



Come on Eileen

PECKHAM VISION FOUNDER EILEEN CONN HAS CAMPAIGNED TIRELESSLY TO PROTECT AND ENHANCE PECKHAM TOWN CENTRE.

The extraordinary local resident and community activist discusses what drives her quest to encourage citizen action and bring people together

WORDS **LUKE G WILLIAMS** PHOTO **PAUL STAFFORD**

In the world in which we live, the theoretical and the practical are often mutually exclusive. Individuals who view the world through a theoretical prism can often diagnose the flaws in our society, but struggle to remedy them.

The reverse also often holds true: namely that those of a practical bent struggle to underpin their actions with a coherent view of the mechanics of human existence.

Eileen Conn – founder and coordinator of local community action group Peckham Vision – is one of that rare breed of human beings who combines a formidable theoretical intelligence with the practical ability to mobilise, engage and inspire social change at a grassroots level.

She is also one of the most remarkable and intellectually stimulating people I have ever encountered.

Eileen and I meet on the second floor of the Bussey Building on Rye Lane, on a grim winter's evening on which rain is being emptied from the sky as though from buckets.

It's here that Peckham Vision is based, an apt location if ever there was one, considering Eileen's key role in the 2005-09 campaign to save the Bussey Building from being demolished and replaced by a tram depot. The fact the Bussey is now such a hub of vibrant community activity is due in no small part to her.

Eileen greets me warmly with the welcome offer of a cup of tea but beyond that, superficial pleasantries are not the order of the day.

Instead our one-and-a-half-hour chat ends up resembling an exhilarating combination of a life lesson and a university lecture. Eileen speaks throughout with conviction and passion, but always underpins her theories and ideas with a keen sense of humanity. It's rare that an encounter with another human being can challenge the way you view the world, but meeting Eileen was just such an experience for me.

Despite Peckham Vision's many achievements, Eileen is initially disappointed to hear that – although I have lived locally for many years – I am

not particularly familiar with Peckham Vision's work.

"That's so frustrating!" she sighs. "At Peckham Vision, like most organised community action groups, we're often written out of the story, and so it's as if things just happened."

"That's why we have this on the wall," she adds, gesturing towards a sign upon which is written four simple but profound words: "Things don't just happen."

The path that eventually led Eileen to Peckham – where she has made more things happen than most – began in Tyneside, where she was born in 1941.

"I'm a Geordie," she says. "I grew up in a provincial town, left school at 16 and went into the civil service in a very junior administrative and clerical role."

"I came to London in my 20s as the first step in a planned trip around the world, because I needed to understand the world from a different perspective.

"I didn't get beyond London, to start with anyway. Instead I went to evening classes, not because I wanted to pass exams, but because I was lonely and needed to find some way of getting to know people."

"As a consequence of that I ended up going to Oxford University at the age of 25 because I had a thirst for understanding the world."

"Why did I need to understand the world? Two things drove me: one was because I grew up as a proselytiser of a Protestant Christian sect, but I then realised the world wasn't as black and white as I'd been taught."

"The other thing that influenced me was that the job I had involved contact with people who were financially unable to look after themselves. I watched people fall into debt, lose their houses and eventually end up in prison, and thought there was something very odd about the way in which this happened. Why had people come together to create such a crazy system that kept people in debt?"

"After university I went back into the civil service, this time in Whitehall. By this time I understood more and I thought I could change things."

"It was the late 1960s and the civil service was undergoing great reforms under Harold Wilson. My job was mainly concerned with the way government operates, and reforming the civil service so it was fit for the 20th century."

In the mid-1980s Eileen fell in with the Business Network, working for a holistic approach to business and "stumbled into lots of new thinking about the human species and the planet."

However, she admits that her quest for human understanding has never – and will never – be complete.

"I've answered a lot of the questions I formed in my teens and 20s but it's been a slow, long process," she says. "It's a bit like getting to the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, only to discover there are more rainbows with pots of gold to look for."

As for Eileen's connection with Peckham, that began in 1973 when a promotion in the civil service enabled her to buy a house.

With her office in Whitehall being located on the number 12 bus route, Peckham was a perfect place for her to settle and she has been here ever since.

"I felt really attracted by Peckham," she recalls. "I liked the size of the houses and the fact that unlike Hampstead, where I had a bedsit, the streets weren't full of cars. Of course it's very different now."

"Peckham also had a human scale, which really appealed to me. I wanted my own space, with no one above or below me, where I could have my own garden and a cat. And I found it in Peckham in the house I still live in today."

Eileen has been fascinated to observe the changes in the topography and demography of Peckham over the last few decades.

"What we see in Peckham today is a microcosm of the global community," she says. "Many of the people who live here have come from countries with terrible conflicts, or places with economic and environmental problems. So Peckham is an extremely rich place [in which] to understand the 21st century dynamic of human society."

Eileen's entry point into community activism in Peckham came in 1975, when she teamed up with a group of neighbours to express concern about the noise and disruption caused by a local industrial site.

