

Excavating The Reno: The Power of Place

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Introduction

This chapter looks at the experiences of excavating a twentieth century urban site with the community who created and used it. The format is deliberately not that of a traditional archaeology report or theory piece, but rather a dialogue between the community, archaeologists, and artist involved in planning, exploring, and interpreting this site. These different perspectives reflect the complexity of the twentieth century material under study and the potential for fresh approaches to understanding its role in and for a local community. The place in this case is a former nightclub in Moss Side, Manchester. The chapter describes its continuing significance for a particular heritage community, many of whom still live locally.

The Multiple Voices of the Past

[LB]: In my experience, literally, archaeology can't stand aloof on its own pedestal anymore. The computer, transport, film, oral history, paper and photography have put paid to this. To work as a community venture it has to see itself in a stream of these other art forms. If you look back at the fascinating handprints inside a 30,000 years old cave why did they make them? Were they for hierarchical reasons: is there a structure to the handprints; are some higher than others? Are they to tell the future that they lived: did they have brains that could think in that way? Are they simply marking their time on earth? Are they making themselves immortal? Are they delineating ownership over their territory like a dog pisses on a wall? Is it their consensus of who lives in these caves? Coupled with the animal drawings they make using the natural formation of the rocks, are they talking about their culture: what herds will pass when at what season; what they caught that month? Or are they the marks of the people who attended a spiritual experience? They do it in their moment on earth. Finding these handprints is not even strictly archaeology I suppose. And as a layperson to archaeology I don't know where the boundaries are. What I do know is excavating the Reno was to achieve all of the above. But I didn't start there. I began with collecting our memoirs: our recollections of the Reno.

[MN]: Archaeology cannot ignore all the various forms of new data available from the twentieth century. The Excavating the Reno project is one example of a project that uses oral history and archaeology to explore the story of a particular site and to recover the multiple voices of its past. The Reno was a Manchester soul and funk club that became a sanctuary from racism for 1950s-born mixed heritage people in the 1970s. Having secured a grant of £65,000 from the National Lottery Fund, the site was excavated over three weeks in the autumn of 2017 by and for members of the local community in Moss Side and the results displayed in a 24-hour open day and later as an event and exhibition at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, curated by the local community.

[LB]: Hearing the first beat of Reno classics I am awash with internal light that makes my flesh tingle and creates an opera in my veins. I know other Reno Regulars share that feeling. The Reno was a cellar club in Moss Side MCR. Heyday 1971 to 1981. Soundtrack, imported soul and funk. Predominantly populated by 50s born 'half-caste' stigmatised by the 1930 Fletcher Report: *Offspring of interracial alliances suffer inherent physical and mental defects.* Born in 1950s England of No Black; No Irish; No Dogs. We were special. Elite. In the Reno we were majority not the minority. The nod of acknowledgment was a total thrill.

The Reno was demolished 1986. 2015, crossing the poppy filled empty site, I sat to remember our civilisation, black market, social structure, king and queen, all frustrated artists. I am a multi-award winning playwright, but a play couldn't capture the nuances. Instead, 2016 I filmed Reno memoirs. It was a simple affair. In my flat I stuck a cheap Panasonic V160 in their face, and asked them: 'tell me about your first night down the Reno.' Over an hour their stories spiralled from their first night into: people spat in our prams; our white mum's being ostracised from her family and society; being divided between our mum's roast and our dad's yam; finding our family in the Reno of wall-to-wall half-caste.

I would upload them to You-tube, write an introduction, quote a line from their memoir, below a lead image of the memoirist as a teenager during their Reno years, and post them every weekday night on our website www.thereno.live. Word of mouth, in a few months, 45,000 interacted with four seasons made up of 20 episodes. Huge discussions began on Facebook. The major one was the word half-caste. Since the world had gone PC, and half-caste was deemed the same as nigger, we had become black. So now not only was our mum ostracised from her family and society now she was also ostracised from us. The PC undercurrent was insidious or accidental. No insidious. Just like the gradations of slavery, we could never live in the white camp. A strange thought to us when our mum's were our main care-givers and whether anyone liked it or not most of our reference points were white. A mass movement began as we reclaimed who we had been, our rightful place within the Reno society, and with each other. Our fractured society began to coagulate again. Began to drift towards each other again. Like stardust gravitating, we began to form a star our project could orbit.

