

## Exchanges between Southwark Notes and Rob Bowman, Artangel re: Heygate Estate Mike Nelson Pyramid

9th October 2013

To rob@artangel.org.uk

Dear Rob Bowman

We are writing to you in reference to the intended Mike Nelson artwork that ArtAngel seeks to site on the Heygate Estate in The Elephant & Castle.

We are an group of local people who have been active under the name [Southwark Notes](#) for many years. We run a popular blog that provides news and critical analysis of the regeneration programme for The Elephant area. We have also been very active in the last few years in various community campaigns that attempts to achieve certain conditions for any regeneration scheme. Namely these are 1) Open Masterplanning 2) Genuine Affordable Housing and 3) Benefits for All none of which we feel has been taken seriously by Southwark Council during our various attendances at consultation meetings and planning hearings. These campaigns are Better Elephant that seeks a more equitable and sustainable regeneration; Elephant Amenity Network, a local coalition of housing, open space and park groups and traders ; the 35% Campaign that seeks to ensure the statutory 35% affordable housing component in any new development; and the Elephant Neighbourhood Forum, an emergent grouping of local Tenants Groups, traders and community campaigns that desires a voice within the regeneration scheme itself now that the Masterplan for the area has been accepted. As far as we understand it none of these groups have been approached by Artangel regarding this project but all have or are still actively involved in matters concerning the Heygate Estate.

### **BACKGROUND:**

As you may know, the last few years have been highly contentious with regards to the regeneration scheme and particularly on the issue of the decanting conditions and process of the Heygate Estate tenants and leaseholders. The background to this is very long and complicated and so without elaborating the full history from 1998, we will strive to make this long email as concise as possible. With this in mind we have not peppered the mail with supporting references (although we are happy to provide these should you wish to see the documents and histories we refer too).

Right now, our friend, Adrian Glasspool is the last leaseholder to remain on the estate. We understand that you have been in touch with him as part of the formal proposal to create a work on the Estate. Throughout the last few years we have been supporting not only him but many other residents who were battling the Council for either decent rehousing locally or for a reasonable offer of compensation for their homes. In this time, we have seen the Council act in a manner that can only be described as arrogant and uncaring.

As part of Southwark Notes work we have been engaged on a year long Antipode Foundation research project on regeneration and displacement at The Heygate in collaboration Prof Loretta Lees, a key writer on regeneration and gentrification and the Just Space Network working out of University College London. The research and analysis of displacement within regeneration schemes is quite new but absolutely important to establish how regeneration does impact on long term residents. As part of this we have been interviewing many former residents about their stories of the decant process and also mapping where these people have ended up. As you might know, consistently from 1998 residents have argued that did not want the community that was centered on the Estate to be broken up. The Council's own surveys re-iterated this and also highlighted how many residents were original tenants from 1974 when the estate was opened and how now that they were OAP's the stress of decant and new homes should be taken into account. In the decant process as it actually happened, both the communities own wishes and the Council's earlier recognitions were ignored. Our research shows that many Heygate residents were rehoused far from the estate and some leaseholders have moved out of the borough as the low compensation given on their homes by the Council meant they could not buy an equivalent home locally.

The intention and promise of the Council to build 16 sites of new social housing that those decanted from Heygate could move into did not materialise. It was on the basis of this Council Plan residents trusted the decant process, the leaving of their homes, and the promise to move into a new replacement one.

We have added an Appendix at the end of this email that contains quotes from four of the interviews we have conducted with former residents. Short selections from these interviews is further available on the website [Heygate Was A Home](#) which seeks to contend the narrative and spin re: the Story of the Heygate that the Council has been employing over the last decade.

### **INTERIM USES / PUBLIC ART:**

As you know, the notion of interim or temporary use of public land within regeneration schemes is quite well established. As part of Elephant Amenity Network, we were involved in developing and arguing for interim uses on the Heygate for community benefit so that the open spaces within would not be locked up behind hoardings for years and years. We held an Interim Uses gathering that attracted a 100 or so locals and we produced a report from people's desires for various uses that we published and also argued with both the Council and Lend Lease for. In the end, we were very upset to only be able to squeeze out one small site for a gardening and growing scheme and also that the old Doctors Surgery on Heygate be let to an artist (albeit this not being much of a community use). There is another scheme for a Box Park on the site but this also cannot be classed as a community benefit as it is a private business venture.

In regards to the siting of a major public art on or within the Heygate Estate we would express dismay about this. The Council has been operating aggressively since the decant process to clear the estate and to hand it over as Vacant Possession to Lend Lease, the developers. As part of this process, they have constantly interfered with public and community events and projects that have been established by local people in the Estate in an attempt to both keep the somewhat scandalous behaviour of the Council towards the residents in the public eye but also to use what is still public land for public uses. In the last few years, and with a great deal of local support, the site has seen public talks, film screenings, music nights, gardening and allotments, childrens go-karting, parkour and sporting activities as well as hosting many art projects and film-making. None of this was condoned by The Council but the activities were self-managed by locals with active support from some of the leaseholders and tenants who were still resident on the estate. We have received numerous threatening letters from the Council re: these uses, interruptions by the police for nonsensical reasons and also an vindictive campaign by a housing manager against the allotments, pond and street art galleries.

