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Participatory collaborations between geographers and performance artists: Taking urban renewal histories to the street

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Abstract

This article explores how collaborations between geographers and performance artists can offer new ways for present-day communities to engage with the histories and legacies of postwar urban planning. Focusing on the development of site-responsive performances in Newport (Wales) codesigned by geographer Aled Singleton, Tin Shed Theatre Co and artist TEMMAH, the paper examines how artistic interventions can mediate contested planning documents, oral histories and lived experiences. Drawing on archival research, oral testimony and embodied performance, the project reimagined Newport's post-World War II renewal through performances staged in the streets, layered with both real and imagined voices from the past and subsequently turned into online and digital formats. These interventions challenged official narratives of urban renewal and foregrounded alternative memories and experiences. The article reflects critically on the methodological, ethical and political dimensions of this work, arguing that participatory historical geography, when entangled with artistic practice, can transform how urban pasts are remembered, represented and contested, and opens up new possibilities for place-based, public engagement with the planning histories that continue to shape urban life.

KEYWORDS

historical geography, Newport, participatory geography, performance artists, urban renewal

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper explores how collaborations between geographers and performance artists can create opportunities for present-day communities to participate in constructing and reflecting on contested planning histories and their legacies. Focusing on the development of a series of site-responsive street performances that informed a series of geolocated online and digital outputs in Newport (Wales), collaboratively developed by Aled Singleton, Tin Shed Theatre Co (TSTC) and the artist TEMMAH

(Rebecca Hammett), it specifically argues that participatory historical geographies can provide new insights into the histories of post-World War II urban renewal and how these moments of redesign continue to affect twenty-first-century communities' lived experiences of urban spaces. Although rather than focusing solely on public engagement, it foregrounds collaboration with artists—particularly theatre makers—as a way to explore how creative practitioners can help co-develop stories, and participatory forms of history. This approach aims to centre on the lived experiences of communities that are often less heard or marginalised, aligning with Raynor's (2019, p. 694) call to expand participatory and inclusive research practices.

In examining Newport's postwar urban renewal, this paper focuses on a broader period after World War II (from 1945 to the mid-1970s) during which the UK, the USA and Western Europe sought to materially rebuild urban areas affected by the war (Alvanides & Ludwig, 2023; Jerram, 2011). This period of postwar reconstruction often became a vehicle for reimagining city spaces, framed by a rhetoric of hope and implemented through large-scale urban planning and modernist design. While modernism is commonly associated with this era, it is important to emphasise the nuance and contestation between different urban planning approaches (Wakeman, 2014). In engaging with contested planning histories, this paper highlights the top-down nature of urban planning at the time (Zipp, 2012), including the frequently overstated support for comprehensive redevelopment and slum clearance (Hubbard et al., 2003). What emerges is a contested and often contradictory relationship between the visions of mid-twentieth-century urban planners and the ways in which twentieth and twenty-first-century city inhabitants did, and do, engage with, and experience, the resulting urban landscape (Fyfe, 1996; Hubbard et al., 2003).

Although scholars have extensively documented the many contexts of postwar urban renewal in the UK (Tallon, 2020; Wakeman, 2014), the USA (Klemek, 2011; Zipp, 2012), and across Western Europe (Jerram, 2011; Verkasalo & Hirvonen, 2017), there remains an ongoing need to reassess its local impacts and continued relevance for the contemporary communities who are living within its legacies (Alvanides & Ludwig, 2023). This is not to say that scholars have ignored people's experiences of postwar city spaces over time (for specific examples, see Brookes, 2022; Hubbard et al., 2003). However, more recently, there has been a growing effort to explore how urban spaces and their histories are constructed, practiced and experienced (DeLyser, 2014; Raynor, 2019; Sachs Olsen, 2018). This paper therefore situates itself within these emergent interests, considering how performance—alongside other creative practices—can offer a powerful means for communities to understand both past and present experiences of urban renewal. In doing so, this paper provides a critical reflection of participatory historical geography methodologies that involve collaboration between academics and performance artists, exploring the extent to which site-responsive performances can create opportunities for local communities to engage with different readings and representations of the cities they live in and their postwar physical renewal.

