Reclaiming Places Through Cultural Memory and Collective Storytelling

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MA Design for Social Innovation and Sustainable Futures
Final Report // December 2023

* This project was a collaboration and would not have been possible without the contributions and support from the community

PLACE OVER POWER

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Place Over Power is a collaborative, storytelling project that explores how we can better build our cities by preserving cultural memories of place and belonging. With the aim of tackling the impacts of gentrification, this project is grounded in reclamation, empowerment, and building connections to our communities, our places, and ourselves.

This research was conducted in collaboration with many community members and organisations, primarily located within Elephant and Castle in London, England. This document outlines the context for this project, an opportunity for action, research insights, reflections, evaluation for impact, and next steps for Place Over Power in the future.

Gentrification is a complex issue and requires creative interventions, radical ideas, and open conversations. I acknowledge that there are many organisations, activists, artists, and community organisers who have already been leading bottom-up placemaking projects long before me. My goal of this project was not to create something entirely new, but instead amplify the work that is currently happening in these spaces and provide an innovative and creative way to bring people together and preserve memories of place.

DEFINITIONS

Cultural memory is a system of values, artefacts, institutions, and practices that retain the past for the present and the future. It transfers knowledge and supports the emergence and elaboration of distinct identities, because humans define themselves and are defined by their affiliation to one or various cultural groups and traditions (Assmann, 2021).

Gentrification was initially coined a half-century ago by British sociologist Ruth Glass as the process of rapid urban change when working class quarters are invaded by middle/upper class residents until all or most of the working class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed (Freeman, 2016).

Placemaking is an approach and a set of tools that puts the community front and centre of deciding how their place looks and how it functions. It represents a paradigm shift in thinking about planning and urban design, from a primary focus on buildings and macro urban form to a focus on public space and human activity (Courage et al., 2021).

Redlining is a discriminatory practice by which banks refuse to give mortgages to people of colour, extracting unusually severe terms from them with subprime loans. This was used as a systematic tool by the government to residentially segregate America by restricting people of colour to live in specific neighbourhoods (Rothstein, 2017).

Gentrifying neighbourhood in Denver, Colorado. 2023.

A. PLACE, BELONGING, AND MEMORY

"It was important to create one's own culture – a culture of belonging rooted in the earth." – bell hooks

I've always been fascinated by the concepts of 'place' and 'belonging.' Place is personal, political, natural, and built—we as living beings each use place to create a sense of belonging and community. Belonging is more difficult to define and is unique to each individual, but it simply means that we all can have a place to call home or be included in a community. Reminders of belonging and place hold memories and can be found in pieces throughout the city: in language, on commemorative plaques, on statues and buildings, and woven through the city's visual and literary cultures (Bélanger, 2002).

Memories are also personal but when remembered collectively, they become cultural memories and enable our connections to places, community, and ourselves. Throughout my life, I've moved through many cities and have many places that I can call 'home.' This feeling of having many homes made me question the fluid idea of place and how we gain a sense of belonging and identity through the spaces that we live, work, study, and gather in.

The feeling of belonging is complex and is unique to each individual living in urban environments. This project seeks to both embrace and untangle the complexities of belonging and reflects on how it may be applied to future urban planning and placemaking practices.

When I revisit these places and see significant changes from development and urban regeneration happening in my childhood places—in the natural, built, and social environments—my sense of place and belonging is disrupted. I understand that places and cities will naturally change over time, but there is a growing sense of nostalgia and loss that I feel when I return to places that no longer feel like home. Memory is a powerful way to stay connected to place and in a continuously changing time-space matrix can offer a window into the continuously changing cultures of cities (Bélanger, 2002).

Therefore, I chose to focus on two places where I have strong personal connections: Denver, Colorado (where I've spent most of my life) and London, England (where I was born and am currently living and studying). Through participatory research and ethnographic methods, I've explored the history and impacts of urban change and gentrification in each of these places and have critically reflected on my own position as an eco-social designer.[1]

1 Full positionality statement can be found in my Appendix.

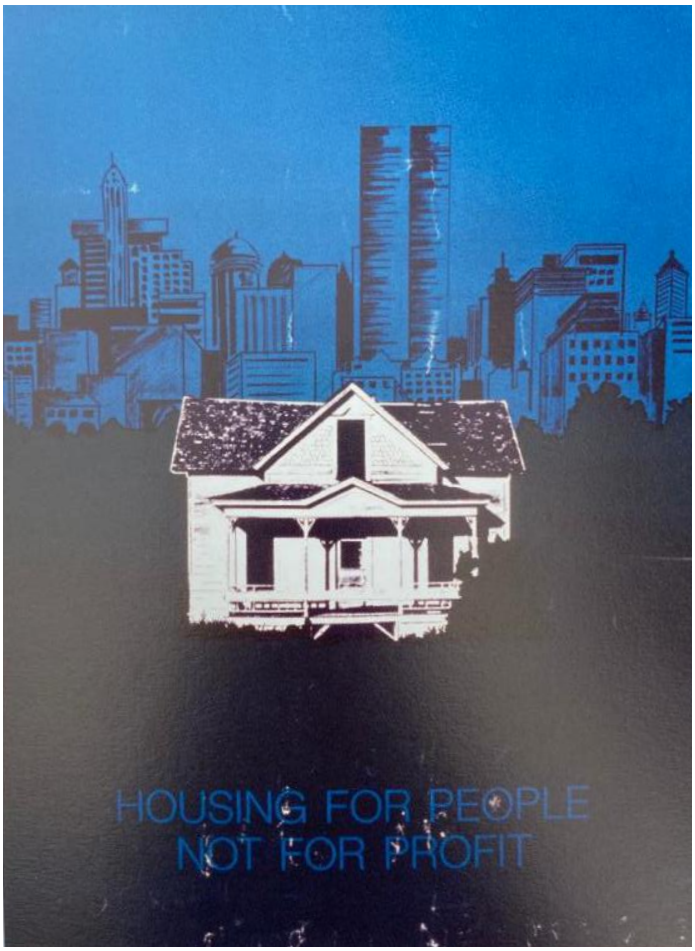
B. POWER, DISPLACEMENT, AND GENTRIFICATION

Throughout history, place and land have been inextricably tied to power. Through colonialism and imperialism, those in power have pushed out Indigenous peoples and existing communities from their homelands in order to gain control, profit, and power. We continue to see these same patterns and at the time of this writing, I must acknowledge the current forceful occupation and displacement of Palestinian people and the inhumane actions of the Israeli government and military. Palestinians have had their society shattered, family members killed, and their lands and lives systematically torn apart (Alif, 2004).

By choosing to do a project on 'place,' I cannot ignore the oppressive systems of power that have displaced, destroyed, and broken apart communities around the world. While my project is focused on the smaller-scale gentrification of neighbourhoods, the roots of these processes are the same oppressive, colonial, and capitalist systems that profit the rich and powerful. These systems have shaped the geopolitical dynamics of our world and the ways in which we build our countries, states, cities, and neighbourhoods.

Rothstein's Color of Law (2017) explains how the U.S. government have systematically imposed racial segregation on cities nationwide with racial zoning, public housing, and redlining. Cities have been significantly shaped by these laws and policies and the effects continue to impact communities of colour to this day. Gentrification, rapid urban development, and affordable housing scarcity have all pushed out many lower-income people of colour from their neighbourhoods and while some of the reasons may vary from city to city, the patterns and causes are the same. As one community organiser stated during a walking tour of gentrification in Elephant and Castle, "It's the same problem because it's the same system to get rid of people."

Historically disinvested neighbourhoods are often portrayed as "damaged, abandoned, and dirty" and that the changes brought by gentrification save these places and make them safe, good, and welcoming (Kern, 2022). There's a common narrative that without regeneration, these places would remain poor, dilapidated, and riddled with crime. Yet, the problem with this is that it continues the colonial 'saviour' mindset that these places needed saving, rather than criticising the systems of oppression that caused the disinvestment in the first place. Therefore, in order to tackle the impacts of gentrification, the root systems must first be acknowledged and reckoned with in order to build more equitable and just cities.



Old housing posters found at London anarchist archives (Mayday Rooms and 56A Info Shop). 2023.

There are many terms used by developers, politicians, and real estate agents to promote large-scale, development initiatives—revitalisation, reurbanisation, renewal, revival, and regeneration. Placemaking is slightly different and can be personal, corporate, civic, and collective. It happens in all types of spaces and can be through embodied experiences as well as the design of the built environment (Griffiths and Barbour, 2016).

While the concept of placemaking sounds like a more friendly way to plan cities, those in positions of power have co-opted the term to justify development projects. Since the term 'placemaking' is vague, it enables a consensus between opposing interests and frees people from having to fully agree which allows business to continue as usual (de Graaf, 2023). Similarly, the term regeneration is often used to discuss large scale development and reinvestment in areas that historically were disinvested in. While these terms are an attempt to rebrand gentrification, they are still perpetuating traditional citymaking processes that disempower community members and reinforce top-down approaches to "saving" neighbourhoods.

C. A PLACE FOR ACTION

Given that my project is all about place, I was very intentional about the place that I chose for my case study and opportunity area: Elephant and Castle in London. Additional research was conducted in my hometown of Denver, Colorado which helped inform my overall project development, insights, and outcomes.

1. Case Study: Elephant and Castle, London, England

The Elephant and Castle neighbourhood is located just south of the Thames River in the London Borough of Southwark and has experienced significant urban change, particularly over the past two decades. According to a recent report, Elephant and Castle has experienced 'severe gentrification' and significant population turnover between 2010-2016, including one LSOA[2] that had over 72% of its households change residency (Almeida, 2021). Southwark Council has had a notorious history with development in the area, including the controversial demolition of the Heygate Estate[3] which was a large public housing estate with over 1,212 units that was demolished in 2014. The latest regeneration projects are quickly transforming the Elephant and Castle neighbourhood and displacing those living and working in the area despite significant community opposition.

The Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre opened in 1965 and was the largest indoor shopping centre in Europe.

The Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre, once located in the middle of South London's busiest junctions, opened in 1965 and was the largest indoor shopping centre in Europe. At one point, the shopping centre housed over 100 different businesses and quickly became a home for many independent Latin and ethnic minority owned businesses in London. It was a community gathering spot and well-loved cultural hub to shop, eat, play bingo, go bowling, and much more.

In 2016, development plans were submitted to demolish the Shopping Centre and make room for new regeneration projects in its place. The planning application had made no provision for retaining the existing retailers nor did it offer

2 Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOA) are a geographic hierarchy designed to improve the reporting of small area statistics in England and Wales.

3 Additional research was conducted of the Heygate Estate demolition and is included in the Appendix.

any socially-rented units. This ignited a storm of pushback by the community and many local groups and campaigns. Despite thousands of formal complaints and community campaigns to keep businesses and traders in place, the plans were narrowly approved in 2018 and the Shopping Centre officially closed in 2020 (Gayle, 2020). All the businesses, predominantly ethnic minority-owned, were displaced to various temporary locations throughout E&C and some were forced to leave the neighbourhood altogether.

"I moved from the shopping centre four years ago and was told this would be a temporary space. [The developers] don't care about us... I really miss my customers." – A trader who was displaced and relocated after the demolition of the Shopping Centre

According to Latin Elephant—a charity that promotes participation and social inclusion of racialised communities in London—the shopping centre displaced all of the traders by changing their physical location, but also disrupted their sense of place, the success of their businesses, and their community. While the regeneration plans[4] claim to provide affordable housing and support local traders, they have fallen short of many of their promises and have provided no clear plan for what will happen to the traders after the new town centre has been built (expected completion in early 2026). From failure to provide adequate access to relocation funds, to poor conditions at the temporary locations, and to the lack of community representation in decision-making processes, the actions by developers and Southwark Council have left the Shopping Centre traders disenfranchised and fragmented.[5]

4 https://elephantandcastle.org.uk/overview-of-the-plans/

5 Key findings from Latin Elephant's walking tour on 23 September 2023.

2. Research Methods Overview

I pursued a variety of methods and channels for my design research for this project. The majority of my primary research was through interviews and conversations with business owners, former residents, current students, people working in citymaking, community organisations and leaders, and others who educate themselves and others on the history and culture of different neighbourhoods. I also combined some autoethnographic methods with participatory methods to gain better insights into what place and belonging means to different people.

My secondary research has been based in community-based archives including the 56A Info Shop and Southwark Archives, as well as resources provided by organisations and people who are already working in this archival and memory-keeping design space for cities. Outlined in further detail in my process documentation, my research journey has been nonlinear but I've formed meaningful relationships and collaborated with different people and organisations throughout the course of the project.

3. Framing an Opportunity Area

Through the research process, I've found that tackling gentrification is complex and there are many opinions about it. Many people consider real estate investment in neighbourhoods as an overall positive asset for the local community as it brings new jobs and boosts the local economy. However, others argue that it displaces current residents and those who work in the area and caters to wealthier and whiter populations, resulting in social cleansing[6] and changes to the racial and socioeconomic demographics of neighbourhoods. Therefore, gentrification is a social, environmental, political, economic, and cultural issue that requires interdisciplinary thinking and radical design interventions.

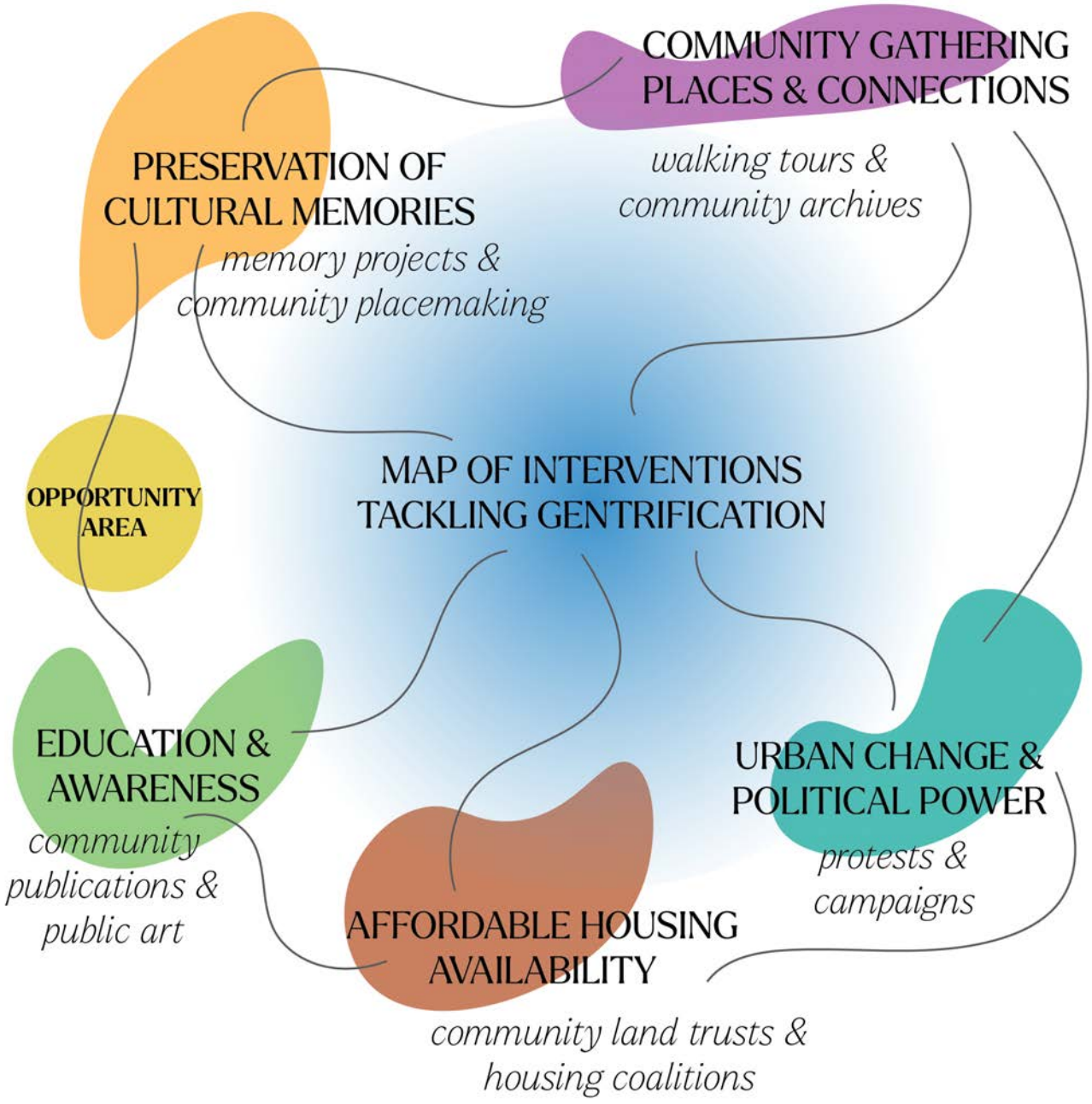
Opportunity Statement:

How might we tackle the impacts of gentrification by building our cities and neighbourhoods around place and belonging rather than profit and power?

As an eco-social designer, researcher, communicator, and human being, I've thought deeply about this question and the ways in which rapid urban change impacts our sense of belonging and identity.

6 Can be understood as a geographical project made up of processes, practices, and policies designed to remove council tenants [or existing residents] from space and place (Lees, 2020).

4. Mapping Existing Gentrification Interventions



After researching the ways in which communities are already resisting urban development and gentrification, I mapped out the web of different interventions and identified the opportunity area where I wanted to focus my design work for this project.

Through my design research I've found that when people are displaced, they not only lose their physical connections to their places but also to their communities and opportunities to exchange stories, build cultural memory, and share experiences within these places. My design opportunity area sits between the preservation of cultural memories and education and awareness—a space essential to maintaining connections between ourselves and our environments, as well as to each other. The importance of preserving cultural memories can further be explained as producing "a sense of continuity and popular identification that many people find comforting in the chaotic world of shrinking time horizons, unprecedented geographical mobility, and endlessly differentiated cultural forms" (Bélanger, 2002, p.75).

I spoke with many members of the Elephant and Castle community to learn more about the unique challenges that are happening with the neighbourhood and how my project could best support and amplify current community work. Gentrification is happening everywhere and due to the limitations of this project's scope and timeline, I acknowledge that this design project is just one portion of tackling a much larger, embedded issue and will hopefully serve as a launching point for a longer-term project.

Due to the complexity and scale of gentrification, this project became an opportunity to mitigate the effects on communities rather than resisting the entire process of gentrification altogether. As a designer, I wanted to explore how to use my creative background to develop bottom-up citymaking practices, particularly with underrepresented communities and finding ways to best engage and involve them in planning decisions.

The entrance to the famous Palace bingo club and bowling alley inside the Shopping Centre.

To avoid the romanticization of the past and future, I wanted to situate my project in the present and use cultural memory and collective storytelling as a way to preserve public spaces. Through this process, I hope to educate and communicate the stories and history of these places to others and gain a sense of place, belonging, and community in the process.

D. DESIGN INTERVENTION: PLACE OVER POWER

Place Over Power is a collaborative storytelling project that tackles the impacts of gentrification by preserving memories of place. Through a grounded practice in reclaiming clay from development sites, this project aims to unearth stories as well as create stronger connections to our communities, our places, and ourselves.

In the process of creating Place Over Power, I went through a variety of different design intervention ideas including murals, storytelling games, memory cubes, workshop toolkits, printed publications, and more. While all of these design interventions would have helped achieve my goal of preserving cultural memories and creating community awareness around gentrification, I still wanted to create something that was unique to my case study area of Elephant and Castle.

1. Concept Development

As this project is situated in the built environment and around a sensitive topic that involves memories and displacement, it was important to test my ideas in a careful way with community members to evaluate for impact. I experimented with activating space both in the physical and digital worlds, and also went through the process of thinking how my design would interact with people in a workshop format. After evaluating the effectiveness of different interventions, I decided to do something that was unique to Elephant and Castle and focused on tactile storytelling as a way to preserve cultural memories of the Shopping Centre. Therefore, the design intervention for this project is the entire design journey itself as well as a physical design output with deeper meaning embedded in its materiality.

