MY LONDON STORY

Without veteran campaigner Eileen Conn, two of south London’s best creative hubs – the Bussey Building and Peckham Levels – simply wouldn’t exist.

‘We proved Peckham had potential’

PECKHAM IS MY HOME. I’ve lived in the same house for 45 years. I first started doing community work in the area in 1975, alongside my job in Whitehall as a civil servant. Initially it was out of self-interest: I had a new car that was bashed in and the first time I spoke to my neighbours was to ask, ‘Have you any idea what happened to my car?’ They also had problems because of a noisy factory behind their houses, so we went to see the local MP, who told us to set up a residents’ association – and we did.

Soon I got involved with the Peckham Society, where I was introduced to local history, transport management and all kinds of other things that I knew absolutely nothing about at the time. When we found out that the council wanted to demolish half of Peckham High Street to build a new town hall, we decided to take action.

I founded the Peckham Action Group, which campaigned from 1977 to 1982 to save the historic high street. It was my first experience of that kind of campaigning. I was on national TV news, Radio London... we even produced a punk record by a group called Crisis, and marched from Elephant & Castle to Peckham with the band playing on the back of a lorry.

Throughout the ’80s and ’90s I mostly worked on the relationship between the police and the local community. Then I discovered that there was an old industrial site, the Bussey Building and Copeland Park, which was scheduled to be turned into a tram depot and a commercial development. In January 2006, I organised my first ever public meeting and set up Peckham Vision.

The campaign to save the Bussey Building was intense. The development went through all the planning procedures and we lost every battle. But in 2008, I collected everything that was relevant to the vision of what Peckham town centre could become and published it. It was obvious that there was potential in Peckham, especially on that site. The Bussey Building had been designated for demolition because it was derelict, but I proved that it wasn’t. Now it’s a creative hub with studios, spaces for arts, events and fitness, a record shop, a café and even a rooftop cinema.

Peckham Vision has always been very informal – just this growing list of volunteers connected by email – but we’ve achieved so much. One of our biggest campaigning successes was last year. Peckham multi-storey car park (which I actually campaigned against when it was built in 1963) was designated as a development site. We mobilised people to write to the council and oppose the plans. The cabinet member responsible for regeneration got 5,300 emails: he couldn’t avoid it! Now the site is home to Peckham Levels, with seven stores of the car park providing work and creative spaces for artists, entrepreneurs and the community.

I’m a mobiliser. I’m interested in how people organise themselves to make a sensible and effective decision. And one of the lessons from my experience I would like to convey to all community activists is this: don’t give up when the formal procedures say it’s the end. We have proved it over and over again: it’s not the case. Just don’t give up.

Interview by Daisy Stenham

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