Routing out place identity through the vernacular production practices of a community light festival

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Introduction

*Lighting the Legend*, a community light festival in Ordsall, a neighbourhood in inner-city Salford, UK, has taken place each November for the last 26 years. This parade of hand-held, locally made paper lanterns generates an exuberant burst of energy in the November night, as residents walk through the housing estate towards a firework display in Ordsall Park. A small band of young children led by a professional drummer spiritedly play and sing throughout, attracting other residents, some long-standing, some new, who wave or join in the parade. The new residents are welcomed just as warmly as existing friends and neighbours.

Situated between Manchester city centre and Salford Quays, Ordsall’s residents have experienced momentous changes over the past five decades. In this chapter, we explore how their participation and the creative vernacular practices they mobilise in *Lighting the Legend* resist threats to their sense of place amidst fears that current levels of development will eventually displace them. Such concerns emerge from a historical context in which many recall the obliteration of around 18,000 dwellings in the ‘slum clearances’ of the 1960s and 1970s. These demolitions blighted the tight-knit community ‘long noted for a strong sense of community based on close association through family, friends, workplace as well as social and cultural activities’ (Norris Nicholson, 2001, p. 43). Though some families returned to replacement social housing in the 1980s, only a ‘minority of the original population were re-housed in the immediate area’ and there was considerable population loss (Cassidy, 2012, p. 169). A subsequent period of regeneration between 2001 and 2011 has since increased the population of the Ordsall ward by 111 per cent (Salford City Council, 2019).

*Lighting the Legend* emerged from a grassroots partnership of residents and artists in the early 1990s, harnessing a strong local sense of community pride despite prevailing social and economic conditions. For while certain areas of Ordsall’s rapid upmarket development are prospering, its social housing estates are some of the most deprived parts of the UK; Salford is the twentieth most deprived local authority area and deprivation on the Ordsall estate is within the lowest decile nationally, with health deprivation among the most disadvantaged in the country (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2019). The complex effects of such
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living conditions, along with gang violence, drug use, and gun crimes, can lead to stigmatization (Wallace, 2015). In responding to these conditions, Salford City Council has provided an annual subsidy to support *Lighting the Legend*. However, since 2014 austerity-driven cuts to local authority spending have been passed on to services deemed ‘non-essential,’ including the festival. This loss has provoked the development of organisational and creative skills amongst participants in attempting to sidestep their former reliance on the skills of paid professional artists.

In exploring these creative adaptations, we first highlight academic accounts of contemporary light festivals, including smaller, community events. We then explore how making, displaying, and carrying the lanterns creates ‘spatial, temporal and human interstices’ (Petcou and Petrescu, 2015, p. 259) within the frequently harsh everyday experiences of living in Ordsall. We subsequently discuss how participating in the festival and its production generates valuable individual outcomes and enables the forging of neighbourliness between disparate adjoining communities, reproducing a shared place-identity.

**Light festivals**

To date, research on light festivals has tended to focus on large, spectacular, metropolitan showcase events, often led by professional artists or cultural organisations. Contributions have explored the role of festivals in the formation of cultural policy and in boosting night-time economic strategies, their lack of place-specificity, the particular sensory and affective affordances of illumination, and the ways in which they may contribute to fostering a sense of place (Edensor and Millington, 2013; Alves, 2007; Giordano and Ong, 2017; Evans, 2011). More critically, while some accounts focus on how the process of ‘festivalisation’ (Häussermann and Siebel, 1993) can contribute to delivering economic outcomes, this economic instrumentality exposes them to criticisms that all too often, formulaic, homogeneous spectacles empty of meaning are produced that are passively consumed by audiences. However, other accounts suggest that a more nuanced analysis can reveal alternative responses and potentialities in placemaking (Edensor and Sumartojo, 2017; Edensor, 2012; 2017; Jeong and Almeida Santos, 2004). Moreover, festivals of all kinds can be understood as social and cultural experiences that diverge from the mundanity of everyday life and have the capacity to temporarily transform ordinary places into spaces that offer new meanings and sensations (Edensor, 2018; Rofe and Woosnam, 2015). In particular, community-centred festivals have the potential to offer bottom-up, locally oriented approaches to placemaking that veer away from the top-down economic and cultural strategies of city marketers (Friedmann, 2010). However, such potentialities have been somewhat overlooked, perhaps because many occur in marginal places and are small in scale. Derrett (2003) contends that community-based festivals can evolve over time to reflect shared values and foster a sense of community and place, partly by employing networks of local residents (Jarman, 2018), while Alves (2007) claims that a festive opening up of community spaces for local audiences can lead to a renewed sense of place and re-territorialization. Other accounts discuss how community festivals can permeate neighbourhoods, encourage more intensive use of places, generate memories for local residents, and offer scope for the evolution of new meanings and practices while sedimenting shared community values (Edensor, 2018; Rofe and Woosnam, 2015). In this context, we focus on how one small light festival, *Lighting the Legend*, acts as a crucible for initiating the formation of shared community identities.