"We went to see our then MP, Sam Silkin, who earnestly told us that what we should do was to set up a residents' association," she recalls.

"One night not long after, a knock came on my door from a man called Bob Smyth, and I was invited to join The Peckham Society. I attended meetings every month for about two years – that proved a huge education in civic affairs."

It's an education that Eileen has put to good use, with Peckham Vision being one of the direct results of her community work and activism.

A resident-led group of local citizens who live, work or run businesses in Peckham, the organisation's stated aims are to promote and encourage citizen action to help Peckham town centre become thriving and sustainable, as well as to create and nurture ways of connecting people in Peckham who want the area to realise its potential.

"The roots of Peckham Vision started when I discovered how exciting email was as a way of connecting people," Eileen says. "I'm instinctively interested in connecting people. Then I began to take an interest in how the council was planning

on turning this vast area of land in Peckham town centre into a tram depot.

"Soon I had a network of contacts and people and email addresses which I could put to good use. Our strapline since the beginning has been 'for an integrated town centre' – that has never changed and all our work is informed by that idea."

Over the years, Eileen and other members of Peckham Vision have been involved in countless community campaigns and activities that are too numerous to list in full here. Some of the group's most high-profile work has seen it helping to save the Bussey Building and its surrounding area from demolition and challenging redevelopment plans around Peckham Rye Station, Peckhamplex and the multistorey car park.

"In each of our big campaigns, we relentlessly exposed and publicised the potential of these spaces in a way that the big institution [ie Southwark Council] in the end could not ignore," Eileen explains proudly.

"I think we have achieved something through several of our campaigns by enabling spaces we inherited from our predecessors – I get emotional about this – to show their life again."

"And how much better is that than these soulless and expensive 21st century buildings that we otherwise would have been left with?"

"Peckham town centre is like a living museum, we've got buildings from the end of the 17th century right through to now and it's beautiful. If you look up in Peckham, it's amazing what you see above the noise and bustle and shopfronts."

If one quality of Eileen's burns brightest, it is undoubtedly her passion, most significantly her passion for changing the way the world works, and improving the outcomes of interactions between large institutions and local communities.

"The dominant experience of all the people who work in corporations and institutions is a form of organisational relationship that is very different from that in organised community action in groups like Peckham Vision," she explains.

"What has kept me going and motivated is the feeling that there is often something not right about decisions that have been made at a higher level. For example, the real, lived-in economy is being neglected across London."

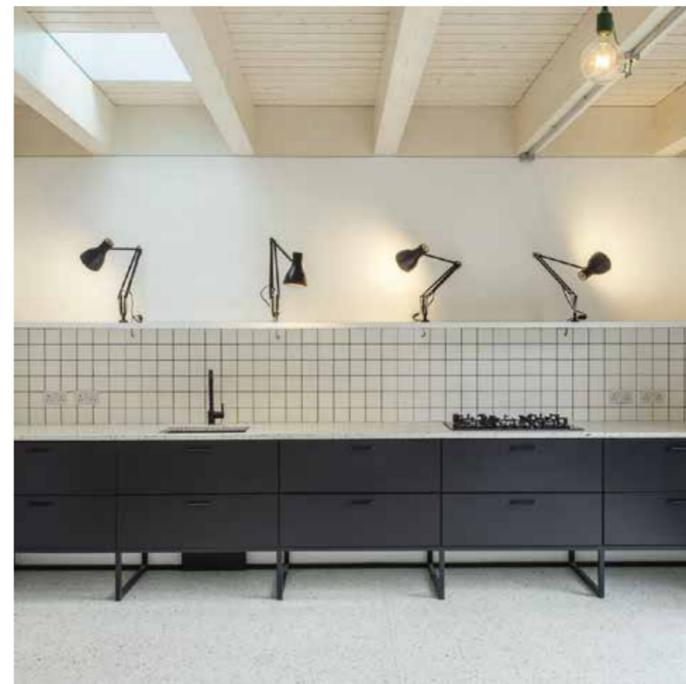
"I'm also passionate about organisation and good order. When people come together they're more likely to achieve what they want. Helping that to be more effective drives me."

Given the wealth of her experiences and her long and unending journey towards human understanding, I wonder whether Eileen believes if the battle for more productive connections between local residents and their institutional overseers can be won. So I conclude with a simple question: "are you an optimist?"

With a rebellious twinkle in her eye, Eileen says: "I don't like the word optimist, I prefer to say 'hopeful'."

"I have no doubt whatsoever that many things are possible. I'm certainly hopeful that there can be change and I'm a great believer that we can change things if we understand them better. You might say I'm an emotional optimist and an intellectual pessimist!"

Peckham Vision is seeking local volunteers to help with social media, basic graphics, IT, creative retail and fundraising, and also needs a treasurer. Please email info@peckhamvision.org to find out more. Follow [@peckhamvision](https://twitter.com/peckhamvision) on social media and pop into the shop in Holdron's Arcade, 135a Rye Lane, every Saturday from 2-5pm, or on the first Thursday of each month from 7-9pm. peckhamvision.org



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