

Recovering Community Series 2 Episode 5 – Roots and Futures in Sheffield: Growing Heritage Around Communities

Les Back

Hello, and welcome to Recovering Community, a podcast about community: what it means, how it's formed, and how it can be rebuilt.

I'm Les Back, Head of Sociology at the University of Glasgow. Thanks for joining me over the last four episodes as I've explored Glasgow, meeting the people working to change and strengthen the communities they're part of.

In this series I've discovered that there's plenty of creativity blossoming in the city's post industrial wastelands, food solidarity taking root in the kitchens of Castlemilk, curators at the Hunterian museum are thinking differently about how to use the discomfort generated by colonialism, and there's some inspiring, but very hard work going on in the city centre to tackle the shocking number of lives lost to drugs.

At a time when things can feel pretty tough in the Academy, it's been a wonderful reminder of what's possible when social research is a living, collaborative practice.

And that collaboration can take us far and wide, so for this special bonus edition of Recovering Community, we travelled south of the border to Sheffield to look at how rethinking the relationship between heritage and local communities can make them more inclusive, particularly for the most marginalised.

Here, the Roots and Futures project is listening to the perspectives of under-served communities, particularly Sheffield's Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities in seven locations across the city.

The project is informing city-level heritage strategies in partnership with Joined Up Heritage Sheffield, Sheffield City Council, University of Sheffield, and community partners including Zest, SOAR, Sheffield and District African Caribbean Community Association, Care for Young People's Future, ChilyPep, Manor and Castle Development Trust, and Heeley City Farm. This all might seem like a long way from Glasgow but Roots and Futures is part of the AHRC's Place-Based Research Programme which is based at the University of Glasgow.

People rooted in local communities are absolutely essential to this kind of co-production and I was lucky to meet one of Sheffield's finest - Aisha Jones.

Aisha's story mirrors the experience of so many migrants who are both deeply connected to life here in the UK, but kept at arms length from the lives and histories told through our museums and municipal heritage projects.

Aisha has been living in Sheffield for over 20 years and pours huge amounts of time and energy into her community volunteering work - it's how she became connected with Roots and Futures.

On a blustery day in her local park, I asked Aisha how visible she thought migrant and minority communities are within Sheffield....

Aisha

To be honest, sometimes they feel invisible because there's nothing to represent us anywhere, no statues for us or pictures or myself on the board, especially in this area

Les Back

It's one of the things that's come out already from our talks with people, is... it's hard to live in a place where you don't feel visible. I can imagine,

Aisha

yeah, it is hard. That's why sometimes I just say hello to people and try to help them and say, I'm here. I can help you. How are you? And that's how I do my community champion. If I see someone is kind of lost and I guide them,

Les Back

It seems you have a special gift for that, Aisha, if I may say. Could you just tell us a little bit about your duty? You said you living here for 20 years. But what was your, this is your kind of Journey's End. Where did you move through before coming and making home here?

Aisha

I lived in Kenya, and then I got married and lived in Saudi Arabia. The funny thing when I was in Kenya, my dad used to always tell me, you see these spoons? They're from England. You see these forks? from England, and they're durable, and they're nice, and they're very good stuff. It's like he was introducing me to Sheffield unconsciously. And when I came here, it's like, wow, this is the city my, my dad was talking about. And that's it, that. And then after coming from Saudi Arabia, I came here.

Les Back

So there was a little bit of Sheffield in Kenya.

Aisha

Yes, of course, there was, we had a lot of kettle, I mean spoons and forks, all from Sheffield. Yeah, my destiny. Yeah.

Les Back

Well, you know, in a way, it's a sort of, it's the destiny of Britain too, in the sense that, you know, the connection between Britain and the wider world is often the thread that draws people here, isn't it? I think that's so true. It's such a beautiful story. I absolutely love that. I mean, one of the things that I think the researchers involved in Roots and Futures have been so appreciative of is the idea of working with the community rather than studying on them. And yes, could you tell us a little bit about how you were involved in that process of collaboration?

Aisha

Yeah, after working with Courtney we were, I worked with her in a community centre, and she called me after a year and she told me, would I would like to speak to the community? I was like, wow, that's exciting. It's like we are finally being recognised. We have finally been noticed that we are here and they want to speak to us. So I have very good connection with the community. So I spoke to my friend. One of my friends met Courtney outside Zest and spoke to her about how the husband came here at the age of 16 with flip flop. It was cold, and he worked in the industrial steel industry.

Les Back

Like your spoons?

