

## Contesting Neoliberal Common Sense: Bottom-up History and the Struggle over Urban Space

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Rather than that dwelling-saturated question of our belonging to a place, we should be asking the question of to whom this place belongs. Who owns it?<sup>i</sup>

The question that drew me to Peterborough in 2010 was about *belonging* in Doreen Massey's terms: who the place belonged to. The question had to do with land ownership, from the historical power of local landed gentry and the 900-year-old Anglican Cathedral, to contemporary property developers, food sector capitalists and the business of accommodation provision for recently arrived migrant workers. It also built on another of Massey's ideas in the same essay that resonated with the findings of my earlier research with historian Becky Taylor at the Larkman Estate in Norwich:<sup>ii</sup> the possibility of interests emerging in common between those displaced through migration to work in low-paid jobs and those who have experienced economic dispossession while staying still.<sup>iii</sup> As Massey put it, '[m]aterially, and in terms of power, the "national" working class (of whatever ethnic origin) has no more ownership than does the recent migrant.'<sup>iv</sup> This idea, always political as much as academic, has assumed ever starker relevance through the present decade in the face both of rising far-right nationalism, anti-migrant and anti-Muslim sentiment on the one hand, and the onward march of neoliberal urbanism on the other.

My and Becky's study had itself been influenced by Massey's earlier concept of the 'throwntogetherness of place': the fact that place is porous, dynamic and extroverted, 'constructed out of a particular constellation of relations, articulated together at a particular locus'.<sup>v</sup> Building on the idea that space is 'never finished; never closed [...] a simultaneity of stories-so-far', this is not simply a mode of understanding, another academic theory.<sup>vi</sup> The 'so far' and 'never finished' in this formulation contain a *politics of potential*, or as Massey herself put it 'a more challenging political landscape [...] the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now (itself drawing on a history and geography of thens and theres)'.<sup>vii</sup>

Massey's 2011 essay formed part of her collaboration with Patrick Keiller on the film project *Robinson in Ruins*. Just as the film's close study of parts of Berkshire and Oxfordshire reveals, in Massey's words, 'the historical robbery of the English landscape by an elite',<sup>viii</sup> Massey's long-term collaborative work with Stuart Hall and Michael Rustin on neoliberalism – the name given to the social settlement that triumphed in the UK in the 1980s – argued that the goal of neoliberalism had been to reassert elite power. For these authors neoliberalism operated

across political, cultural and economic dimensions, and was 'held together by a hegemonic ideology, a common sense, a glue of ideas'.<sup>ix</sup>

It is not therefore surprising that Massey had, after an initial discussion in the sidelines of a conference<sup>x</sup> at which she spoke, called up Jessie Brennan, kickstarting a series of meetings and discussions with Brennan about her work on The Green Backyard, and had been committed to producing a contribution for this collection. Sadly, and unexpectedly, Massey died on 11 March 2016 before she had been able to visit The Green Backyard, where she would have witnessed in action an ongoing process of struggle, negotiation and political contestation in relation to the future of Peterborough's city centre.<sup>xi</sup> The Green Backyard is a space that, by its very existence and through the practices of its founders, board members and other volunteers, stands as a direct challenge to neoliberal common sense. I was first introduced to it in 2011 by Jocelyn Cunningham, then of the Royal Society of Arts, a collaborator with the Arts and Humanities Research Council over the fellowship I had just been awarded to conduct research in Peterborough.<sup>xii</sup> Usually based in Brighton, I had rented a room in the area of Fletton in Peterborough, where The Green Backyard is located. Fletton became a part-time and temporary home, where I spent three nights a week over nine months between March and November that year.

Influenced by Massey's concept of space as a 'simultaneity of stories-so-far', I took an oral history approach to recording the life stories of a diverse set of Peterborough residents, including interviews with The Green Backyard's co-founders – Sophie and Renny Antonelli – as well as with Renny's father Walter.<sup>xiii</sup> Oral history, like other forms of '[b]ottom-up history',

requires that we pay attention to the cranny in the wall... [and] bring to life again the real history on the ground when the concrete is the enemy of the abstract and when the historian, or people's remembrancer, is a cultural worker serving the people in struggle.<sup>xiv</sup>

At its best oral history is always a collaborative approach. For this reason, it is possible retrospectively to construct the research project's way of working as counter to the neoliberal common-sense idea of individual autonomy. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger set of actions (including a play, photography and film) that always entailed interdependence, albeit often unequal, among the seven-strong team of researchers and artists, as well as between the research team and Peterborough residents with whom the project interacted and worked, and through the 'webs of relations' by which each person – researchers, artists, residents – existed.<sup>xv</sup>