2 | SITUATING SITE-RESPONSIVE PERFORMANCE

In using site-responsive performance as a lens to explore contested planning histories, this paper aligns with a rich tradition of creative, experimental and theatrical approaches to understanding the postwar urban landscape. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, the Situationist International employed the dérive (or drift) as a method of disrupting routine interactions with the city and fostering critical spatial awareness (Hancox, 2012; Smith, 2010). However, it is important to note the critiques surrounding performances and practices like the dérive and the ableist and patriarchal politics surrounding who has the freedom to access and engage with urban space in this way (Smith, 2010). Similarly, the site-specific performances of the arts group Fluxus during the 1960s and 1970s challenged dominant understandings of art and urban space, treating cities as arenas for resistance and social transformation (Sachs Olsen, 2018). This tradition has since expanded to include more overtly participatory and politically engaged practices. Pinder (2005), for example, documents activist groups such as Toyshop in the USA, whose performances invited citizens to critically engage with the politics of public space. Likewise, the socially engaged collective zURBS has employed performance as a tool for activating city spaces as contemporary archives, encouraging urban enquiry and dialogue around complex social and historical issues (Sachs Olsen, 2016). Walking and urban exploration have also emerged as modes through which geographers engage with the often overlooked production of urban space over time (Adams & Larkham, 2016; Aoki & Yoshimizu, 2015). In this context, in-situ oral histories have also become part of a broader repertoire of performative and archival practices that connect layered memories and experiences of place with the contextual and embodied nature of performance (Roms & Edwards, 2011).

Across these varied practices runs a shared engagement with *site-specific performance*, broadly defined as performance that is inseparable from the site in which it occurs—responding directly to its physical, social, cultural and historical

dimensions (Rendell, 2020; Wilkie, 2002). This paper draws on that lineage but adopts the term *site-responsive* to reflect the participatory, enquiry-based and reflexive processes involved in working with TSTC. Whereas site-specific performance may at times be more fixed or object oriented, site-responsive performance seeks to be adaptive and dialogic—emerging through collaborative engagement with place, time and community (Heddon and Turner, 2012; Pearson, 2010, Wilkie, 2002). Similarly, one drawback in always pointing to site specificities and matters of situatedness is bringing space to the fore rather than time (Kwon, 1997; Rendell, 2020). Thus, by choosing site-responsive performance as a method for exploring the city's planning history, it enabled the collaboration with TSTC to engage with Newport as a 'contested space' (Harvie, 2009)—shaped by conflicting memories and uses over time. Site-responsive performance, in this context, becomes a means not only of accessing those different temporal layers of meaning, but also of granting greater agency to both performers and spectators in shaping their own experiences and interpretations (McAuley, 1999).

3 | NEWPORT'S POSTWAR RENEWAL PLANS AND THEIR LEGACIES

Before going further, it is useful to provide an overview of the wider context of postwar renewal in the UK. This then leads to the archival sources used to explore Newport's planning history, and the extent to which they were implemented, before continuing to discuss how these documents were used in the collaboration with TSTC and artist TEMMAH.

After World War II, the British Government faced urban challenges due to factors such as bomb damage and limited investment over previous decades. The 1947 Town and Country Planning Act required every local authority to prepare a forward-looking local (development) plan and offered them resources and powers to compulsorily purchase private land for the purposes of urban renewal (Shapely, 2011). Through the following decades, local authorities formulated and implemented plans which renewed urban centres but also moved hundreds of thousands of residents to the periphery of cities including Glasgow (Mass, 2019), Coventry and Birmingham (Adams & Larkham, 2016; Jones & Evans, 2012).