The material for this project became the primary focus of my design concept: reclaiming clay sourced from the Shopping Centre redevelopment site in Elephant and Castle and giving it back to the community. The clay produced for this project was a community collaboration in itself: from the sourcing, to development, to production, and to the creation of the final output, I appreciated all of the community support and relationships that were made through the claymaking process.

See next page for full visualisation of the claymaking process.

2. The Claymaking Journey

1 I wanted to get clay from the development site where the shopping centre was once located. I walked around for about two hours, speaking to different construction workers on-site, each one directing me to talk with someone else. Finally got through to one of them named Yeshu (after speaking with 10+ workers) who told me he'd be able to get clay for me and to come back the following day. The next morning I picked up the clay but asked if there was any more that I could use for my project. Returned the following morning with pastries in exchange for more clay.

2 Took the clay home and broke it apart into small pieces to dry faster. Used a hammer and mallet to break down the clay and try to get it into a dust form. Got all my materials from around E&C (bucket from Walworth Road, materials from LCC screenprint studio, and tools from local ceramics studio Mud Gang).

3 Reintroduced water back into clay after it had dried and was broken up in small pieces. Let it sit overnight and poured out excess water, then mixed clay so that it became a smooth texture again. Attempted to sift out the rocks and debris that were in but the clay mixture was too thick and unfortunately did not have an immersion blender to get the clay mixture more thin.

4 Put the clay mixture in tights to dry and left it out to dry with some unfortunate timings of rain. Clay was not dry enough for the workshop but instead used the clay from a local studio (and still brought clay mixture for the symbolism of it). Got advice from a ceramist and clay technician at Camberwell on how to treat and fire the clay. Let the clay dry on a plaster plate for a few days, wedged the clay and to get out air bubbles and some rocks

5 Decided to create a handbuilt vase and mugs using images/memories that people came up with at the workshop. Fired and glazed at Camberwell ceramics studio and then displayed at the final exhibition. The vase was given to Latin Elephant as a thank you for all the work they do in the community and was a way to give the land back through this project.

3. Materials and Sustainability

Inspired by the connection between memory and place, I decided clay would be a meaningful medium to illustrate my concept of reclaiming public spaces that were taken away from the community. Clay is from the land and has the symbolic value of building and shaping our cities quite literally from the ground up. The City of London sits on a variety of rock types, some dating up to 145 million years ago. Chalk and London Clay are the main bedrocks that make up the City, Chalk is porous while London Clay is a sea-bed sediment and is known for being a 'heavy' clay soil. London Clay is known for making bricks and structurally sound tunnels—which explains why much of the Underground was built through London Clay.[7]

In addition to the raw materiality and natural sustainability of clay (you can infinitely reuse clay before it's fired), I was drawn to the idea of creating something beautiful and organic out of something raw and natural. For this project, the clay has become a symbol for the Shopping Centre itself and by using it as my medium to hold stories from the past, I hoped it would create a powerful way to share the unique story with the Elephant and Castle community.

I was conscious about where I sourced my additional materials and tools for the claymaking process. All of the tools were either found at my flat or locally-sourced in the Elephant and Castle area from local shops on Walworth Road.

The beginning of the clay journey (above bits) and the final outcome (handbuilt vase with carved images of Shopping Centre memories).

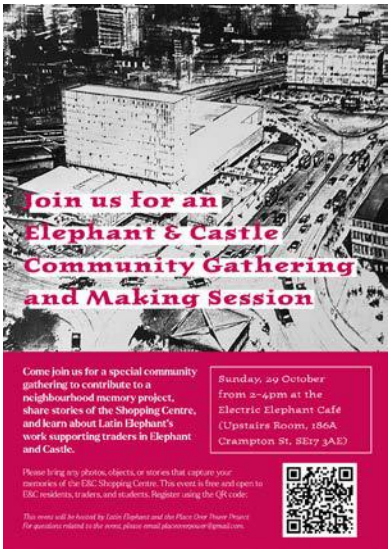
7 https://www.lnhs.org.uk/index.php/articles-british/249-geology-of-london

4. Gathering, Making, and Outcomes

Outcome 1: Community gathering and making session

The purpose of the Elephant & Castle gathering and community making session was to share the history of development in the area, the work of Latin Elephant, and give community members a chance to participate in collective storytelling activities around place, belonging, grief, and remembrance. Additionally, there were photos and stories of the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre to show what it was like to those who hadn't been there before it was demolished.

My original intention was to have the reclaimed clay ready to use at the Elephant and Castle gathering and making session, hoping that this would empower community members to sculpt their memories rather than letting developers overwrite the story of the historic Shopping Centre. While the clay was not yet ready for sculpting at the workshop, it was still a powerful conversation tool and I was still able to use clay from a local studio to test out my idea of sculpting memories. While there were more students than community members at the event, it was still a nice way to evaluate my design concept, expand conversations around Elephant and Castle development, and reflect on individual connections to place.[8]



Event flyer and social media graphic were created in both English and Spanish.

A community gathering and making session with Latin Elephant to share info about development in E&C and sculpt memories of place out of clay.

8 Additional insights and photos of this gathering and making session are located in the Appendix.

Outcome 2: Physical design outputs

To capture the stories of the Shopping Centre, I created my own physical pieces—a vase/time capsule in which I carved the stories that I collected during my research and the community making session. I also produced two additional mugs to initiate conversations around change and gentrification, inspired by an interview I had with a former resident of the Heygate Estate and visitor of the Shopping Centre who won a mug set from playing bingo at the Shopping Centre.

After speaking with multiple ceramics technicians, I learned about the technicalities of working with and firing raw clay. The vase and mugs are quite literally pieces of history, including the bits of the land that can still be found in its cracks and impurities. During the firing process, these bits expanded with heat and caused portions of the vase to bloat, break off, and crack—demonstrating both the fragility and resilience of place and community.

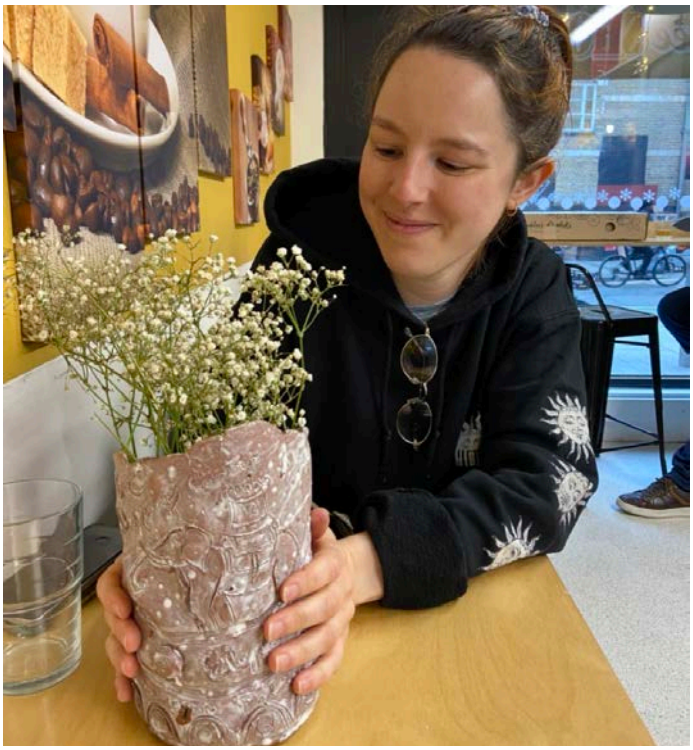
To complement the ceramic pieces, I created a zine to provide a brief history of the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre and serve as a small action guide for people living, working, or studying in the area. While these physical design outcomes do not represent my entire design and research process, it was important for me to make a physical object with the reclaimed clay to give back to the community at the conclusion of the project.

Inez, a former resident of the Heygate Estate, used to play bingo at the Shopping Centre. She won the mug set featured above which inspired the mugs that I created out of the reclaimed clay.

Pages from the zine on the history and memories of the E&C Shopping Centre (full version in visual document).

Outcome 3: Final Exhibition

In December 2023, I presented Place Over Power to the public at the London College of Communication Postgraduate Degree Show. I presented Latin Elephant with the vase along with copies of the zine. I reconnected with Yeshu (the construction worker who originally gave me the clay) and brought him to the exhibition to see the final outcomes of the clay. It was an honour to have worked with many people through the process and I appreciated all of the meaningful connections and conversations along the way. I hope this project will hold both memories of the Elephant & Castle community and also keep those in power accountable to their promises to the community. This is just the beginning and I plan to continue Place Over Power in the future.



Big thank you to Yeshu and Latin Elephant for making this project possible!

5. Measuring Impact & Evaluation

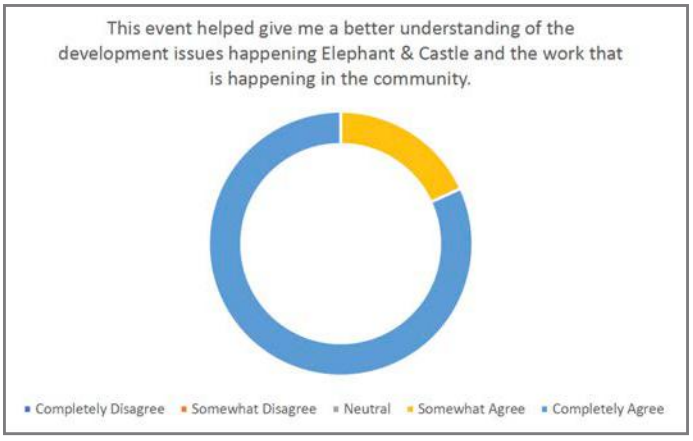
For this project, my impact goals were the following:

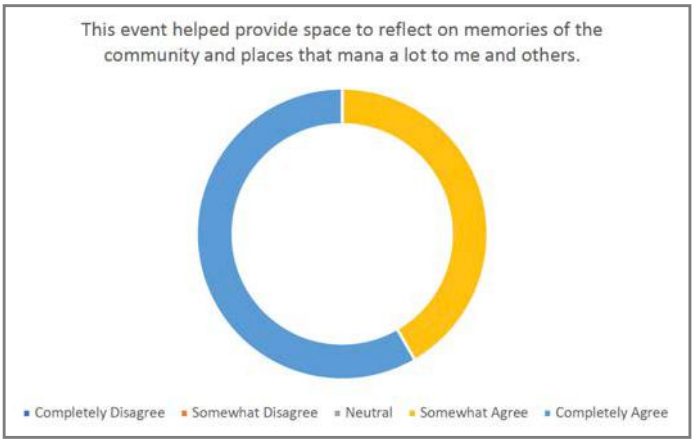
- Increased **education and awareness** of development issues in Elephant and Castle
- Greater feelings of **community belonging and empowerment**
- **Usability for community organisations** and replication in other cities

Acknowledging that these categories are difficult to measure and evaluation for this project is all self-reported, I did my best to accurately evaluate the impact of my work based on the feedback forms I received. Yet, with all self-reported data there may still be bias involved in my reflections and how I evaluated the data. Further insights and workshop reflection are located in the Appendix.