Aisha

Yes. Like my spoons! of course. So the husband used to work there, and they worked very hard, very hard, to an extent, when she was telling me the story, I felt like crying because of the heat they went through, and it shows how much tax they paid as well. And they worked

for so many years, from when they were 16 until when he passed away. So that was very interesting story about the Yemenis, who came here and did all this work, but it's never depicted or shown anywhere like I would like a statue of them, men doing their steel thing, and their name on that will be good, and you'll be I think my friends will be happy that their husbands and children were appreciated for building this country.

Les

I absolutely love Aisha's story about connecting Kenya to Sheffield via the family tea spoons, and we'll hear from her again towards the end of the episode.

But next, I'd like to introduce you to two of the researchers working on Roots and Futures.

Lizzy Craig-Atkins is Professor of Human Osteology at the University of Sheffield and the principal investigator of Roots and Futures.

Lizzy goes right to the heart of this project and she's thought deeply about inclusion, but let's begin by listening to Rhonda, one of the newest members of the Roots and Futures team

I was interested to hear them talk about different way of thinking about inclusion and co-production

Rhonda

I think it's looking at the diversity of the communities that we have in Sheffield. Sheffield has a rich history of you know, people coming from different parts of the world and engaging with their heritage and not forgetting who they are and where they come from

Les Back

And what aspects of that past are, the ones that you think of are the most important,

Rhonda

I think, remembering where you came from. You know, as an individual, your birthplace impacts a lot on the things that you believe in, the things that you stand for, the things that make you basically who you are.

Les Back

And do you think that that means that a city like Sheffield is remade by all of those many feet that have walked the streets and and brought the connections from the places they've come from and the lives that they've made here?

Rhonda

I'm going to go down the road of Carnival, because carnival allows everybody to be inclusive and to showcase their culture. So Sheffield has been fortunate to have their carnival because that allows us to engage with all the communities, to showcase their culture in carnival for everybody to get a taste of the food and their dance and their music and everything. So basically, that's what Roots and Futures is about, you know, remembering your culture and your heritage and holding on to your identity, you don't need to change to fit in. Be you.

Les Back

Do you think, though, and I want to ask this to you, Lizzy, does it mean that then what Sheffield is and what it's becoming shifts with that process too?

Lizzy

Right? Yeah, very much. So I think the city has to shift, because the people that constitute the city will change over time. The kind of the roots, elements of Roots and Futures is important, because the city has a history. It has a heritage, but that history and heritage is constantly remade, reimagined and reinvented by new people and trying to make those connections in ways that empower and support people who've previously not really had much of a say in how that's done is really kind of what Roots and Futures is about. So I guess one of the ways that we can help is by raising the profile, by showing the fact that these sorts of things should be a priority to people who hold the purse strings at kind of local and regional government level, but also enabling people to do their own thing and step outside those structures, get their own funding, you know, create their own organisations.

Les Back

So are you, you're both trying to reflect and give a voice to people within Sheffield to describe their sense of place. Do you think that, in a way, what the project is doing is remaking what community is here?

Rhonda

Yeah, I think you know how you would take an old picture and refurbish it to bring it back to life, and I think that's what Roots and Futures is doing. Reimagining that way

Lizzy

One area that's really important to the kind of conversation about what's changing here is to do with visibility. And visibility is a theme that came up in all of our consultations over the past 12 months, that many of the communities we've worked with have a strong internal sense of their own identity, but they don't see that identity reflected elsewhere in the city. And so when we're thinking about ideas of reimagining community or reimagining there's a real strong sense, I think, from people's input to the project, that that needs to have an element of diversity. The city needs to look like the communities that make up the city as it is today, while not forgetting all those communities that have come, have been, have gone, or indeed are still here, because Sheffield has a really long history of many different migrant groups. Sheffield has come from many, many different backgrounds, but they're all Sheffielders.

Les Back

And what do you feel is your sense of how open the municipality has been and and the city itself to the kinds of questions that you're trying to explore really and and a way of reimagining what the city is itself?

Lizzy

We're really lucky as a project to have partners representing both the city council. We've been working with the council from the very beginning of the project, and also representing the city's heritage strategy, which has now just been adopted by the council, creating a nice link between those, those two kind of policy based partners that we began the project with. So I think what's really valuable about the way that Sheffield has gone about it, thinking about its heritage strategy, is that it's a grassroots document produced by community organisations within the city. The caveat to all that optimism was, of course, that one of the main objectives of that strategy is founded on a recognition that the different voices present in its formation were not fully representative of all the different communities in the city.