For me, The Green Backyard was and remains part of these webs. Reflecting on Edward Casey's philosophical writings on the co-constitution of subjectivity and place, Matt Fish has argued that place

could be said to refer to the relationship we have with particular locations that goes above and beyond the merely physical and encompasses the mental, emotional and, in some cases, spiritual connections we have with them [...] It is the means by which we make sense of the world and that enables us to live *in* it and by extension is a constitutive part of our sense of self.<sup>xvi</sup>

Through my sporadic visits there over the last five years, The Green Backyard constitutes part of my sense of self. There is no doubt that this is in part due to its implicit political struggle against a second element of neoliberal common sense, the supposed naturalness of the 'market'. Whenever I have met Renny Antonelli there, for example, he has simultaneously been busy and appeared to have time for me, often demonstrating his artistic skills with wood, and in the process revealing a non-commercial sense of aesthetics. Having returned to Peterborough and worked as a carpenter for a construction company in the early 1980s, Renny told me

there were slow jobs but you needed somebody to do [them] nicely [...] [T]he main carpenters would go in and crash all the doors and windows and stairs and skirting, they'd do everything, they'd get the big money and they'd disappear and there'd be loads of snagging jobs to be done, so my job was to go along and chop a bit out of the threshold that had been smashed and let a new piece in and plane it all up and sand it up so it looked nice.

I am reminded of the beauty of Renny's woodwork every time I walk to the north end of my street in Brighton, where a pair of gates he made using curved wooden slats marks the entrance to the front yard of the house of a family friend of his, a former Peterborough resident. The two families first came to know each other through Renny's father and my Brighton neighbour's grandfather working together at Peterborough's brick pits, a major source of jobs for Italian men and other migrants to Peterborough in the 1950s and 1960s. As it turned out, Sophie Antonelli and I were connected in another way too. Rereading my field notes from the time we met I described it as a

research whoopee moment. Went to garden [The Green Backyard] by railway line up the road – a project that I had been told about by Jocelyn [...] at RSA. I wandered in thinking that nobody was about – impressed by the amount of veg, and other plants around [...] When I met Sophie we got talking about her rabbits, which she said she used to have in Brighton. Before a few minutes had gone by it was established that she had graduated from Sussex Uni with a BSc in Geography in '06 or '07 [i.e. from the very university department I worked in] [...] It also struck me as I cycled back to the house to pick up my [interview] consent form – I will go back to meet her father in a few minutes – how much people wear places they are 'from' – Sophie had lived in Brighton as a student and this came out so quickly in seeing her [...] I have found that people see me wearing my Brighton identity when I speak to them, hence many have referred to it warmly (research field notes, 4 May 2011).

As I continued to drop in at The Green Backyard not just during the fellowship but over the ensuing years, I felt a strong connection with the politics of the site in its offering of a more communal, less frenetic, green, 'ludic' space,<sup>xvii</sup> an alternative to the increasingly brand-dominated retail developments in the nearby city centre. Moreover, The Green Backyard has brought me into contact with the inspiring radical music and lyrics of Chris Wood and Hugh Lupton. I attended a live performance there of the retelling of the peasants' revolt led by Robin Grey, including renditions of Sydney Carter's 1981 song 'John Ball'. At the time of writing Wood's video recording of his performance of 'Jerusalem' at The Green Backyard is the first thing any visitor to his website encounters.<sup>xviii</sup> But the connection did not stop at political ideology or musical taste.

I often found a welcome that was generous both in terms of the time The Green Backyard volunteers made for visitors – including unexpected ones – and the home-grown food and drink that were spontaneously offered. I have taken people with me to The Green Backyard on several occasions including my partner and teenage son, as well as collaborators and artists involved in the research project. Its space, its relaxed hospitality, reminded me of better moments in my teenage years, hanging out in the city after work without commercial engagement and well before the smart phone was invented, with no particular agenda. The Green Backyard seemed to offer a slowing down of time, a warm conviviality.

My fieldwork notes record such a welcome at the end of one of the most stressful weeks during the Peterborough-based research project when we had put on productions of the play *Fair's (Not) Fair!* at three different venues.<sup>xix</sup> Viewing a version of Peterborough's recent history through the lens of the fairground made The Green Backyard a perfect fourth venue, based as it is in Ram's Fair Meadow, one of three contiguous pieces of land associated with the city's historic Bridge Fair.<sup>xx</sup> We had rehearsed the play in a mosque and a community centre for recent migrants, and performed it in a church, a south-Asian community centre and Peterborough United Football Ground. At each performance we hung an exhibition of photographic portraits of Peterborough residents who had recorded oral histories as part of the project.<sup>xxi</sup> Having heard that what would have been our fifth performance the following day had to be cancelled following torrential rain at the Peterborough Festival venue in Central Park, we had just concluded that The Green Backyard show was to be the last...