In addition to the feedback forms I received from community members who attended the gathering and making session, I also established checkpoints throughout the design process where I would send report drafts, workshop plans, and concept ideas to Latin Elephant and other people involved in the project. This was a way for me to check the work and make sure that my project was meeting my impact goals as well as the needs of the community.

I gave all my workshop participants evaluation questions at the end of my making event to rate their awareness around development and sense of community on a scale of 1 to 5. I also provided them the option to stay involved past the end of the project and follow up with additional feedback for the event. This was an evaluation tool to see if community making events make a lasting impact on people and help build a stronger sense of place and belonging.





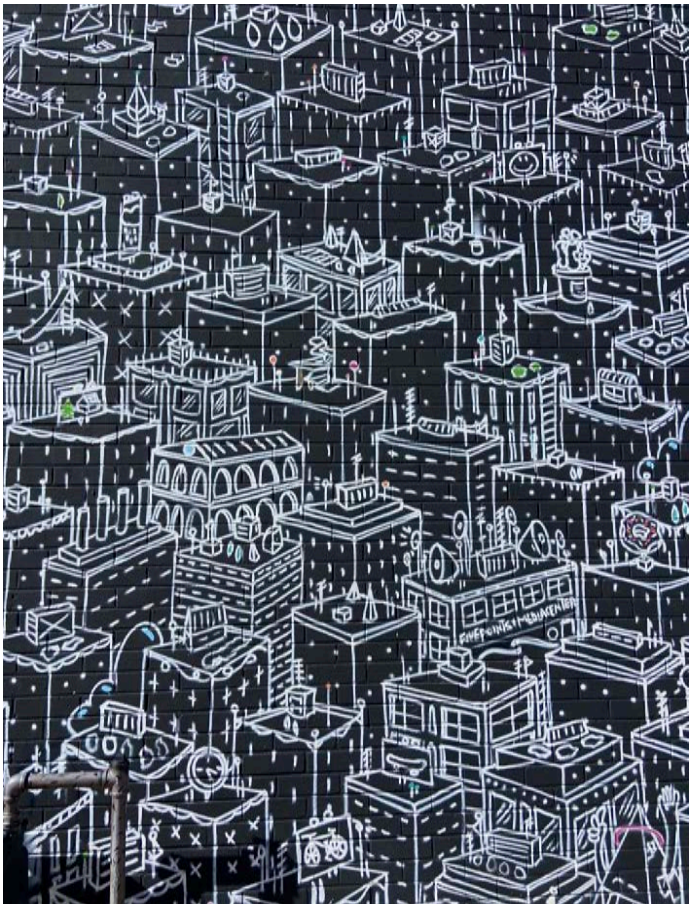
Charts to summarise some of the feedback responses I received after the making and gathering session

E. REFLECTIONS

Place Over Power has been both the design process and outcome of my final design-in-action project. The journey has been collaborative, reflective, messy, emotional, fun, and meaningful. When I started this journey, I didn't know what would be the end result. I knew I wanted to focus on memories and citymaking but, like clay, let the process mould and sculpt the project. Through conversations with community members, family, friends, and strangers, I've been pushed out of my comfort zone and have engaged with many people throughout the entire design process.

This project unearthed stories and memories as well as the physical land itself in Elephant and Castle. It is part of a larger memory project dedicated to the E&C Shopping Centre but more importantly to the broader community that was displaced when it closed. Memories and places live on through storytelling and community connections. It is the way that communities hold on to the power of place and resist the forces that seek to disempower and displace them.

As our cities grow and change, regeneration projects aim to make things look clean, structured, and neat. This ignores the fact that cities are raw, messy, organic, and full of energy. Attempting to 'clean up' or develop a place without respecting the community needs or the cultural history of a place is a form of injustice and an unsustainable way to build our cities. There is no single solution,



Mural of the City of Denver, located in the Five Points Neighbourhood.

and this project alone will not put an end to gentrification nor will it stop the development and displacement that is already in process. Instead, I hope this project will amplify the work that is already being done, empower communities to reclaim their places, and raise awareness around the injustices happening in gentrifying neighbourhoods.

"It is people's collective and individual relationships to place and to each other, whether physical, digital or imagined, that make place real and important in their lives" (Griffiths and Barbour, 2016, pg. 6).

Another key process reflection was learning the importance of building community and relationships throughout the design process. I've learned that in order to have meaningful collaboration, you need time and exchange. Throughout my process, I approached people and groups for this project as primarily a volunteer, and then the project collaboration came second once the relationship had been established. I didn't want my partnerships to be one-way transactions and supported groups with my volunteer time and design skills before asking for any project support.

As I critically reflect on the design process and my research methodologies, I've realised that my project has been nonlinear and has looked more like a web rather than a timeline. If I were to redesign my initial research, I would have done more participatory research at the beginning to engage community members about their feelings on preserving cultural memory as a way to resist gentrification. That way, I could have justified my opportunity area earlier and narrowed down my scope for my design intervention. Additionally, if given more time I would have put more resources into engaging harder-to-reach communities. This would have allowed me more time to build trust and relationships and get more participation at my events and workshops later on in the design process.

Through working on this project, I became a volunteer for Latin Elephant and supported them with this walking tour in late September.

NEXT STEPS

I will be continuing my work with Latin Elephant after this project and am currently collaborating with them to create a welcome toolkit/guidebook (an extended version of my zine) for people moving to Elephant and Castle. I will be giving the ceramics pieces to Latin Elephant as well as other materials that were created for this project and are included in my process documentation.

As a vessel for other objects, photos, or other materials, I hope the vase can serve as a time capsule in itself to help remind people of the memories and connections within the community. I hope Latin Elephant can use this as a storytelling device or conversation tool that could help commemorate the Shopping Centre each year. Overall, I hope that these materials (including this report) will be a resource for the Elephant and Castle community and provide awareness around the issues of gentrification and displacement.

In the long term, I hope to create a virtual platform for the memories by digitising the community clay sculptures (through 3D scans/ rendering) and other objects, photos, and stories from the time capsule collection. While there are many digital tools out there, I'd ensure that the platform would be easy to access and use, sustainable, and beneficial for the community. I also hope to replicate this land reclamation process in other places, including my hometown Denver, Colorado where I did additional research for this project.

Lastly, I hope to design and organise a recurring collective storytelling session/gathering for people to come together, share their memories, and feel a stronger sense of belonging and place in their neighbourhoods. Place Over Power will continue working to preserve memories of places, reclaim land in creative ways, and empower people to continue sharing stories through times of change.

Ginkgo tree leaves are used in traditional Chinese medicine to improve memory and symbolise hope, strength, and resilience (which is why I've used them throughout this document).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Place Over Power was inspired by the work of local organisations, community leaders, and activists who have been involved in empowering communities long before me. My hope with this project is to amplify the work that is already being done within these communities and use my design background as a tool to continue and support their work.

At the time of this writing, there are people being displaced by oppression, war, genocide, colonialism, and climate change around the world. As this project discusses place, displacement, and cultural memory, I hope that it opens the door for further conversations and actions towards peace and liberation for all living beings.

There are many people who helped support me throughout the course of this project and I would not have been able to complete this work without their support, knowledge, guidance, and trust:

- My advisors Ella Britton and Umi Lovecraft Baden-Powell
- My instructors and course leaders from MA Design for Social Innovation and Sustainable Futures
- My classmates for their support, food, advice, and collaboration
- Sophie Rebecca Wall and everyone at Latin Elephant who have been doing incredible work within the E&C community and supported me with facilitating this project
- Chris and his team at the 56A Info Shop for all the knowledge sharing and archival work
- Rebecca Chau and Felicitas zu Dohna from Arup for providing citymaking perspectives
- Vicki Hellmer who led me through Five Points in Denver and pointed me to many resources about memory projects in that neighbourhood
- Rachael and Hussain at Mud Gang who provided technical advice, back-up clay, and tools for my workshop
- Link Age Southwark and Inez Marks who shares many stories and laughs with me
- Louisa from Electric Elephant Café for sharing her space, food, and conversations
- Yeshu and his team for the clay and kindness at the Elephant and Castle development site
- Liam for the technical claymaking advice and moral support during the making process
- James from the UAL Camberwell ceramics studio who took time to support me with the firing and glazing processes
- All the Elephant and Castle traders who I got to know throughout these last few months and spoke with me when I came in for meals, shopping, and research
- All my family and friends for their love and support throughout this journey and beyond. Thank you all.

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APPENDIX

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POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

Before creating Place Over Power, I mapped out my own identity and positionality to reckon with my inherent biases as well as leverage my own personal experiences. I am a cisgender, able-bodied, educated, young Asian woman with economic and social stability. I have the privilege of living and studying in a country where I have citizenship and English is my first language. Acknowledging these privileges that I hold, my design practice has been shaped by the following three themes:

- **CARE:** approach everything I do with intention and mindfulness
- **SELF:** bring in my own unique identity, background, and skills to my work
- **COMMUNITY:** make sure that I'm designing with and for the community in all that I do

Building on my multidisciplinary background in environmental policy, urban planning, studio art, communications, and community building, I chose to focus this project on the cross section of all these disciplines as well as locate it within the geographic places that I'm currently situated in. I am aware of my limitations (e.g., Spanish speaking abilities) conducting research in diverse communities and recognise that my living situation has been short compared to many long-term residents who have lived and worked in Elephant and Castle for years.