In considering lantern-making and parading as the symbolic crux of this festival, we elucidate Alves’ (2007, p. 1252) contention that light can play ‘a central role in the creation of cultural events that may energise cities’ nocturnal lives. Throughout history, communities have used light to celebrate and commemorate, mark agricultural growing seasons, protest and unify
Bonfires, torchlight processions, Christmas lights, and lantern parades have a long history (Stevens and Shin, 2014) and may provide significant occasions in people’s lives. Such festive events often have roots in carnivalesque rituals, away from the burden of working life and social control (Croose, 2014), facilitating ludic behaviours and expressions that disrupt mundane experience, outcomes often neglected by criticisms of instrumentality (Edensor, 2014). In some cases, these events have developed from a mythical story or a celebrated local legend (Fox, 2002; Edensor, 2018; Quinn, 2013). Here, we consider how residents involved in the Lighting the Legend festival, itself inspired by a local legend, develop skills in developing and staging the festival.

Crucially, we draw on a longitudinal study which documents the production practices, creative programmes, festive event itself, and the annual cycle of organisation of Lighting the Legend, an event that annually engages approximately 200 participants, predominantly children under 12, who create their own lanterns. The festival takes place around the UK’s Bonfire Night, 5 November annually, and is the most significant event of the year for many local residents, some of whom are also part of the festival production team that primarily comprises female residents with deep roots in the community. They are currently grappling with the challenges of replacing resources once provided by the state and other public agencies to deliver the festival, and we explore how they develop the new skills required to sustain this place-based festival.

From cultural policy to vernacular creativity?

In order to examine the development of the placemaking capabilities of Lighting the Legend, we review its evolution as an outcome of cultural policy initiatives from the 1970s onwards. The deployment of artists as intervention agents to support struggling communities followed the radical period of the alternative arts and theatre movement that emerged from the global student insurrections of 1968. Due to its rates of high crime and deprivation, the Ordsall estate was the recipient of local political intervention in this era. The City Reporter (10 November 1978) details that revenue funding for Ordsall Community Arts was financed over a five-year period under Phase 17 of the Urban Programme. This government aid package gave ‘financial help for social and educational projects in urban areas with particular social needs and problems, for which Salford … qualified’ (Salford CVS Report, 2016), and Ordsall Community Arts employed artists and practitioners to develop culturally engaging programmes. Influenced by Welfare State International, who pioneered lantern-making practices in the UK by importing paper and willow technology from China (Fox, 2002), the artistic team utilized lantern- and prop-making as part of the processional ‘folk-art’ that ‘came to form the bedrock of participatory alternative theatre’ (Croose, 2019).

In 1992, many UK cities experienced summer rioting; Ordsall’s ferocious reputation was sealed in the summer of 1992. Riots broke out across Salford, but it was Ordsall, just across the road from the gleaming Salford Quays, which hogged local and national headlines. A fireman was shot as he tried to douse a blazing Job Centre and a police dog handler survived a bullet ricocheting inside his vehicle. The Carpet World warehouse was destroyed in an arson attack (Keeling, 2004).

