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Living heritage: universities as anchor institutions in sustainable communities

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In this paper we argue that universities have the capacity to play an important role in supporting the living heritage of place by acting as anchor institutions in making sustainable communities. In a case study centred on the new town of Hatfield we explore how the act of remembering industrial pasts works as a powerful affirmation of heritage as a living history that has the potential to inform policy, place-shaping and academic theory and practice. Key to our approach is the concept of "sense of place" and how in the UK this has become interconnected with ideas about place-shaping and localism that are central to public policy and planning discourse and practice. As one of few points of continuity in a community, universities remain underexplored as institutions with the resilience, adaptability and capital to act as anchors to lead work on reclaiming lost pasts and build sustainable futures.

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Introduction

The term "heritage" has many meanings across the English-speaking world, but what is not in doubt is the importance of history as a living tradition. As a channel that connects people imaginatively, often emotionally, with the past, history can foster relationships of belonging and identity; it can contribute to community-building, economic prosperity and cultural adaptation. It is in this context that we refer to heritage and explore its capacity to orientate people in specific places and embed them in a flow of time. For some communities, the act of reclaiming forgotten or marginalised histories can be a powerful affirmation of presence. Remembering industrial pasts is one response to their loss; where social fragmentation runs along lines of cultural difference, shared histories have the potential to make connections through empathy. Far more than a form of preservation, heritage or living history has the potential to inform policy, place-shaping and academic theory and practice.

In discussing universities as anchor institutions in sustainable communities, we explore the physical place-shaping aspects of heritage with reference to a particular case study in the new town of Hatfield, north of London, in the United Kingdom. We think of heritage as not simply about the preservation or conservation of a few "important" buildings but reflecting a more subtle relationship with a wider set of elements that contribute to collective memory. We note that the orthodoxy of the 1964 Venice Charter, however, has continued strongly to shape the way that built-form aspects of heritage are approached. As Hardy points out (Hardy, 2009: xvi), the Venice Charter was read as requiring old buildings to be understood as historical documents in themselves, never to be copied for fear of "falsifying" history: 'In recent years the requirement of Article 9 of the Charter that new work must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp has been misused to justify contrasting

modern additions, alterations and new buildings in historic places worldwide, and to validate modernist interventions in traditional buildings and places'. As Hardy goes on to say, 'these misused clauses have become a central regulatory tool used in development control to block any form of traditional design' (2009: xvii). This is one key context for the way that heritage and the increasingly influential concept of place-shaping have come together in recent years.

Key to our approach in this paper is the concept of "sense of place" (*genus loci*), which has both an academic and a popular resonance, capturing something intellectually and/or emotionally about the spirit of the place: its prevalent feeling and identity. Everywhere is somewhere; all places have their own unique local character, the things that make them distinctive. It is this distinctive character that underpins feelings of connectedness and authenticity. How we understand place is complicated, reflecting layers of meaning built up over time: the settlement in its landscape; the way the buildings and spaces fit together; the way streets and buildings look and feel; the materials they are made of and the way people use them. Yet some places feel more "authentic" than others. Places that reflect the constraints of local topography, landscape and building materials and vernaculars can feel far more "real" than those that look the same everywhere. That is why a village usually feels more "authentic" than a business park, with its single function land use, generic architecture, planting and car parks. The history, natural landscape and "townscape" of a place and the way these elements intertwine through daily use can be understood as marks of identity that make up "genus loci".

The heritage of a place is central to how this *genus loci* is developed and transmitted, and this can be as much artistic, literary, technical, political, religious and institutional (among other things) as about buildings and landscapes. In the UK, a holistic notion of place-shaping has emerged at the centre of public policies for the regulation and governance of space (Gallant and Wong, 2008) and gained additional influence from political commitments expressed in terms of localism. Its effects, however, have been the subject of vigorous debate, not least in relation to heritage; it is notable, for instance, that place-shaping approaches have been used to justify mass demolition of working-class housing in the north of England (Allen and Crookes, 2009).