[Annette Ileke]: *'Made me realise I am not mad and many of my age group experienced the same. Ha I feel to tell my GP I don't need their counseling I get to understand a lot more listening to these stories at least I can relate.'*

[MN]: Central to this debate was how far can archaeologists act as enablers for local groups to explore their own, self-defined, heritage rather than impose a more academic framework for exploration? In the late 1960s the American planner Sherry Arnstein (1969) developed a structure for summarising how local communities, local government and academia engaged with the various power structures in contemporary society and how they interacted when important decisions were being made. Arnstein's 'ladder of citizen participation' has eight 'rungs' grouped into three broad categories: 'Nonparticipation', 'tokenism' and 'Citizen Power', the latter including the rungs of Citizen Control,

Delegated Power and Partnership. Arnstein defined citizen participation as the redistribution of power that enabled the 'have-not' citizens presently excluded from the political and economic processes to be deliberately included in the future. Although critiqued by Tritter & McCullum (2006), who called for more recognition of the process of participation itself, and by Collins & Ison (2006), who argued for a social learning approach, there is still much in this model that is pertinent to public and community archaeology practice in Britain. Particularly relevant to The Reno project is the way in which Arnstein's model allows decisions within a single project or process to be seen to move backwards and forwards across the spectrum of the 'ladder of citizen participation', from 'Nonparticipation' through 'tokenism' to 'Citizen Power'.

[LB]: I don't even know what half of that means. But this is what I do know, and I know it relates to that.

2002 I become a professional playwright. Produced at major theatres across the country. 2010 with Shared Experience I am co-writing a play about two real characters, elect mutes, June and Jennifer Gibbons who burnt down their school in 1981, and are sent to Broadmoor. During our process I realize it isn't a random incident, these two black girls haven't just gone mad. Isolated in deepest Wales they are joining the riots that are burning up and down the country.

Long story short, in rehearsal A.D. Polly Teale is asking the two white secondary characters what they think, and telling the twins what to think. As we do, I am having this conversation with the actresses in corridor but going in and allowing it to happen. On Saturday morning I grow a pair, and write to Polly to tell her my thoughts.

Sunday morning all hell broke loose. As hysterical as Blanche Dubois, Polly is screaming down the phone that I called her a racist. She's been up all night. I have just been expecting a conversation. Her co-artistic director, Nancy gets on and opens with, 'at least you're not being aggressive.' I wouldn't take back my thoughts. On bank holiday Monday, Nancy gets back in touch and tells me, 'you're not to speak in rehearsal. You can speak to Polly for 20 minutes after you are sure she had eaten. Don't stop her on the way home because she has a family to go to.' I write back 'you do realize this play is called speechless and if we don't unpack the characters you're making the real twins speechless, the actresses speechless, and you're literally making me speechless.' At 6.30 their producer rings and says, 'don't come back to rehearsal and if you do the police will remove you.' I imploded. I have never written another play.

As a teenager I was addicted to pulp fiction slavery. The one place where there is a representation of me. Then lo and behold, I get my hands on some authentic slave narratives. I can't believe it. They're real. I'm devouring them and all their intricacies. 1000 pages in, Jacob D Green apologizes for stealing a horse to escape. All weekend it bothers me. There is something wrong with that sentence. A white man escaping a WW2 Prisoner of War camp would see himself as a hero. Then it hits me. More than likely Jacob can't read or write. He is dictating his story to a missionary. Aligning himself with their values to get alms. Suddenly I

see two Jacobs. One is kneeling cap in hand — his slave quarter camaraderie lost. The other sits his cap pushed back lifting his brandy in the Reno telling his horse-theft as a hero. Then I realize no slave narrative I've ever read is authentic: they're all defined by what the white man wants to hear. Then I see me kneeling to the arts. Also lost to my truth.

