

## Third Party, Fire and Theft

Nina Edge

### The artist's story

I make art about power and value informed by the situations and people around me. In 2004 I found myself in a situation where both power and value met as if in a slow-motion collision. Whole systems crashed. I went home to bed one night in a busy street and woke up in a clearance zone, earmarked for demolition by a regeneration scheme called Housing Market Renewal (HMR). It was a national housing scheme. My home was in its path, along with 400,000 others also threatened by the government's regeneration juggernauts. The twin engines of policy and spending looked unstoppable. Being in the path of an HMR meant transformational change approached. It met resistance and the impact saw debris from the crash strewn across nine cities in the Midlands and the North of England. Art appeared at the scene of devastation. Art used by government agencies to mediate their schemes, art made by the public compelled to participate, and art made by the residents for many reasons.

The New Labour government regeneration vehicle collided with communities. It was an accident. The smash left some people trapped in their vehicles, some survivors and some dead. The pile-up has lasted for seven years. In 2010 the Coalition government put the brakes on and then terminated the HMR scheme in mid-flow. The collision continues. I remain a resident and an artist at the scene watching Crash Scene Investigators and tracking the trajectory of events. Events that, among other things, delivered wastelands in the cityscape and scattered the remains of communities. Sometimes I take visitors on tours of the extensive wastelands, reciting the claims and ambitions of regeneration as HMR officers had once recited them to us. The Housing Market Renewal journey took us to unplanned destinations.

The New Labour government launched the national HMR Pathfinders policy in 2002 in nine northern, post-industrial towns characterized by high levels of poverty and unemployment. The aim was to remove surplus housing in areas where depopulation had resulted in low occupancy – termed 'market failure' and 'low demand'; to achieve 'tenure diversification' through a mix of owner-occupation, social rental and shared equity occupants; and to diversify housing stock by adding different house sizes, gardens and parking, defined as 'aspirational homes'. In these Neighbourhood Renewal Areas residents became subject to new legal powers of compulsory purchase (CPOs) that could force people to sell their houses for demolition on the subjective grounds of 'regeneration'.

Nina Edge, *Nothing Is Private*, 2007  
(photograph: Pete Carr) details of the net curtain



This story recounts my experience of the HMR when it came to my street, Kelvin Grove, in Liverpool's Welsh Streets. It all began when I walked down my street to a public meeting in a church club where a city councillor, an architect, a developer and a community leader all assured me that my home was worthless, obsolete, surplus to requirements and was going to be pulled down. I walked home by the same streets that were now condemned. Astonished, I joined a group of neighbours discussing the proposals to destroy our homes. We were not alone; thousands in the North of England were in the same boat. We were ambushed by a new language in which control was established by the use of jargon. Learning the jargon armed us for what became a war of words. Seven years on, HMR has amassed and boarded up 15,000 houses on Merseyside. They are being rendered 'unfit for habitation' with public funds.

Inevitably existing communities were divided. The offer of new aspirational homes depended on whole communities agreeing wholesale demolitions. Consensus on this issue was rare. Our area – predominantly owned by a housing association with homes let on low rents – was to be cleared for new houses mostly to buy. There was to be shared equity, and loans to ease residents out of renting and into home ownership. Community expectations were corralled by drawings from which existing houses were excluded. It became harder to imagine alternatives. Big displays of big drawings asserted that there was no option bar compliance. The financial incentives didn't fit everyone: pensioners and unwaged people don't always want debt. Owner-occupiers could be winkled out of ownership and into rental or part ownership, sometimes receiving 50 per cent less for their old house than they were charged for their new one. There were calls for 'like for like' or 'a key for a key' across HMR areas. Calls that went unheard in high places. For that you'd have to be on the ground walking. Walking with me on broken glass where residents talked about their experiences and their homes; first to each other, eventually to anyone who'd listen. Their letters, interviews and artworks framed the collision. This text continues the process.

### Summer: Housing Market Renewal visits the Welsh Streets

In the Welsh Streets summer was over. The daytime felt flatter and the evening fell fatter, the window boxes had yellowed and the kids were back at school. The nights were drawing in, yet in this house nobody drew the curtains. There seemed no point. This was a home on the brink of non-existence; a place swept of its safety and stripped of its domestic status. A place so publicly contested it had ceased to be internal and become external instead. The home had become the outside world, because outside had crept in. Across the area, even when they were in, the inhabitants were psychologically and all but legally out. Some dreaded the loss of homes and neighbours but not everyone. For some, poor repairs or rich ambitions made homes into prisons. What was a nightmare to some was a ticket to heaven for others. The HMR scheme drove into the neighbourhood, and the neighbours crashed into each other.

SAVE OUR HOMES posters appeared in half the windows where people asked to be allowed to stay and DEMOLISH posters appeared in the other half where people asked to be allowed to go. The windows spoke the mind of the inhabitant.

Third Party, Fire and Theft: Nina Edge

The journey from  
Kinmel Street,  
before and after  
regeneration  
(photographs: Mark  
Loudon and Sandy  
Voltz)



CULTURAL HIJACK: RETHINKING INTERVENTION





Welsh Streets  
window, Liverpool,  
2005 (photograph:  
Nina Edge)

The Welsh Streets, like many other areas, were subject to New Labour largesse, cornered by government housing policy and commercial interests. Along with whole swathes of the city, they would be emptied. Communities splintered as they met the force of regeneration professionals brandishing new compulsory purchase powers and compensation offers. Some inhabitants made a case for the right to remain in their homes and engaged with the media. Their window presentations went national, then global. The space of the private dwelling had become the site of a public debate.

In the Compulsory Purchase Orderlands there truly is no place like home. Even if you have a home it is no place like a home. Not unless your version of home is approved by the authorities and their ‘partners’. Here in the Orderlands ‘housing choice’ is the doublespeak for frozen assets and an erosion of personal autonomy. Here, the hapless residents dangled in the Pathfinder purgatory, swinging between subsidized new build, shared equity, home-swap, buy-out, more debt or reprieve. Reprieve remained a theoretical possibility not unlike Shangri-La: people liked the idea of it, but no one had ever met someone who’d actually been there. A residents’ campaign group was formed and they set out for the Promised Land.

