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'placemaking'



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'Breathing a bit of life back into the blocks' CULTURAL PLACE MAKING IN THE INNER CITY

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Balsall Heath is an inner city area of Birmingham, UK. It is a place with a rich history that figures in various ways in the cultural and political imaginary of the city. Notable for its diversity, Balsall Heath has welcomed a range of migrant communities, with Yemeni groups settling in the 1940s followed by Pakistani and Sylhet Bengalis arriving from the mid-1950s. More recent arrivals are migrants from Afghanistan, Sudan and Somalia who establish themselves alongside the long-term and enduring presence of Irish and Caribbean groups.



IMAGE by Paul Long

Identified by the City Council as a priority neighbourhood for attention and intervention through a number of mechanisms, Balsall Heath records some of the highest levels of social and environmental deprivation in the UK.

In addition to these characteristics, this is a place that has attracted attention on a number of occasions, often focussed on a range of irruptions resulting from social and cultural conflicts. For instance, in the 1990s, Balsall Heath's reputation as a red-light district led to a well-publicised mobilisation by some community members to protest against prostitutes working on the streets and from houses in the area (Hubbard 2002). More recently, its schools have been the object of a wider investigation into an alleged take-over plot to provide a fundamentalist education in schools with a largely Islamic student body.

Alongside its multiple deprivations, such instances draw attention to the manner in which the sphere of culture in Balsall Heath is an object of policy attention from a number of agencies, including the City Council. Predicated on a 'deficit model' of cultural activity, the neighbourhood has witnessed the importation of a wealth of arts programmes.

These have sought to engage the disadvantaged and 'hard-to-reach' in creative activities and with a number of purposes, not least of all in seeking to enhance community and a sense of place (for a summary of this kind of policy approach, see: Jancovich & Bianchini, 2013; Bell & Oakley, 2014).

In light of this framework, it should be noted that with its cheap rents and property, Balsall Heath has been a home to the City's bohemians and indeed has historical associations with the surrealist movement while the local Moseley School of Art nurtured a wealth of creative talent. Thus, while policy and the projects it authorizes might assume to enculture this place, there is much that emerges organically that aids in creative placemaking. Such work draws from and gives Balsall Heath its distinctive character, not always recognizable within the terms of conventional aesthetic directives and expectations. That said, the often overt 'othering' of this place in public policy and in its wider representations from without is something to which one needs to be reflexively resistant.

A signal figure, whose work and activity is instructive in dealing with such issues and in the cultural making of place here, is the artist Mohammed Ali. Under the umbrella title of Aerosol

Arabic, and through the auspices of the organization Soul City Arts which he founded, Ali's aim is to establish a permanent space for creative activity in and by the local community while welcoming those from across the city and further afield to participate.

Ali's artistic practice evinces this commitment and generous sensibility. It takes its stylistic cue from the style of graffiti street art and its associations with hip-hop culture. This is art that emerges from public space and which is best presented there in the form of large-scale murals that sat initially amidst the streets he grew up in and lately have been installed around the world. Whether in New York, Chicago, Toronto, Melbourne, Dubai or elsewhere, Ali's work is produced with reference to the specificity of each locality and the particular character he discovers there and enlists from collaborators in each community.

Ali describes his work in terms of 'Art bursting outside of the gallery spaces'; it is 'accessible, an art form for the people'. The Aerosol Arabic website cites descriptions of his approach as one 'challenging the oft-heard term "clash of civilisations" with his fusion of street-art and Islamic script, along with conscious messages that speak to people of different faith traditions'.

This ethos is evident in the work Ali has produced in the area of Balsall Heath and its neighbouring areas of Small Heath, Sparkbrook and Moseley. This work draws on these places in its aesthetic statement and in its presence on the walls of each area adds to the nature of place and variety of cultural possibilities. In one [video statement](#) he ponders the colourful nature and imagery any public work, officially sanctioned or otherwise, suggesting that 'surely that does have an impact on the way we think, the way we feel'. Certainly, he champions the value of his own murals as 'breathing a bit of life back into the breeze blocks' of the built environment which both shelters, nurtures and perhaps limits in turn.