By this time, community artists had already formed strong partnerships with local residents and in order to counter further unrest, they continued to develop arts practices that particularly sought to engage with young people. Two years later, the idea of a community light festival as a strategic intervention to avert further anti-social behaviour was proposed, led by Ordsall Community Arts. According to Bennett (2018, p. 161), the community arts movement took as its ‘starting point the material circumstances of those perceived to be disadvantaged or oppressed.’
Utilising a broader historical perspective, Matarasso (2013) attests that since their beginnings in the late 1960s, community art practices have constantly changed; at Ordsall, continued funding from national and local authority revenue allowed the organisation and the festival to flourish but this came at a cost, with the radical roots of community arts, forged during the early years, left behind. Reviewing the community arts movement’s efficacy following policy interventions of the 1970s, Jeffers and Moriarty (2017) claim that its lifespan ended in the late 1980s, following a trend from ‘radicalism to remedialism’ (cited in Matarasso 2013, p. 216). As Courage (2017) contends, changes have also been provoked by the dilemma for cultural organisers in employing artists as key agents, particularly pertinent in this case with the withdrawal of state subsidy to Ordsall Community Arts under austerity conditions, soliciting a change from a professional to a voluntary arts organisation.

Formerly managed by a professional festival manager, Lighting the Legend is currently organised by a group of local women, initially recruited as volunteers to support art activities, who schedule regular meetings to plan the festival. By participating as volunteers and in workshops and events between 2016 and 2019, we gained privileged access into these women’s experiences as they have taken up the reins of festival organisation and followed a steep learning curve to manage multiple administrative, financial, logistical, technical, and creative tasks. They constantly juggle the organisation of a creative programme of workshops with their busy lives as family carers in an area where extended families are common and residents experience levels of ‘health and wellbeing that is worse than the national average’ (Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Devolution, 2017).

In 2017, approximately 200 children and young people were invited to make lanterns in school or community environments. The women’s group recruit other adult volunteers to help prepare materials which they often take home to spend hours doing ‘in front of the telly’; ‘plabour’ (Hawkins and Price, 2018, p. 4), rather than the hard graft of more formal work. They also initiate and manage fund-raising activities, attract local business sponsors, run raffles, and organise a fundraising ‘Ordsall’s Got Talent’ contest. They begin work on the forthcoming festival early in the year, commencing with the organisation of a steering group of local residents to discuss the parade route and selection of the annual theme. In following the ongoing emergence of Lighting the Legend since 2016, we consider how residents are reconfiguring a bottom-up approach to building community resilience and explore how emergent forms of vernacular creativity are remaking everyday space (Edensor, 2018). In so doing, we focus on the creative retelling of the mythical tale upon which the festival is founded, the inventive route-making practices that are organised, and the imaginative processes through which Lighting the Legend’s annual theme is produced.

The salience of the mythic narrative of Lighting the Legend

The original inspiration for Lighting the Legend is the myth that in the lead-up to the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, Guy Fawkes stayed at Ordsall Hall, a fifteenth-century landmark manor house. The Hall was home to the Radclyffe family, recusant Catholics who were potentially close to the conspiracy. A nineteenth-century romantic serial by William Harrison Ainsworth, Guy Fawkes (1842), imagines Fawkes escaping from the authorities through an underground tunnel directly from the Hall, assisted by the Radclyffes. This work of fiction continues to ignite a proud association within the community to one of England’s most infamous revolutionary plots, and this has been accentuated by the annual 5 November celebrations. The nationwide commemorative celebrations following the failed plot eventually lost their anti-Catholic fervour, evolving into the vernacular, secular tradition of Bonfire Night. Before the 1960s demolitions, this was a
popular night for residents of Ordsall’s closely packed terraced houses, which afforded plenty of local places for the night’s activities, as local resident Madge Bown recalls:

Bonfire night was a big thing here, nearly every street had a bonfire – the one outside our house; we had it there that long that … [laughs] you could walk down the street, any street and you could tell where the bonfire had been, and it had damaged the cobbles in that area. And then of course you had fireworks, and the bonfire [laughs] … everybody brought chairs out, and if you had anything you wanted to get rid of, anything, it was round the bonfire, and gradually, somebody would say ‘I want that, that’ll go on the bonfire,’ so you ended up with nothing [to sit on] [laughs]. You know, people would make things [to share] and chestnuts would go in, and somebody would bring toffee apples; it was all just for the one street, everybody was round that bonfire. But then you could go round and look at different bonfires, some were bigger than others.