The background threat of CPO is the tinnitus of the tinned-up communities. That interminable ringing in the ears which never really goes away, although it might intensify, change pitch or give a person decision itch from time to time. So here hung the homemakers, never less at home than when at home, never more out-a-door than when indoors, never more public than when being private, never more aggressed then when at rest. A tile may blow off but home is still considered by most a sanctuary. Roofs that give no shelter are the developers’ icing on the ‘doughnut’ or inner suburb, circling the city centre. Land earmarked as ‘suitable for redevelopment’ on confidential Local Authority maps. Destined to become the fatal Orderlands.

Areas served with CPOs are called Orderlands. It’s not in the dictionary, which seems odd, since it is an imposed reality for thousands of UK citizens. Not all citizens were the same any more. Not all residents were equal. Some were redefined in mass planning exercises that reduced their legal purchase on their land. It reduced their options yet pretended to offer choice. The threat of compulsion was presented as ‘choice’ in a market place stripped of any illusions of free will or personal freedom. So some citizens became subjects of Regeneration, which turned out to be much, much worse than being a subject of the Crown.

‘Earmarked for Regeneration’ type residents were re-defined – and not only legally. They found their private business discussed in public places. Households were exposed to each other in unprecedented scenes in public meetings, in the media, local leaflets and gossip. Elected representatives and unelected officials without exception agreed demolition was the only option. Yet concerns developed about the ethical implications of the project. The operation sprang a leak. The leak showed a much bigger picture.

There were regeneration professionals, officials and consultants who inhabited a parallel universe and had power and confidence. They had taxpayers’ money with which to enact the legal and physical process to clear as many hectares of urban Brownfield as they liked. They re-defined in law occupied decent homes as ‘Brownfield sites’ for development. They lived in a land far away from multiple

poverty indices, where property prices met or exceeded national average house prices, and where people were bothered about that sort of thing. And they’d huff and they’d puff and they’d blow your house down.

Locking the door did not secure the home. It was no defence against what other people wanted. People started leaving, some carrying boxes, some carried in boxes, some cradling their compensation as the opportunity of a lifetime. As the cat population diminished and the rat population took its place, it became impossible to prevent the state-sponsored blight running across your kitchen floor of an evening, pissing and shitting as it went. When the workmen boarded up the empty properties, they smashed the glass first. There’s nothing like the noise of breaking glass to shatter your illusions of security. The Welsh oak doors did good service for 150 years but could not shut out the remorseless hammering of information systems which claimed one thing and one thing only: your house is getting pulled down. ‘They’re all coming down.’

Homes that the inhabitants defended publicly were turned inside out and wore their inner life outwardly in an effort to survive. The unproven regeneration doctrine galloped through homes like killer smoke. Three breaths and you’re out. It seeped in via surveys, newsletters and public meetings. It spread like fire as it took hold of what inhabitants were able to remember, repeat and rumour to each other on the corners and in the kitchens. It invaded thinking and reduced what people were able to imagine as their possible futures. The only route to peace of mind became compliance.

### Autumn: regeneration knocks on the window

If compliance didn’t fit there was the company of the neighbours and the creative strategies they devised in defence of their homes. The idea that nothing was private crept into conversations. I made something for the window. You could call it a domestic textile, or a time-based site-specific artwork. It is a net curtain and it hangs in the window of my front room. Actually when I say it’s my front room of course it’s only mine if no one threatens to regenerate it. If push comes to shove a bulldozer down my street, there will be nothing either the most highly paid barrister or I can do to stop it. So it isn’t really *my* home. Because nothing is private.

This was no ordinary net. It was a net with a title for a start and that immediately locates it outside the realm of the domestic in the framework of art discourse. *Nothing Is Private*. It’s made to measure. It fits the situation, expounds its context, it does its bit in the construction of the legend. The legend I invoked to shield the idea of home. A home in a terraced street, in a street frayed a bit by the War and put right with solid 1950s council houses. Kelvin Grove – as seen on TV, one-time home to Yosser Hughes – birthplace of the flagship anti-demolition residents group, the Welsh Streets Home Group (WSHG).

The net in the window, in the house, in the street, in the HMR’d neighbourhood. So here hangs a curtain and here hangs a tale.

The net curtain was made when Melanie Miller, senior lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), curated a touring show of drawings to be made on

the last working schiffli machine in the UK: *Mechanical Drawing: The Schiffli Project* (2007). The machine converted drawing into stitching using a pantograph and powered needles. It was threatened because of worries that it was too old to be safe. The schiffli, which made multiple images as stitched embroideries, was invented around 1860 when my home was being built. The machine and the house were united by the fact that by 2004 both were declared obsolete by officials and yet at the same time remained highly useful to their users. I hauled the pantograph over my drawing, unleashed the needles and BANG, the image shrank, multiplied and linked as continuous rows. No bulldozers, recycle-the-houses, house and doorstep symbols followed a text, which appeared just once: *Nothing Is Private*.

My embroidery design remembered vintage lace and reflected the patterns in terraced streets. That easy-on-the-eye rhythm of a linear form, punctuated by doors, windows and chimneys. Double front doors, double chimney, double window, double railings, double steps and repeat... That pattern landscape.

In terraced streets you can see special things. People take chairs out and sit together, create bunting outbursts, install widescreen projections for the footie, rig Christmas light extravaganzas and impressive flag displays. There were shiny glass fish on Cardiff windowsills where I lived in the eighties, seasonal displays of rabbits and eggs or lights and evergreens. In back-of-pavement terraces, windows are a cultural interface. Seeing your neighbours’ curtains open and close is an ordinary pleasure, which like the rhythm of the bins is imperceptible until it stops breathing life into the street.

Breezeblocks sometimes replace the hired tin sheets used to cover the windows of empty properties. Both flatten the pattern of the terrace, damaging the look of the street by effectively ‘blinding’ buildings. Eyeless houses cease to be spaces with thresholds and boundaries. They revert to a collection of components assembled on an area of land. They become merely their area. They become the Land Parcels that the developers had always taken them for.

During autumn 2006 I hung the Schiffli curtain in my window and it was listed as part of Liverpool Biennial’s Independents. It went on to tour galleries in the UK’s textile towns displayed in a pretend window. When first shown at home, it was real. The real net curtain. In the real house. Threatened by real laws. My embroidery mourned the blinding of the windows – the denial of light, fresh air and life. I made the front window into a seeing eye – a lens that could focus attention on what happened on either side of the glass. The work dissolved the veil of consents between internal and external worlds using light to shift the gaze from the street to the room and from the room to the street.