In this paper we first situate our case study within the wider political context. We then move on to consider the Hatfield case study in terms of place-shaping, history and heritage, connecting its historic role in the aviation and defence industry to structural economic shifts in recent years that undermined its economic base and its more recent renewal through the provision of educational and business services. We explore the heritage case study as a process of social, intellectual and community engagement with place-shaping and reflect on its key elements. We look at some of the spatial design implications for place-shaping arising from the reconsideration of the Venice Charter and conclude that heritage-related activities give universities important opportunities in future to anchor cultural and physical environments as part of an overall focus on sustainable communities.

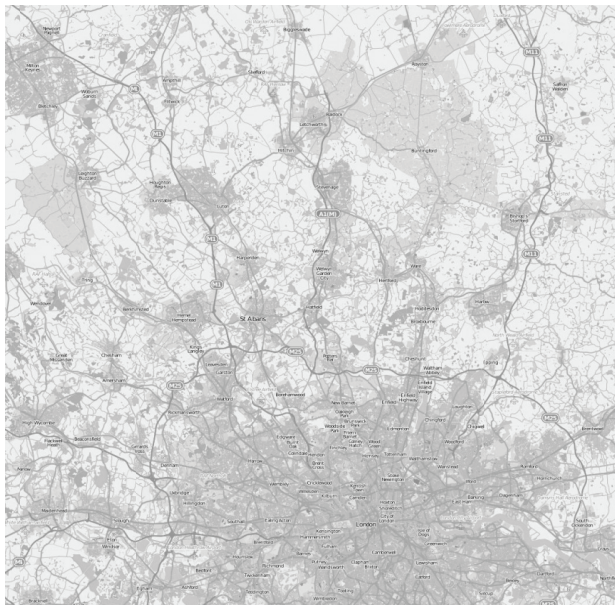


Figure 1. Map of Hatfield in its regional context Source: Map data © OpenStreetMap contributors, CC BY-SA.

Political context

In this initial part of the paper, we attempt to locate the concept of place-shaping within a wider political context, but also to bridge between place-shaping and history and heritage. It is interesting to note that, as the turn towards localism was occurring in policy, so a conscious shift in attention within the discipline of history was elevating the experiences of the everyday and situating those localised experiences within global currents. Historians had been responding to the collapse of certainty associated with postmodernism since the 1970s, if not before, yet it was in the 1990s that momentum built, with Richard Evans publishing his trenchant defence of history in 1997 (Evans, 1997; Tosh, 2006). While the pressure has since eased, as historians work with multiple perspectives, sensitive to the gradients of power, the rejection of the nation as a unit of historical thinking in favour of local and identity groupings has become well established. A 2011 companion to history demonstrated this well (Rublack, 2011). In the context of public engagement, this turn can be problematic where audiences remain interested in matters of national identity and with the lives and conduct of elites, alongside, rather than in tension with, matters of local heritage and everyday life.

Place-shaping assumed political significance during the Labour administrations from 1997, which devolved power in Scotland and Wales and sought to define a "new localism", a framework of accountability for local authorities, both to residents and to central government. Themes such as efficiency and responsiveness can be traced back to 1980s and remain evident under today's Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, an indication of consensus across party lines in terms of the policy priorities for local administration, but also of the resilience and traction of the language of locality and of local distinctiveness and determination. The Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s emphasised market pressures to this end, with an interventionist approach of inspection and regulation, a tone which their Labour successors picked up. As Sir Michael Lyons, the author of the 2007 inquiry into local government noted, a tension emerged between a devolutionary impulse based on the recognition of the need for local decision-making for local circumstances, and a disciplinary impulse in pursuit of the reform of public services, often through target-setting (see local government White Paper: *Strong and Prosperous Communities*, 2006). So, while Lyons put a holistic notion of place-shaping at the centre of the regulation and governance of space in the UK, the concept must be understood in a context where localism carried a political charge.

