

Connected Communities

Civic Associations and Urban Communities

Local History, Place-Making and Activism in Twentieth-Century Britain

Lucy Hewitt and John Pendlebury



Background

Executive Summary

This study sought to explore the nature of the connections between place and community. In particular, it used a focus on the growth and activities of civic associations during the twentieth century to examine the importance of shaping place for both spatial and social identities.

This discussion paper provides an overview of the key elements of the study and indicates the potential for future research. It explores the themes that developed out of a review process: the value of examining civic associations to extend knowledge of the history and practice of community participation; and the way civic organizations have conceptualized the relationship between people and place, particularly by emphasising the importance of the tangible legacies of the past and by appealing to the complex concepts of locality and amenity.

This document also gives a brief explanation of the scoping exercise conducted which aimed to assess the extent of surviving archival material held in both public and private archives. Our final comments draw on the findings of both the review and the scoping elements of the project to recommend approaches to future research focused in this field.

Researchers and Project Partners

Researchers

Dr Lucy Hewitt

Urban Studies, University of Glasgow

Professor John Pendlebury

School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University

Key words

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Introduction and overview

This study is premised on the absence of research into the history of civic activism and the consequent lack of understanding of the interconnections that have existed and developed over a significant period of time between local associations and place in British towns and cities. The project, therefore, sought to situate questions of place and identity at the core of its investigations of community activism from an historical perspective that remained sensitive to the contingency of values and the variability of community concerns over place and time. In this discussion paper we provide an overview of the key elements of the project. In so doing we emphasise the relevance of our findings for contemporary policy agendas.

There were two activities at the core of the project. First, we conducted a review of existing relevant academic literature and used this review as the basis for two journal articles examining key questions raised by our study. Second, we conducted an investigation and assessment of the surviving archival material in both public and private collections.

The review element of the study drew on a broad range of academic disciplines, including urban and social history, planning, conservation and heritage studies, and the social sciences. Our aim was to consolidate the work that currently engages with our topic, providing a synthesis of knowledge and using it as the basis for two peer-reviewed journal articles. The first of these journal articles (discussed in section 2 below) combined the review exercise with material from previous archival research by the authors to examine the participative role of civic associations in shaping urban places over the twentieth century.

The key questions examined by the second journal article (discussed in section 3 below) concern the importance of local history and the complex and malleable concepts of locality and amenity in grounding a sense of community. To pursue this, we have, first, examined the publications and records of civic associations to understand the way community groups themselves have conceptualized the relationship between people and place. Second, we situate this analysis within existing research that deals with the social value of place.

Alongside the review element of the project we conducted a scoping exercise which investigated the extent of surviving archival material and assessed the potential of this material for future research. This was mainly desk-based, specifically through the use of archival databases, but it was supplemented by the findings of a short questionnaire circulated to local amenity societies by for the project by two national organizations. This scoping exercise resulted in a report (discussed in section 4 below), which is available to download through our project webpage and will provide a key reference point for information about the remaining archival resources relating to the civic movement. The final section of this discussion document (section 5) draws on the results of both the review and scoping elements of the project to suggest potential avenues for further research.

Association, participation, place

Recent decades in the UK have seen a broad and growing emphasis upon participative place-making, cutting across traditional political divisions. Current political agendas of localism and the 'Big Society,' have signalled a clear interest in the further decentralization

of decision-making and a renewed emphasis on the importance of Britain's civil society. Given these trends, it seems reasonable to anticipate that the involvement of local community and residents' organizations will become an increasingly significant element in future place-management processes. In this context historical scrutiny of how participation works and what it can deliver can assume an important role.

Participation has been a formal and visible part of the planning system in Britain since 1968 and the emergence and growth of this trajectory has often been welcomed as a movement towards democratizing place-based policies (see Cherry, 1974; Cullingworth and Nadin, 2002; Sandercock, 2005). However, as experience of participative practice increases, concerns have also emerged (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Agger, 2012). Furthermore, recent examinations of the historical experience of participation have challenged the dominant narrative that depicts a paradigm shift in practice over the 1960s and 1970s (Haumann, 2011). Instead, as Haumann suggests, a locally variable experience of citizens' involvement straddles the decades before and after the mid-century thereby signalling the inadequacy of temporal dichotomies and pointing to the value of continued historical research.