Newport followed a similar trajectory, as illustrated by a number of planning documents that highlight the city's redevelopment over the past 50 years. These materials formed part of the collaboration with TSTC and TEMMAH (which is discussed in more detail below). Sourced from the Newport Reference Library, it comprised a series of roughly 20 scanned documents, images, maps and minutes from Newport Borough Council Planning Committee and the 1950 Conjectural Plan (Figure 1). These documents presented how a new commercial centre would comprise multistorey car parks, shopping centres, office buildings and leisure facilities, and would be enclosed within a ring road. The new developments would necessitate the removal of riverside wharfs, railways, a canal, warehouses, small shops and terraced houses where families lived—all of which fundamentally transformed the city centre from being characterised by industry to one focused on a rising consumer and leisure culture.

For instance, the minutes of Newport Borough Council Planning Council meetings identify how the plan was largely implemented through the 1960s and into the 1970s; driven by the local authority. Media coverage taken from the Library's newspaper archive capture how the redevelopment was contested by certain members of the public. One article in the *South Wales Argus* newspaper in April 1969 revealed the emotive context of the plan with a front-page story featuring Mrs Mabel Jonhson, Newport Chamber of Trade's first female President, which hoped to halt complete pedestrianisation, and doubted whether the new shopping centre would ever be fully occupied (South Wales Argus, 1969). Contemporary photos and maps revealed that a large shopping centre, car parks, roads, offices and civic buildings had been constructed over the middle of Dock Street. Remnants of the latter street were then divided into 'upper' and 'lower' sections. Rows of terraced residences on adjacent thoroughfares such as Union Street, which features later in this paper, were completely erased from the map. The broken line of 'Dock Street' and the late-1960s shopping centre development became an important part of the focus for the collaboration with TSTC—as the project sought to creatively explore the different periods of redevelopment and cycles of rupture and repair through site-responsive performance.

4 | TIN SHED THEATRE CO AND TEMMAH: SITE-RESPONSIVE THEATRICAL PERFORMANCES IN NEWPORT

Turning to the collaboration with Tin Shed Theatre Co (TSTC), they are a theatrical company of artists, makers and creative innovators who specialise in 'site-responsive' theatrical works that aim to connect disparate communities and form intergenerational and cross-cultural relationships.[1] TSTC have a longstanding interest in heritage in south Wales. In 2018, they created an immersive performance inside a Victorian-era pub and on the floating pontoon of Newport's