It is possible to identify a number of factors that contributed to successive governments' interest in localism. One is the concept's rhetorical power, though it is notable that the language of devolution and empowerment has been, and continues to be, deployed by central governments in contexts where they also evince a lack of trust in local capacity and capability, particularly those of local authorities. This usage provides an indication of the (at least perceived) power and resonance of localism (one example would be schools policy, where academies, later free schools, run outside the control of councils, and much greater powers are being accrued to the Secretary of State). Another, connected, factor is a broader crisis of legitimacy for central government, involving a disaffection with the politics and culture of Westminster and a sense of democratic disengagement. "Sleaze", associated particularly with the Major era, was damaging to individual reputations but also collectively. The Iraq war, and the absence of WMD, eroded public trust under Labour and the parliamentary expenses scandal spanned two administrations. The Leveson Inquiry is exposed close connectivities between government and the media and can be seen as the latest in a series of episodes that have undermined confidence in central government. As a result, political rhetoric has been shaped by a need to emphasise not only accountability in a broad sense but also the importance of devolving responsibility and control downwards (under the precept that those who deliver and use services know best).

We can perhaps connect localism (as a policy concept), the academic turn away from the national to the local, and public interest in local history and heritage. We can recognise in them attempts to respond to collapses in established certainties through creating anchors at local level. Localism in the 1990s suggested democratic devolution and accountability but also reflected an acknowledgement that central government no longer had the big funding levers to provide incentives for change (this also underlies current Prime Minister David Cameron's "Big Society", which has taken on a localist narrative). The academic turn to local/global polarities responded to an erosion of objectivity and of the grand narratives of national rise and fall. For some, heritage suggested an authentic grass-roots phenomenon through which ordinary people connected with the past and discovered a transformative sense of belonging (Samuel, 1994); for others, it was a form of commercialised nostalgia that exploited a need for "comfort" in a "postindustrial, postcolonial... postmodern, postboom situation" (Boniface, 1995: 24; Hewison, 1987). The search for a sure anchor, for a refuge from the turbulence unsettling the structures and apparent certainties of the past is understandable at a human and at an intellectual level. But what are the mechanisms and the organising principles to do so? Much of the thinking in these three perspectives on the local – the political, the historical and the heritage-oriented seems to rely on the creation or identification of collectivities that replace those structures – often institutions that once provided a more certain framework. This paper suggests that, in the search for new, more fluid forms of collectivity, we may have missed the potential of a particular type of institution: the university.

With histories measured in decades if not centuries, universities are often one of the few points of continuity in a community – as well as a major employer, cultural hub and catalyst for renewal, drawing in people and businesses. Yet they remain under-explored as institutions with the resilience, adaptability and capital to act as anchors within communities in a "post-institutional" world. This is as much a challenge to

universities themselves as to any other constituency. Their leaders and their staff have often located themselves in national frameworks, both economic and social, even when established to meet local needs by founders motivated by civic pride and a commitment to the future of the place. This may be associated with the effects of homogenisation of institutional mission and identity, where esteem becomes attached to activities measured nationally and compared internationally, rather than shaped and valued locally. This paper aims to challenge us to reimagine the role universities can play within their communities as part of a historically-conscious place-shaping agenda.

Place-shaping, history and heritage: a case study

The county of Hertfordshire has a population of over a million people and a twentieth-century history of urban, demographic and economic expansion connected with its proximity to London. The population is culturally diverse, including Londoners re-located to post-war council estates, travellers and migrants from many countries.

Hertfordshire's complex sense of place derives from many layers and kinds of settlement built up over a very long history. People have probably lived in Hertfordshire since Mesolithic times; Neolithic long barrows, several Iron Age hill forts, and the traces of a Celtic settlement (an "oppidum") near present day St Albans (itself an important Roman town) remain. Hertfordshire's settlement pattern of market towns grew in the Middle Ages through trade and agriculture, while abandoned medieval settlements in the north and east of the county reflected poor harvests and hard times. Roman roads through Hertfordshire are a reminder in the landscape of the importance of trade to and from London over the long haul, as are, more recently, Myddelton's New River (constructed between 1608 and 1613), the Grand Union canal, the railway development of the nineteenth century and the motorways and highways that now transect the county. In the twentieth century, modernist ideas in town-making have given Hertfordshire some of its distinctive character including garden cities, post-war new towns and the redevelopment of traditional settlements (in part) as suburban overspill for London. Hatfield itself comprises a traditional village centred on the historic Hatfield House and a post war new town, with these two urban elements severed by the north-south railway and highway.