In our first journal article, '*Association, participation, place: the local civic movement in Britain*', we use a review of evidence relating to the civic movement to contribute to historical perspectives on the participative role of associational culture in urban governance and place-making¹. The specific example provided by civic associations offers a number

of correlations with contemporary interests in localism, place identity and community engagement. A significant element of the amenity movement, civic associations have maintained a strong focus on the quality of place and the value of local distinctiveness throughout their history. They have consistently sought opportunities to shape place, linking civil and political spheres through their interest in planning and preservation and their direct involvement in urban governance through mechanisms, such as Conservation Areas Advisory Committees, effectively created for this purpose.

A series of key issues emerged through an examination of the history of the civic movement that also have important links with contemporary debate. Our key findings were:

- Associations have played an important and under-examined role in shaping planning and conservation agendas. They have functioned as a significant conduit for the spread of professional ideas and innovative practice and offer a vantage point for understanding the development of participation in place-making and management in Britain.
- Groups have tended to operate through two primary yet apparently opposing modes of participation. On the one hand, groups may seek close integration with the structures of local governance, through the use of networks and overlapping memberships and, on the other, may pursue a strategy of direct conflict with local governance regimes over development proposals or policies. Whilst some groups may operate primarily in one mode or another, many

¹ This paper is currently submitted. Further information is available from the authors.

groups use both strategies in different periods or on different occasions.

- The role of civic groups was subject to greater scrutiny and more explicit formulation in the context of the public and political debates about community participation which emerged in the late 1960s. However, although these debates are often represented as a watershed, in practice there is significant evidence to suggest that many of the activities of civic groups continued largely unaltered.
- Following from this, the history of civic associations demonstrates patterns of intertwined local government and voluntary association cultures, dominated by middle class interests, which can be traced back into the nineteenth century.
- The importance and dominance of middle class and professional interests in amenity groups highlights the differential resources on which community groups draw and underlines the importance of a continued attention to the complex nature of 'community' as it is manifested in associational culture.

Locality, amenity, heritage

The idea of localism and attempts to promote policy and practice rooted in localism has occupied a central position in recent debates over place-management. In England and Wales, landmark reforms of the planning system have taken place under its banner, while in Scotland the same ethos has shaped the discourse of 'community asset ownership' and is developing

through a number of trial schemes that offer to transfer a range of 'assets' (including historic buildings and local facilities) to community groups.² Throughout the United Kingdom, therefore, the importance of local identity and the role of local communities in shaping place is being emphasised and situated in the foreground of policy.

The significance of local identity, often conceived in terms of amenity and heritage, has a history that extends throughout the modern period. Urban historians of the nineteenth century have recognised the crescendo of civic pride, often motivated by competitive city corporations, that was increasingly manifested in the physical fabric of towns and cities as the century progressed (Briggs, 1963; Beckett, 2005). Further, Levine has shown that alongside the rhetoric and building associated with civic pride, there was a rising interest in histories that emphasised locality: 'Belonging to the locality was to be in possession of an identity and of a genealogy, and to explore and uncover the past of the county was to enrich that genealogy...' (Levine, 2003, p 61).

Thus, the concern for local history and heritage and for civic status and distinctive local identity were historically significant forces shaping the physical development of British towns and cities and providing central reference points for associational and political activity. These themes have continued to exert influence ever since, yet this trajectory has rarely been traced.

We have drawn on the publications and records of amenity groups to examine the way the relationship between people and place was conceived through the twentieth century. Our article, '*Locality, amenity, heritage*:'

² See www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/engage/CommunityAssetOwnership

*conceptualizations of place*³, makes the following arguments:

- Civic groups provide a valuable window on conceptualisations of place and place-identity. Specifically the repeated emphasis placed on locality and the ways this is manifested through representations of local patriotism and civic pride was an important undercurrent throughout a century marked by the increasing power of the national state and regional tiers of administration.
- Relationships formed between local communities and their environment are often depicted in terms of two key concepts – amenity and heritage – that are complex and malleable, used variously at different times and in different places.
- The idea of amenity was a pivot for discourses of place in the twentieth century. It encompasses the conjunctions of functionality and aesthetics and of continuity and change and is thus capable of mobilization around different and competing ideas of place-quality. It has frequently been utilized by community groups to ground their arguments about place quality and also to engage with technical processes and language in defending local community interests.
- The history of civic associations makes a valuable contribution to understanding the development of ideas about heritage, particularly conceived in terms of the relationship between tangible legacies of the past and the social values of local communities.