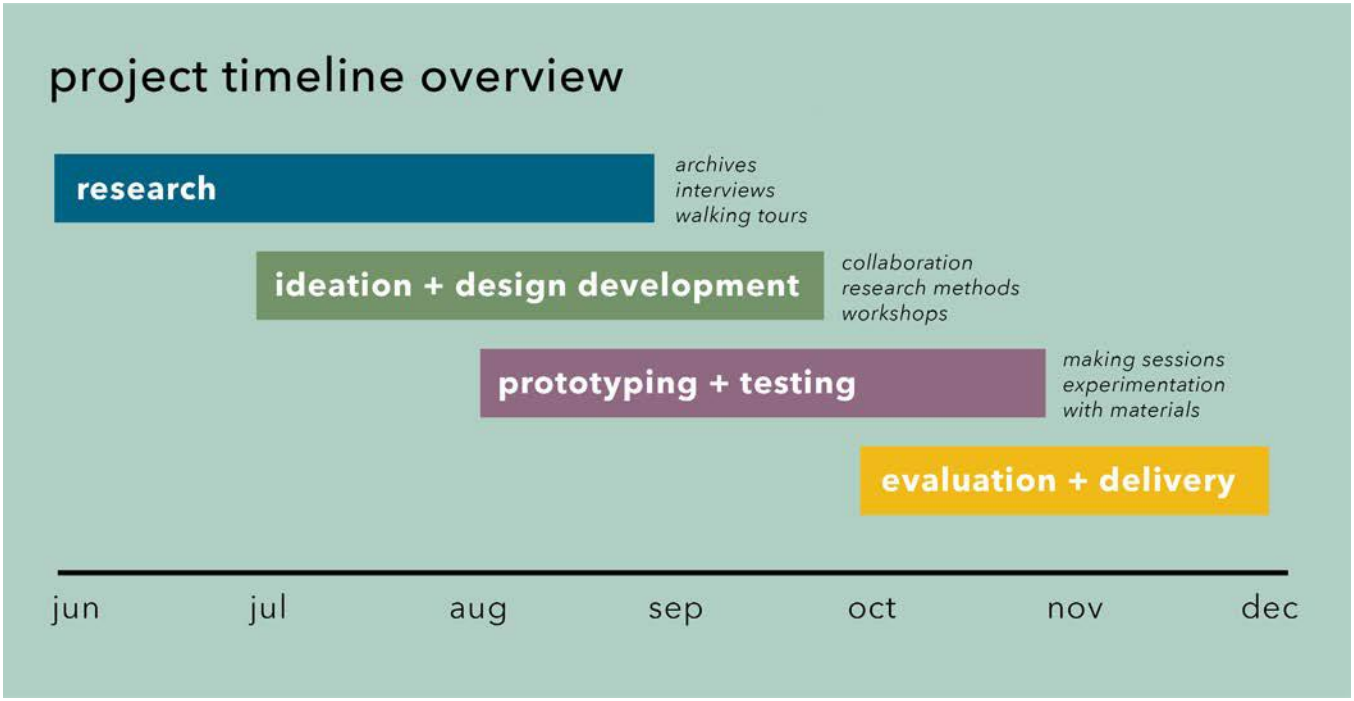
I am acknowledging my role as a short-term resident in a neighbourhood where my presence itself is contributing to gentrification of the area. I am also a student at the London College of Communication, one of the key partners to the developer of regeneration projects in this neighbourhood. I'm hoping to use my position as a student to leverage the resources of the University of Arts London (UAL) to critique its practices and role in the development and create more awareness and education with the UAL community.

While my role was a designer and researcher in this project, I would not have been able to work without the collaboration and support from Latin Elephant and many others who I worked with on this project (full list included in the Acknowledgements section of this document).

PROJECT TIMELINE

Place Over Power examines the complexities of gentrification and explores how empowering communities through storytelling and cultural preservation can improve overall sense of place and belonging. Therefore, I wanted to focus my project in places that I'm currently living and studying in (Elephant and Castle, London) and where I grew up (Denver, Colorado).

The timeline below gives a broad overview of the four different phases of the project. Note: Many of the phases and tasks overlapped, as the design journey has been nonlinear and guided by the creative development process:



This final report was produced as part of my final project submission in November and December 2023.

RESEARCH METHODS

While developing this project, I chose to focus on the following three main themes: **belonging, placemaking, and empowerment.** I recognise that there are many organizations, activists, artists, and organizers who have been leading bottom-up placemaking projects long before me. My goal of this project wasn't to create something completely new but instead work to amplify the work that is already being done in this space and to put community at the center.

I pursued a variety of methods and channels for my design research for this project, not all conversations and actions were photographed and recorded. I situated my research in both the Elephant and Castle neighbourhood in London and the Five Points neighbourhood in Denver, Colorado. While these two neighbourhoods are over 7,500km apart, the patterns in these two neighbourhoods are frighteningly similar. There are endless examples of gentrification happening in cities across the world, but I chose these two case studies based on my personal connection to them and used this research to guide the ideation and development for my design intervention.

Primary Research

The majority of my primary research was through interviews and conversations with business owners, former residents, current students, people working in citymaking, community organisations and leaders, and others who educate themselves and others on the history and culture of different

Had many meaningful conversations with former E&C residents like Inez (above).

neighbourhoods. I also combined these methods with participatory approaches to gain better insights into what place and belonging means to people.

Interviews - this made up the majority of my research as I wanted to gain a better understanding of issues related to gentrification and displacement in the neighbourhoods that I was studying.

Walking Tours - I went on three walking tours, two of Elephant and Castle and one of Five Points. These tours were an example of how the community is working to preserve cultural memory and share the history of these neighbourhoods.

Workshops - I hosted several workshops throughout the course of the project. Culminating in one larger gathering and making session.

Zoom Meeting

RESEARCH METHODS (cont.)

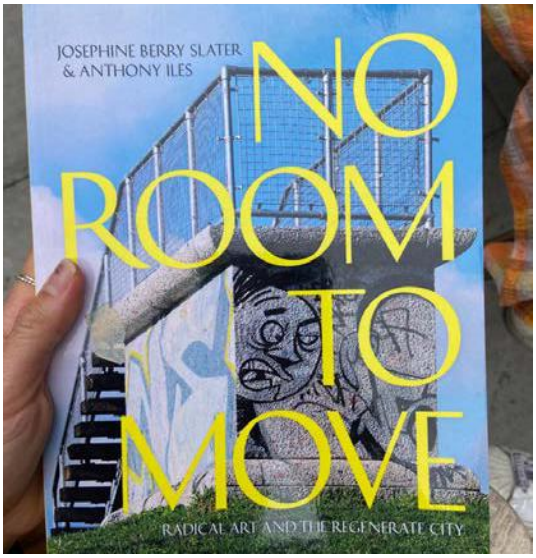
Secondary Research

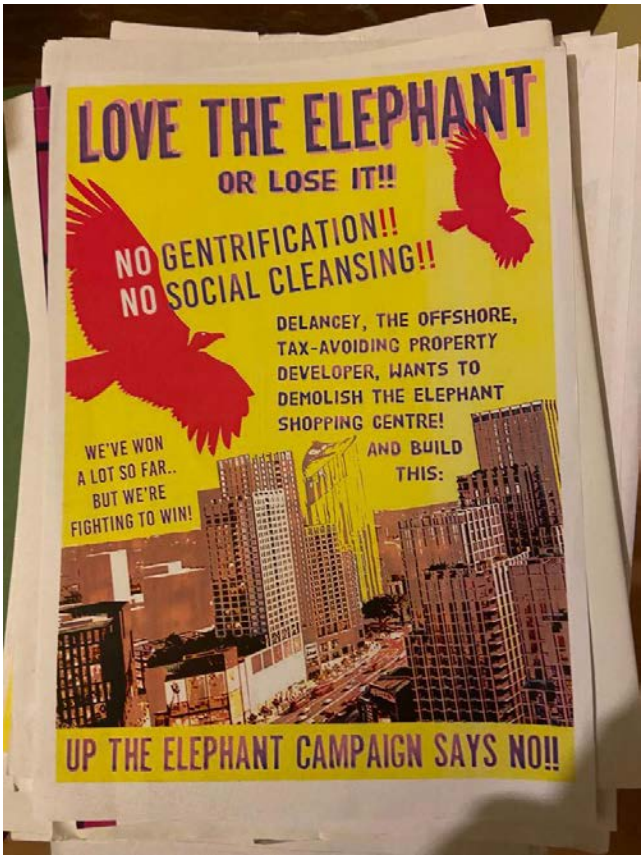
My secondary research was comprehensive but also just scraped the surface. There are so many resources and work in this space already—the more I dug deeper, the more I realised how much work has been done and how much there is still to do.

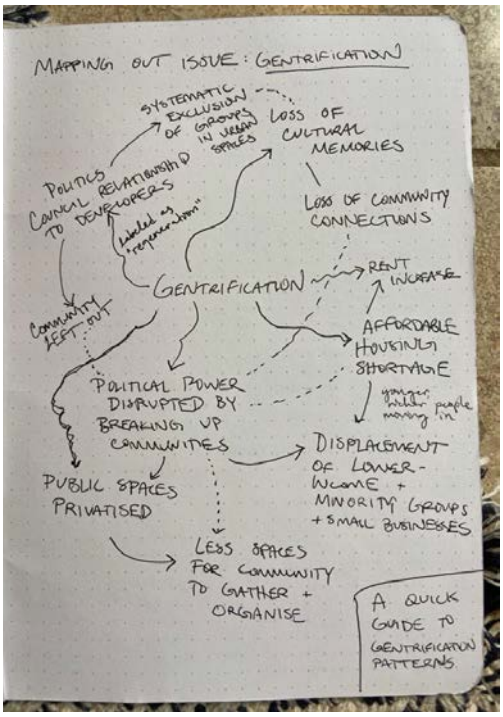
Desktop Research - this including reading books on gentrification (Color of Law), academic articles on memory and place, and news articles about campaigns against displacement in the neighbourhoods I was studying.