Figure 2. Traditional Hatfield village urbanism Source: Photograph from the authors.



Figure 3. Hatfield's "New Town" urbanism Source: Photograph from the authors.

From its origins as Hatfield Technical College, the University of Hertfordshire (UH) emerged and developed alongside broader cultural and planning ideas about how to make places. Through Garden



Figure 5. The “business park” architecture and place shaping of South Hatfield Source: Photograph from authors.

The de Havilland airfield community heritage project

In 2004, the University of Hertfordshire opened a second campus on one portion of the former Hatfield Aerodrome. From 1934, the airfield site had grown into a major centre of the British aviation industry. During the Second World War, the de Havilland Aircraft Company developed and produced the Mosquito fighter-bomber there; post-war, the site was an important centre of rocket, missile and jet-engine research. In the 1940s, de Havilland planes held records for the fastest and highest flights. The world’s first commercial jet airliner, the de Havilland Comet, was developed and manufactured at the aircraft works in the 1950s; its test flight hanger was for a time the largest aluminium building in the world. For decades, the airfield had been an international centre of technological research and business. It was also the major local employer: over 4000 workers in 1939, rising to 10,000 by the 1960s. A dramatic reversal occurred when BAE Systems closed the site in 1993, with a loss of 8,000 jobs. As a result, by mid-decade, a thriving company town was experiencing post-industrial uncertainty and decline.



Figure 6. The de Havilland site’s original buildings - the aircraft hanger now used as a fitness centre and hotel Source: Photograph from the authors.



Figure 7. The de Havilland site’s original buildings – part of the Art Deco-style administration block now extended and used as a police station Source: Photograph from the authors.

By 2003, few of the original buildings remained: an art deco administration block (now a police station); a gate house (a fast-food restaurant) and a control tower and hangar (a private sports club). In their place, the property firm, Goodman (then Arlington), gained planning permission for a residential area of 1800 homes, a distribution centre (1 million square feet), office buildings and for an eventual 1.8 million square feet of production. A small shopping area, school and a nature park were also part of the mix. This re-development, including heavy remediation, demolition of the production space and breaking up of the runways, erased most physical traces of the site's industrial past, with major implications for its sense of place. Although there had been attempts to capture the history of the airfield by naming the streets after de Havilland planes, and considerable interest exists in the history of the de Havilland site, locally, nationally and internationally, there was little to connect the new businesses and residents to the site. If we consider the specific time stream of the area the medieval manor, centuries of agricultural labour, early aviators, hangars and nocturnal rocket tests – redevelopment had obliterated temporal as well as spatial markers.



Figure 8. Aerial view of community exhibition in Salisbury Village, June 2010, showing a plan of pre-Second World War beacons Source: Geoff Collins.

It was in this context that members of the University's History Department looked out of the office windows and wondered about the significance of the scene. Then, in 2009, one of these historians teamed up with the de Havilland Housing Partnership, which was set up to implement the brownfield development and regeneration scheme. The Housing Partnership, comprising the borough council, private developers, registered social landlords and a tenants' panel, aimed 'to foster an active, practical and sustainable community who feel a genuine sense of place, in as short a timeframe as possible' (see: <http://alturl.com/pbsu7>). The de Havilland Airfield Community Heritage Project – the outcome of this collaboration between the University and Housing Partnership and funded by a community grant from the UK's Heritage Lottery Fund began in June 2009 and ran for 18 months (de Havilland Airfield Community Heritage Project, 2010).

