

Hull's Ships in the Sky

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Hull's Ships in the Sky by Esther Johnson

Hull Co-Operative's 'Three Ships' Mural tried to 'unite the community through art'. Threatened by development, a community is now uniting to try and save it.

On the night of the Hull Blitz in 1941, the recently modernized Central Co-operative store was bombed, destroying almost all of the premises and £97,000 worth of stock. In 1947 a temporary Co-op store, known locally as 'The Prefab', was built. Meanwhile, the Co-operative Wholesale Society's Architects' Department had lavish plans to build a new store with the best materials available - a store providing every modern convenience for the people of Hull.

The Co-Op architect E.P Andrew points out that the Hull Co-Operative Wholesale Society "made everything from toffee to whole premises, a most amazing place. Just everything they ever did was the best quality. The Hull central premises was a really big job, and I was on that for years." Built from 1955 to 1964, the final Hull Central Co-op was a modernist's dream in five floors, crowned by a spectacular concrete handkerchief dome over the 'Skyline Ballroom' and restaurant. The 'Three Ships' mural, unveiled in 1963, is a bold, unmissable wonder of public art adorning the main entrance. Responding to the Co-op's brief to "unite the community through art" [Alan Boyson](#) created this 66x64 ft. concrete curved screen to celebrate Hull's maritime heritage and its trawler fleet. The mosaic comprises 1,061,775 individual glass tesserae, "[as it was too big for ceramic work](#)" and depicts three stylized trawlers with masts spelling 'HULL' over the motto 'Res Per Industriam Prosperae' (Success Through Industry) gliding through sea-surf.

When I was growing up in Hull, peering up at the sheer height of the 'Three Ships' was formative in my enthusiasm for modernism and my desire to study art. The sight of the mural would prompt my father, who came from a long line of seamen, to recount his tales of his first trawler trip at the age of 12 to Murmansk and beyond the Arctic Circle. I associate the 'Three Ships' with stories of fantastical voyages that began in Hull, and it remains a metaphor for where life might lead me.

E.P Andrew remembers that, "anything I could do to get Alan involved in I did because I admired his work so much. I imagine it's the colour of underwater. There's no attempt to represent the sky, the sea, the horizon - no, that would have been banal. This is an imaginative interpretation of an industry...It's a masterpiece." Boyson was known for '[bringing art to the people](#)' through his bespoke sculptural creations, commissioned by churches and educational, financial and commercial institutions. Boyson's Co-op assignments both break the mould, and yet are entirely typical of his work. The Hull premises are unique in having three of his creations sited in one building; the 'Three Ships' plus the 'Fish' mural (rediscovered by Christopher Marsden in 2011) and 'Sponge-Print' tile mural (rediscovered in 2018 through SHIPS in the SKY interviews) for the store's interior.

In buildings of the post-war era, it's often the public art that is first to go. The Co-op invested heavily in bringing art to the population by incorporating artworks within their building designs, and in embracing progressive developments in architecture. The Hull Boyson artworks are some of the last remaining examples of their type. Architectural historian [Dr Lynn Pearson](#) says, "The Co-op made a big impact with some lovely 1950s-'60s murals on shop exteriors, so attractive and colourful, and now rare." Many artworks

were in-house CWS designs, whilst others were commissioned from artists such as Boyson and William Mitchell, frequently using innovative techniques and unfamiliar combinations of materials.

After the Hull & East Riding Co-operative Society store closed in 1969, a branch of British Home Stores opened in the front of the store in 1970, with other areas later becoming an indoor market. [Hull Heritage Action Group](#), [Hull Civic Society](#) and the [Twentieth Century Society](#) all foresaw threats to the murals when BHS vacated the store in summer 2016, and swiftly applied for Grade II Listing. Listing was rejected and appeals were lodged. Hull City Council acquired the building and as it now lies empty and awaits redevelopment, canopy hoardings proclaim, “A Prime Opportunity in the Heart of the City”. In April of this year the council planning committee approved the current application to demolish the site in readiness for redevelopment, with conditions to retain the ‘Three Ships’ ‘if viable’, and to preserve and relocate the ‘Fish’ and ‘Sponge-Print’ murals.

In celebration of all that the building represents - from progressive public art, the co-operative movement and post-war rebuilding to women in the workplace, friendships forged through work, shopping and the nightclubs that have used the building - I have developed a social history arts project titled ‘[SHIPS in the SKY](#)’ to commemorate and prompt questions about who chooses what heritage is retained in the built environment. The importance of public art on/in commercial and civic buildings alike cannot be overestimated. Works such as the ‘Three Ships’ are symbols of geographical and historical local identity, a navigational aid connecting people’s memories of the unique places they grew up in, or pass through. As former DJ Paul Dakeyne (aka Tinman) discussing his memories of the building, says, “The Three Ships mural was a beacon because in those days people didn’t have mobile phones so would use the artwork as a meeting point to start their night out.” In a world crammed with virtual sites of memory, we still need meaningful sites like this in our real surroundings.

Esther Johnson is an artist and filmmaker, and professor of Film and Media Arts in the Art and Design Research Centre at Sheffield Hallam University.

Her website is at <http://blanchepictures.com>.

For further information on the Three Ships mural, see

<https://shipsinthesky.weebly.com> or [@ShipsInTheSky63](#) on Twitter and Instagram.