

Portland works - Sheffield: a framework for co-production and community ownership

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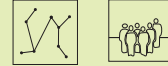
Published version

CERULLI, Cristina (2021). Portland works - Sheffield: a framework for co-production and community ownership. In: FOKDAL, Josefine, BINA, Olivia, CHILES, Prue, OJAMÄE, Liis and PAADAM, Katrin, (eds.) Enabling the City: Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Encounters in Research and Practice. Routledge, 202-209.

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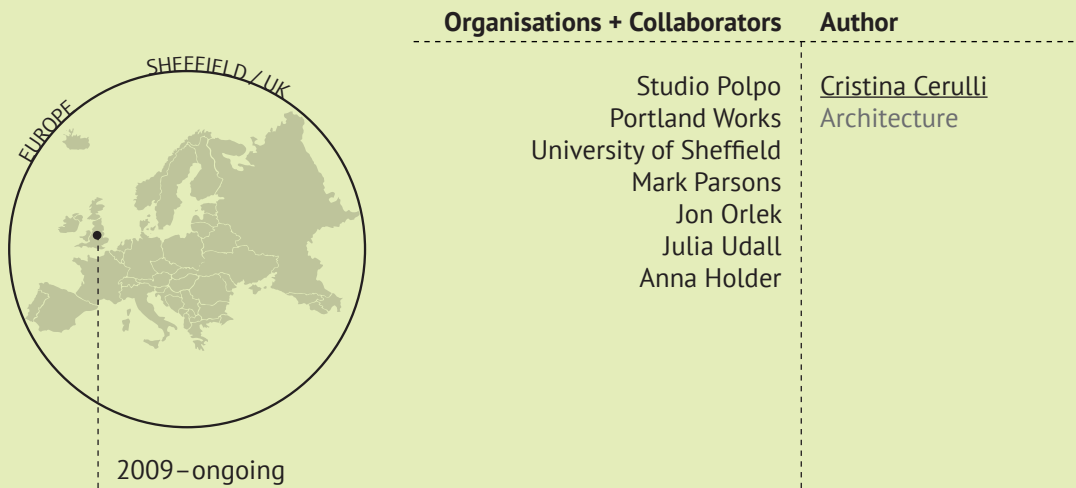
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03



PORTLAND WORKS – SHEFFIELD

A Framework for Co-Production and Community Ownership



Introducing Portland Works

Portland Works is a building whose importance was recognised with Grade II* listing by Historic England, a mechanism to protect by law “particularly important buildings of more than special interest” (Historic England, n.d.). Built in the 1870s, Portland Works is an integrated cutlery factory listed as a rare complete example of large integrated cutlery works, with a layout that optimises the use of power in the cutlery manufacturing process, and for retaining both hand forges and steam grinding rooms (Historic England n.d.). Its cultural significance also lies in the fact that, over a hundred years ago, in 1914, it was the birthplace of stainless steel cutlery manufacturing, which is now a key part of Sheffield’s identity. Despite its recognised significance and the fact that the building was home to a diverse community of thriving small businesses, including metalworkers, engravers, artists, wood workers and musicians, Portland Works came under threat in 2009, when its then owner lodged for “Change of Use” to convert the Works into bedsit flats. This sudden threat to both the

FIGURE III.3.1 Community shares issue launch event at Portland Works. Photo by Mark Parsons.

building and its wider historic and cultural significance, as well as to the livelihoods of those using the building at the time, spurred a campaign to save it.

Whilst this campaign initially focussed on opposing the immediate threat – the redevelopment of the building – it quickly shifted towards being a propositional endeavour, with tenants, activists, local residents, practitioners and academics working together to propose viable alternatives, rather than simply opposing the change of use (Cerulli and Udall 2011).