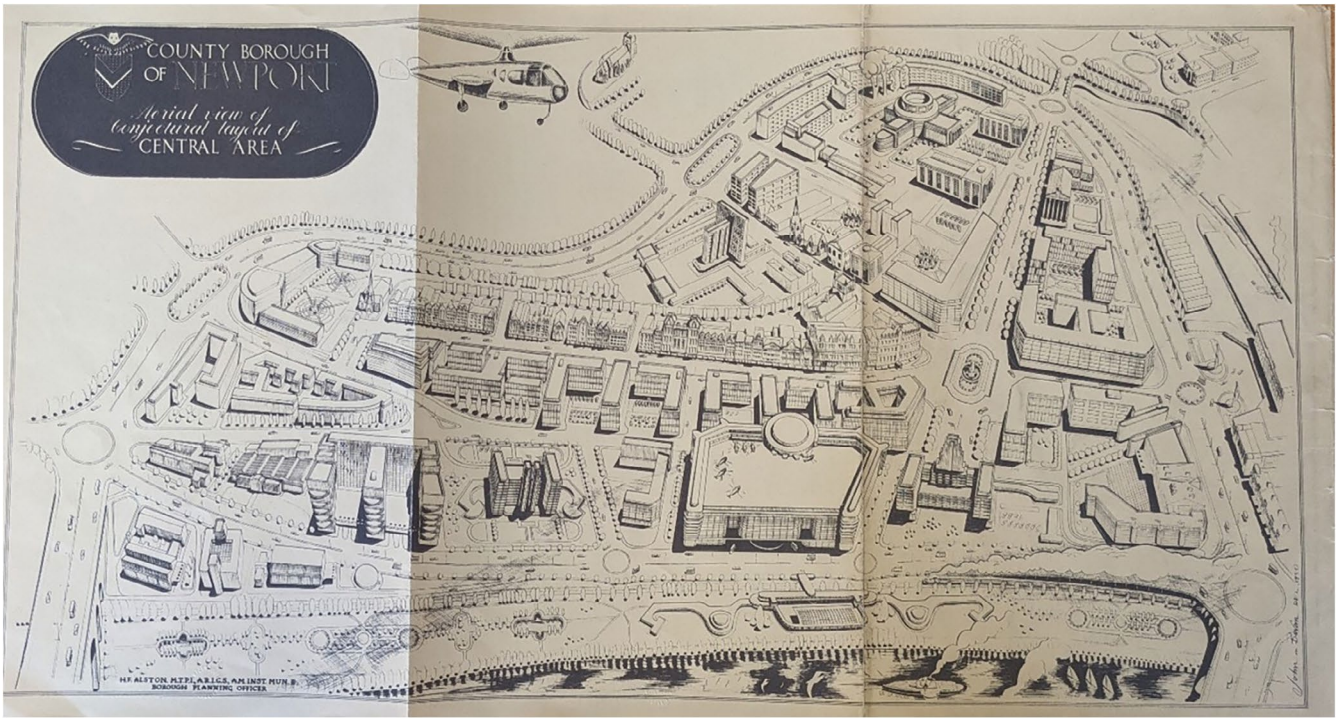

FIGURE 1 Conjectural Plan for Central Area (1950) © Newport Library.

Transporter Bridge.[2] Many of the themes explored in their performances seek to understand how creative methods can be used to reveal individuals' lived experiences of urban spaces and historical urban renewal, and to communicate these insights to members of the public. Their interest in urban space, creative methods and history provided a point of overlap with Aled's research—who at the time was a research fellow at Swansea University. A shared interest in the histories of Newport's public spaces and how the city's contemporary communities experience them led to a formal collaboration in 2022. Precipitated by a small commission funded by the ESRC and Swansea University, it sought to develop site-responsive performances in Newport that explored and engaged residents with postwar planning histories and their legacies.

To create these performances, Aled and TSTC initially organised a two-day development workshop exploring various parts of Newport's city centre. This brought Aled's research into conversation with several of the theatre's producers and dramatists, as well as volunteers and freelance artists. Their aim was for the workshop to investigate how they could create public dialogue around the city's planning past. This process included sharing data from Aled's previous research, such as the archival material he had found in Newport Reference Library (mentioned above), which included the 1950 Conjectural Plan (Figure 1) alongside the media responses to the proposed plans. This provided TSTC with insights into how Newport's postwar renewal was planned, implemented and (to some extent) experienced and contested. These archival documents provided an effective starting point from which TSTC and TEMMAH were able to develop artistic performances grounded in imagined responses to the historical moments the documents preserved. However, it is also important to emphasise how the archival material from Newport Reference Library provided limited insights into residents' lived experiences of the mid-twentieth-century urban renewal schemes, and little to no indication of its ongoing impact on Newport's twenty-first-century inhabitants. Reflecting the collective priorities and ever developing challenges faced by government-run archives (Stevens, 1999), these limitations made it necessary for the project to pursue more contemporary perspectives from a number of oral histories and interviews gathered prior to the collaboration with TSTC.

For instance, Aled had collected over 40 interview responses from part of his previous PhD and post-doctoral research, which included experiences from existing and former Newport residents, alongside professionals with experience of housing and social work (Singleton, 2025). These data captured aspects of how the redevelopment was experienced by families impacted by it. One interviewee took a virtual walking interview (Singleton, 2024) using Google Street View to describe moving from the centre to a newly built housing estate as a child in the 1960s. Another interviewee described bringing up a family in a modern semi-detached suburban house in the 1960s. She highlighted the benefits of central heating, but also the downsides of needing a car to travel for grocery shopping. Many interviews reflected on how it felt to

work in new jobs created around the steel industry and light manufacturing. This had given younger people in the 1960s and 1970s disposable income to spend on leisure, holidays and to get mortgages on houses. These accounts were also supplemented by a set of pre-existing digitised biographical audio interviews which discussed life in the terraced houses that had previously been in Union Street in central Newport, and after relocation to suburban social housing after they were demolished (Hammett, 2017).