The project explicitly set out to commemorate and make visible the cultural, social and economic heritage of the former airfield and the thousands of people who had worked there. As is common in public history, it started with an anniversary; July 2009 was the sixtieth anniversary of the first flight of the de Havilland Comet. People from Salisbury Village (the residential area), local school, college and university students, as well as businesses on the site, participated in a series of events which generated permanent educational and commemorative features. A heritage trail with ten boards was set up across the site; the old aerodrome navigational beacon, the only remaining example of its kind in the world, was restored and re-installed at one of the entrances to the business park. Over 100 men and women, recruited through various ex-employees' organisations, word-of-mouth and local advertising, attended a reminiscence event that launched the oral history project. They agreed to be interviewed about their experiences and feelings as employees at the airfield; the oldest had memories dating back to the 1930s, while the youngest participants had worked on the Spielberg movies that were filmed on the site in the 1990s after industrial activity had ceased.



Figure 9. Map of the de Havilland heritage trail Source: University of Hertfordshire.

In applying for funding, the project described its aim as ‘to generate a much needed sense of community and place for residents on the site and Hatfield more generally’ and to do this through physical structures and acts of reminiscence (Davies, unpubl.). Many ex-workers still live locally and came back to events at the former airfield; partnerships created by the project gave residents access to varied experiences and knowledge of the site. By working with a county-wide online community archive in Hertfordshire, the history of the site was embedded in a still wider historical frame, that of “Hertfordshire Memories” and “Our Hatfield”. Here again the project worked within an established discourse in which it is said that a shared sense of history can foster community identity through cultural “ownership” of a common historic/historical legacy (Jordanova, 2006); it becomes a living tradition.



Figure 10. Typical Hatfield “new town” post war domestic architecture Source: Photograph from the authors.

Reflections on the case study

Looking back over the project it was apparent that the University could act as a community broker by bringing together disparate groups and interests. This also required sensitivity. A sense of place, an appreciation of heritage, and a local identity cannot be imposed from outside or above; a living tradition can only be experienced and made by the participants themselves. Here, the University continues to learn through ventures in community heritage, with new projects related to the anniversary of 1914 and the development of another of Hertfordshire's post-war New Towns, Stevenage.

The de Havilland Aerodrome Community Heritage Project also raises some questions about the role of higher education institutions in fostering community cohesion and creating a sense of identity. The heritage model is frequently couched in the language of legacy, pride and celebration. But what are the trade-offs between commemoration and omission? Were some people's experiences represented more visibly than others: skilled male employees rather female residents of Hatfield, for instance? What are the longer-term effects for Salisbury Village, where in the main residents had no personal links with the history commemorated and whose connection with it was solely through their presence in that location? Can technological innovation in missile production, for example, ever be a source of unalloyed inspiration? In the case of weapons, there is a lethal difference between "here" and "there". These are clearly subjects for longer-term evaluation, but they raise a final possibility. In addition to facilitating community history projects, do academic disciplines and research cultures offer the possibility of opening – over time – a rather more complex understanding of history in place? It is notable that the de Havilland Housing Partnership aimed to create a sense of place 'in as short a time frame as possible'; could institutional longevity suggest another or complementary sense of place, one which is created through a sediment of connected but not necessarily uniform histories?

A strong theme in this case study is fragmented and broken connections: the disappearance of aviation manufacturing; the end of economic certainty for those laid off in 1993; demolished buildings; a first generation of residents with little more than road names to orientate themselves culturally; a transient student population. The current focus of the Business Park as a distribution centre reinforces that sense of unsettledness. Even the dynamic de Havilland Housing Partnership ran its course and disbanded by the end of the project. By contrast, the University can provide continuity, sustainability and certainty. What also emerged was considerable potential for the University to engage in community partnerships specifically through heritage initiatives. Knowledge exchange is a common objective in higher education institutions, but the activities discussed in this paper suggest models of research collaboration that build new academic identities grounded in specific local and institutional contexts.

What can we learn from the project about the role of universities in contributing to place-making? In one sense the University of Hertfordshire had a distinctive role to play; not only was it literally on the spot, but, since its foundation as the Hatfield Technical College in 1952, its own institutional history had been tightly bound up with the de Havilland Aircraft Company. The project also fitted well with the University's declared mission to be rooted in the county. As a major local employer with over 2000 staff, a role it has assumed since the demise of the aircraft industry, the University was comfortable with the idea of brokering connections between residents, schools and businesses. Higher education also has generic qualities that support this sort of activity: breadth of resources (in this instance, departments of history, education and engineering) and strong relationships with external organisations, including schools and businesses.