Case Studies - While I researched gentrification and memory as general topics, I spent most of my time on the Elephant and Castle and Five Points neighbourhoods (see next page).

Archival Research - was primarily based in community-based archives including the 56A Info Shop, Mayday Rooms, Southwark Archives, and local libraries.







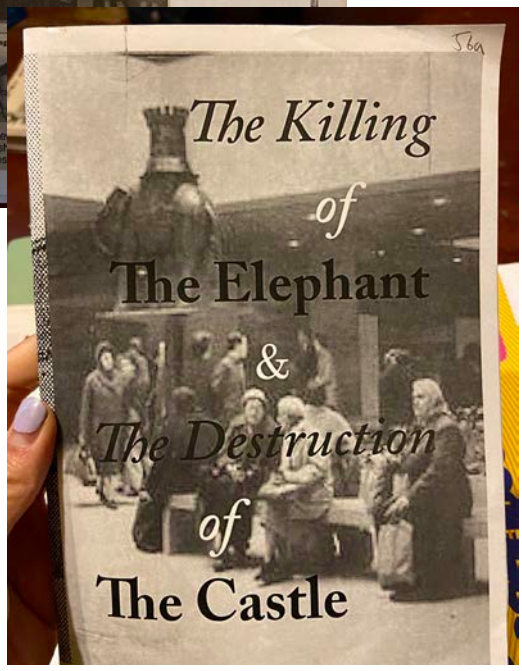
Evening Standard THURSDAY, 19 MAY 2016

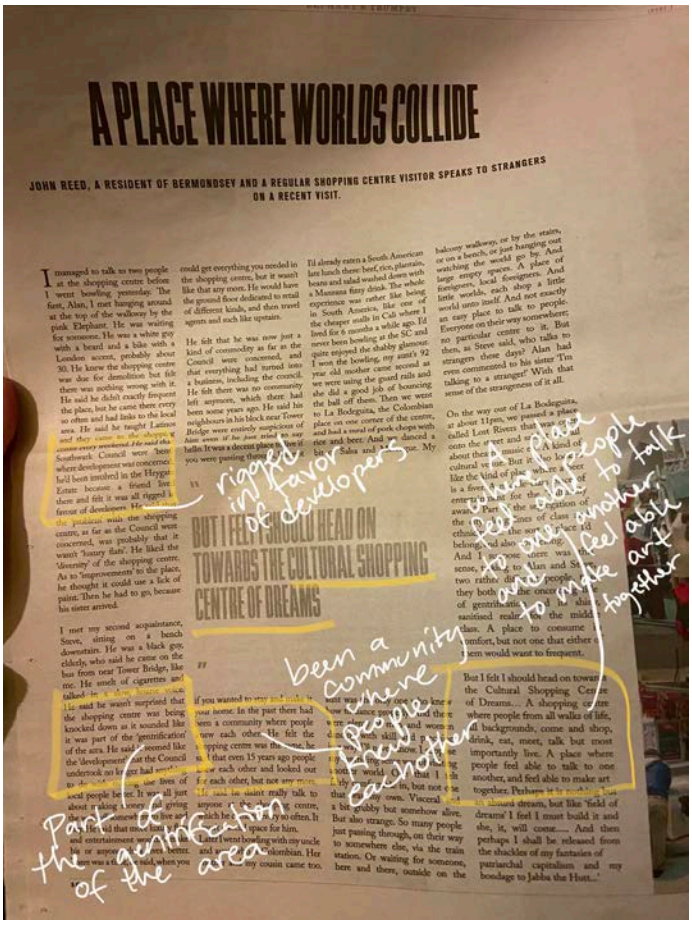
Put shopping back on a human scale

I CAN hardly believe it. The Elephant and Castle is at last "in play". That may mean nothing to North London chauvinists. Readers who would never be seen dead south of Waterloo can turn the page. But to a small boy who used to crane his neck from the top of a No 12 bus to catch sight of the old Elephant on its pub roof, its destruction in the 1960s was an outrage comparable to the Blitz. The legendary "Inferno of Castile" was abandoned on a mean pothole patch, to be blessed by vandals.

Three big-name architects, Norman Foster, Terry Farrell and John Thompson, are now vying to rescue her. The Museum of London is celebrating the event with a show of photographs and an exhibition on the rise and (pray God) fall of the London shopping centre. The story is of almost total catastrophe. It began with the Elephant and culminated with Elsenwise, opened last year near the Dartford M25. Those have been the retail equivalents of the high-rise basement and the Canary Wharf fortress. They represent the inflexible, inhuman, hard-edged city of alien citadels and defensive castles. They are America, not London; but can the new Elephant really defy the present one, and recapture the vitality of the old?

Most people think it was Hitler who destroyed London south of the river. It was not. He blasted buildings. It was Londoners who razed whole districts to the ground. Hitler's bombs were selective, their damage easy to rectify. When the London County Council and Southwark Council stretched a neighbourhood, the effect was of total devastation. They destroyed comprehensively. They destroyed to stop the middle classes cultivating the area. They waged the same class war across the acres of fourth-rank that Shirley Porter waged across those of West Mayfair, but they were Labour and got away with it.





A PLACE WHERE WORLDS COLLIDE

JOHN REED, A RESIDENT OF BERMONDSEY AND A REGULAR SHOPPING CENTRE VISITOR SPEAKS TO STRANGERS ON A RECENT VISIT.

I managed to talk to two people at the shopping centre before I went bowling yesterday. The first, Alan, I met hanging around at the top of the walkway by the pink Elephant. He was waiting for someone. He was a white guy with a beard and a bike with a London accent, probably about 30. He knew the shopping centre was due for demolition but felt there was nothing wrong with it. He said he didn't exactly frequent the place, but he came there every so often and had links to the local area. He said he taught Latinos and they came to the shopping centre every weekend. He said the Southwark Council were been where development was concerned. I'd been involved in the Heygate Estate because a friend live[d] there and felt it was all rigged in favour of developers. He [said] the problem with the shopping centre, as far as the Council were concerned, was probably that it wasn't 'luxury flats'. He liked the 'diversity' of the shopping centre. As to 'improvements' to the place, he thought it could use a lick of paint. Then he had to go, because his sister arrived.

I met my second acquaintance, Steve, sitting on a bench downstairs. He was a black guy, elderly, who said he came on the bus from near Tower Bridge, like me. He smelt of cigarettes and talked in a [illegible] voice. He said he wasn't surprised that the shopping centre was being knocked down as it sounded like it was part of the 'gentrification' of the area. He said it seemed like the 'development' that the Council undertook no longer had anything to do with the lives of local people. It was all just about making a [illegible] giving the rich [illegible] to live and [illegible] that much [illegible] and entertainment [illegible] like or anyone else's [illegible] Steve was a [illegible] when you [illegible]

could get everything you needed in the shopping centre, but it wasn't like that any more. He would have the ground floor dedicated to retail of different kinds, and then travel agents and such like upstairs.

He felt that he was now just a kind of commodity as far as the Council were concerned, and that everything had turned into a business, including the council. He felt there was no community left anymore, which there had been some years ago. He said his neighbours in his block near Tower Bridge were entirely suspicious of Asian [illegible] but were friendly as hello. It was a decent place to live if you were passing through.

BUT I FELT I SHOULD HEAD ON TOWARDS THE CULTURAL SHOPPING CENTRE OF DREAMS

[illegible] if you wanted to [illegible] your home. In the past there had been a community where people knew each other. He felt the shopping centre was the same, he [illegible] so that even 15 years ago people knew each other and looked out for each other, but not any more. He said he wasn't really talk to anyone [illegible] centre, which he [illegible] to live and [illegible] space for him.

Later I went bowling with my uncle and [illegible] Colombian. Her son was a [illegible] my cousin came too.

I'd already eaten a South American fast lunch there: beef, rice, plantain, beans and salad washed down with a Manzana fizzy drink. The whole experience was rather like being in South America, like one of the cheaper malls in Cali where I lived for 6 months a while ago. I'd never been bowling at the SC and quite enjoyed the shabby glamour. I won the bowling, my aim's 92 year old mother came second as we were using the gutter rails and she did a good job of bouncing the ball off them. Then we went to La Bodeguita, the Colombian place on one corner of the centre, and had a round of pork chops with [illegible] and beer. And we danced a bit – Salsa and Reggae. My [illegible] walkway, or by the stairs, or on a bench, or just hanging out watching the world go by. And large empty spaces. A place of foreigners, local foreigners. And little worlds, each shop a little world unto itself. And not exactly an easy place to talk to people. Everyone on their way somewhere; no particular centre to it. But then, as Steve said, who talks to strangers these days? Alan had even commented to his sister Tin talking to a stranger! With that sense of the strangeness of it all.

On the way out of La Bodeguita, at about 11pm, we passed a place called Lost Rivers that was open [illegible] about the music [illegible] cultural vc [illegible] like the kind of place [illegible] is a fiver [illegible] entry to [illegible] for the [illegible] Part [illegible] the [illegible] ethnic [illegible] belongs, [illegible] And I [illegible] sense, [illegible] two rather [illegible] they both [illegible] of gentrification [illegible] sanitised reality [illegible] them. A place to consume [illegible] comfort, but not one that either [illegible] them would want to frequent.

But I felt I should head on towards the Cultural Shopping Centre of Dreams... A shopping centre where people from all walks of life, all backgrounds, come and shop, drink, eat, meet, talk but most importantly live. A place where people feel able to talk to one another, and feel able to make art together. Perhaps [illegible] to [illegible] dream, but like 'field of dreams' I feel I must build it and she, it, will come..... And then perhaps I shall be released from the shackles of my fantasies of patriarchal capitalism and my bondage to Jabba the Hutt...'