The next phase of the project involved Aled, TSTC and its associated freelance artists moving around Newport to develop and rehearse various site-responsive performances grounded in the archival material and oral history interviews Aled had shared. These initial performances were intended as a precursor to public involvement and were documented on film (Figure 2) as a means of helping the team to reflect on the creative process and to make series of public facing digital resources that would allow people to explore the city's history. Notwithstanding paying the artists more money, a full public performance would require explicit permission from landowners and the development of plans for inclusion and safety. For both Aled and TSTC, it was important that these performances took place on Newport's streets, responding to Pain and Kindon's argument that 'contexts are fundamental to how participation operates, practically and politically, and inform the shape of its outcomes' (Pain & Kindon, 2007, p. 2808). By taking place within Newport's public urban environment, these performances were able to take the contents of Aled's archival and oral history research and 'reimagine' this material to focus on the experiences and stories of those who might have lived in Newport since the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, Georgina Harris from TSTC described the performances as 'fantastical re-imaginings, new stories … inspired by true events', that were 'not static', but ways that explored 'sensory and visceral experience[s]'.

One performance was set on the empty top floor of the car park built over terraced houses on a former section of what used to Union Street in central Newport (Figure 2). During the performance, an imagined married couple explored their bitter-sweet reflections from the late-1960s, including their move to a modern suburban housing estate and new factory jobs on the horizon. This sought to weave together the 1950 Conjectural Plan for Newport (Figure 1) with the personal experience of people leaving a setting such as Union Street, juxtaposed with the present-day reality of a car park. The aim was to show that planning decisions for the wider public benefit caused upheaval for individuals.

A different approach was taken by TEMMAH (Rebecca Hammett)—a multidisciplinary visual artist whose practices focus on the interplay between the body and different experiences of space (Hammett, 2025). She curated *A Little Space Gallery* (Figure 3), a transparent backpack containing objects which signified urban renewal. These included tiny reproduced copies of newspaper articles discussing Newport's redevelopment in 1969, alongside contemporary maps, a small

FIGURE 2 Performing on the car park roof (c) Aled Singleton (2022).

FIGURE 3 A little space gallery on TEMMAH's back (c) Aled Singleton (2022).

digger, and colourful ceramic terraced houses made by a volunteer from TSTC. TEMMAH carried *A Little Space Gallery* around Newport, allowing it to become a point of dialogue and connection. Inspired by the artwork, residents took images of the miniature gallery and began to reflect on the emotional impact of the city's past, present, and future redevelopment. Two residents talked to TEMMAH about their grandparents making similar moves from the centre of Newport to social housing on the urban periphery.

Aled joined TEMMAH as she visited the line of Dock Street to discuss the newspaper article about Mrs Mabel Jonhson from 1969. As they talked, a link was made to the challenges facing the current Newport Local Development Plan (Newport City Council, 2023). The plan calls for measures to address city centre challenges of high vacancy rates, falling footfall and pressures on the shopping centre from non-city-centre retailers. Effectively, Mabel Johnson's concerns captured in the 1969 *Argus* newspaper article had been borne out in the long term. All of the performances were captured on film, contributing to a process of 'cutting, curation and employment' (Revill et al., 2020, p. 296) of the archival material—in this case positioning the performance and the wider city as part of a collective archive that curated and juxtaposed a new set of experiences and materials which captured one aspect of the city's various pasts and presents.