A Knowledge Transfer (KT) grant from the University of Sheffield facilitated a process to explore what sustainable alternatives might be available, through participatory events and research into precedents. A key moment within the KT project was a significant stakeholder workshop – attended by tenants, local residents, councillors and the local MP as well as conservation and community development experts – during which key elements of heritage value were discussed and prioritised. It is during this workshop that the milestone decision to buy the building and to manage it as a community asset was made. The governance and financial mechanisms through which this was achieved were the setting up of an Industrial Provident Society for the Benefit of the Community – essentially a cooperative, with a commitment to the wider community, rather than just its members – and raising capital through community shares, which served as a deposit for a standard commercial mortgage.

In 2013 Portland works was bought by nearly five hundred people, through Sheffield’s first community share issues. This recent chapter of the history of the building is a story of how communities with an interest in the Works self-organised to gain control through ownership and cooperative governance, strengthening the building as a renewed centre for small manufacturing, independent artists and craftspeople.

This story was made by many people. Hundreds of hours were volunteered by many to contribute to the multiple strands of the project, from exhibitions to media interviews, case studies of relevant precedents, student projects, business planning, stakeholder engagement and building repairs. The successful outcome of the project is in part due to the convergence of multiple interests, but also to the fact that processes were designed to allow multiple voices, even minor, to be heard, striving to keep the project open to inputs.

As an academic, practitioner and citizen I have been involved in the project in different roles, capacities and intensities.

I was initially approached by campaigners for support with exploring viable and sustainable alternatives for the building. Through the KT grant from the University of Sheffield, where I was then employed, I was able to run a project that culminated with the decision to purchase the building and manage it as a cooperative for the benefit of the community. In the same period I was also involved, on a volunteer basis, for countless hours in the lead up to the community share issue, which involved, amongst other things, the development of a detailed business plan.

The KT grant (£10K) provided support to the Portland Works project through enabling me to employ researcher Julia Udall (a former student of mine and now colleague, who had brought the Portland Works campaign to my attention); commission case studies of relevant precedents, a website and graphic identity for the project and fund participatory events and publicity. The KT project was an “intense” and “punctual” research activity, which enabled the development of an ongoing relationship between the newly formed Portland Works cooperative and the University of Sheffield, creating an informal “framework for co-production” (Udall, Forrest, and Stewart 2015, 4). Part of this loose framework were a number of student projects designed to produce work that somehow assisted Portland Works in achieving some of its objectives, ranging from a building survey to archival



FIGURE III.3.2 Excerpt from Retrofit Strategy for Portland Works. Photo by Studio Polpo.



FIGURE III.3.3 Portland Works – Internal Courtyard. Photo by Mark Parsons.

research to a physical model of the building, strategic documents and event support. These student projects, largely orchestrated by Julia Udall, were in collaboration with Sheffield School of Architecture, the School of English, the Department of History and the then Department of Town and Regional Planning (now Urban Studies and Planning) and ranged in ambition and duration, to suit respective programmes.

Since the building is in community ownership (2013) and no longer under threat, my personal involvement has drastically reduced, but the social enterprise architecture practice I co-founded and am director of, Studio Polpo, has been involved in various ways, notably by securing funds for and advising on self-build upgrade of the building.

With Studio Polpo's support, Portland Works secured a £10K grant from the Architectural Heritage Fund Cold Spots programme to allow Studio Polpo to explore collective and co-operative approaches to facilities management and renovation of the Works. The key outcome of the Cold Spot project was a report making information about the building's fabric, tenants, and heritage visible to steering groups and decision-making bodies. The report also suggested how Portland Works might develop to maintain its character as a lively, creative and innovative space for small scale making. It included a range of fully costed retrofit strategies with suggestions about how and where these could be implemented, with reference to the conservation management study developed by consultants Wessex Archaeology. Tenant issues (including use patterns and rental costs) have also been mapped onto future aspirations for the continuing use of the works as a place of making and innovation (Studio Polpo 2014).

Within the Portland Works project, heritage was framed broadly to include the building alongside its material, technological and social histories. The campaign to save the building gained support from a large number of different constituencies, each with their set of values and priorities: from building tenants, local residents and professionals to stainless steel enthusiasts. Multiple understandings of heritage value appealing to different audiences, created a media friendly set of narratives that helped in promoting the project and encouraging people to support it financially through buying community shares or donations.