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In contrast to national organizations with similar spheres of interest, such as the National Trust or the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (see Waterson, 1994; Matless, 1998), there is little extensive research into the history of the civic movement. We suggest that, at least in part, this reflects the tendency of local activity to result in local records and consequent dispersal of evidence relating to their history. Thus the histories of civic associations remains largely absent from histories of planning, conservation and voluntarism in the twentieth century.

A scoping exercise was conducted in an attempt to assess whether surviving archival material might provide the basis for future research into the history of community associational activity and its relation to the processes that have shaped local places. The exercise drew on three main sources of information. First, it used the results of an extensive search exercise conducted through online archival databases, specifically the National Archives Access to Archives (A2A) database and the Scottish Archive Network (SCAN) database. Second, it draws on the authors' experience of working with a number of private archival holdings in different parts of the UK and, third, it uses responses to a brief questionnaire circulated to local groups affiliated to the Scottish Civic Trust and Civic

³ Further information is available from the authors

Voice. The questions this sought to answer were:

- How much material remains?
- Where is material held?
- What sort of material has survived?
- How much potential is there for research using this material?

The findings represent an attempt to establish the extent and the quality of surviving archival material. It does not offer an exhaustive exploration of all remaining archival deposits, but rather focuses on providing an indication of the potential for further research. In addition, it was also the intention that the results of this exercise might prove useful for current members of the amenity movement and provide a point of reference for information about the history of the movement as a whole. The final report of this work is available on the project web-pages through this link: *Civic Associations and Urban Communities*. It has also been directly discussed and shared with Civic Voice and the Scottish Civic Trust to enable direct dissemination to their affiliated groups.

Recommendations for future research

In urban centres of all sizes throughout the United Kingdom amenity organizations contribute to the making and managing of place. The inherently local nature of much of this activity is a source of considerable potential, suggesting the possibility for research that can contribute to understanding the social, cultural and political dynamics that create place and community. Furthermore,

historical research in this field offers the opportunity to transverse the divide between local associational culture and broader trajectories in modern social history. In particular, the work of amenity organizations provides a valuable perspective on current political emphases relating to localism and community engagement. Thus, from this scoping study we can identify both a largely untapped rich empirical resource and research potential to add to conceptual questions over the nature of community, place and participative democratic engagement.

One specific question the authors are working on, in conjunction with Professor Mark Tewdwr Jones, is conceptualisations of the civic group "voice" within democratic processes. As we have discussed, civic groups represent a significant participative force, often laying claim to a representative role of wider public opinion in the process (Law, 2004). Yet these claims to wider legitimacy are, as highlighted above, questionable at best; indeed, some work has argued that groups maybe constituted to allow limited participation even within themselves (Coxall, 2001). Again, these are important questions within a move to a more participative approach that is embodied within the localism agenda.

Empirically, both privately held collections and records held in public archives offer considerable research potential. The most substantial concentration of surviving material exists relating to the second half of the twentieth century, reflecting the growth in numbers of local groups during the 1960s and 1970s. However, there are also a limited number of extensive collections relating to amenity groups that have been active since

the early twentieth century. The geographic dispersal of material remains a logistical difficulty, but in a number of places the extent of surviving records would support a case study approach to research. Furthermore, some regions have concentrations of archival deposits, offering the potential for research to focus on particular parts of the UK as case study regions.

It is also evident that the members of civic associations themselves, many of whom have been involved in the movement over a considerable time period, represent a significant reserve of knowledge. This depth of sustained commitment, combined with on-going activity suggests the potential of research approaches that extend beyond archive-based research, particularly interviewing and co-production methods. This aligns with recent emphases among both archival and community researchers and there are a number of examples of community archive projects that have existed in parallel to local oral history work, some ongoing over a period of several years, enabling the development of a nuanced understanding and a record of community experiences (see Flinn, 2007; Bastian and Alexander, 2009).

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