SPECIAL ISSUE ON ARTS AND JUSTICE

Edited by Sarah Armstrong and Kirsten Sams
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ALSO

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Angela Bartie and Alistair Fraser on the Easterhouse Project
Kath Murray on Stop and Search in Scotland
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THE EASTERHOUSE PROJECT

Angela Bartie and Alistair Fraser

IN 1968, at the height of renewed concerns over youth gangs in Glasgow, the popular entertainer Frankie Vaughan swooped into the city in a blaze of publicity. Meeting with gang leaders from the relatively new Easterhouse housing scheme, Vaughan promised to help them to organise a youth centre in exchange for a promise to end the violence. Weeks later, police organised a weapons amnesty on an area of waste ground deemed ‘neutral’. Despite an appeal to the public to stay away, the Glasgow Herald reported an audience of around 200 spectators, a large crew of photographers and television cameramen, four ice-cream vans and two fish and chips vans! Just over six months later, Vaughan’s intervention culminated in the opening, by Lord Kilbrandon, of the Easterhouse Project. From the beginning, the it courted negative publicity, eventually closing in 1971 before reopening as a police-run project.

The Easterhouse Project was built upon a model of social justice

Though this episode has become firmly established in Glasgow lore, little is in fact known about the Easterhouse Project in those early days between 1969 and 1971. We have been exploring this and subsequent developments for some years now, tracking down individuals with first-hand experience of Easterhouse (and especially of the Project), in an attempt to understand its wider significance to the history of Glasgow. This has included interviewing police officers, social workers, youth workers, residents of the area, sociologists, and former ‘gang members.’ We also traced a cache of interviews undertaken in 1969-1970 by sociologist Gail Armstrong with young people who used the Project, many of whom had been involved in the Drummy gang (named after Drumlanrig Avenue). In so doing, we have uncovered a hidden narrative of arts, grassroots politics, social justice, and participatory action, involving some of the key players in 1960s Glasgow.

What made the Project so innovative in its early days was also what attracted much of the negative attention. Its first leaders, Graham Noble and Archie Hind, were artists. Graham Noble had been to art school, and was a set designer, folk-singer, and active in the Playground Association movement (there had been an adventure playground in Easterhouse, ‘the Venchie’, since the mid-1960s). The assistant secretary was the Glasgow novelist Archie Hind, who had recently published Dear Green Place, thought by many to be the quintessential artistic rendering of the city of Glasgow.

In one of its earliest official publications, Graham Noble, called it ‘one of the most ambitious and experimental Projects in Britain, if not the world’. It was run by a Trustees, selected by the boys, in conjunction with the secretary, assistant secretary and a panel of young people. The first Trustees included Frankie Vaughan alongside Glasgow’s Chief Constable James Robertson, Glasgow Corporation Bailie Frank McElhone, MP Hugh Brown, and local minister, Peter Youngson. Underpinning the entire initiative was an emphasis on young people helping to run the Project, actively co-operating with the organisers and Trustees. The Project’s first publication asserted, “unpalatable though it has been to accept by many, the way ‘through’ to the youngsters has proved to be one largely on their own terms”. There were teething problems: the process of decision making via committee meetings was tedious for young people not used to such formal procedures. In 1970, a specific Youth Committee was established to harness their energies and to maintain their interest in the running of the Club.

The Easterhouse Project was built upon a model of social justice that saw it as a springboard for improving the lives of everyone living in Easterhouse and tackling the underlying issues that had led to the ‘gang’ problem. The Project sought to engage with young people on their own terms, to discuss their behaviour with as little judgment as possible, and to instil a sense of personal responsibility (through, for example, making Project users repair any damage caused or go without). A delicate balance was sought that showed concern and a willingness to help whilst avoiding being patronising. The politics that underpinned the Project, undoubtedly, were shaped by the broader currents of change in art and politics in the period. As Noble recalled recently:

I was interested in drawing and painting and I think that was also seminal in the sense that the belief grew that through the arts then you could work with young people in circumstances like Easterhouse where there was a great deal of deprivation and poor education and therefore always the belief that the personal development of the individual was what was important and the material was less important. So I think that was one of the main things I picked up from that experience …
Noble placed the Easterhouse Project, and what he and Archie were attempting to do, firmly in the context of the wider cultural-political scene in Glasgow, particularly the folk song movement and the mixing of writers, artists and musicians with sociologists, social workers and others involved in youth justice. Indeed, Gail Armstrong and Mary Wilson also talked of this mixing and the wider context in which these conversations and the cross-fertilisation of ideas took place. They point to a lively scene in which discussions about the arts, social justice, and the problems that many communities faced were taking place in a relatively small number of pubs and cafes. Glasgow, they noted, was a fairly small city, smaller in population than it is today, with plenty of opportunities for people from a range of backgrounds to meet and to engage with one another. Noble recalled:

Certainly at that time we would sit in the State Bar, [with] people like Archie Hind, Alasdair Gray, lots of people involved in the arts and literature in Glasgow. Matt McGinn, Hamish Henderson when he was through from Edinburgh all that, and they’d all say ‘yes, you’re doing the right fucking thing here, it’s people like us that should be involved in trying to help young people’, you know, through the arts and through outdoor education. And I suppose that’s what we thought we were trying to set up.

Even more interesting is how those initially involved in the Easterhouse Project sought to introduce young people from the estate to these networks, to extend their social relationships beyond Easterhouse and to introduce them to new ways of life and thinking.

Attempts to engage young people through the arts and to harness their creative activity took a number of forms. Gail Armstrong encouraged some to use writing to express themselves. On telling a teenage girl that the poem she had just written was ‘excellent’, the girl responded, ‘I didn’t think anyone else could understand what I write’. A longer term writing project was also established with one of the young male ‘gang members’ and surviving fragments of this personal writing are both intriguing and deeply moving. In 1970, the Project staff was increased with another art school educated organiser joining alongside David Godwin, who was brought in as a ‘culture organiser’.

Despite the concern for young people that the initiative provoked and its emphasis on the need for social investment in youth (especially in outlying housing areas that lacked amenities), continued negative press coverage of the Project and of Easterhouse undermined its effectiveness. This contributed to a view of the area as a gang-ridden ‘concrete jungle’, one that persists to this day. Yet there is a more positive and, we think, more significant narrative yet to be unpicked.

From the late 1960s, there developed across Britain a heady mix of grassroots politics, community arts, and social activism that sought to find new ways to work in conjunction with communities to resolve problems. It is no surprise to us that Easterhouse became well known as a centre of this kind of grassroots community development. For example, in the 1970s an award winning community newspaper, The Voice, was established, as was the Easterhouse Festival Society. In 1980 the Easterhouse Festival Society hosted the largest community arts gathering in Britain. Reflecting on the democratic and cooperative approach manifested in the early Easterhouse Project we cannot help but see some intriguing similarities and intersections with the Barlinnie Special Unit, created in 1973. In the Easterhouse Project of the late 1960s, a range of individuals from social work, arts and justice backgrounds had pioneered a new way of engaging with ‘gang members’ treating them with respect and understanding whilst advocating self-reflection and personal responsibility.
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