*Nothing Is Private* enacted the process of exposure every time someone walked past. The flimsy nothingness, the delicacy of the net structure and the schifflic images, and the vulnerability of the whiter-than-white whiteness to spoilage reflected my experience. The inside world was forced outside and the outside in. To see the embroidered images and words in any detail you had to get up very close, where you were rewarded with the adage ‘Nothing Is Private’ surrounded by pictures in white-on-white stitching. I prolapsed my own privacy as a live artwork. MMU produced a catalogue for the *Schiffli Project*. In the catalogue, Alex Hetherington describes that experience:

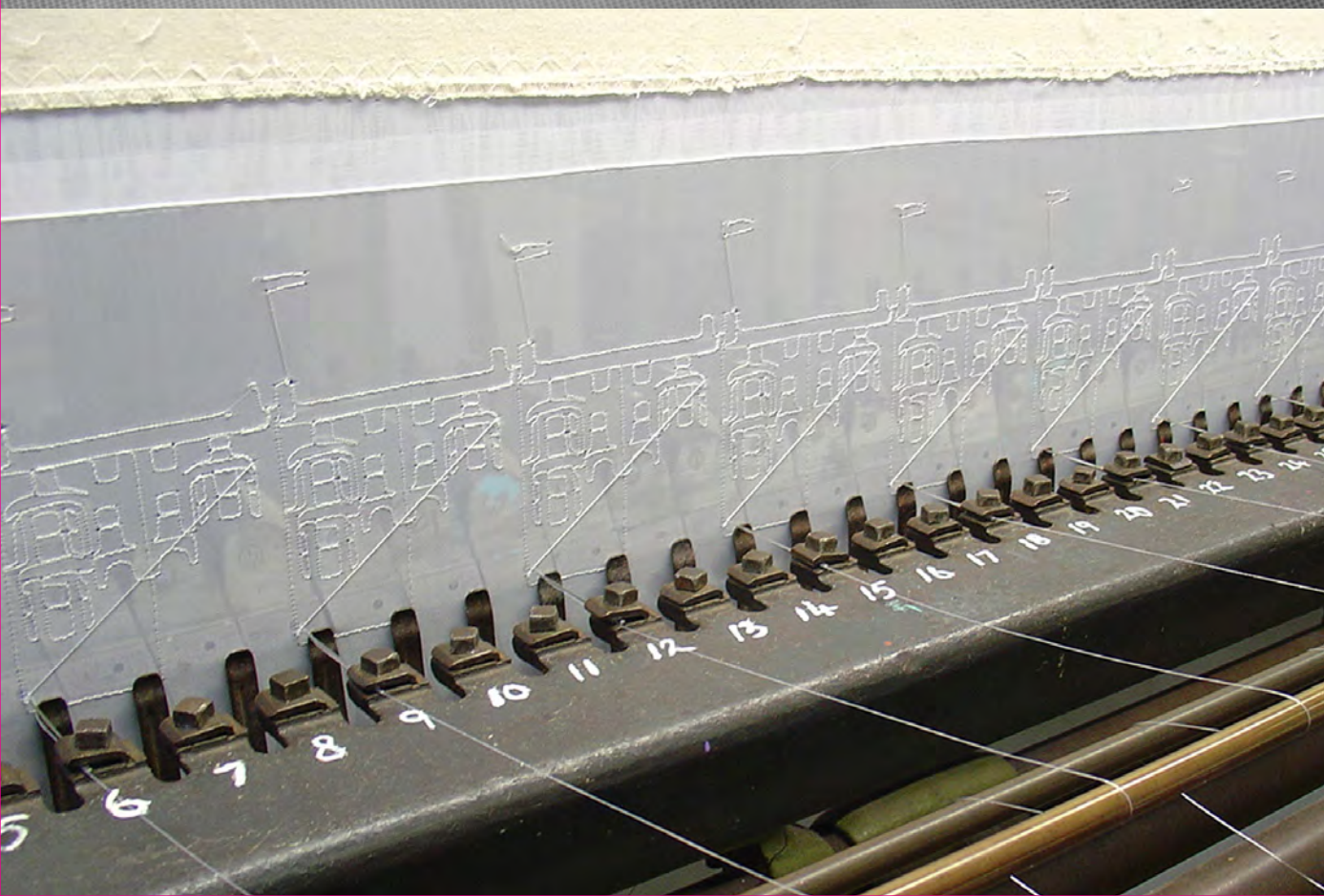
#### FOLLOWING SPREAD

Nina Edge, *Nothing Is Private*, 2007 (photograph: Pete Carr) details of the net curtain