We'd have loved how Jacob slapped the mistress, kicked the master, and stuffed two live chickens in his bag. He'd have been safe with us.

As a multi-award winning playwright, I was tempted to write a Reno play for many years. But, no, the minute I begin the missionary on my shoulder takes dictation: we need to be saved; we are victims. The Reno would kill me. Instead I harvest the Reno itself. In 2016 I collected our memoirs. In 2017 we excavated the actual club with Salford University archaeologists. In 2018 we were finalists for eight awards. In 2019 we were resident in the Whitworth Art Gallery, located a mile from the Reno, collaborating to evolve an exhibition of our memoirs, artefacts to tell our history.

An Archaeologist's Approach to the Past

[MN]: An archaeological approach inevitably means drawing upon more than two hundred years of research and scholarship and particular ways of reporting and understanding the past. The professional archaeologists on site at The Reno had no intention of being exclusive or limiting. However, the use of academic language and jargon can seem intimidating to those not familiar with this process. Equally, learning the culture of the community being explored can seem equally daunting to the archaeologist. The act of undertaking the project leads to a shared discovery that both parties embark upon.

Just as there is a particular language and terms of reference used by those who experienced The Reno, so archaeology fieldwork and reporting uses a particular language and terminology that can be very technical. This is in line with the scientific approach to the discipline which looks to record in as much detail as possible the physical remains of the human past. This is in part a recognition that archaeological excavation is a destructive act – the remains can only be removed from the ground once and therefore archaeologists feel a duty to future generations to recover as much data as possible.

Consequently, the language used can sometimes seem to be a barrier to wider involvement. That language, though, reflects the use of standardized terminology to describe what has been found and also the employment, where appropriate, of more scientific approaches to analyzing artefacts and materials.

Thus, a more traditional approach to reporting the archaeological work at The Reno would summarize the findings as follows, without necessarily engaging with the contemporary experiences of those who lived, worked, and used the space.

The archaeological remains of the club filled the full width of the basement of the building, with the bar, dance floor and toilets at the front and a kitchen and smaller room at the back for gambling. The excavation uncovered the back stairs up to the ground floor, and the alleyway and cellars of the building behind. Many of the more interesting finds including clothing, make up, wallets and drinks bottles were found in the grids and cellar lights of this alley.

Photographs and memories from the club indicated that the two front rooms, the dance floor and kitchen, had wood-effect panelling on the walls and red and blue lino tiles on the floor, with an area of red tiles for the dance floor. Although the floor was well preserved, all that remained of the panelling was the plastic corner trims and occasional fragments of hardboard, but this revealed that the wall behind was constructed from white glazed brick. This was a common feature of basement rooms built in this period, which were often originally used as kitchens, laundries, or cold storage. The glazed bricks extended the full length of the basement and included curved examples around the doorways, which still retained fragments of their wooden frames in places.

The rooms to the rear of the club were more conservatively decorated with the kitchen retaining its blue painted bricks, again common for cellars in this type of building. The room to the north had plastered and painted walls and a concrete floor, below which was a laid brick floor. The room also had a small fireplace complete with a 1970s-style grate and fret. Several dice were found in this room, along with drinks bottles and pieces of formica tabletops.

The point about such an archaeological description is that it records the physicality of the site in a way other sources of evidence, such as photographs, plans, and even oral history cannot. The interpretation of this material begins at the very moment of excavation and continues as the objects and past social spaces inhabited by The Reno community are once more revealed as physical structures. An essential part of the archaeological approach involves trying to re-image and re-inhabit those past spaces and to understand the archaeologies of the mind that produced them. This process continues off site with the detailed examination of the finds, a role traditionally undertaken by professional archaeologists and museum specialists.