Former residents directly link ‘the decline of family bonfire nights, [the cessation of] of children begging for pennies for the Guy, the diminution of bonfires on street corner bomb sites’ (Fehler, 2006, p. 4) with the loss of the old terraced streets. Yet Lighting the Legend echoes the community spirit described above and has provided at least a temporary space for the loss of small, vacant plots and cobbled streets after 1980s demolition and rebuilding. Reiterating the tradition founded on Bonfire Night has been effective in reinforcing place-identity in an area once renowned for its close-knit community. Battling with anti-social problems well into the 1990s, the pride released by making and carrying lanterns in this annual tradition in honour of their mythical history provided a defence against negative stereotypes for local children. Perhaps the alluring association with the romantic imagery of a revolutionary chased through the tunnels of Ordsall (Sharp, 2005, as cited in Fehler, ibid.) has been significant enough to fire local imaginations in spite of the lack of any historical evidence. Indeed, one parent vehemently complained that there was no reference to this story at her son’s 5 November primary school assembly, a perceived threat to the continued reiteration of this local myth that provoked strong feelings.

Guy Fawkes Street, which runs alongside Ordsall Hall, is a constant element of the parade route, suggesting a shared social dimension to remembering, not only in the case of the myth but the memory of the old estate. For Ordsall Hall was among a small number of buildings left standing following the slum clearances of the 1960s and 1970s. Resonating with Deacon’s claim that ‘the shared dimension of remembering, and the equally social nature of how space is produced’ are intertwined, the formation of the festival has provided alternative symbolic spaces to replace what had once existed (Deacon, 1998, cited in Hoelscher and Alderman, 2004, p. 348).

Creative route-making and managing the parade

The predominant ingredient of Lighting the Legend is the carrying of hand-made lanterns through the streets by children. Aside from the release of fun and excitement, the route through the estate is also a vehicle by which the wider community can participate, support, and witness the parade, as local resident Sylvia Sharples articulates:

It is one of the largest events in our community and people of all ages participate during the event and in the preparations leading up to it. It helps keep our community together and is one of the few events during the dark nights at winter.
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The route itself is an important part of this illuminated, night-time walking tradition, as the parade claims space, makes noise, and draws attention. Parading through the streets was already part of local cultural practice with Roman Catholic and Church of England Whit Walks. According to Entwistle (2012, p. 209), these ‘processions not only represented the visible symbols of religious, political, and community identities, but were also an integral part of the common culture of working-class streets, the sites of most social interaction,’ though today there is little evidence of this once strong tradition in Ordsall. Residents reiterate the reasons for the decline of Bonfire Night in asserting that the loss of the streets is physically and socially dismantling the community, including the decline of a walking tradition, yet Lighting the Legend is ameliorating the loss of the ‘glorious spectacle’ of community expression in the public domain (ibid., p. 214). Practically, organisers must consider temporary access limitations, logistics of the support vehicle’s ability to access the whole route, and closeness to the main roads. Accordingly, they must negotiate between ‘carnivalesque’ rights for local residents and the upholding of Salford City Council’s obligations for ensuring residents’ safety. Jarman (2018) contends that irrespective of such impediments, it is the participants that collectively contribute to the place-making possibilities of a procession.

These potent affects generated by walking the streets have been made more effective by the changing routes that are devised from year to year. Recent changes to the route have been devised by the emerging leadership of the festival group, who organised a walking activity during school half term. The walking party consisted of two local parents and a group of seven children between the ages of 8 and 11. The adults had previously reviewed previous year’s routes in their meetings, with concerns focusing on the practical realities of the length of the walk and the weather conditions, one opining that ‘if it rains, it’s always too long, and people start to go home.’ Lighting the Legend is fuelled by children’s energy at the front and, frequently, a battle with the elements to get to the end. Along the walk, the group bumped into neighbours and friends who were greeted in a loud sing-song style, and the high-spirits of the children led to them joining in as a chorus. From then on, every person was greeted with a sung chorus of ‘Hiya,’ with all joining in and laughing. The experience of this impromptu choral performance inspired an idea for the community theatre at the end of the Lighting the Legend parade. This theatre piece expands the parade narrative, and in this case featured the recordings of the street names. The young people involved in the walking exercise were then invited in a separate workshop to create poems for each of the special lanterns that represent buildings, as detailed later, and during the creation of the lanterns this poetry was incorporated into a soundscape played for the audience present during this event. The familiar street names and daily paths through the estate were therefore elevated to something more than the everyday during the festival. The recordings allowed them to share their unique place experience, as well as entertain neighbours and audiences.