Lizzy

So I guess that's where we find ourselves as a project, with our policy and strategy partners Joined Up Heritage Sheffield, and Sheffield City Council is helping to support that breadth and growth of different participants that there are within their extant strategies, and hopefully develop and kind of change things for the future, so that everything works in a way that benefits all communities in the city.

Les Back

I wonder if I could ask each of you if there's an example you can think of from the project that that has been that you've been surprised by something that you couldn't have imagined before doing the project that it's revealed.

Lizzy

I think what's been really significant for me is the extent to which our community participants, people from across the city, from from different backgrounds who have traditionally been underserved and marginalised by the way heritage has been presented and and done, have been willing to share so much of their their kind of insight and their understanding with us. One of the strongest and kind of most affecting part of our interviews was when we were working directly with the black ladies group, who were based in Park Library and work under the auspices Manor and Castle Development Trust. They wanted to work with us directly on an aural histories project. They wanted to share their stories of being Caribbean women who had come into Sheffield generally in the kind of mid 20th century and made a life with the city here, but they were also really engaged and really enthusiastic about sharing some of the challenges and the problems that they faced. They were really hopeful about the way in which this might change in the future, and they shared some really important insights. One lady explained that living in the city for the last 40, 50, years, she'd never seen anything that made her feel like she was visible, or that you could tell that black or brown people, in her words, were living here. And I think that made a really strong impression on me, because it really did show the foundations of why work like this is still so necessary.

Rhonda

And I think it would be amazing if this project could run next year, year after year after keep going. Just keep going. I think that roots and futures shouldn't just be something that just happens. And at the end of 2023, because of funding, be forgotten about. You know, the funders should recognise, in my opinion, this is a gold nugget we have here, and we should invest in it. Because, you know, just like roots, it's going to grow and it's going to grow leaves, and our young people are the leaves and the future are the fruits that will hang from those branches. So yeah.

Les

A beautiful metaphor there from Rhonda illustrating why projects like Roots and futures are so important.

Rhonda and Lizzy's reflections on representation took me back to our episode on the Museum of Discomfort at Glasgow's Hunterian Museum.

There is a deep history of underrepresentation in our society and it's so important, and valuable for everyone to have a better understanding of how identities, places and cultures are shaped.

[you could comment more deeply on how that can help to confront thing like misinformation and fear spread by bad faith media and influential figures]

Co-production is a bit of a buzz word in research at the moment, and it's so much easier to talk about than actually implement, but when it's done well, it really works.

Izzy Carter is a historian and the co-investigator of Roots and Futures. Much of her work is connected to place and working with communities.

One of the people she collaborates with is Robin Hughes from Joined up Heritage Sheffield and he brings a lot of expertise about Sheffield's built environment to Roots and Futures.

I met them both in the beautiful St George's Churchyard, right next to the University of Sheffield's Diamond Building and I began by asking Lizzy how working with place and city life can help us understand how communities work...

Izzy 1

So we are really passionate about place on the Roots and Futures project, and we describe it as a place based heritage project. Now we approach place in a couple of different ways. So obviously, we're based in Sheffield. This is a project that is just focusing on Sheffield. So place as a geographical element is very important to us in that sense. But we also understand place as something that is a little bit more abstract. So it's something that is kind of a repository for emotions, experiences, people's memories. It's what people use to kind of shape stories about themselves and their identities. So we also understand place as something that very much informs experience and belonging.

Les Back

I guess, Lizzy the risk, sometimes for researchers or policymakers or politicians, is to tell people about their places and who they are in their communities. But it feels like the project is trying to change how we understand community from both within but also in dialogue with those without.

Izzy

Yes, absolutely. So the ethos of the project is really around co-production, we are working, ultimately, to really disrupt those traditions of community engagement work that impose knowledge and expertise from an institution like a university onto communities, and will purely extract information from communities for the sake of a research project.

Les Back

I imagine Lizzy, as a researcher, often we try to control the questions and the problems that we want to prioritise. It feels like in the context of this commitment to co-production, you have to let go of some of those controls. Could you tell us a little bit about what's been gained, but also what the maybe the challenges of that process of letting go?

Izzy

Yes, absolutely. So I'm an oral historian by trade, so I'm used to doing the interviewing, and have come up with kind of some interview questions that I know I want to ask, but then I'll kind of leave the conversation open to the people that I'm working with, with something like this, it's much more important to allow the organisations that we're working with to kind of set the questions. So in practice, what we did when we were approaching the consultations was come up with a set of themes that were responsive to the community need as we'd assessed it thus far. We came up with, I don't know how many questions, so many questions that were not necessarily applicable to directly asking community members.