Reproduced below, for instance is an image of a mural at the junction of Ladypool and Highgate

Roads, right at the heart of the Balsall Heath area.

The signifiers of this mural speak to the transmutations of place, of how this operates at a number of physical and cultural levels, between the infrastructure of built environment and the 'structures of feeling' of everyday life. The vibrant palette expresses Ali's ideas about the life-affirming impact of and attention grabbing aspects of public art.

The mural has a personal dimension for him in referencing the local BSA factory where, like many other post-war migrants, the offer of work brought his own father from Pakistan to Birmingham, to aid in the maintenance of industrial production. In its current form, the Birmingham Small Arms Company (or BSA), barely compare with its heyday as an

industrial giant but the company acknowledges its heritage, and in so doing indicates its signification for many in Balsall Heath, other neighbourhoods and communities understood in a variety of ways:

'The story is not entirely one of steady progress and expansion; there is drama and excitement too. And because [BSA](#) has served its country more directly than most private concerns, its story is also part of Britain's history.'

The placing of Ali's imposing and unmissable 'canvas' around a derelict industrial site and scrapyard in part disguises yet offers a contrapuntal comment on what has been lost in the nature of contemporary work.

Yet what has been lost have given way in turn to new types of endeavour in the area. For some, this comes in the form of the

service industry, as the labour represented by BSA has given way to the restaurant and other enterprises.

Even while some physical spaces remain relatively untouched, soundscapes, smells and the essential rhythms of life may be added to or alter as a result of migration. For instance, perhaps as a direct result of a [demographic shift](#) many public houses – a traditional focus point for certain kinds of community activity - have closed and given way to new uses and users. Balsall Heath's Ladypool Road is central to an area that is [marketed](#) by city agents as the 'Balti Triangle' in recognition of the high concentration of restaurants there serving South Asian cuisine. Alongside the many fabric and fashion businesses servicing the cultural dispositions of the migrant community (See:



IMAGE by Paul Long



IMAGE by Mohammed Ali



IMAGE by Mohammed Ali

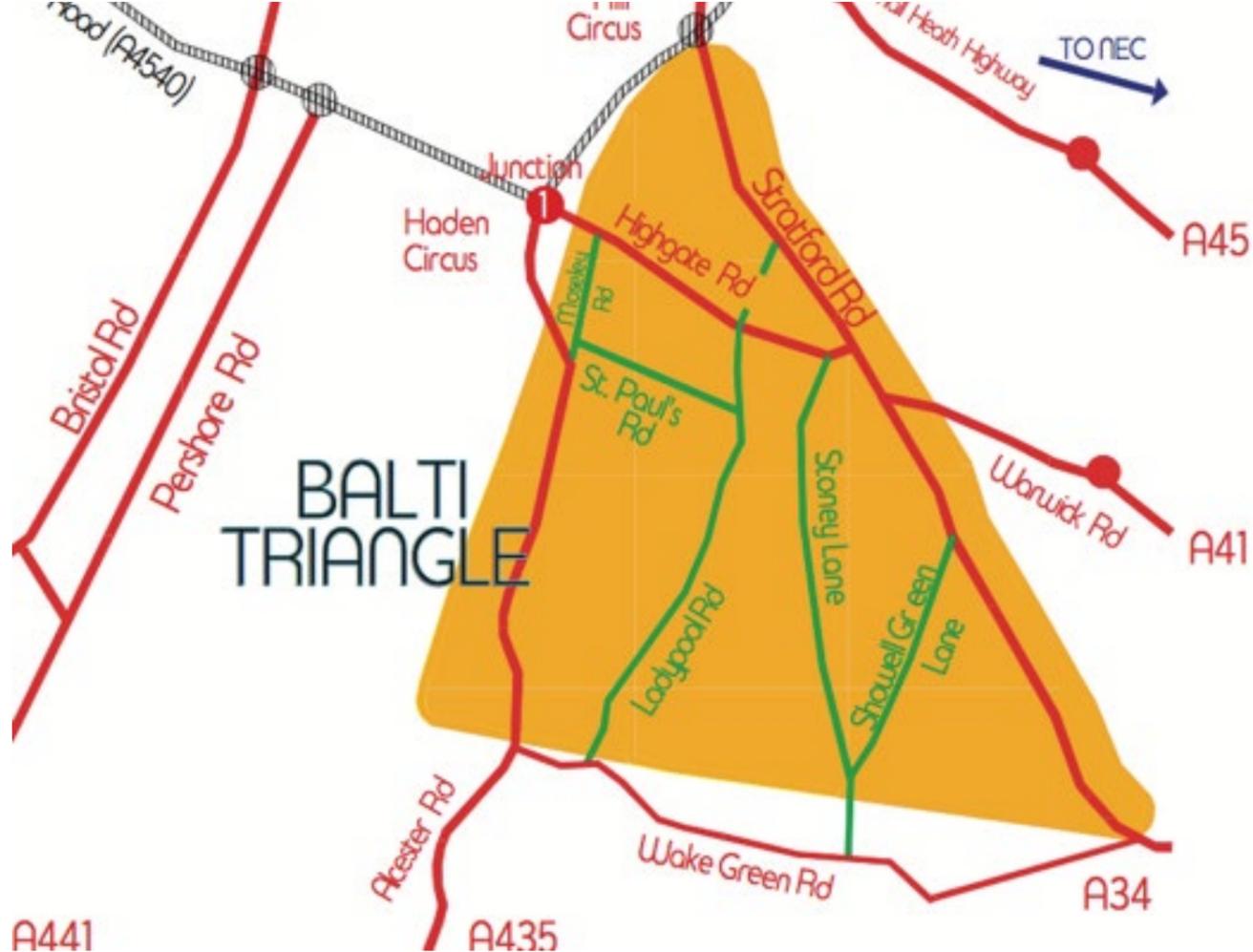


IMAGE from www.balti-birmingham.co.uk

Sardar, 2012), such features evince the manner in which migration remakes place.

Nonetheless, there in the mural, alongside the dome of the mosque and minaret (are they here, or glimpsed as memories from another home?), is the high street vegetable stall that still services all of the community, even if some of its offer appears relatively new to UK shores and tastes. And there too, is an ornate, spouted pot, reminding spectators of that most traditional of 'English' habits imported with Empire and shared now between cultures: tea drinking,

Here Ali espouses a relatively benign view of the rub of faiths and cultures (although of course, the BSA's products hint at a troubling history servicing the conquest of Empire). Yet, as the

instances of cultural conflict cited above suggest, placemaking can be a fraught process involving questions of rights, expression, belonging and conformity. This fraught quality is certainly one often acknowledged directly by Ali in his work, such as the rush if images and voices of the multi-media Conflict of Silence.

As culture plays a part in placemaking, Ali's work suggests how to speak to issues arising while contributing to a sense of place, aestheticizing, enhancing while commenting on it. It emerges organically and sensitively from the locations in which it is produced and in this instance, is all the more compelling for its personal dimensions. How and where are these aspects seen and heard by policy makers and by the communities to whom they

are is directed? The value and signification of such works in a wider sense of place are matters undergoing further investigation.

References:

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Soul City Arts presents CONFLICT OF SILENCE

In a pitch battle between cultures....
Who will be the victors, victims or villains?



Soul City Arts invites an intimate audience to view it's premiere of 'Conflict of Silence', an exploration of Balsall Heath against the backdrop of political correctness and a growing far right in British politics.

Designed, produced and performed by an ensemble of creative practitioners who have lived, worked, or played in Balsall Heath, the performance is a commentary on Faith through the experiences of some of Birmingham's marginalised and disaffected. The live performance will be followed by a post-show discussion.

The entire show and discussion will be recorded live and available to hear online within 24 hours of the event.

*A special visual art display will be available to view in the theatre space before the show starts.

 Tweet on the hashtag **#ConflictOfSilence**

Monday 17th November 2014 / 7pm - 8.30pm / **FREE ADMISSION**
mac Birmingham, Cannon Hill Park, Birmingham B12 9QH
for more information t: 07743 018 594 e: steve@soulcityarts.com



IMAGE: Soul City Arts, Mohammed Ali.