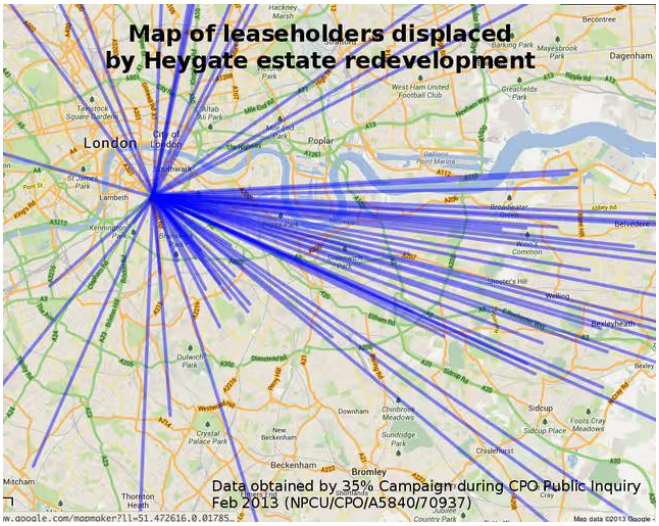
CASE STUDY RESEARCH

Case Study 1: Elephant and Castle, London, England

The Elephant and Castle neighbourhood in London South London has experienced significant change over the last two decades. The Heygate Estate was a large public housing estate that had 1,212 council homes and was demolished in 2014, despite pushback by the community, to make way for new urban regeneration projects. Residents of the estate were forced to move out to other areas, with the promise of replacement housing sites (most of which were never built).

In 2014, the Heygate Estate—a large public housing estate that had 1,212 council homes—was demolished despite significant community pushback to make way for new urban regeneration projects. Residents of the estate were forced to move out to other areas, with around half relocating to SE postcodes but others having to go further to places such as Sidcup, St. Albans, Chelmsford, Croydon, Bexleyheath, Ilford and others (see Heygate diaspora map).

While Southwark Council claims that they are committed to social housing, they have fallen short of many of their commitments and promises to the community and have failed to provide adequate housing options for their residents. Critics of the regeneration in Elephant and Castle have criticised the Council for pushing out the working-class community it has long-served and housed. In fact, the Council sold the Heygate Estate land for less than the cost to demolish the site and rehouse its residents, therefore they were accused not just of gentrification, but also of social cleansing.



Similarly in 2020, the focus on development and regeneration in Elephant and Castle continued with the closure of the shopping centre and demolition which began despite powerful campaigns by the community to keep the shopping centre and its businesses in place.

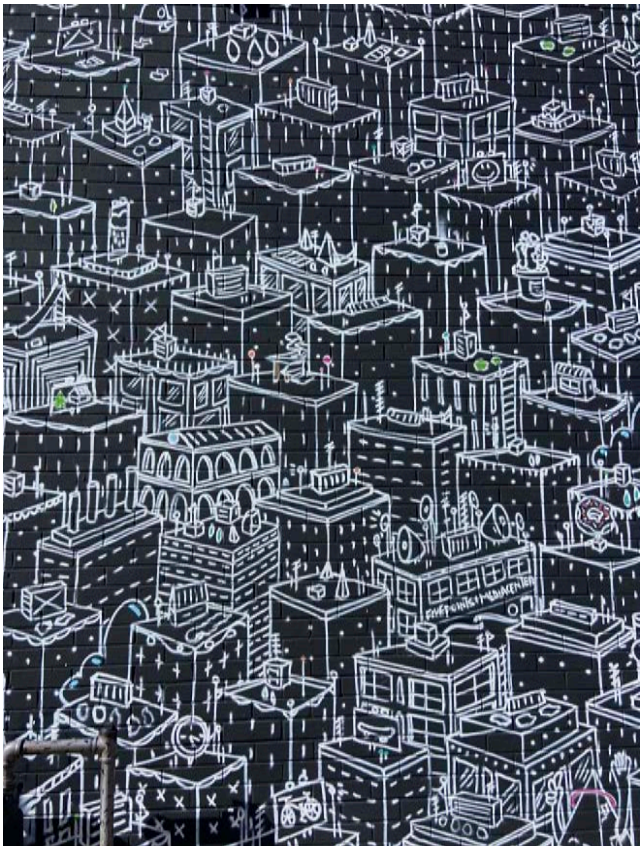
Currently, all of the traders and businesses, predominantly ethnic minority-owned businesses, have been displaced to various temporary locations within E&C, while others have left the area altogether. While the developers have regeneration plans that claim to provide affordable housing and support local traders, they have fallen short of many of their promises. From failure to provide adequate access to relocation funds, to leaving out the voices of traders in trader panels, to failing to communicate and provide options to businesses business, the actions by developers and Southwark Council have left the community disenfranchised and fragmented. According to Latin Elephant, when the shopping centre was demolished many of the displaced traders not only lost their physical location but also their sense of place and community.

Case Study 2: Five Points, Denver, Colorado

I was initially inspired by the Five Points Plus Neighbourhood Memory Project which took place in a neighbourhood within Denver, Colorado. The Five Points area was originally developed as a streetcar suburb in the 1870s. Over the following decades, due to segregation and redlining, the Five Points area became predominantly occupied by African-Americans, Latin Americans, and eastern European immigrants. By the 1930s, more than 75% of Denver's African-American population lived in Five Points and soon approximately half of Denver's Latin American population also lived in Five Points. By the 20th century, the Five Points neighbourhood became known as the "Harlem of the West" (History Colorado, 2021).

In the 2000s, the Five Points neighbourhood became one of the fastest gentrifying areas in the country with many of the businesses and historic homes becoming replaced with high-rise apartment buildings to attract a new set of residents. Over the last 20 years, the neighbourhood has experienced tremendous development and gentrification, with younger white populations moving in and driving out the area's Black population which has decreased to 10 percent. When I go back and visit this area, it's hard for me to remember what it looked like when I was younger. Unfortunately, these patterns are familiar in the story of gentrification and speak to decades of racism, segregation, and racial zoning that continue to have impacts on neighbourhoods to this day.

The Five Points Plus Neighbourhood Memory Project is through the voice and perspective of community storytellers who shared stories of Five Points to create a community-based public memory project. “The project explores the history of diversity, music, and self-sufficiency in Five Points, a neighbourhood shaped by racism and segregation in the 20th century and that is facing reshaping due to development and displacement... Community storytellers shared stories of neighbours who are like family, residents who achieved significant success, the realities of segregation and integration, the impacts of racism and redlining, and the joys of community” (History Colorado, 2023).



Big thank you to Vicki Hellmer who gave me a full tour of the neighbourhood and sent me many resources and reference material for my project.

WORKSHOP INSIGHTS

At the end of October, I hosted a community making event to bring residents, students, traders, and other people in the E&C community together to contribute to a collective memory project. The goal of this workshop is to bring people together in Elephant & Castle to learn about the development that is happening while providing an inclusive space to participate in a collective storytelling memory project. There will be discussions throughout the workshop, but the focus will be primarily on the physical making, storytelling, and education about the work of Latin Elephant.

Many participants discussed having a feeling of nostalgia or "missing" the shopping centre even though they had never visited themselves. For my project and Latin Elephant, this was an interesting way to see how sharing information about a place with new residents can still be a powerful tool to bring together the community and support the initiatives that are challenging the development of the area.

By hosting this workshop, I realised that finding a time to gather community is difficult. Traders often work most days and on the weekends, and there is a level of engagement fatigue that even organisations like Latin Elephant express when they try to conduct surveys of the traders. Additionally, the workshop was on a rainy Sunday afternoon, a bit removed from central Elephant and Castle which may have affected participation.

If I were to do this workshop again, I would change the way that I promoted the workshop. Reflecting on my positionality, I think not being able to speak Spanish was a disadvantage to getting people to come to the workshop. Even though I started by saying that I was partnering with Latin Elephant, a community group that they know well. I still found that many of the traders asked if I could speak Spanish. I distributed over 25 English flyers and 15 in Spanish and promoted the event on social media (Latin Elephant and Electric Elephant Café also promoted their socials). Most of the workshop participants were LCC students but there were a few members of the community who did not know about the project beforehand and showed up to the event after hearing about it on social media.

On a personal level, I've realised that I've been categorising "community" as the residents and traders who have been in E&C a long time and prioritising them over the people who have lived here a shorter amount of time (i.e. many LCC students). This event made me realise that there is an opportunity to share history and culture with people who are moving to E&C and goes along with my original proposal of wanting to tackle the impacts and not stop the entire process of gentrification from happening.

I believe that collective storytelling is a way to reclaim power as a community. There is no single solution to gentrification or displacement and this

project alone will not prevent these processes from happening nor will it stop the development that is already in process. Instead, I hope this project will amplify the work that is already being done and empower individuals and communities to reclaim their places through storytelling and increase awareness around the injustices happening within Elephant and Castle.

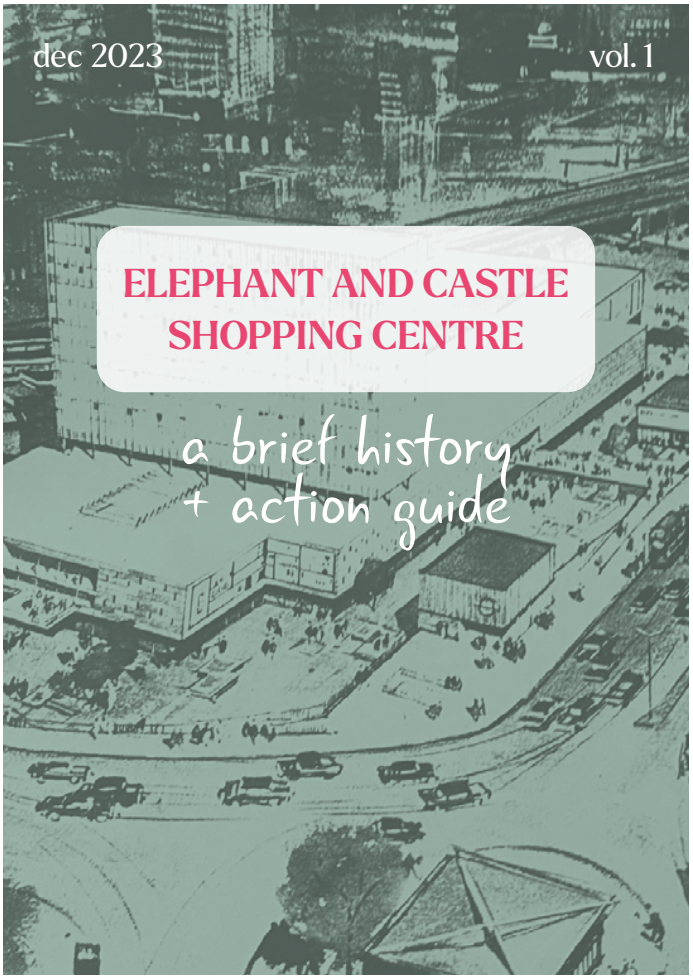
ZINE DEVELOPMENT

In addition to the clay outcomes from this project, I also created a collaborative zine with Latin Elephant to share the history of the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre. I wanted it to be action-oriented and give people steps, as sometimes memory projects can get too stuck in the past. This was my way of focusing my project on the future and building our cities with place instead of power.