Izzy

We then put those questions to the community organisations, and we had essentially a working draft of what those questions looked like. They were then amended by each organisation, so they would pick questions from our question bank that most suited them and what they were hoping to find out from their communities, and then reword them to make them a lot more accessible and that that importance of terminology and accessible language has been something that has just come up again and again and again that I have found really interesting from an academic perspective, to interact with, because I have even sat in consultations and immediately, with my note taking, translated what people are telling me

directly into kind of academic speak, because I'm used to doing that, and I've actually had people saying to me, What are you writing down there? Are you writing down what we're saying, or are you translating this in some way, and how far is some meaning lost there? And how far is this kind of subscribing to kind of hierarchies of power within language, and actually perhaps using academic language to sometimes alienate the communities that you're working with.

Les Back

Thank you so much, Izzy, we have another member of this collaboration, Robin Hughes from Joined Up Heritage. Could you just do the same, Robin? So just tell us who you are and where you work and your involvement in Roots and Futures.

Robin

So yes, I'm Robin Hughes, and I'm a trustee of a charity called Joined Up heritage Sheffield. I don't work at all. I mean, you know, you know how it is with retirement you stop working and wonder how you have had time to go to work in the first place. And I probably ought to tell you something about Joined Up Heritage Sheffield itself. So it came into being seven years ago, something like that. A group of various kinds of heritage campaigners felt that for a long time, heritage I'll come to what heritage is in a moment, heritage in the city had had a fairly poor deal. The physical fabric of heritage, the historic environment in the city, has got particularly badly eroded over successive decades, and there didn't seem to be much appreciation of how this actually related to people who lived in the city or worked or played here, and what it meant to them, the significance to them. And it was time to try and draw those threads together, to try and influence public policy, because that's the big thing. So if you can have some kind of influence over how those decisions are made, then actually a lot of the rest will just become a great deal easier. So but it wasn't all about being a lobby group or a campaign group. It was actually trying to be something of a collective voice for the heritage sector. And so what this group decided to do was to try and create a heritage strategy for the city. And it's going to be different to all of the heritage strategies, because the usual model is a local authority perceives the value of heritage, or the historic environment, and decides they're going to have a heritage strategy. They'll get a consultant in, consultants will go out and consult. They'll do a good job, and then there'll be a kind of top down narrative. So we said, right, we're going to go from the grassroots up. It's going to be something that's created by the community for the city as a whole. So it's not a community heritage strategy as such. It's a strategy that is for Sheffield and which we wanted decision makers and, you know, the the big movers and shakers in the city to be able to take forward and actually be part of the implementation.

Les Back

Robin it seems like there's a risk that municipalities or politicians hand the citizens of a city like Sheffield their heritage. And the risk is that it's kind of given over to or imposed in a way. And I just wanted to ask you about, well, what you're trying to join up.

Robin

We're trying to join up and harness the immense energy that you can see all around the city. There are lots and lots of heritage groups. There's about 40 registered already. But that's, you know, that's maybe not much more than the tip of the iceberg. You know, everywhere you look, somebody has something they care about, you have to ask why they care about it, because of the meaning that they ascribe to it, but they weren't being heard outside their area. They needed a sense of here's all this energy, here's all this this passion, here's all this creativity, and it's being very well directed, but it's not then amounting to something larger, so that the city as a whole starts to understand itself. And you start to realise actually, these buildings might be important because of their grandness and because of the money that was spent on them, but they're also important because hundreds or 1000s or 10s of 1000s of people have been there and to them. It was just where they did this, and their story is then

interwoven with story of that building. Actually, all that building is kind of, you know, it's the cover around all these threads that are going through. And it's those threads, those narratives, that actually keep us secure in our environment. So you can design a building for safety and security, but actually a recognisable place, a place that has some kind of meaning to you, personally and to the people that are close to you, but also to other people that you don't know, that can make you feel safer in your environment, because you know this is your place. You belong here. That's not necessarily all about places. It can be about books. It can be about stories. It can be about recipes. Our definition of heritage was deliberately drawn very, very widely. I summarise it by saying it's heritage if it's something you've inherited that you care about enough to want to be able to leave for succeeding generations to enjoy as well. And that's it, doesn't have to be a physical thing. It can be an idea. It can be a place that has no physical things in it, just where something happened or where people happen to meet. So it's deliberately a very, very wide definition.

