

PASSIONATE ABOUT PECKHAM... AND PEOPLE

Eileen Conn is the activist who's trying to rewrite the rulebook in terms of getting fact-based audits done and community engagement properly recognised and tapped into. By *David Taylor*

Meet Eileen Conn.

She's the sharp-as-a-tack activist who's done so much to keep Peckham vital and vibrant, through ensuring that schemes like the Bussey Building stay alive, and that Peckham Levels gets over the line.

She's a former civil servant who admits she's obsessed with making systems and neighbourhoods work better.

And now she's putting all her considerable energy and resolve into winning 'small victories' on the road to reshaping the way that institutions respond to and include the real experts of development—the community.

'I've got a thing about facts', she says. 'I can't bear the waste of time in quibbling about facts, when there's so much to discuss which is not facts. That's my point.'

We meet at NLA beside the model of London, following a series of NLA roundtables Conn has taken part in to get communities to up their game and be heard more. Happily, it's also a time when developers like Grosvenor are beginning to sit up and take notice of the fact that trust in their kind is at an all-time low. In the wider political world, moreover, things are also in a period of flux, with Extinction Rebellion, Brexit and delicate international relations all seemingly contributing to a milieu in which it might just be possible to get some sort of reform. Something, surely, has to be done.

Conn's main move in this regard is to persuade institutions to recognise the skills and knowledge base that exist in the community, in a world that she feels has become too 'professionalised'. The main method she sees as getting one of these 'adjacencies' towards wider change is through fact-based audits of places.

We have to recognise, she says, the facts that are out there concerning what we have, before we set about redeveloping our environments. These audits could be produced by students, a relatively untapped resource as well as local people working with the developers. But the key point is that they will help to form the basis of evidence to enrich London and, Conn hopes, allow the complex linkages between communities and their knowledge and experience about what they have and what they need, to be 'tapped into' rather than 'harnessed'—the latter of which she believes says more about control than freedom.

'I can't bear things to happen badly', she says. 'I'm an organiser by instinct and am forever seeing how things could be done better.'

Born and raised in Gateshead—she retains a little of the accent today—Conn has lived for 40 years 'south of the river'

in London. Conn's appetite for righting the wrongs of systems began perhaps when she worked in the county court system, witnessing a depressing spiral of people losing their houses and furniture because they couldn't manage their debts. She saw that, perhaps, this system was flawed. 'I couldn't understand why we were doing this', she recalls. 'What we did to them made it worse.'

She decided to go to Oxford as a 25-year-old mature student (difficult, she says, emotionally, intellectually and academically), and was there as president of the Middle Common Room at the time of the 1968 student revolution. Again, Conn felt that the way students were taught gave them little in the way of a voice or input into the design and management of those degree courses. 'It's always been about sense, common sense. I'm a practical person. I like things organised well.' She's also interested in how we organise ourselves to take collective decisions, something that would underpin her whole life.

Following that, Conn came back to the civil service in Whitehall, again noting with dismay the way that organisations seemed blind to the needs of those they serve. She was seconded to Business in the Community, learning about the relationship between the two elements and never went back, discovering from another group, the Business Network, that nothing works well unless we understand connections better. All of which brings us to Conn trying to understand what's wrong with the planning system. She is pleased, she says, that property is at last beginning to stir its interest in the apparent 'disconnect', and that the Centre for London's conference earlier this year focused on trust, because it brought together a lot of what she had seen, and specifically over 15 years around a plan to create a tram depot near Peckham Rye station. 'It's brought me to realise that what we have to do is start with facts', she says. 'It's unbelievable that, in this whole thing, there are no facts.' You go to planning committee, she adds, and you are given three minutes to give comments and there is little time to correct facts, so it is imperative that these must be corrected in any area, with any scheme, right at the beginning. 'If there's an area that somebody thinks should be redeveloped, the first thing that you have to do is find out who has a stake in it and so knows what about that area.' Thus, a fact-based audit can also contribute by establishing what those people also think about the future. 'Of course, that's opinion, but it's important opinion because it is based on rooted experience.'