Figure 11. de Havilland redevelopment area urbanism, in modernist style Source: Photograph from the authors.



Figure 12. de Havilland redevelopment area urbanism, in traditional style Source: Photograph from the authors.

In the longer term, the urbanism created from this post-industrial landscape will itself need some reassessment or retrofitting to support the sense of place. For the University's ongoing heritage role in anchoring sustainable communities, this would mean focusing on urbanist principles of robust, long-life architecture: buildings that work for many users doing different things over time; spaces where people would rather walk than drive; and a convivial public realm that produces outdoor rooms where people will want to meet each other (Madanipour, 2003). Achieving human-scaled places means connecting up compact, mixed-use buildings: a bit like a traditional town (Jenks, Burton & Williams, 1996).

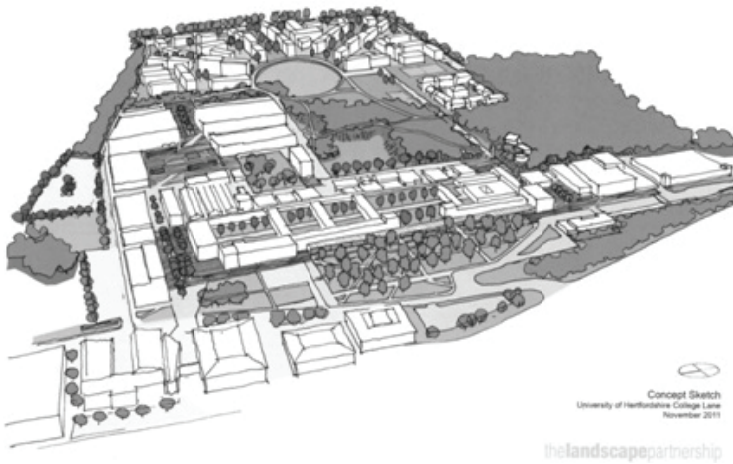


Figure 13. Diagrammatic representation of the University of Hertfordshire master planning process outcomes Source: Estates, University of Hertfordshire.

So, as well as its intellectual and social responsibilities in supporting heritage, UH continues to employ master-planning initiatives on campus and work with partners beyond its own estate to support place-shaping. In the twenty-first century, we have started to acknowledge the need to repair urban areas, make good architectural mistakes and rethink approaches to heritage's spatial expression. In so doing there is a range of approaches that look to urbanist principles (Parham, Clos, 2005); reconnecting urban spaces benefits universities and host communities. Reknitting the urban fabric offers exciting opportunities for authentic and sustainable urbanism and makes universities richer educational environments in which the *genus loci* – the spirit of the place – will be well in evidence.

Conclusions

The Hatfield case study shows how a university has taken up the opportunity to support a local community in dealing with the difficult outcomes of structural change and the consequent imprint on the landscape. We suggest that no other institution would have been able to adopt such a role. This is partly to do with

continuity over time. Though the transformation of the institution from technical college to university has been profound over a sixty-year history, its locatedness within the community as an educational centre gives a sense of resilience allied to a capacity to evolve. This combination connects the past to the present, and in doing so provides a structure for imagining the future. In this case study, the capacity of universities to play an “anchor” role in knitting together critical aspects of heritage as a living tradition in a new town context is demonstrated. Yet universities in very different geographical, cultural and economic circumstances can also reinterpret the anchor role in ways appropriate to the distinctiveness of the institution and the place. If universities are to realise their potential as anchor institutions in sustainable communities, new perspectives will need to be developed in policy and university strategy, in urban design and planning, and in academic practice.

