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Even the rain feels better

by Ben Gidley

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Thank you to Emma, Zoe and everyone for making today happen in these dark time, and for inviting me to contribute. It means a huge amount to me.

We were asked to talk about a moment or project, but first I wanted to give some context.

Today marks CUCR's 30 years, but my association only goes back 28 of those years. I had finished a degree, and wasn't quite ready to leave academic study. I had a place on an Anthropology MA at UCL, when someone (I think it was my mother) sent me an ad for a newish MA at Goldsmiths, in Contemporary Urban Studies, that seemed to be exactly up my street. So I applied to that, was thrilled to be accepted, and joined what was maybe the second or third cohort of students on the programme

It was a great privilege to be taught by Paul Gilroy, Les Back, Fran Tonkiss, Vikki Bell, Vic Seidler, but especially by Michael Keith, in the portacabins on St James. My most vivid memory being Michael's pre-powerpoint multimedia lectures, flipping between a slide projector, overheads, and VHS video.

Michael inspired us to read [Ian Sinclair's Lights Out for the Territory](#), of which Peter Ackroyd said it's "a book about London; in other words, a book about everything". Michael taught us about London; in other words, he taught us about everything, and I loved how wide and various his frame of reference always was, symbolised by the juxtapositions that his former students will all recall; the llama at the Mudchute city farm on the Isle of Dogs with the cow on the banlieue in La Haine, between a John Heartfield dada collage and Jean-Michel Basquiat mural on a Brooklyn wall, between Spike Lee's version of Malcolm X in the Savoy Ballroom and Jim Carrey in a zoot suit in The Mask, or between Heseltine in a helicopter above the Milton Court estate with Michel de Certeau looking at Manhattan from the World Trade Centre.

I loved so many texts we read for that course, many of which I now teach my students. But what I learnt in particular from Michael was the value of walking. As Sinclair puts it: "Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city; the changes, shifts, breaks in the cloud helmet, movement of light on water. Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie, allowing the fiction of an underlying pattern to

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my political consciousness. At the TUC festival the following bank holiday Monday; it started raining while Billy Bragg was on stage, and he said "even the rain feels better today".

I left CUCR nearly 13 years later, just before the May when David Cameron won the election, and those 13 years were something of a golden age for social research, evidence-based policy, area-based interventions, and evaluations of area-based interventions. I started that time as an anarchist who thought that all governments are basically the same, and ended it cynical about New Labour but a witness to the profound transformation that even modest and partially successful area-based interventions could make, in myriad small ways, in the fabric of the lives of people living in places where I spent that time working, like Deptford and Woolwich in London, Grimethorpe in South Yorkshire, Aston in Birmingham or Hillfields in Coventry.

And, so, finally I've reached the moment or project I intended to talk about this morning: the evaluation of the Creekside Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) programme, which was the first research job I had at Goldsmiths, which I started the May after I finished my MA, in 1998, under the direction of Michael Keith and Marj Mayo.

This was a regeneration scheme led by the London boroughs of Lewisham and Greenwich focusing on the Creek that ran between them, in a then neglected part of Deptford. Through initiatives such as supporting the move of the Laban dance academy from St James (next to Goldsmiths) to the Creekside, it hoped to ignite the growth of a "cultural quarter" in post-industrial Deptford. ("But whose culture? And why our quarter?", as one of my interviewees asked.)

The first people I interviewed for that are people who all turned out to play a significant role in several of my subsequent research projects, and any of you who are local will probably know their names: Paul Halliday (who was not yet working at CUCR), Paul Maslin (not yet a local councillor), Jess Steele (not yet the enormous influence she's been on community-led regeneration nationally), Willi Richards and Chris Mažeika (not yet living in the Master Shipwright's Palace), and Pete Pope and Malcolm Ball, two of the guardian angels of my research career, who are both sadly no longer among us.

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two and often three tapes, which is also a lot of cups of tea – and in Pete's case a lot of rollies.)

2. I learnt how to listen, and that I was good at listening, and that listening well is a valuable skill. Valuable because of what it brings back to the academy. Valuable for opening a space of reflection within the tense infra-politics of local urban change. And valuable because most people just appreciate being heard – and so rarely are.
3. I learnt how the arbitrary lines drawn on a map by a local authority or a funder can dream into being a group of people who call themselves a community --- even (or especially) when they define themselves in opposition to the powers that drew those maps.
4. I learnt that residents acting together have enormous capacities to organise and transform the realities of a place, but also how corrosive and cannibalistic³ people can be towards each other, thwarting their own best intentions --- and that sometimes the bureaucratic disinterest of a local authority can be a healthy mitigator of that dynamic.
5. I learnt that the statistical profile of a place often obscures as much as it reveals about the lived experience of it --- especially a place as eccentric and constantly changing as Deptford.
6. I learnt that there is no one true story of a place, but that for every interview you find often contradictory, incommensurate realities, and that each of them can be true in some way.

And I learnt that the maps of research methodology and social theory I had studied in the library could never match the messiness of the territory, but that a good teacher can prepare you for that.

So, to finish on this May morning, I want to say thank you to Michael for giving me the opportunity to work on that project, and for being my most important teacher, then and in the 28 years since.

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