The Bussey Building — a former cricket bat factory Conn helped to save, now home to Peckham Vision

An example. Back in January 2006, Conn called a public meeting together to see what was happening concerning the Bussey Building in Peckham, once a factory in which cricket bats were made for the English cricket team. ‘From its own willow’, Conn amends, with characteristic attention to detail. George Bussey had made small arms, landing in Peckham when the railways came, also creating the first rifle range on site for the Met Police to train up their staff’s gun skills. At the meeting, the talk was of how the council had no vision. ‘We began to realise we were talking about Peckham Vision. We were concerned at the lack of understanding of what was happening there and its potential.’

Isn’t this a failure of planning? Yes, and most communities fail to have an effect because they are involved too late, she retorts. In 1982, Conn stopped the destruction of the north of Peckham High Street after ‘falling into’ a five-year campaign. And what she has realised is that local knowledge is the thing that is missing from the system, often downgraded beneath the professional knowledge that is much more readily available. Professionalism, she goes on, is like an ‘alien creature’ that has fallen on the back of seven billion people on the planet over the last 50–60 years. ‘It thinks it’s serving them, but actually it’s leaching them.’

Local business in the Old Kent Road ‘Opportunity’ Area have stimulated a short term project run by The CASS at London University to prepare an audit of industrial land across the borough for the preparation of the New Southwark Plan inquiry, which is quite a specialised form of this. ‘Let’s start with facts. The council has developed the Old Kent Road area action plan

without adequate facts’, Conn considers. Before red lines are drawn around areas, she goes on, very little research with those who know the area in detail takes place, and the way planning goals are focussed on numbers of units are only making the housing crisis worse, she feels, creating too much that is officially defined as ‘unaffordable’ in a city with what she feels is too much ‘commodification of land’ rather than gentrification.

‘Change is easiest and effective when it is incremental’

Conn is an active member of Just Space, a network of grassroots community groups, campaigns and independent organisations, working closely with some London universities. For example, UCL students are working with Just Space to develop the methodology for fact-based audits. The term ‘community’ is used and thought of as some kind of ‘blob’, she says. And yet the community inside is not an amorphous blob, but a social system that has sophisticated infrastructure. Community groups are part of that but are often dismissed by being described as ‘the usual suspects’. Developers and the rest of the professional world have to relate to that in a new way. And Conn is trying to give this all some systemic language to enable locked-away information into the policy process.



Carl Turner’s Peckham Levels; Conn was on the scheme’s steering group

Is she optimistic that the time is right for change? The changes we need are not dramatic, she says, even though it sounds complex. Most evolution happens by the ‘adjacent possible’—organisms naturally all take the next easiest option. ‘Since I’ve spent my life studying institutions that’s what I notice about institutions too’, says Conn. ‘Change is easiest and effective when it is incremental.’

So, what is it that Conn loves about Peckham? ‘I don’t ‘love’ anything about Peckham’, she fires back. ‘I just happen to have lived there for 45 years. It is my home.’ She knows its nooks and crannies, but it’s familiarity, not love, she insists. Peckham Vision is an entity—or ‘citizens’ agency’—where people give their time free, working together, to try to make the area better, responding to changes in the area. It’s hand-to-mouth, operating on a turnover of around £2,500 a year, but producing what she estimates at around £100,000 of output elsewhere, and funded in part by merchandise (including a bestselling tea-towel) it creates.

But ultimately, it’s a major rethink of how the corporate, institutional and community systems operate with each other that Conn believes will be the only way that trust and better development can begin to take place. ‘It’s a bit like a lion and a tiger in the same territory. They have to find out how to mark their own territories and interact in a way which is constructive to them both living. But it’s much wider than planning’, says Conn, banging her hands on a complex system diagram showing the ‘non-linear’ interactions of systems. ‘Everything connects.’ ●

Eileen Conn: Agnese Sanvito; Bussey Building: Jerome Favre; Peckham Levels: Tim Crocker



Eileen Conn, local hero — Fact file

Won an MBE in 2009 for services to the community

Prepared a ‘social eco-systems dance model’ showing the relationships between citizens and authorities and other institutions

Describes herself as a Buddhist Christian Humanist