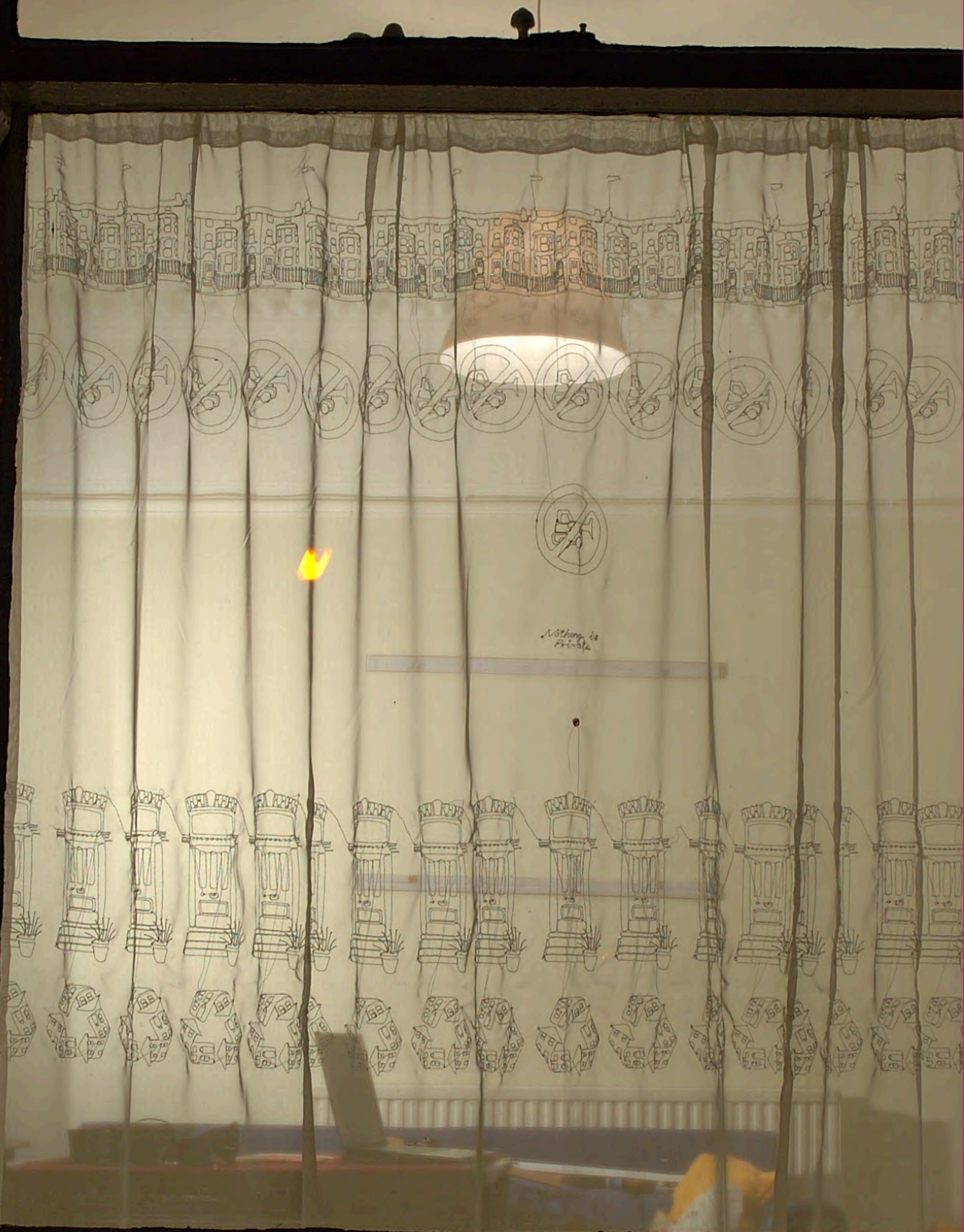
Schiffli machine work in progress (photograph: Nina Edge)

Nina Edge, *Nothing Is Private*, installed at Kelvin Grove in Liverpool’s Welsh Streets, Liverpool, 2007 (photograph: Peter Haggarty)









1 Alex Heatherington  
in *Totally  
Free* (Biennial  
Independents, 2006).

2 Neighbourhood  
Renewal Area  
Declaration [http://  
councillors.liverpool.  
gov.uk/iel.List  
Documents.asp?  
Cld=282&  
Mld=4550&J=8](http://councillors.liverpool.gov.uk/iel.ListDocuments.asp?Cld=282&Mld=4550&J=8)>  
Exec Board 06/07/05

It is immediate, tender, desperate, engaging, inviting, social, elaborate, reactive and active. It is finely conceived, in the tiniest of details, inviting inspection and broadly formed, demanding action.<sup>1</sup>

*Nothing is Private* poses the idea that nothing is obsolete until people stop using it by choice and not because of compulsion.

## Winter: art shines a light in your face

It worked like this: people walk down the street, and their movement breaks a passive infrared beam which triggers a security lamp in the front room. Don't underestimate the violence of this sudden harsh white light. The light bounces off a mirror and shines straight back out through the window onto the street. It lasts for four seconds and then it goes off. In this wafer-thin slice of time the occupants of the room are exposed to the street. The room is revealed too – it jumps out of the window as a picture of domesticity interrupted. Even the watcher on the street is hit by the light.

Cars and dogs and cats break the beam and throw on the light; footballs and pigeons and litter break the beam and throw on the light. The light is thrown on, the room jumps out of the window; the light is thrown on, the street jumps in through the window. It hurts your eyes a bit. It marks the long-term darkness of the blinded windows. It's a rude, crude rabbit-in-the-headlights effect. It's a super-short event that happens repeatedly for ten weeks. Some people don't notice, others seek it out.

People who enter the house become part of the work, occupying the image for the next person who passes by. The next time the light comes on and seizes a random moment of stillness in a moving scene. Like flash photography but with less glamour and less permanence. Neighbours and supporters enjoyed the work. It illuminated our predicament.

The WSHG 'Consider Alternatives' campaign had involved much writing. There were letters, forms, newsletters and databases, petitions and surveys, a house buyers and renters register. We did three Select Committee evidence documents assembling residents' comments for government scrutiny. They all met the same reply. Your house is getting pulled down. They're all coming down. Then campaigner Barbara Smith wrote a poem.

Barbara visited her mum, bringing bad news after a particularly stinging defeat at a council meeting in 2005. Liverpool City Council had agreed to the demolition of the Welsh Streets despite the fact that earlier that year residents' objections to demolition outnumbered residents' support.<sup>2</sup> The authorities had re-run their ballot until they had a majority for demolition. Barbara Smith explained to her octogenarian mother that her attempts to save the family home had failed. Then she wrote a poem that was published in the *Liverpool Echo*. It was a new approach to writing because it expressed emotion. The previous campaign documents had attempted impassivity. We tried to be formal when writing to councillors, council officers, overseeing bodies, architects, government ministers, civil servants, heritage buffs, auditors and journalists. We wanted to impress them and we wanted to be taken seriously. We discarded emotional appeals because we sought equality with them, the people with power and influence. But there is power in passion.



## Spring: our place, our time

So Barbara Smith wrote a poem. It was painfully honest and it made people cry. It changed how people engaged with the situation. In 2008 the poetry thing mushroomed. At this time, most of the lower Welsh Streets stood empty with their doors tinned up and painted grey. They had ‘elec off’ or ‘gas off’ spray painted on them in fluorescent orange paint. One of them had ‘fuck off’ sprayed on it. Pointless really because most people already had. The lead flashings had been ripped off the chimneys and the down-pipes were gone. Not the result of freelance vandalism but the work of council contractor, IPS, which had performed the above tasks at great cost, apparently using the euphemistically titled ‘Living Through Change’ budget.

Then one grey spring morning long after the Pied Piper of the Pathfinder had paid and then played everyone out of the Welsh Streets, poems and song lyrics were fly-posted on every tinned-up door. It was Capital of Culture literature week but that must’ve been a coincidence. Surely. We can’t say who made this gesture as they signed themselves Ann On. It was someone with a sense of humour and eclectic tastes. The posters were headed: ‘The Welsh Streets Poetry Project Part One: Papering Over the Cracks.’