So we can amplify our dismay at your proposal in the following way:

The Heygate Estate site contains both a serious and well documented history of poor judgement and poor treatment of residents by the Council and a well documented history of the struggles by those residents to maintain their dignity in the right to be treated fairly and rehoused in a manner befitting them. Just because a site becomes empty does not mean that it exists in a neutral vacuum. It contains a local memory and a local desire. In the same way we would say that art cannot then be produced on this site in a vacuum. If art is to be able to represent or make commentary on the world it is produced in, it has to be produced in some kind of context and that context is both in the realm of its production and its later reception.

It is also arguable that outside of the desires of the artists and their practice and the commissioning body, such an artwork can also fit easily into the Council and developers own PR strategy and narrative for the regeneration. The buzz and excitement around it (as there was with Roger Hiorns) focuses attention on the regeneration and the artwork syncs in with the Council and developers agenda in creating a marketing ambience for the area. It is not unknown that developers commitment to public art rarely strays far from the balance sheet for their overall construction projects. We have written much on our website about this and the failure of art and public art to reflect upon the conditions and context of where it is finally sited. We had a similar criticism of the Roger Hiorns piece that was produced in another Southwark Council flat under similar but not as extreme circumstances vis a vis the current Elephant regeneration plans.

As we understand it, but we are also not clear on this, the piece by Mike Nelson desires to create a labyrinth from the homes at 60 -72 Chearsley. Or at least wants to use removed parts of the structure to create an art piece or installation. Our apologies if we have got this wrong for this understanding underlies this strong letter to you.

A new and popular art work made from the material structure of the estate put on show for a publicly invited audience in a space where the space itself has been so hotly contested, by residents for their homes and by those using the space for interim uses, would sound like it had been created with certain privileges that public art commissions can easily access but that local people could not. After the shoddy decant and resultant displacement of residents, the constant argument of the Council to clear the estate so that the much needed regeneration could happen, the recent fencing off of the estate denying access to numerous autonomous interim uses, we would view the then siting and invitation to an audience to view a new public artwork in this space as a gross act of symbolic violence that erases the long history and battles of local residents.

Adrian's battle for his home has seen in the last 6 months a terrible undermining of his character and his rights at the Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) hearing for which we were all involved in presenting evidence to the Planning Inspector. This when all he has done is demand a reasonable valuation for his home to enable him to stay where he likes to live and where he has done for 15 years. This is not just Adrian's story though. This demand also applies to numerous other leaseholders who could not remain as resolute as Adrian for reasons of pressure, ill health and their own fear of their futures under these conditions.

When the Council won the CPO, they immediately fenced off the entire site even though Adrian is still living there and he had to negotiate with security guards to come and go. It does seem incredulous to think that they now want to agree to site a major public artwork there and invite hundreds of people onto the estate after such a strategy of rush and stress to get the residents off-site. It is in that invitation that we situate our dismay.

Please reply when you can.

Best wishes

Chris Morris

*for Southwark Notes.*

## **Appendix – Interviews With Former Heygate Residents Extracts (2012 / 2013):**

### **Written Account: Dylan Parfitt - Heygate Resident**

*Myself and many other former Heygate residents have moved to inferior accommodation, thinking that we would have the right to return to brand new homes when the new flats were built. Now this will never materialise – we have been deceived. The council has been unscrupulous since the outset of the regeneration in everything they have done. This whole scheme has been a shambolic Act of deception on a grand scale.*

### **Written Testimony – Helen O'Brien, Heygate Resident 1974 - 2009**

*It was on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2008 that we received our 'notice to quit' a notice seeking possession of our home by Southwark Council. We had dreaded getting this letter, even though we had been expecting it. Having lived on the estate for so many years, we couldn't believe that Southwark Council were forcing us to give up our homes even though we were secure tenants, to make way for private developers.*

*I lived on the estate with my family for 34 years, half of my lifetime. I have never been in arrears all that time. I worked as a teacher and have devoted 30 years of my life to the community and was honoured for this work with a civic award in 2004. I am very angry and insulted. Southwark's Elephant regeneration plans are a miserable failure. Everyone who has worked on the regeneration at the Elephant should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves.*

### **Written Testimony – Terry Redpath, Heygate resident 1974 - 2008**

*I very reluctantly sold my property to the council as I was being pressurised into settling. I felt really intimidated. I had to move 15 miles from Southwark into a property that was smaller, and I had to spend my life savings of £40,000 to add to the paltry amount the council forced me to accept for my home.*

### **Written Testimony - Suley and Rehme Mustafa (56 Chearsley) 1975 - 2012**

*Then the council stopped all maintenance and switched off the estate boiler in 2010. After a winter with just a portable fan heater for heating we decided we couldn't take it any more, and so we took the compensation and got this place in Bexley - there wasn't much else we could afford with the money they were offering, not in London anyway.*

*The council said if I wanted to stay in the area and be rehoused then the only option was a retirement home. I miss seeing my friends at the Elephant and my son in Camberwell. I feel like we have been bullied out*

**11<sup>th</sup> October 2013**

Dear Chris,

Thanks very much for getting in touch. Your email was welcome and I appreciate you taking the time to write to me.