The university played an informal but significant role. Elsewhere (Cerulli, 2017) I have explored the political economies of university projects with external partners, framing them as complex ecologies, which, in the context of increasingly neoliberal universities, have the potential to be pockets of resistance, but can also become instruments for validating and reinforcing the status quo. In the Portland Works project the University of Sheffield played the role of the civic university as enabler by offering a grant for the KT project and providing the context for numerous student projects, all of which were instrumental in developing a sustainable strategy for the future of the Works and building the capacity to implement it. The nimble, flexible, strategy for Portland Works to host student projects was a mutually beneficial arrangement which benefitted the university by providing a live context for learning experiences and Portland Works by providing small, targeted, pieces of work at no cost.

The facilitated process of exploring viable and sustainable alternatives to the speculative redevelopment that would have obliterated much of the heritage value of the Works led to the collective decision to acquire the building through community ownership. This required intense work around developing a robust business plan to support a community share issue, through which the capital required for the purchase was raised. The purchase itself, however, was a relatively straightforward process: since the building was privately owned, it could be easily bought with a private transaction. As the Save Portland Works campaign gained substantial momentum and reach,



FIGURE III.3.4 Portland Works entrance sign before refurbishment. Photo by Mark Parsons.

it seemed increasingly unlikely that the planning application for change of use of such a significant place of manufacturing and creative enterprise was going to be granted. This created the ideal conditions for negotiating the purchase of the building: with the planning gain resulting from the speculative planning application less likely, the building's owner was amenable to dispose of it, given that due to its relatively poor state of repair and its heritage listing status, Portland Works was likely to become a liability. The purchase of the building was, therefore, a simple transaction, negotiated only in terms of price, without a need to look at the broader value of the building, or to align values between stakeholder groups and owner.

The issue of heritage value was central throughout the process of exploring, promoting, acquiring and managing community ownership at Portland Works. Underpinning these processes was a commitment to openness and inclusivity, which resulted in wide support and broad but also nuanced and diverse understanding of the heritage value of the building and its associated ecosystem of users, community owners and stakeholders.

The Save Portland Works campaign was effective in shifting the perception of the heritage value of the building from a remarkable yet crumbling edifice to be preserved, to a thriving hub of manufacturing and creativity pulsating from this remarkable building.

The planning application for change of use portrayed Portland Works as crumbling, unloved and unused and framed the proposed redevelopment as something that would save this fading piece of heritage.

A measure of the impact that the campaign had in reframing the perceived heritage value of the building is the u-turn in the position of English Heritage (EH), the then statutory body – now a char-

ity – tasked with stewarding the historic environment in England. EH initially supported the planning application to convert Portland Works into studio flats, on the grounds that this redevelopment would ensure that the fabric of the building was preserved; later on, however, EH changed its position to support the Save Portland Works campaign, once it became evident that the rich heritage of use within the building and the thriving community of users were as key to the building's heritage value as its layout and fabric.

As part of the drive to raise capital through community shares, a wide-ranging campaign explored multiple notions of heritage value, appealing to a range of audiences (local and global). The approach adopted by Portland Works was not to seek a consensus on what is of value, but to strive for a broad, open framing to allow for a range of views and inviting support from constituencies with different agendas and priorities (e.g. stainless steel enthusiasts, local businesses, artists, customers of Portland Works tenant businesses etc.).

Overall the multiple stories of the Portland Works project and its remarkably positive outcome of community ownership are a testament of what is possible when multiple interests, values and desires converge and when the energy and capacity of each participant are harnessed towards shared goals and objectives. It needs to be acknowledged, however, that such processes are very resource intensive, and require significant commitment from a large number of people. Once the immediate threat is removed, such commitment is harder to sustain and a transition towards less intensive, hence more inclusive, processes is essential.

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