At the time residents were isolated and dispersed across the site. Streets that previously housed 60 families were reduced to half a dozen. It was bleak walking though the area as it fell apart. This lifted when the poems came. You could read anything from Ray Davies, Lennon and McCartney to the Specials, Madness and W. H. Auden. Ann On had even adapted Wilfred Owen’s ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ with ‘the stuttering planners’ rapid rattle’ and ‘Each slow death the demolition of dreams’. Sophisticated allusions. It was Our Place, Our Time<sup>3</sup> all right.

Every now and then, instead of a poem, there would be a comment such as ‘Dereliction of Duty’ and ‘Thank You For Flying Pathfinder’, referring to the Second World War Luftwaffe bombing campaign, which shared the name Pathfinder but which destroyed fewer houses than the HMR Pathfinder threatened. One poster read:

THIS DEVASTATION WAS BROUGHT TO YOU BY NEW WASTELANDS  
Destroying neighbourhoods for the future.

Ann On was skitting the Merseyside Pathfinder Company name NewHeartlands and mocking its slogan: ‘Building Neighbourhoods for the Future’. Every now and then there would be an empty frame poster that read ‘YOUR MESSAGE HERE’. People started to fill in the blanks.

The authorities painted over the poems a hell of a lot quicker than they painted over the ‘fuck off’, which had been written on the wall for years. The poems were re-posted many times and the council painted them out each time. Why censor the Anonymous Poet’s pastings? The poems were not permissioned, paid for, imposed or bussed in. Yet they addressed head on the biggest environmental impact: the tinned-up empties. Was it the poems or the tins that were acts of vandalism? The home-grown poetry project had achieved what the official art projects only promised. Painting over 300-odd poems pasted on the doors of deserted and degraded streets highlighted the ambiguities of the ‘controlled’ arts projects in clearance areas. Was cultural aspiration being controlled, just as the aspiration to different forms of housing was controlled?



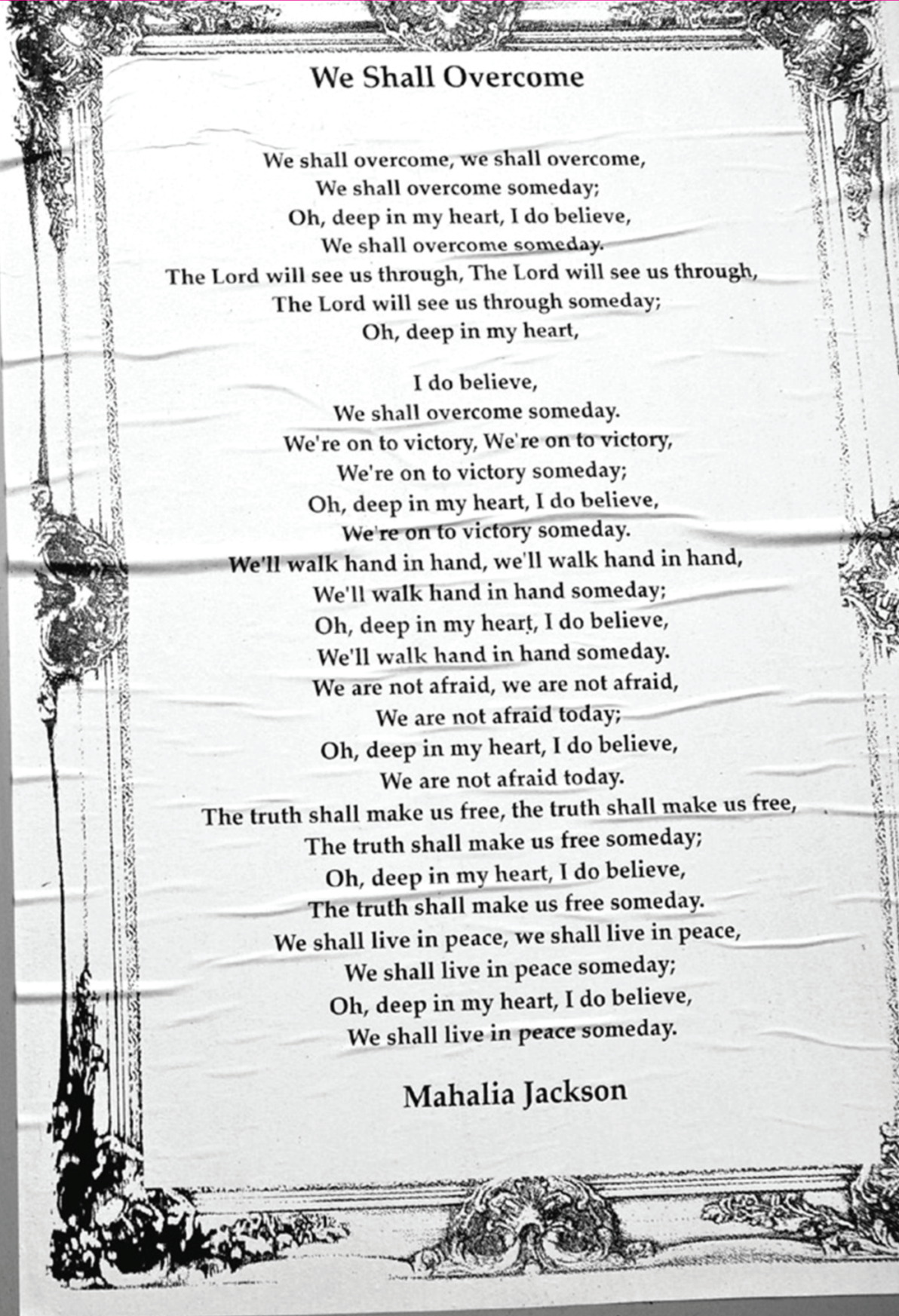
3 ‘It’s our time, it’s our place’ was the marketing slogan for Liverpool’s year as European Capital of Culture in 2008.