Although these development performances were not publicly advertised, their in-situ nature made them public facing. As a result, passersby engaged with the artists during their work and were informed that filming might occur. Those who were ultimately filmed signed video release forms. Video from the performances was used to produce two publicly accessible outputs. Firstly, six extracts from the artists' work, including the conversation between TEMMAH and Aled, were geolocated to sites along Dock Street using Echoes—a freely available app for audio files (Echoes, 2022). These GPS-plotted biographical interviews (Jones & Evans, 2012) mirrored Janet Cardiff's sound walks (Bretherick, 2020) and oral accounts available through *Linked* (Lavery, 2005) by giving experiential and historic accounts specific to places—some of which had been changed by the redevelopment. Secondly, a 23-minute YouTube film stitches together elements of the performance alongside scenes of Newport in the present day, using sepia coloured segments to create a sense of the past (Thomas, 2023). For instance, one 3-minute scene sees the performers walking through a short street which architecturally represents the joins and ruptures between the Victorian era, the late-1960s and also a twenty-first-century redevelopment. The video partly addresses the concern when making performance from archives, and other historical accounts, to 'not reduce gestures and embodied practice to descriptive writing' (Taylor, 2007, p. 16). Taken together, these two forms of documentation are free to access and offer opportunities for people to explore the city and to interrogate the creative process.

5 | PERFORMING IN NEWPORT: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

Reflecting on the process and collaboration with TSTC, what became immediately apparent was the richness of the engagement—how it took archival material and oral histories and transformed them into something more discursive. The collaboration moved beyond the scope of a single research project to initiate a broader conversation about the city. At

the same time, the process highlighted the limitations of relying solely on official planning documents to understand the legacy of past redevelopment, particularly given the partial and fragmented nature of many archives, which often fail to capture how people felt at the time. Instead, this collaborative process invited both real and imagined responses to urban transformation, foregrounding how changes in the city were experienced by its residents.

For participatory historical geography, this work illustrates how historical sources, and historical knowledge can inform collaborative participation with local communities in dynamic ways (Slatter, 2024). It also demonstrates how performance and artistic practice can bridge past, present and future—accessing dimensions of the historical record that may be incomplete, partial or entirely absent. Simultaneously, the work connects to and extends broader conceptualisations of how urban space is understood and socially constructed (McFarlane, 2011). In this context, TSTC's performances disrupted and reimagined Newport, allowing alternative conceptualisations of the city to emerge. The collaboration therefore built on and contributed to wider approaches in human geography that prioritise diverse forms of knowledge and understanding of urban space (see also Latham & McCormack, 2004; Lorimer, 2013; Thrift, 2008; Whatmore, 2006). It wove together participatory experience and multiple historical and temporal narratives with notions of affect, sensation and intuition.

In doing so, the project extended ideas presented by Sachs Olsen (2018) and Schneider (2011) on the often antagonistic relationship between performance and the archive—where performance is characterised as ephemeral and the archive as materially fixed. In a similar way to Lucy Thompson's article also featured in this special section on participatory historical geography, TSTC's performances challenged this binary. They showed how urban space can act as a performative—and crucially, participatory—platform for encountering both the physical and imagined remnants of the past (Sachs Olsen, 2018). In many respects, the work repositioned the relationship between archive and city, proposing instead the concept of 'the city as archive'—a collection of performances, artworks, interventions, movements, materialities and temporalities (Sachs Olsen, 2016). TEMMAH's *A Little Space Gallery* made this notion even more explicit. By reimagining the traditional archive as a portable, performative construct housed in a backpack, the piece juxtaposed contemporary objects with fragments and representations of the city's planning history and redevelopment (e.g., the newspaper cutting and digger). It captured both the physical traces of movement through the present-day city and the multiplicity of often competing practices through which urban space is produced—as a performance of the actual and the possible, the material and the imagined (Sachs Olsen, 2018).

In reflecting upon the roles within the project, it became clear that care needed to be taken when reproducing and adapting archival materials and interview content responsibly. While obtaining permission from rights holders was essential, we also recognised that digital archival resources such as images, texts, videos and audio clips, are significantly more adaptable and accessible than their physical counterparts (Revill et al., 2020). For instance, online and digital formats, including the project video, and geolocating sites using Google Street View enabled participants to virtually navigate to locations significant to their personal histories. This also played an important part in people being able to connect with Newport as a place, in many ways providing tangible and 'site specific' qualities to the numerous archival and historical materials. Many of these approaches also went on to inform subsequent walking tours delivered by Singleton (2024) and introduce an interesting relationship with digital technology and how different experiences of the city became mediated through different kinds of technological interface, which in this instance broadened engagement, making Newport's redevelopment more legible and meaningful to diverse publics.