An Artist's Approach to the Past

[LB]: All Jamaicans are descendants of slaves. Four years before I was born Rosa Parks was arrested for remaining on the newly designated front row of a bus, which was actually the coloured front row but the whites had run out of seats. Billy Holiday fills Carnegie Hall after she enters through the back door, and washes her hands in a segregated sink. My Irish mum was ostracised for loving my Jamaican dad. People spat in my pram. As a child I recall black bodies dressed in 'modern' clothes swinging from trees. As a teenager I couldn't get a job with an M14, M15 or M16 postcode. After 9/11, I saw a picture on the front of the Guardian of three dead Iraqi kids. Their distraught dad was weeping over them. No way in the world would the Guardian post a picture of three dead Swiss kids and their blonde dad weeping over them. It would be deemed too distasteful.

Historically, society does not see us as human. My project is not about nostalgia. It is about us telling our story the way we tell a story. It is about us being the hero of our story. Only humans can be heroes. I used to feel ashamed about being from Moss Side, I know people who are ashamed of going down the Reno. That is the story the condemning world has put in our heads.

Our Reno memoirs led to an appreciation of our Moss Side community. The excavation unearthed evidence that it did exist. The perfume bottle still full of perfume mapped out the 1970 chemists where it could be bought. Which then creates pictures of the surrounding streets and activities. Our artefacts are as priceless as those of Rome. Our stories trapped in the photos on our Whitworth Art Gallery wall document weddings and kids and style and love. They make our younger generation feel like they belong. Now we will not just be an academic footnote of unsavoury characters and victimhood: society's default script for the likes of us.

The Reno memoirs were talking therapy. Excavating the Reno was doing therapy. Exhibiting our finds in the Whitworth Art Gallery has been viewing therapy. We view ourselves differently, and therefore the world has to view us the way we view ourselves. It is not for the world to see us as human but for us to see it ourselves.

Peter Naughton (Facebook): *And it's working Linda. What you have done is showing Moss Side in a different light. Sort of uniting those of us who lived through those times in a very positive way. We are generally strong people as a result of our tough upbringing and as such just get on with life with little discussion. You've got us talking to each other about experience we all share. Can't tell you how impressed I am.*

Gail Allott (Facebook): *Linda Brogan you cannot change the world my friend. But what you have done is brought a community, a family back together. Not only that, you have given them, a voice a sense of ownership, recognition, a sense of self worth. I myself would never have dreamt I would be on FB putting my 2 pennies worth in and not only am I doing it I enjoy it and feel that people are interested in what I have to say. Sometimes some of us post things that are nothing to do with the Reno directly but they are things that we feel passionate about. These things have been going on for years but for some of us we are using this opportunity to express our frustration, this platform to voice our disgust. You can not change the world my friend but you sure as hell bring a little sunshine and belonging into some of lives through this amazing journey you invited us to join you on. Thank you Linda Brogan.*

Legacy 1: An Artists' View of the Dig

[LB]: Over 18 months Salford University archaeologist Sarah Cattell, and unit director Adam Thompson helped me minutely plan the Reno excavation. Incredibly we were only overspent by £174 at the end.

For three weeks, 9th to the 27th of October 2017, overseen by level headed, patient Sarah Cattell, [who did a remarkable job balancing health and safety whilst not dampening Reno enthusiasm, excitement, and natural camaraderie] joined by middle aged, middle class archaeology enthusiasts, myself, and, our predominantly middle aged, mixed race, working class Reno Regulars, we actually excavated the Reno.

By week two the Reno energy was luring participants of both classes back day after day. White, working class, cameraman John Lloyd, white middle class professional photographer Karen Rangeley, archaeology enthusiasts Posh Margaret and Portuguese Alcina would definitely be Reno Regulars now if it were still there.