ABOVE

‘This Devastation’, Demolish and Liverpool City tin window pastings (photograph: Minako Jackson)

BACKGROUND AND RIGHT

Ann On, fly-posted poem as seen on the tinned-up doors of 479 Welsh Streets houses, 2008 (photograph: Jude McLoughlin)





Perhaps Pathfinder HQ feared the poetry might improve morale, or raise further public interest in the controversial plans to flatten the area, or spawn further invited cultural response. The Welsh Streets Poetry Project was documented locally and by visiting photographers including Sandy Voltz, a Capital of Culture visitor in Liverpool to take pictures for the *Cities on the Edge* exhibition. Ali Taptik and Philippe Conti had already selected the subject of tinned-up houses so, as well as creating images of pub interiors in Bremen and Liverpool, she joined an historian to produce work on the streets for publication in Germany. Swiss and French television crews visiting for Capital of Culture also shot footage of the poems. The area was on the itinerary for visiting media with no need for promotion from Liverpool's marketing department. They came to film the tinned-up houses and got the poems as a bonus. They chanced on the self-seeding culture of Liverpool; un-curated, unadulterated and undeniably witty. They also saw that Liverpool was at war with itself. Civic War.

Anyway Ann On had some stamina – the poems, kidnapped slogans and blank sheets were re-posted and painted out five or six times before they stopped. Phil Key, then Arts Editor at the Liverpool *Daily Post*, interviewed the Anonymous Poet in 2008. The council had been paying people to leave their homes for many years, leaving the streets unkempt and untidy. There was little footfall, the toys and noise had gone. The poems reflected a scene soaked in loss and broke the silent acceptance of the damage. I banged out some insulting limericks and skitted our tormentors in song and I was not alone.

Someone went out with a biro and wrote a long poem about the impact of their neighbourhood exodus. It described the loss of neighbours as a form of demolition. An eloquent song of grief. A lament then. A lament now. My favourite comment written up on the YOUR MESSAGE HERE posters though was really simple. I quoted it in an artwork commissioned by Tate Liverpool later that year in homage to its writer. The single most poignant comment of all: WE ONLY ASKED FOR CARPETS.

WE ONLY ASKED FOR CARPETS was a reference to public consultation meetings when people were asked what they wanted, what were their aspirations. It was painted over before we could photograph it. Maybe the writer said 'new carpets' when asked about what they aspired to in 2003. By 2008 it was clear that if you were going to have a new carpet you would not be laying it anywhere in the Welsh Streets. The YOUR MESSAGE HERE idea was faultless, being consultative, relevant, pertinent, useful and inclusive.

In autumn 2010 the Anonymous Poet struck again, this time with Part Two, 'Safe as Houses'. The owner of a house in Kinmel Street said she was amazed to be greeted by poems so moving and relevant.

There were other un-permissioned, un-commissioned cultural interventions outdoors on the streets. There have been teapots and hearts drawn on the tins. Protagonists such as Ann On, purveyor of fly-pasted poetry, and whoever drew the teapots and hearts felt obliged to break the law in order to make a cultural response and access their audience. A bust-able creative response, not a bankable one.

Imagine wildflowers appearing on the corner of Voelas Street, or 800 daffodils nodding in the Welsh Streets on Liverpool's 800th anniversary in 2007. The daffs

were a Welsh Streets Home Group project, as was the delivery of 60 bunches of daffs to the Town Hall on St David's Day 2005 with over 200 letters from local residents opposed to demolition. In exchange they got press coverage and a receipt for the letters. This makes a lie of the current narrative projected by the authorities in which local people agreed wholeheartedly with the demolition of the Welsh Streets. They didn't. They only agreed slightly less than half-heartedly and that was only after the Pied Piper got his chequebook out.

In the nearby Granby Four Streets, cultural activity is highly developed and largely self-funded and self-initiated. Residents have painted curtains and cats on the blocked-in windows in Beaconsfield Street, which is mysteriously half-renovated, half in limbo. 'I took up a paintbrush rather than look at black breeze-blocked windows for another fifteen years' said one of the painters, Rosa Smith. In the adjacent street neighbours have planted forecourts and containers with flowers and food. Every first Saturday of the month Cairns Street hosts a market. The Granby Streets Four Streets Market boasts free bike repairs, Nigerian food, local cakes and jams, Moroccan leatherwork, a photographer, bric-a-brac, kids on bikes and community mosaic making. This is a shining example of a creative community response to having half your street tinned-up and being told 'your house is getting pulled down'.

The council responded to this outburst of invention by pulling half of Ducie Street down in August when no one was looking.

## Top-down: looking the gift horse in the mouth

The HMR scheme was emboldened by legislation before its launch. Its public consultations often had limited impact on decision-making. Residents' critical concerns and cultural responses were not invited. But they happened albeit not planned, paid for, commissioned or permissioned by the authorities. This challenged the central HMR narrative. Through the net curtains the story found its way to other voices who retold the story, and it spread via publications from Liverpool Biennial's Independents and Manchester Metropolitan University or from the artwork itself.

Simultaneously there was officially sanctioned, fully paid for, permissioned art going on just a few streets away where Moira Kenny had been installed for the summer in an empty house at 59 Powis Street as Artist in Residence for the Welsh Streets. It was possible to get on the bus and see both the official CDS<sup>4</sup> Artist in Residence and the unofficial un-permissioned artwork by a genuine authentic resident and artist. Subtle difference.

I hadn't known about the residency and was effectively the Artist without Portfolio so far as the authorities were concerned. My neighbours, by contrast, thought I was their artist and had concerns about the recruitment, remit and funding of the Powis Street Art Project. We visited the project and enjoyed recordings of residents' talking. The engagement of an artist by a housing association that could not provide tenants with central heating or kitchen worktops speaks volumes about the priorities in play at the time. You might worry that art was lobbed in as a panacea, padding to soften the impact of the real decision-making. Perhaps it's good that

<sup>4</sup> CDS; the housing association now known as Plus Dane which owned most of the Welsh Streets and intends to develop the site if demolition eventually takes place.





The mysteriously half-renovated, half in limbo Beaconsfield Street (photograph: Nina Edge)



Beaconsfield Street, council regeneration topped up by residents' painting, Joe Farrag, Rosa Smith, Anna Ryan & Co. (photograph: Nina Edge)

slivers of the HMR budgets were used to give artists the opportunity to contribute, earn and develop ideas around the myriad possibilities of a tinned-up street. Aesthetically, though, rather than politically. This ignored the residents' ability to forge meaningful creative responses to their own situation. Condemned streets were apparently to be one-way streets in terms of cultural dialogue.

The artists were not there to be social agents or community activists, creative urbanists, eco-designers, observers, radicals, champions or critics. The tinned-up street was an opportunity – but only for people who don't live in it. The HMR arts caravan raises some vexed questions. It would be rash though for an artist to criticize any organization with spending power. And who wants a rash? Better to silently contemplate how easy the control of funded culture is and how easily this culture might contribute to the control of others.