Finally, given the importance that participatory geography places on care and responsibility toward the people and communities it engages with (Kindon et al., 2024), it is important to make some critical reflections on the politics of academic and artistic interventions—particularly the risk that such work might reproduce, rather than challenge, power-laden urban spaces (Pinder, 2015). Similar critiques emerge in debates around urban 'artwashing', which caution against uncritical arts interventions that may inadvertently serve the aestheticisation and commodification of inner-city redevelopment (Mould, 2015; Pritchard, 2020). Kwon (1997) and Rendell (2020) also stress the importance of critically evaluating site-specific performances, noting they should not be assumed to inherently challenge the status quo or serve community needs. While TSTC's performances in Newport took place outside formal institutional spaces, they were not immune to institutional constraints, interests or power dynamics. These tensions were evident in the structure of the partnership itself. TSTC operates without core funding, and the work described here, including the work of two volunteer artists, was financed through a limited budget tied to a one-year postdoctoral fellowship. Similarly, while the performances reflected a developmental process that created public facing digital outputs, the in-situ aspect of the engagement with the public was limited to a reasonably short part of the process.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

Overall, this project's process of co-designing site-responsive performances in Newport interwove traditional historical geography methods (specifically archival research and place-specific oral history interviews) with artistic, performative and playful provocations. In doing so, it juxtaposed and connected official archival documentation, memories of lived experiences, and imagined experiences of Newport's post-World War II urban environments. These juxtapositions and connections are central to the collaboration between Aled, TSTC and its associated volunteers and freelance artists. Highlighting the 'joins' and 'ruptures' that emerge when using a patchwork of archival materials, lived experiences and artistic engagements to study a single place, this project emphasises how academic and creative approaches to the histories and legacies of urban planning can move beyond the official records of Newport's mid-twentieth-century urban renewal and provide insights into the many different ways in which the city's urban renewal has been experienced over the past 80 years. Moreover, this project highlights how collaboration between geographers and artists not only produces alternative representations of the past, but also enacts new modes of knowledge production; ones that are embodied, affective and dialogic. These are methods that challenge the authority of dominant planning narratives by layering official plans with situated knowledges and speculative reimaginings.

Ultimately, the project invites further experimentation with how urban histories are mediated and how these modes can make planning histories more accessible, resonant and open to critique. For instance, these collaborative, site-responsive, participatory historical geography methods could be usefully applied to many other urban spaces in the UK and beyond that were the subject of significant postwar urban renewal. For example, Glasgow, Birmingham and Liverpool each underwent large-scale redevelopment in the postwar period, with complex and often contested consequences that continue to shape contemporary urban life (Fyfe, 1996; Jones & Evans, 2012). These cities also contain rich but unevenly preserved planning archives and evolving communities whose memories, experiences and critiques could be surfaced through creative, situated interventions. Such approaches offer ways of reconnecting residents to overlooked or obscured urban histories, while inviting new forms of critical reflection on how space has been planned, contested, lived and remembered. In doing so, they contribute to growing conversations in historical geography, urban studies and the creative humanities about how we might not only study the city as an archive, but also perform it differently: as an unfolding, contested and co-produced space shaped by multiple voices and temporalities.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in 'Spatially-led Video Interviews', UK Data Service (Data Collection), https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-856012.

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ENDNOTES

[1] https://www.tinshedtheatrecompany.com/ (accessed 5 June 2025).

[2] Newport and Middlesborough are the only two places in the UK to have a working bridge which uses a moving pontoon. The Newport bridge was opened in 1906 and is an important part of the city's heritage and identity.

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