Daily we posted footage of our excavation progress on www.thereno.live. 45,000 interacted on Youtube. Facebook was ablaze. We featured on BBC Radio, BBC Northwest, Granada Reports, Manchester Evening News, and a full page Saturday Guardian article.

Not all scheduled Reno memoirists turned up for their shift. I outreached in our daily progress uploads, always making sure the site footage was energetic and enticing. I also successfully tasked labour shy, natural promoter, Reno Regular Fonzo Buller to find replacements. Our fenced-in compound began to shape its own natural order. The Reno Regulars who didn't like digging assumed other jobs. Deborah Laird and her granddaughter washed and labelled found artefacts. Suzy Mousah became our site 'mother', budgeting and making lunch every day. Stew, saltfish fritters, chicken soup, and cakes made by female Reno Regulars lured the wary middle class from their homemade sandwiches and the cameramen's cabin to join us loud, working class, hugging other long lost Reno Regulars in the sunshine, or talking over each other in our 12ft canteen cabin lashed with rain.

I had expected the excavated Reno to be like lifting a lid and the shoes are laid inside. It wasn't the case. The main entrance is trapped under new pavements built since the 1986 demolition. The original doorway could not be accessed. The precarious, excavated, Reno's walls meant an audience couldn't walk inside, only view it from the side, they can't dance on the dance floor as I had romantically envisaged. It would have been gilding a lily. The evolving excavation daily revealed the Reno's resemblance to a sacred Roman or Greek ruin. As a female middle class visitor remarked: 'I can never look at temples again without realizing that it must have been people as passionate as the Reno who worshipped in them.' On the night of the celebration, theatrically lit, it was Pompeii, a work of art in itself, the most beautiful sculpture.

The BBC *One Show* filmed our last four days, including the rocking, original Reno DJ Persian, you couldn't squeeze in, £10 a head, 28th of October marquee celebration on site [almost singlehandedly marketed by white, working class, Reno Regular, funeral director Helen Ryan Lewis] capturing their BBC reporter Michelle Ackerley's Reno Regular mum, Mavis, hugging friends she's not seen for

30 years, and voicing our common bond: what it was like to be born half-caste in the 1950s. While white, middle class, *Guardian* music critic Dave Simpson necked all offered Jamaican rum punch to oil our second *Guardian* article advertising the Whitworth Art Gallery colonisation one night stand on 23 November.

300 participated. 80,000 interacted with our daily progress videos on www.thereno.live. BBC Northwest, Granada Reports, the BBC *One Show*, Manchester Evening News and *The Guardian* broadcast our excavation to millions. 800 attended our all-night celebration on site. Best night they ever had resounded across Facebook for weeks. On 23 November 1500 people who do not engage with the arts colonised the Whitworth Art Gallery to view our exhibited memoirs, excavation footage, photos, artefacts, and dance to Reno DJs in the main hall. The morning after Arts Council England's Alison Boyle wrote: 'It was great to see you in the context of the Whitworth, bringing so many ideas, people 'and hopes together.' We are finally the artists we were meant to be. Our self-esteem heightened by the clever, ambitious, aspirational project we achieved, equipped with the skills we practiced achieving it.

Everything I set out to achieve was achieved with bells on. I assessed, and evaluated overall-project participation on film also available on www.thereno.live, including Salford University archaeologist wonderful Sarah Cattell, Whitworth senior curator Sam Lackey, and middle class amateur enthusiast Posh Margaret to help everyone similarly, passionately, engage future communities. To document our methodology.

Legacy 2: The Reno At The Whitworth's 12 Months Residency 2019-20

[LB]: People who have never stepped through the Whitworth Art Gallery door before, arrive all week, asking where is the Reno exhibition? They are directed to the first floor of the prestigious building. Where we are still capturing our nuances, using our gallery's walls as pages: acts in a play. Discreet text in the doorway of both entrances direct our visitors to start where we did, with our memoirs.