The 2017 parade walked past a developer’s hoarding, erected to enclose a large piece of land earmarked for housing development, the final phase of the Ordsall Development Framework (Manchester Evening News, 2017). The site was formerly a shopping centre which once provided local amenities, as well as a much-used path from the north of the estate to the schools and the doctor’s surgery. As they walked past the hoardings on their night-time parade carrying their symbols of place identity, the loss of access rights for local residents was accentuated. Following a decade of new housing developments, such hoardings are familiar, with new construction occupying 73 hectares of land (LPC Living, 2019). The public narrative is of regeneration success:

a once feared council estate, synonymous with trouble in the early 1990s, has been transformed into hundreds of modern, new homes. The £100m transformation of the
derelict Ordsall estate has taken more than a decade but the last few homes have now been built.

(Manchester Evening News, ibid)

For local residents however, the newly built houses across the estate do not register as belonging to them, and they are still subject to the ‘vagaries of regeneration politics’ (Wallace, 2014, p. 536) and continue to refer to construction projects on the sites of demolished houses as taking place on ‘our land.’

Despite these local sentiments, a study in 2014 recognised that a lively community spirit persists in Ordsall, with many residents ‘engaged and active in their community, working to stimulate a sense of pride in the area’ (Symons, 2018, p. 208). This positive, forward-thinking disposition was echoed during festival steering group discussions where the organising group actively encourage new families to take part in the festival, providing an example of ‘hidden’ care-giving which reveals the nature of ‘women’s work in the urban … landscapes that daily act to transform the understanding of the spatiality of everyday life’ (Dyck, 2005, p. 243). A generosity of inclusion is expressed even though the small group of women acknowledge the social divisions being created in the estate, where they feel that there are now two separate communities. Until recently, the festival manager leveraged public funding on the community’s behalf by foregrounding the festival’s promotion of social integration and the potential reduction of social isolation. Now, unsupported by such professional roles, the residents group demonstrates a magnanimous intention to enable the two communities to come together as participants in their community light festival, even if for a brief symbolic moment.

They also take considerable responsibility during the parade. For instance, one of the residents, Jean, volunteered to help out on the parade by handing out lanterns and stewarding. The energetic, older, unsupervised children at the head of the parade can in their ebullience occasionally bump into the drummers who lead the procession. Jean took it upon herself to take up a position between the drummers and the children and, as a strong athlete, using her body to prevent the children from coming forward too rapidly. In filling this responsible leadership void, Jean joined the group of volunteers who annually support the festival. The longevity of the festival allows for intergenerational interactions, with parents and grandparents accompanying young children and fostering family and communal connections. In supporting the children’s lantern-making, adults such as Jean show how ‘the relations among the generations are not just interpersonal; they are caught up in the material and cultural processes that give rise to places’ (Mannion, 2012, p. 395).