HMR was a significant creative opportunity and a significant spend. Arts organizations joined development industry specialists and consultants and dipped into the Pathfinder Pie, finding controversy and profile as well as cash. Anti-demolition campaigners in Liverpool had run a media campaign that began in the Welsh Streets and went global. By 2008 the issue of demolition in Liverpool exceeded the coverage of the Capital of Culture 2008 campaign even with its significant public relations budget: a budget kindly provided by the public. The lived, DIY culture of residents' storytelling had outdone professionalized culture and marketing. Demolitions had become a big story. A big story is a honey pot. People gathered round.

Liverpool Biennial ran projects in the HMR territories. A row of terraces features on their website – by now an iconic image. The Biennial appointed a dedicated HMR Public Realm project manager. He said they aimed to 'bring a creative angle to discussions with people about place'. The HMR project manager's post was funded by two government quangos: Arts Council England and HMR through the latter's communications budget, normally associated with public relations or image. The association raises complex questions. What does it mean when two government quangos combine to commission artwork? When an independent-looking arts organization is patronised by a policy delivery agent such as HMR which uses legal compulsion to impose site assembly? What if 'a creative angle to discussions with people about place' fostered criticism or impacted decision-making?

The HMR scheme has been marked by attempts to silence, demonize and ridicule the residents who were its first critics. In this context the HMR artists – however motivated or skilful – risk being viewed as stooges at worst or spoons full of sugar at best. Would creative, critical or ethical discussions loosen the knot of interests in the 'Public Realm' or would it take something else? Maybe one man's regeneration is inevitably another man's asset-stripping. Editorial control and public image are necessarily subject to censure by the HMR executive. If you want music – you pay a piper.

Residents on the receiving end of arts projects sometimes respond with frustration. The occasional table gets overturned. People shout a bit but no one gets hurt. I saw Bootle residents at the 2009 Liverpool Biennial's HMR canal-side event who were angered; both by the parachuting in of outsider culture and by its airlifting out. The potential for the professional classes to alienate and enrage the multiply



impoverished is considerable. Just as the externally decided HMR remit alienated its recipients by its interest in house prices and home ownership, the officially sanctioned cultural remit differs from the recipients' interests. It is the recipients of the housing policy and its attendant cultural programmes whose poverty initially drew the funding down from on high. Like a ton of bricks.

Use of public funding to generate moments of culture around the despoiled terraces started to bother me. Radio and TV interviewers would introduce me as the Liverpool artist campaigning to save her home in the Welsh Streets. This drew venom from opponents who felt it somehow benefited me. While my detractors were angry that I was credited as being an artist, I became uneasy with the title of 'artist', the practice of art and its role in power and value systems. Art had a tendency to rent itself out as PR, social marketing, whitewash, community inclusion – oh and aesthetic response. Art seemed never to sit out a tune but to dance for whoever piped up. This is nothing new; the power of the patron runs through cultural production from Popes to Pathfinders.

### Bottom-up: straight from the horse's mouth

Outside, and precisely because of the systems of official patronage, it seemed important to produce some work and a creative strategy. By 2006 I was standing in the local elections as an Anti-Demolition candidate for the second time. The campaign was like some durational performance funnelling consciousness of the Welsh Streets into the dense matter of Liverpool's political hub. We produced arguably some of the funniest, best-designed election print in the city. Locals individually drew our hoardings. We showed them in the adjacent Conservation Area courtesy of neighbours opposed to our forced removal.

We also became the subject of other people's cultural productions. *Nerve* magazine ran a piece co-written with Richie Hunter featuring Mark Loudon's photos. *tenantspin* at FACT produced a short film and ran live-streamed debates to packed audiences. Ciara Leeming compiled sound and image work across the nine HMR areas. Bill McGary wrote a play, *The Welsh Streets*, for Dingle Community Theatre; a voluntary, independent, local organization. The play was historically and politically sharp. Bill McGary said he wrote the play after years working in housing, watching people get steamrollered. He wanted to exhume facts and histories otherwise buried deep. Liverpool Lantern Company hired me to make demolition games in 2006, when their Halloween Carnival focused on the decanted souls of empty streets. I was one of dozens of creatives hired for the show. My games, which involved knocking things down and balancing public opinion, were part of the pre-carnival warm-up show. In 2010 Sola Arts put on a stunning Welsh Streets exhibition during the Independents Biennial; Janet Brandon made animation and guerrilla crochet appeared on railings in Rhiwlas Street. I'm shooting footage of the tinned-up houses with camera operators Beverly Dale, Sandi Hughes and Kenny Thomas. There were apparently 15,000 derelicts created and hoarded by NewHeartlands, the HMR agency.

Artist Catriona Beales, who lived near the Edge Lane demolition zone, put on an exhibition at the Bluecoat's Lost Soul space where I spoke and showed elements of the Lantern Carnival games. She produced a flier with the total number of sealed

properties acquired by NewHeartlands – 12,586 – in 2009. As time goes on, the significance of small gestures such as a powerful flier has increased. They build up into an archive of self-organized cultural interventions. The Welsh Streets Home Group did a comic Christmas card, which was reported in the local press, newsletters and window posters. They seemed throwaway at the time, yet they record resistance to the scheme that eventually attracted widespread criticism and lost government support.

People living with dereliction were sporadically provided with official commissioned culture. Their predicament also became the subject of art work by independent cultural producers. The independent events were usually unfunded and enjoyed freedom from official control and curatorial ambition. They manifested a collective 'folk' need to learn and repeat the story, and soaked up resident input like gravy. Eventually though, residents in clearance zones lost interest in their situation as a creative opportunity. Their quest to satisfy their primary needs for shelter, security and community took precedence. They were incapacitated by the ultimate weapons in the regeneration arsenal: the brick wall and the stonewall.

The HMR art commissions had various outcomes, from PR benefit and nice pictures for the scheme's reports, to continued curatorial acceptance and ascendance. Those making culture from within the HMR areas were also doing it for different reasons. They had different incentives, budgets, permissions, access and audiences. Those outside official systems of production sought to criticize, survive, bear witness or campaign for alternatives to demolition. They were often local creatives and they wanted to communicate broadly.