Central on the wide brick wall is our large telly, surrounded by 3 large sofas, a standard lamp, lava lamp, and glass fish referencing a 70s living room, where excerpts of our Reno memoirs play through headphones. Visitors are told they can watch the other 70 hours at home on www.thereno.live.

Turn left: the excavation is 5m x 4m photo of the empty grass where the Reno used to be. Inset in the grass is a smaller television of excavation footage. Beside that is a 5m x 4m black and white 1970 photo of the Reno itself. Metaphorical we have exhumed it. Turn left a 2m x 2m of 2 half-caste excavation participants hug a white woman, symbolically their reclaimed white mum. In front are 4 tables on which the Reno is mapped in 30 artefacts with explanatory text, and a sublime, anarchic conjuring of the Reno by Reno Regular Mark E. Smith.

Carry on along that wall: our timeline poem, distilled from in-depth conversations we had preparing for the residency from October 2018 to March 2019, beginning with WW1 through the decades ending with a Reno teen photo slideshow. Underneath, artefacts are displayed.

Turn left again: a vast magnetic wall holds our teen photos collage, telling the ordinary human lives we lived. Beside our purpose built memorial wall.

The professional moody lighting is designed to create 4 distinct, dramatic areas. A Reno soundtrack curated by Reno DJ Persian plays.

I spend weekdays in there. Having marvellous conversations with all walks of life. Most enthralled are our children, and other young mixed race struggling to find their identity. The Reno 12, those most loyal to the excavation, meet on Thursday night to gently excavate our evolving narrative by listening and talking to each other, our visitors, our Facebook group, and the comments on our weekly www.thereno.live blog filtered through our weekly podcast One Conversation Please.

[anon]: 'It is so refreshing seeing and hearing real people share real stories more spaces should be filled with stuff like this.'

[anon]: 'What a wonderful exhibition – so important to tell these stories such inspiring interviews. Loved the Reno findings. [lipstick etc] from the Reno ruins.'

[anon]: 'Dear Linda this space is fucking incredible. It is so moving to see so many years' work and so any peoples' stories all in the same room together. What a powerful thing you have done.'

[anon]: 'Made me laugh. Made me sad. Such fantastic Mancunian characters. Well done Linda. Have got memories as a kid of feeling scared of the Reno and the Nile yet seeing this makes me realise there was nothing to be scared of.'

Conclusion

[LB]: Understanding the reason for the archaeology, its goals, will create better engagement, and longevity of any project. From my position, to see the archaeology as the main event is misleading. For me, it was a means to an end: a knife to cut a cake. Going back to the ladder of power. My main aim was to dig down and dislodge that ladder. Cause it to fall. So when it was rebuilt we would have a say in its structure. Where it is placed. Validate our existence. Afford our descendants hope. Grieve our lost home.

I found this on Instagram: @moya_lm: *'Just walked into this exhibition at the Whitworth and started sobbing. It's about the Reno, a club in Manchester that became a magnet for young mixed race people in the 70s I'm still crying typing this out but I want to share it because I've never experienced this before, never had such a visceral reaction to art in my life. I've never seen mixed race history done like that, never seen black and white individuals specifically be recognised by cultural*

institutions as existing in our own liminal lane, not just black or white but both, a grey mix of the two who don't fit fully into either world. This work by @excavatingthereno just smacked me in the face. Nightclubs were the first place I started feeling at home, like I fitted, that I saw my identity begin to calcify - Visions in Dalston gave me a sense of self that I'd never experienced before. Now this exhibition has shown me so many people that came before, that felt the same, that went through a similar process and I can't describe how powerful the sense of belonging and rooting within history feels. Maybe I'm overreacting, I don't know but often, while being mixed is incredible and special, you also can feel rootless, lost, especially if, like me, half of your parentage wasn't there, didn't pass their culture to you specifically, didn't give you anything to cling to and say 'this is my legacy, this is who I am, this is where I sit'. Thank you, thank you, thank you for this.'

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