I would be interested in coming to meet you to talk. Would that be possible, perhaps next week?

best wishes,

Rob Bowman  
Head of Programmes and Production

Artangel  
31 Eyre Street Hill  
London EC1R 5EW  
T: 020 7713 1400

**14<sup>th</sup> October 2013**

To Rob Bowman

Hello Rob

Maybe we could meet in The Elephant and take a walk round the sites of regeneration and the histories.

Next week I have a few times free. Best for me is Weds or Fridays.

Thanks for your reply  
Chris Morris

**14<sup>th</sup> October 2013**

Rob Bowman

Dear Chris,

I think Wednesday around lunchtime might work okay. Noon might be best for me. Will you suggest a place for us to meet?

best wishes, Rob

Rob Bowman  
Head of Programmes and Production

**17<sup>th</sup> October 2013**

Dear Chris,

It was good to meet you yesterday.

I wanted to ask if you could point me in the direction of the document on interim use that you mentioned. I found something that looked right on the EA Network site, but when I opened the pdf the font was clearly corrupt and wasn't reading properly....

best, Rob

Rob Bowman  
Head of Programmes and Production

### **17<sup>th</sup> October 2013**

To Rob Bowman

Hiya Rob

[Here](#) is the EAN document on Interim Use. Hosted on Southwark Notes

Best  
Keep in touch

Chris

### **25<sup>th</sup> October 2013**

To Rob Bowman

Hello Rob

Did you have any further thoughts from our meeting last week? Would be keen to hear what you thought of what we said.

Best wishes  
Chris

### **31<sup>st</sup> October 2013**

Rob Bowman

To Me

Dear Chris,

Many thanks for your recent email. It was good to meet you and have the chance to talk.

I understand your feelings about a public art commission on the Heygate Estate, not least given the disappointment over previous proposals put forward for interim uses, with community benefits that you value, that have not happened.

Over the past two decades, Artangel has worked in many different ways with artists on a wide spectrum of projects inspired by, or related to, specific places and their histories. Some have developed from sustained discussions with particular interest groups or communities, others have not foregrounded this process in the belief that it may be seen as a token gesture given the specific nature of an artist's idea.

We don't believe that Mike Nelson's project, if and when it materialises on the Heygate Estate, will be inappropriate or disrespectful and want to reassure you that what he has proposed to do is not intended to erase or aestheticise individual experience for public spectacle.

Mike Nelson does not make neat, shiny or bland work. What he has in mind will be both monumental and mute. This muteness may cause frustration for some, but its condition will hopefully be a catalyst for different responses and positions to be articulated and heard. We firmly don't believe the project will be readily co-opted for a particular political agenda, nor as a branding device for local regeneration.

We've only recently begun to make connections locally, mainly due to continuing uncertainties as to whether we have the capacity and the resources to realise the project within the tight timeframe available. Now, having reached a point where we can make a formal submission for planning permission, it does seem like the right moment to broaden our connections.

The temporary presence of a Mike Nelson project on the Heygate is not going to change what has happened there and is unlikely to change what will happen there in the years ahead. But we are hopeful that it will have value of a different kind during this interim period and that it might offer the chance to reflect on a particular aspect of London's architectural, social and political history.

With best wishes, Rob

Rob Bowman  
Head of Programmes and Production

**5<sup>th</sup> November 2013**

To Rob Bowman

Hello Rob

You wrote:

*We've only recently begun to make connections locally, mainly due to continuing uncertainties as to whether we have the capacity and the resources to realise the project within the tight timeframe available. Now, having reached a point where we can make a formal submission for planning permission, it does seem like the right moment to broaden our connections.*

What are the connections locally you wish to broaden?

Are you submitting for planning permission soon?

Best  
Chris

**8<sup>th</sup> November 2013**

To Me

Dear Chris

To answer your second question first. We have now submitted a planning application for the project.

In relation to the connects we would be interested in developing, these would include

- Educational groups, colleges, schools etc
- Groups with specific interest areas or activities related to our project
- Identifying the best ways to keep people living locally, or who used to live locally, informed about the project.

i think we touched on this when we met and you said that you may have suggestions. I'm sure they would be very helpful.

Best wishes, Rob

Rob Bowman  
Head of Programmes and Production

**21<sup>st</sup> November 2013**

To Rob Bowman

21 Nov

Hello Rob

I can certainly give you the contacts for campaigns who have been opposing what has been happening on Heygate and the wider Elephant area. They may be interested in responding to your project on their own terms. I couldn't however help you promote the project via most of the list of contacts you want to develop.

best  
Chris

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End of exchange