A recognition that universities are institutions with intellectual and social capacities and responsibilities can productively inform policy around local economic development and sustainable communities, bringing policymakers from higher education into structured dialogue with colleagues in other Government departments as part of the policymaking process. In the UK, such an approach would place universities in a central role within the new Local Enterprise Partnerships and as hubs within Enterprise Zones, able to mediate between economic and social imperatives (Wilson, 2012). University leaders are presented with the opportunity to reimagine the role of institutions as anchors within their communities and to consider the location of that mission within national and international frameworks. A key element of this reimagination is an acceptance of responsibility, through intellectual leadership, for contributing constructively to the collective memory of place in an academically rigorous way that meets objectives for making sustainable communities.

It may be that to contribute fully to a sustainable sense of place over the medium term, universities in the “international campus-business-park model” will need to work with local partners to reconfigure the modernist heritage of sprawl-based urbanism that in some cases has replaced a defunct industrial past and to which their own economic and spatial pattern contributes. Urban designers, planners, architects and other with expertise in making the built environment can assist in a process of “sprawl repair” that gives due attention to the heritage aspects of place-shaping. In this way a finer urban grain can be achieved in the urban fabric in and around “new town” universities that recognises and reflects layers of past meaning in heritage terms but points to a sustainable future.

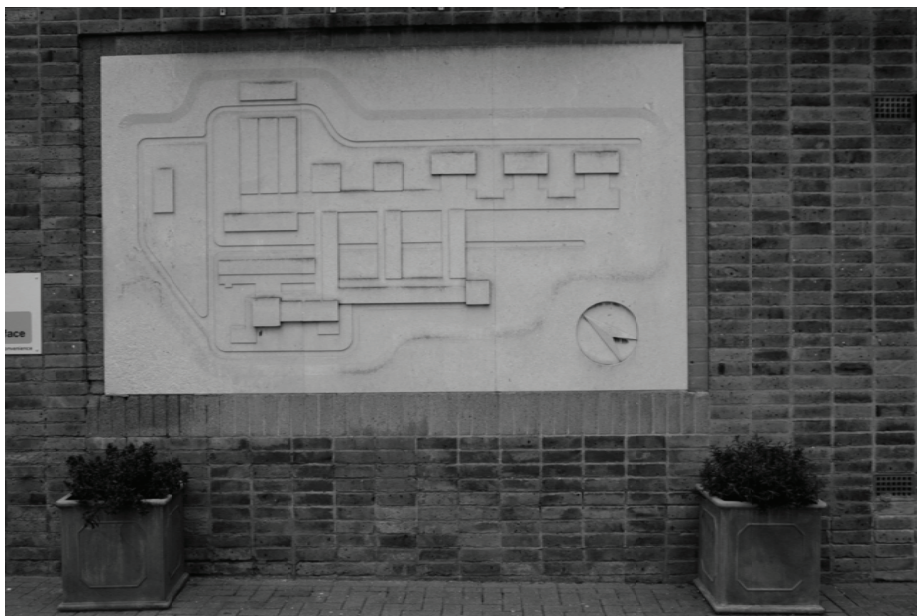


Figure 14. Bianco del Mare Plaque by Trevor Tennant (1953) at the College Lane Campus of the University of Hertfordshire Source: Photograph from the authors.

In recent years, British academic historians have noted a separation of university-based research from the activities of general audiences who are interested in family, local and national pasts. As the case study suggested, heritage provides one context for bridging that divide and putting the history of a particular place into use by individuals and groups. The role of universities as brokers in this process has

considerable potential. Through such projects, historians can also bridge another divide by showing that a sense of place is as much an effect of historical time as a matter of physical space. Although the common language of heritage projects – the air of celebration, inspiration and legacy – can be an uncomfortable, even inappropriate, one to use, institutional longevity presents historians with a mechanism to foster a constructive yet critical approach to community heritage projects and elicit a more nuanced sense of the past. And finally, community histories challenge academics to think about their practice as located in a specific institutional context, itself socially, temporally and geographically located, and to consider the implications of their work for how that institution sets and understands its ethos and purpose. This research has highlighted the resilience and adaptability of universities in their capacity to act as anchors and points of continuity in a community as well as to lead work on reclaiming lost pasts and building sustainable futures.

Endnotes

ⁱ Owen Davies, Application to the Heritage Lottery Fund, 2009.

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