [...] can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew' (Bhabha, 1995: 55). Both Tuan's 'pause' and Bhabha's notion of space are representations of the way in which the project created an imaginary space for the project to begin the process of challenging a 'forgotten' community's narratives. The project emphasises the way in which these are resources which can 'both shape us and be shaped by us' (Rappaport, 2000:7). Rather than presenting a vision of deficit and fragmentation, by drawing on local funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), the project engaged individuals and

organisations in an entertaining, collective representation of their experiences and their social 'identity/ies', which simultaneously *re-presented* the community as reflective, humorous, resourceful and knowledgeable.

We recognise, however, that a profound challenge to the systems and structures which shape experiences, perceptions and identities such as those of this Midlands housing estate cannot be achieved by a one-off creative intervention. As we acknowledge in our Introduction, for a project such as the one we describe here to generate sustained transformative practice which supports a re-appropriation of the symbolic objects of conceived space (Lefebvre, 1991), it must be part of a continued engagement. The research design of our longer-term project acknowledges this; the initial phase described here established a model of practice which continued over two further productions involving residents of this estate and further projects are under development in nearby areas as part of the on-going research partnership between the community theatre company and the University. Material generated from these projects, such as scripts and oral histories, are valuable resources which can support place-based pedagogic approaches in local schools. It is hoped that such work will mean that, for both residents and others on the estate, looking again at what makes the place where they live is not something which becomes easily forgotten.

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