Creating the parade theme

2017 was the first year that the residents group decided upon the parade theme without the influence of a festival manager, and they drew on their own experiences for inspiration, beginning with a discussion of Ordsall’s lost heritage; between 1960 and 2015, as well as thousands of homes lost, demolition laid waste to schools, nurseries, churches, job centres, pubs, clubs, and factories. However, what began as a lament for these now-vanished sites developed into an acknowledgement of still-existing but uncelebrated sites in Ordsall, usually unreflexively apprehended through daily routines but integral to the habitual lives of these residents. They focused upon the importance of celebrating everyday sites at which they met friends and neighbours, joined in classes or workshops, experienced celebrations like fundraising events and parties, and where they collectively experienced a sense of community spirit. Accordingly, the route was designed to honour these everyday sites and buildings as symbols of Ordsall, and it was decided that lanterns fashioned in the shapes of shops, schools, local institutions, churches, and the Hall would be created.
Once the list of local buildings was decided upon, the group discussed issues around the fabrication of lanterns; one previous lantern of Ordsall Hall, made in the 1990s, ‘took ages to make,’ a luxury which the group no longer had the resources to pay an artist to spend days intricately making. Consequently, they discussed the making of basic and symbolic shapes to represent, for example, a logo for the school and a stained-glass window for the church. Gail participated in workshops at the Community Cafe and at Salford Girls Club. These sessions were co-curated by an adult maker and young people and discussed both the importance of particular buildings and the suitability of its structure for lantern construction. At the Girls Club workshop, the Lads Club building was deemed not especially recognisable in itself, but what has garnered attention has been the door and the sign above it, made famous by the iconic photograph of four members of band ‘The Smiths’ standing outside, taken by Steven Wright in 1984, and now exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery. The Club has experienced a renaissance that grew out of the enormous appeal of Wright’s photograph, with tourists travelling from all over the world to photograph themselves in front of the door and sign. However, the Girl’s group decided only to make the door sign in lantern form, changing the iconic text to ‘Salford Girls Club,’ to reflect their Tuesday night girls-only use of the club. They were asserting their identity in place, a shared pride that was highly evident on the night of the parade. However, in the session during which the lantern was fashioned they were presented with two identical sides, which they decided to label as ‘Boys’ and ‘Girls.’ This suggests nuanced and multiple layers of feelings of local pride, to a specific sense of belonging to the Girls Club as well as membership of the broader community of Ordsall. The lantern-making process is thus revealed to be far from static, but dynamic, replete with improvisation and negotiation.

As well as the small lanterns carried by children, a series of large lanterns are created and carried to boost the visual impact of the parade and act as thematic motifs; they are also used as props for a short community theatrical piece at the parade’s finale. As a creative placemaking tool, this short drama is designed to explore the annual theme. For the 2017 festival, as discussed above, these lanterns took the form of ‘buildings’ regarded as symbols of community vitality and were proudly carried by the youths and adults responsible for making them. At the end of the parade, the larger lanterns were laid out one by one to reproduce an image of a symbolic Ordsall street. As each lantern was ceremonially added, it was accompanied by a poetry reading devised by the young people to express its importance in the community:

With these Ordsall lights of ours  
The community takes part  
To celebrate what’s ours  
From the Lads Club to the Park  
With these lights of ours  
Shining brightly like the stars  
We’re the Ordsall community and proud

Here, illuminated forms were utilised to express the importance of places that had endured as key elements of Ordsall’s built environment, while also enabling a forward-facing, inclusive approach that acknowledged the continuously expanding community, allowing old and new residents to explore their environs together.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the processes through which the Lighting the Legend lantern festival in Ordsall has been produced since its initiation as a partnership project between the state
and local residents in the early 1990s. Since then, the festival has grown in tandem with funding support, and its recent withdrawal has created huge challenges for the festival’s continued sustainability, as the residents involved in its production must cope without the support of the professionals who were previously employed. While their conversations may reflect Salford City Council’s language of community development priorities, their exclusion from official cultural policy means that their actions are predominantly led by their need to be together on such an important night for them, the ‘hard to reach’ community (Symons 2017, p. 208). Accordingly, though the residents have experienced many State-supported efforts to ‘engage them’ in the past, they must now take the lead, and are developing their own vernacular skills, expressing their own sense of place-identity in devising the festival’s route, managing the parade and selecting the annual theme. Concurrent social changes in the population of the estate have challenged a sense of community, and yet the residents have welcomed new residents, overcoming their own insecurities. By generating their own festive practices that are based on their own experiences of living in Ordsall, they are rebuilding a sense of community which is inclusive of all those willing to engage with it, including those attracted by Ordsall’s regeneration. The lantern-making programme generates excitement and is a symbolic, material expression of local identity, while the parade unites the whole community. Taking into account ‘a massive sense of loss of sense of place in Salford over the last forty years, as the vast majority of the architectural fabric has been erased in all urban districts’ (Cassidy, 2012, p. 177), these local people have been active in the construction of a renewed sense of place through the creative and innovative production of a local light festival.

References

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Salford Housing News/100m transformation ordsall estate complete-12592319 (Accessed 26 November 2019).

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