Robin

Almost the classic Sheffield example of an abstract significant place is somewhere like Cole's corner. Cole's is not there anymore. Coles left there the same year I was born. The building that Coles was in was demolished a couple of years later. So Cole brothers, the department store, moved on, and since then, they became John Lewis and they vacated their building. The whole world is a different place now. So the place is just this bit of the pavement. This is where people used to arrange to meet because it was a conveniently central corner outside a nice department store. And yet, the name persists. Richard Hawley has used it as the title of one of his albums. Everybody still knows where it is as even a plaque there, if I remember rightly. And yet, is that a heritage asset? I mean, in planning terms, it isn't, but in many other definitions, it is, and we've got to somehow make it apparent that a place can be valuable for reasons that you can't quite put your finger on, and they don't necessarily have objects that you can touch, and yet they are valuable and they connect people together.

Les Back

Are there times Robin where those who claim the heritage for their own sometimes come or make claims that are kind of proprietorial? They're for us and not you say. Or can it be a space where there's a struggle?

Robin

It can be, I'd almost flip that around a little bit and say there's a bit of a tendency to assume that somebody who is in some way different to us must appreciate different things. So it's not so much of this is my heritage hands off. It's I need to discover who this what this other person's heritage is, and by asking the question, you may discover that, in terms of its physical presence, it's the same stuff. It may even be appreciated in exactly the same way. Just because somebody's grandparents are from a different country or a different class, this does not mean that they have to pick they have to pick a side. They have to pick what it is that is going to be appreciated. And this very much ties in with the roots and futures, idea of not going out and being extractive, not not saying, right? You tell us about the things that you like, because that'll be a load of new stuff, won't it? And as with everything in life, some of it will be the same, some of it will be different.

Les

Reflection on what they said.

Well it's nearly time to bring this special bonus episode of Recovering Community to a close, but before I go, I want to leave you with a final thought from Aisha Jones - the wonderful community volunteer who we heard at the start.

It really was inspiring to share time and listen to her experiences, and I asked Aisha, what does community mean to her?

Aisha

I don't know. I always go back to Kenya, and I was brought up in an area whereby we had a community centre run by the missionaries. Every time when we are at home and we're bored, we would just go to the centre, and at the centre, we'll meet all the people from our area, and we're like a big family in a small place that is community. They helped us. They gave us milk, they helped us uniform and a lot of stuff they gave us, and we had fun. We had like, swings, and we just went there and enjoyed ourselves. I see it here. It's just now we are very early, but if you come at like five o'clock, six o'clock, there is community going on here, and you can literally come here and be fed with the community. And I'm not joking, you get food and tea because there's Yemeni, there's Syrians, there's a lot of people come together and they eat, they exchange words, they they exchange numbers to know each other, and they enjoy the weather. It's such a nice way of being in one community and in one area, and come together, and, you know, celebrate where we're living.

Les Back 30:53

Well, Aisha, such a joy to talk to you. You really are a champion this of this community, and it's it's a real honour to meet you so much. Thank you. Best wishes for everything that you're doing.

Aisha 31:05

Thank you, pleased I'm recognised now. Thank you for listening to me.

Les Back 31:12

We didn't pay you to say that, but actually that was brilliant.

Les

In his novel *Shame*, Salman Rushdie wrote: "we pretend that we are trees and speak of roots." But is our sense of place only about that? Rushdie further provoked his readers: "Look under your feet. You will not find gnarled growths sprouting through the soles."

People are not trees tethered permanently to place. The story of the modern world is also about the routes of migration.

The heritage of any place is made at the crossroads of those routeways.

So the ground of community is always a story of rootedness in place and the traffic of people, culture and things cross what Geographer Doreen Massey called a global sense of place.

Just like the story of Aisha's tea spoon in Kenya made of Sheffield Steel.

That's it for this season for Recovering Community; I'm Les Back and I'm really grateful to everyone who has given their time and expertise to make these episodes possible.

If you're interested in finding out more about the roots and futures project in Sheffield, have a look online - there are so many more branches on this tree!

We're already working on plans for our next episodes, but your feedback, comments and questions are always so welcome. You can get in touch with me via social media, and there's more information in the show notes.

If you're interested in podcasting as part of your academic research, please do share your work or what you're listening to, I'm always so interested to hear what other people are working on.

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Recovering Community is produced by Freya Hellier.