I left in the pouring rain and tried to make it over to Central Park to see [an oral history narrator's earlier performance] only to find that it was rained off. I went back to [my room] for a little while and then headed over to Green Backyard for 5.30pm. It was such a great welcome. Renny was making his tea, there were strawberries on a big china plate, freshly picked by the master's own hand. He looked red-faced, curly haired and very well. The venue was so cosy and we struggled to have enough room to put the pictures up [...] The Green Backyard was packed. [Oral history narrator] Charles Wood turned up [for the second performance in succession] with two sons in tow. He loved the bits about him and

laughed warmly and looked at me. At the end he [joked that] he had come back for more and hadn't realised just how much more (research field notes, 11 July 2012).

While I was being fed literally, politically, emotionally and spiritually by The Green Backyard and identifying more and more with their cause, I was also, through my engagement with Doreen Massey (and other authors) deepening my understanding of the politics of urban space.

As The Green Backyard board member Jay Gearing emphasises in his sound-recording for Brennan's artwork,<sup>xxii</sup> The Green Backyard has changed enormously since its inception in 2009. And yet, consonant with Massey's notion of a simultaneity of stories-so-far, interviews with The Green Backyard's founders had revealed a much longer genesis of the space, involving multiple and interwoven stories that led up to the present and remained pregnant with future possibilities. Renny's food growing, and carpentry and wooden sculpture practice (elsewhere in Peterborough at Thorpe Hall and at the Dogsthorpe allotments) stretched back decades and Sophie too had brought some of her prior history and place-based experience with her. Her studies, work and life in Brighton, her love for independent businesses as opposed to large corporate retailers, and her practice of visiting, for example, the Earthship in Brighton's Stanmer Park, all fed into her evolving vision and practice within and beyond The Green Backyard.

As it seeks to find a way to sustain its existence in the face of Peterborough City Council's plans to sell the land once made available for common use by law, The Green Backyard has needed to develop a business plan and more formal working structures through its board of trustees. Its practices have thus changed, resonating with recent research on the 'commons' that moves away from seeing the commons as an idealised thing to which society can and should return, and moves towards *commoning* as a verb.<sup>xxiii</sup> Leila Dawney and her colleagues argue that the 'idea of the commons offers a romance' and its evocation in English music and song (such as that of Chris Wood), centring on a 'notion of loss' of a pre-enclosure world offers a 'counter-narrative to that of the inevitable and uncontrollable force of neoliberalism'.<sup>xxiv</sup> However, at the same time, as they go on to make clear, there are problems with this formulation. First, English enclosure was not a single event but a process running over several centuries.<sup>xxv</sup> Secondly, both commons and commoning inevitably contain tensions and may even fix in place inequalities, exclusions or reactionary forms of local or neighbourhood nationalism. Finally, commoning can be coopted by powerful vested interests.<sup>xxvi</sup> Yet, as Jane Wills makes clear in her contribution to a collection published in honour of Doreen Massey, such forces can also be challenged by people coming together *in place* across difference:

Territory remains critical in shaping our geographical imaginations and our political practice... It is in place that we encounter difference, and, as inhabitants, we have to negotiate those differences or suffer the penalty of not doing so by finding ourselves living in uncivil communities with a poor quality commons.<sup>xxvii</sup>

While not free of the tensions and internal struggles that resistance contains within itself, The Green Backyard remains grounded in place and expressive of a wider politics, a practical claiming of common usage rights,<sup>xxviii</sup> and a challenge in practice both to the elite power of corporate developers and to neoliberal common sense. Its work occurs in a particular time and place but it has much wider ramifications not only for our *understanding* of belonging but for political action over who this place, and other places, belong to.

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<sup>i</sup> Doreen Massey, 'Landscape/space/politics: an essay' (2011), 12. Accessed 26 April 2016. [thefutureoflandscape.wordpress.com/landscapespacepolitics-an-essay/](http://thefutureoflandscape.wordpress.com/landscapespacepolitics-an-essay/).

<sup>ii</sup> Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor, *Moving Histories of Class and Community: Identity, Place and Belonging in Contemporary England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009).

<sup>iii</sup> Massey, 'Landscape/space/politics', 10.

<sup>iv</sup> Massey, 'Landscape/space/politics', 12.

<sup>v</sup> Doreen Massey, 'Power-geometry and a progressive sense of place', in *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Changes*, ed. Jon Bird, Barry Curtis, Tim Putnam, George Robertson and Lisa Tickner (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 67.

<sup>vi</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), 9.

<sup>vii</sup> Massey, *For Space*, 140.

<sup>viii</sup> Massey, 'Landscape/space/politics', 27.