I chose to continue with the motif of clay and as a way to make the content more accessible, I turned clay into a friendly character throughout the zine for readers to engage and empathise with. Clay is the witness of all the change happening in the neighbourhoods and quite literally builds and shapes our cities from the ground up. Therefore, Clay felt like the right character to represent this project and tell the story of place.

This idea came out of a conversation with Sophie from Latin Elephant following her presentation of the Shopping Centre's history and the need to have a more digestible format for people moving to the area or interested in learning more. This will a continuation of the Place Over Power Project and hopefully something that can be used by Latin Elephant in the future to tell the story of the area.

Pages from the first volume of the zine are located on the following pages.



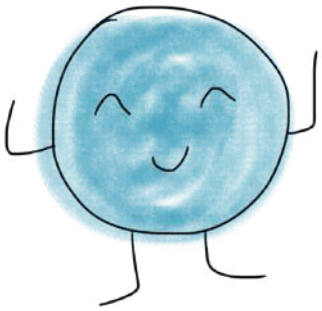
A full version of the zine can be downloaded here: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1WgjUuZ9eT_lYI5dYk0pO79onjb-zwheD

This guidebook was produced in collaboration with Latin Elephant and many other community members who contributed their knowledge to this ongoing project. This storytelling project aims to share and honour the history of the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre as well as make space for critical conversations around urban change. By preserving memories of our neighbourhoods, we create stronger connections to our communities, our places, and ourselves.

PLACE OVER POWER

Place Over Power is a community collaborative project using creative storytelling methods to tackle the impacts of gentrification and preserve memories of place.
@placeoverpower

Hi there, I'm Clay and I'm going to share a brief story of the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre from my perspective...



about me

A little about me first... I've been building and shaping our cities quite literally from the ground up. London sits on a variety of rock types, some dating up to 145 million years ago!

I'm mostly made up of London Clay, a sea-bed sediment known for being a 'heavy' clay soil. I help make bricks and structurally sound tunnels (you can thank me for helping make the Tube possible).

I've seen a lot of change and development happen over the years...

this is how I look when pulled out of the ground in Elephant and Castle!

a cultural hub

At the time, it was the largest indoor shopping centre in Europe!

The Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre, once located in the middle of South London's busiest junctions, opened in 1965. Within thirty years, it became the main hub for many businesses owned by Latin Americans, migrants and other marginalised communities. The Shopping Centre served as a place for the E&C community to connect, shop, eat, play bingo, and much more.

For many years, the Shopping Centre was a well-loved cultural hub and entrepreneurial place for the local community.

many Latin American businesses in the arches are still thriving in E&C!

Images courtesy of Latin Elephant

campaigns

In 2018, despite over a thousand formal complaints and community campaigns to halt development of the area, plans were narrowly approved to allow the developer Delancey to demolish the Shopping Centre as part of a major regeneration project.

The Shopping Centre officially closed in 2020, forcing the traders to vacate. Some relocated to temporary locations in Elephant and Castle, but others had to move out of the area or shut down completely.

demolition

Relocation funding was poorly communicated to traders and the temporary locations were set up in areas with low foot traffic, minimal signage, and maintenance issues. Demolition began in 2021 and construction is set to continue with the new town centre estimated to open in early 2026.

Many businesses, mostly migrant-owned, have struggled since moving to Castle Square and Elephant Arcade due to its location and poor building design.

future plans

There will be a new building for the London College of Communication, luxury apartments that will be mostly unaffordable for current residents, and limited retail space (only 10% affordable floor space). This will most likely push out existing residents and traders who will no longer be able to afford to live or work in Elephant and Castle.

stories

These are just a few of the many stories out there about E&C...

"[This development] is the same problem because it's the same systems [of oppression and power] to get rid of people."– a community organiser against regeneration and displacement in South London

" I moved from the Shopping Centre four years ago and was told this would be a temporary space for 5 years. [The developers] don't care about us... and I really miss my customers." – a trader who was displaced and relocated after the demolition of the Shopping Centre

"You know what people are doing with this country? They sell off everything. When they sell these places to private people, they build private housing and it's only the rich who can afford to live there." – a former resident of the Heygate Estate (E&C council estate demolished in 2011)

"So the displacement was a quite a lot. People did get things but Castle Square and Elephant Arcade are just not good... Now the Shopping Centre is just a hole in the ground." – an organiser from Up the Elephant

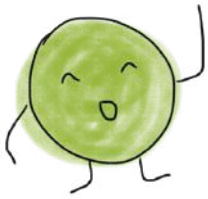
actions

1 **Support local, independent businesses**
Many displaced traders are located in Elephant Arcade and Castle Square. Head there for your next meal or shopping trip!

2 **Learn more Elephant and Castle history**
This was a good start, but there's more. You can find a list of additional reading and resources at the end of this guidebook.

3 **Speak up**
Demand change and hold those in power accountable to their promises, including: Southwark Council, developers (Delancey), and partner institutions (UAL)

4 **Share your story**
Help preserve memories within Elephant and Castle by sharing your stories with the local community!



my story

If you have a story to share about Elephant & Castle, you can write/ draw it here or email to us!

This is an ongoing memory project – if you'd like to submit to My Elephant Story, please email: stories@latinelephant.org

love the elephant

While the future is uncertain for many Elephant and Castle residents and traders, there continues to be important work happening throughout the community.

Latin Elephant and other community groups are holding the developers and Southwark Council accountable to their promises, providing support for displaced traders, and making sure that memories and stories of the Shopping Centre will live on.

resources

35percent.org/shoppingcentre

latinelephant.org/walkingtheelephant

southwarknotes.wordpress.com/latin-american-elephant

myelephantstory.latinelephant.org

London Latin's Quarter, Latin Elephant (YouTube)

southwark.gov.uk/regeneration/elephant-and-castle

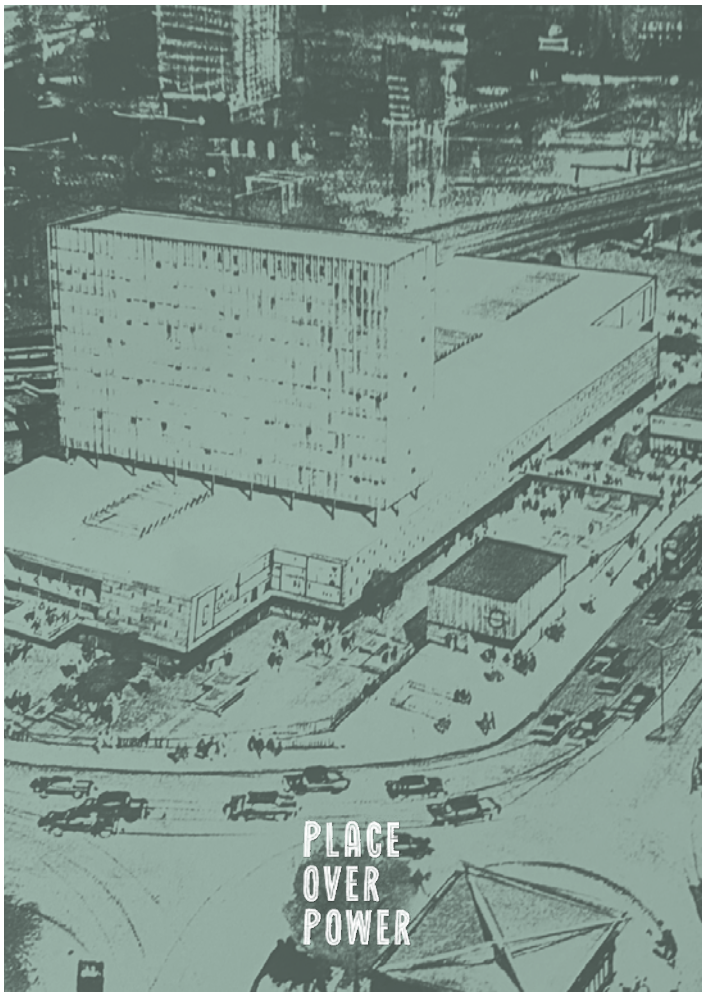
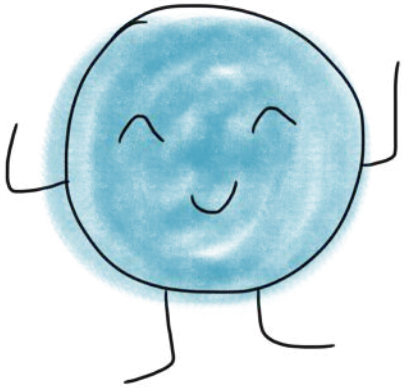
elephantandcastletowncentre.co.uk/looking-to-the-future

elephantandcastle.org.uk/overview-of-the-plans/

runnymedetrust.org/publications/pushed-to-the-margins

Thanks for reading! Let's keep working to reclaim, shape, and build our cities with and for the community.

This guidebook was written and created in collaboration with Latin Elephant.



thank you!