There is undoubted power in cultural production; that's why people invest public or private money or themselves in it. The more autonomous, self-organized systems have added depth and multiplicity to the mono-culture spawned by HMR via its art delivery agencies. The residents responded directly to their predicament. This was the antithesis of public consultation, which by definition is top-down, imposed and constricted by the objectives of those with the power and resources needed to deliver it. Residents were never consulted on their desire to see five, ten or fifteen years of breeze-blocked houses abandoned by the authority to whom they pay a compulsory local tax. They articulated their response though – directly on the windows – without being asked. Citizens produced a culture specific to place and circumstance and outside the HRM commissions. What this lacked in budget and the power of official permission, it made up for in wit and public interface. HMR official art came with permission and funds installed, but with diminished cultural value regardless of aesthetic outcomes, due to PR and political constraints.

Top-down and bottom-up models of production meshed when Tate Liverpool commissioned me to tell the story of the HMR demolitions out of the context of housing debates. I made the work *5 Dimensional Everything*. This reflected Tate's curatorial interest in activism and in the artist operating outside the art world. *The Fifth Floor* show was to expound relational aesthetics, that is, art that references social context. I wanted to manifest the experiences from Liverpool's threatened streets. Tate provided an audience, staff to invigilate, an art context and a publication. I used a form that would communicate broadly: a game.





Nina Edge, *5 Dimensional Everything*, Tate Liverpool, 2008 (photographs: Nina Edge and Alex Heatherington) playing the game



5 From the confidential overarching contract between the government and NewHeartlands released for the Bootle Public Inquiry.

I made the game to work as a decision-making mechanism. Players found it compulsive, competitive and comic. The game had wooden pieces and a computer that could record play and use this record to make decisions: a decision-making process no less reliable than the one residents had already encountered. It worked like this. Residents' comments were quoted on the tops of stacking wooden counters. 'We only asked for carpets' was one of them and so was 'rendered unfit for habitation'.<sup>5</sup> The counters were played in a three-dimensional space which tested the player's mental ability to plan, manage and dominate space, while remaining immune to residents' comments.

Some people played to remove uncomfortable comments. For example 'a damp patch' and 'an early grave' tended to be played off the board quite quickly whereas players tried to keep comic or poetic statements like 'never apologise never explain' and 'a pillow full of dreams'. Winning players usually ignored the words and worked only with spatial strategy while the most entertaining games were often people trying to control the flow of meaning. Demolition zone residents who played recognized phrases from conversations they'd been part of. Outsiders to the HMR areas played recognizing common philosophical and comic figures of speech. Sometimes young and old played for hours. Players who logged their results on the scoreboard contributed to the final decision. After five weeks and around 15,000 players, the single counter that had remained on the board the most often was declared the winner: to be made into a Blue Circle Commemorative Plaque. By playing the game many players contributed to the mechanical 'decision'. And the winner was 'It could be you', a one-time slogan from the national state lottery.

### It could be you

It would be naive to think otherwise. Elizabeth Pascoe, a Liverpool resident who campaigned against the demolition of her place in Edge Lane, has pursued the rights of homeowners to the High Court and discovered that she – well anybody actually – has no rights with regard to property ownership.<sup>6</sup> If regeneration has been cited as the reason to use Compulsory Purchase Orders, force can and will be used to compel residents out of their homes. You won't need multiple poverty indices. You'll just need to live somewhere that somebody else wants (to regenerate). It's important to know that.

If the men brought tin sheets into your street and closed it down then you might agree that sometimes challenge becomes the appropriate cultural response. The work of challenge is a hard work. It's unapologetic, uncompromising, unpaid and recently some of it is borderline legal. You could say unlawful but that's only because they keep changing the law.

What did culture and art do in the face of all this, at the scene of the accident, the slow-motion car crash? All its makers hoped for perhaps, wherever they were coming from. Cultural practice can be more than a PR fig leaf, a humanizing embellishment on the Annual Report of the Quango and the Developers, surely? Yet official sanction does not preclude validity just as lack of support does not guarantee quality. Do we hope the audience see through the cover that art and academia have provided to the machines? The machines of capital and the state, of legislation,

6 Compulsory Purchase Order (No. 2) 2007 ('the CPO') (CO/11226/2008 Pascoe v (i) Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government; and (ii) the Homes and Communities Agency). 162(1) of the Leasehold Reform, Housing and Urban Development Act 1993 and the Acquisition of Land Act 1981.



lobbyists and marketing departments all of which are set on the skids here, now, during this crash?

The HMR lost control of their vehicle when the narrative was captured, when residents spoke publicly about their predicament. It spun out of control when the financial assumptions on which the journey rested crumbled as the credit crunched. In September 2010 the doomed HMR scheme was ridiculed repeatedly in the national media, as it had been for years on street corners. By mid-October the scheme was cut by the Coalition government. All this was framed by the simple act of show & tell. The oldest trick in the book. Older than the book. Storytelling.

## The bottom line

Today you are the audience on the tour of the tinned-up town. You got it from an eyewitness at the scene but you know that if you asked six different witnesses they would all have seen something different. Telling the story accumulates audience and perpetuates exchange. The power of history is being brokered, written they say, by the victors. You decide who wins when you tell the story. It's a Regeneration. If that's what you want to believe. Like some things are art if you believe that. They say that as long as your beliefs don't harm anyone else you're welcome to them. Tour the HMR areas and decide for yourself if you think any harm was done here with the power of beliefs.

There were always going to be casualties. The regenerists call it 'collateral damage' when they brief their staff. Residents have been drivers, pedestrians and crash test dummies in the grand collision of ideas that HMR caused. We paid for Fully Comp but barely got Third Party, Fire and Theft. Nothing can cover the damage. The regeneration professionals have flown. Like a retreating army shooting down anything that moves. Blown away Edge Lane, Smithdown Road, Queens Road Bootle, the Venmore Streets in Anfield and much of Kensington last summer. They've paused for breath and threaten still to blow down the Welsh Streets.

The campaigners are in bits all over the area. It's because of them that there will be flowers tied to the railings. After the tow trucks have gone. After the bulldozers have gone. After the lead, the copper and the assets are stripped. The story lives on and now you have read the story its telling falls to you.

In autumn 2010 the government announced the demise of HMR. In May 2011 I report that the threat to my home remains. Yesterday I watched two men remove tins from the empty house next door, break a window and climb in. They said it was perfect inside, amazing, they said after five years sealed up. They replaced the old tins with new tins, swept up and left. 'Yeah,' I said. "Tell your friends.'

So what's happening with my house now? Like the curtain it's still hanging. Still threatened with demolition but still here. And culture? Culture was the loss adjuster.