<sup>ix</sup> Notes taken at Massey's plenary lecture on the Kilburn Manifesto to an audience of over 400 people at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, Tampa, 10 April 2014. The hegemonic common sense of neoliberalism 'revolves around the supposed naturalness of "the market", the primacy of the competitive individual, the superiority of the private over the public' (Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin, Framing statement. 'After neoliberalism: analysing the present', in *After Neoliberalism? The Kilburn Manifesto*, ed. Hall, Massey and Rustin (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2015), 14).

<sup>x</sup> 'Rethinking Democracy: the Challenge of the Protest Movements' was the panel discussion at the conference 'Doing and Thinking Democracy Differently', University of Westminster, 7 November 2015.

<sup>xi</sup> See Ben Rogaly and Kaveri Qureshi, 'Diversity, urban space and the right to the provincial city', *Identities: Global Studies of Culture and Power* 20 (2013), 429–432. Accessed 10 May 2016.

[www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1070289X.2013.822375](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1070289X.2013.822375).

<sup>xii</sup> Peterborough City Council and Arts Council England were the other institutional partners in the RSA's Citizen Power Peterborough project with which my fellowship was associated; see Ben Rogaly, 'Don't show the play at the football ground, nobody will come': the micro-sociality of co-produced research in an English provincial city, *The Sociological Review* (2016). Accessed 10 May 2016. [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-954X.12371/full](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-954X.12371/full).

<sup>xiii</sup> 76 people recorded oral history interviews for the project, two-thirds of them with me and the remainder with my colleague Kaveri Qureshi, who spent three

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months lodging with a family in Peterborough between June and September 2011. 54 people subsequently gave permission for the edited and (in some cases) anonymised transcripts to be deposited with Peterborough Local Studies and Archives.

<sup>xiv</sup> Peter Linebaugh, 'Enclosures from the bottom up', *Radical History Review*, 108 (2010), 26.

<sup>xv</sup> Rogaly, 'Don't show the play', borrows Hannah Arendt's concept of webs of relations to analyse the micro-sociality of the research project. More information is available on the research project at [www.placesforall.co.uk](http://www.placesforall.co.uk).

<sup>xvi</sup> Matt Fish, 'Contested spaces/radical places: squatting, place and subjectivity', in *Radical Space: Exploring Politics and Practice*, ed. Debra Benita Shaw and Maggie Humm (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 114, author's emphasis.

<sup>xvii</sup> Leonie Sandercock, *Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities of the Twenty-First Century*, (London: Continuum, 2003), 8.

<sup>xviii</sup> 'Chris Wood Music', accessed 26 April 2016. [chriswoodmusic.co.uk](http://chriswoodmusic.co.uk).

<sup>xix</sup> Written by Raminder Kaur, inspired by her reading of the oral history interview transcripts, and directed by Mukul Ahmed.

<sup>xx</sup> Richard Hillier, 'A history of the Green Backyard site' (2013), accessed 29 April 2016. [www.thegreenbackyard.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/A-History-of-The-Green-Backyard-Site.pdf](http://www.thegreenbackyard.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/A-History-of-The-Green-Backyard-Site.pdf).

<sup>xxi</sup> Each photograph by Liz Hingley (see [placesforall.co.uk/photos](http://placesforall.co.uk/photos)) was accompanied by a quote from the respective oral history interview. Narrators were involved in the selection of both quotes and images. At the end of the project a tea party was held and the framed photographs presented to the people pictured in them. Watch Zain Awan's film of the event at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8I-21FRcqHY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8I-21FRcqHY).

<sup>xxii</sup> A growing archive of cyanotypes and recorded voices: *Inside The Green Backyard (Opportunity Area)*, 2015-16.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Leila Dawney, Samuel Kirwan and Julian Brigstocke, 'Introduction: the promise of the commons', in *Space, Power and the Commons: the Struggle for Alternative Futures*, ed. Samuel Kirwan, Leila Dawney and Julian Brigstocke (London: Routledge, 2015).

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>xxv</sup> Linebaugh, 'Enclosures', 13.

<sup>xxvi</sup> David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2012).

<sup>xxvii</sup> Jane Wills, 'Place and politics', in *Spatial Politics: Essays for Doreen Massey*, ed. David Featherstone and Joe Painter (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 142-3.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Bryony McDonagh and Carl Griffin rightly warn against characterising the history of the commons as a pristine form of common *ownership*, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of common *use rights*. However, while they are critical of some of the more romantic recent literature on the commons, their conclusion retains a sense of political possibility: 'That the commons never did belong to the people, does not mean they should not' ('Occupy! Historical geographies of property, protest and the commons, 1500-1850', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 53 [2016], 10).