

Les Back

Hello, and welcome to Recovering Community, a podcast about community: what it means, how it's formed, and how it can be rebuilt.

I'm Les Back - I am the Head of Sociology at the University of Glasgow, and as you might tell from the sound of my voice I'm a new Glaswegian. I moved here over a year ago and I have learned so much from my encounter with the life of this place that I have always loved from afar. In the making of this new season of the podcast, my colleagues from the School of Social and Political Sciences have been introducing me to the people, stories and ideas emerging here in the city, and beyond.

We understand community better when we think with others and collaborate with communities rather than claim to speak for them. So much of the research going on within our school has this quality. I'd like you to come along with me and encounter the extraordinary people of this place from the kitchens of Castlemilk to the curators decolonising history in the Hunterian Museum.

Today we're going right to the foundations of urban life to talk about the landscape of the city, how it's valued, and who gets to value it.

The story of Glasgow's mixed fortunes is written into its built environment - from the confident grandeur of its Victorian monuments, to the once futuristic, now flaking edifices of post war modernism, to the new smoked glass and steel developments promising growth, longevity and perhaps with some scepticism - ecological harmony.

Glasgow also bears many scars from the collapse of its once thriving industries. Former warehouses and factories, decaying public buildings and housing; euphemistically termed 'brownfield sites' pepper the city. And although Glasgow is rich in this wasteland, these sites are disappearing as developers move in to rebuild the cityscape and harvest profit.

The Wastelands and the City Network is an interdisciplinary research team connecting the University of Glasgow's College of Social Sciences, and The Glasgow School of Art with artists, ecologists, researchers and archeologists.

Together, they are thinking about different perspectives on this 'wasted land' and how we use it. One of the most productive of options might be to do nothing at all - but that requires a huge leap of imagination and courage.

Ross Beveridge, a senior lecturer in Urban Studies invited me to exercise my imagination on a very cold, wet December morning, when I met up with him and artists Mary Redmond and Jim Colquhoun by a small hole in a big blue hoarding by the side of a busy road in the west end...

Jim Colquhoun

And when we go in through this portal, it's a portal, it kind of takes us into a different state of being. So you have to reorder your brain to understand it. Yeah.

Les Back

So as we this, this is kind of a makeshift fence here, which is, you know... So you have to get me on my knees to get through this portal, which is nice.

Jim Colquhoun

Yeah, you're too tall.

Les Back

But through the portal nonetheless, staying on my feet. Oh, this is wonderful.

Jim Colquhoun

As you can see everything changes when you come through the portal.

Les Back

This is Jim Calquhoun - he describes himself as a Professor of Pataphysical Cartography...I'm not sure if he was tickling my ribs, but loved his way of professing the nature of this landscape.

Jim Colquhoun

As we go further in, that feeling always intensifies. Especially, that it's kind of died back quite a bit. But when it's fecund, you know, you can really lose yourself in there. It's like a maze. You can just disappear. And I think that's why people come here to lose themselves.

Mary Redmond

Will we go up, yeah.

Jim Colquhoun

Well, they were only here recently shifting stuff about in a random fashion. But we don't really know why. Because it doesn't seem to be any sense to it.

Les Back

Mary tell us a little bit about just the sort of the history of this place, we're right by the Clyde. We can almost see it, it's just literally, yeah, 100 yards that way. So. So tell us a little bit about what this place is? The past of this place?

Mary Redmond

Yeah so it was, it's right on the banks of the Clyde. And it was a shipyard.

Les Back

And this is Mary Redmond, an artist - she's studying environmental art at the Glasgow School of Art, and she knows this site really well

Mary Redmond

And also nearby was the anchor line, used to come nearby from this area to boats all over the world.

Jim Colquhoun

But also, oh, did the slaughterhouses. Yeah, the animals were brought in from all over the world. And there's even a bit if you look on the old maps for sort of foreign animals, you know, and they would bring them in, and they would either take them somewhere else, they could actually slaughter them on site. So this was a really, really busy site. There was shipbuilding, but there was a lot of other stuff going on, as well it was an incredibly busy place. Where those building that new build over there, that was the Meadowside granary. It was vast, think it was one of the biggest brick structures in the world at one point.

Les Back

So the Clyde as a kind of, as a vein of passage, of life, things coming here, cattle being docked here and unloaded and slaughtered here, things being made here, a place of commerce, and Glasgow's past as both, you know, an industrial place and also a place of commerce and trade. And so it's all of that history is kind of, it's all here,

Jim Colquhoun

Certain traces of it, as Mary says, for instance, these over here, there's like, several large bits of timber. And I think those are remnants of some kind of structure, perhaps a dock. You know, they don't look like much, but you can tell just the size of them. They're enormous. Back when, when they made stuff, they made it big, to last forever, you know, these enormous stones.

Les Back

The word that we've studiously avoided is the word wasteland, which seems a very inappropriate word to kind of capture or describe the kinds of things our experience of just walking into this place. I don't know Ross, if you want to tell us a little bit about how the work, how your involvement here connects to your research about wastelands and why they're interesting and why they're important to think about?

Ross Beveridge

Well, I think what we can call wastelands or planners, the council might call derelict or brownfield sites, there's lots of names.

Les Back

And this is Ross Beveridge who I mentioned in the introduction - Ross runs the Wastelands and the City Network

Ross Beveridge

So artists, and architects and designers are very intrigued by these places. And the reason for that is that they exist outside of our normal understandings of space in the city. So normally, we expect to see housing, or commerce or, or, or something, which is complete. And these sites are not just incomplete, they have resonances of a thing that they were before, you know, as we just said, they have these traces. So they're hugely rich places of imagining and thinking about the city and that's, that's the, that's what drew me to them initially, because these places are usually seen as not having value or as only having value when they become developed or become sort of normalised again. So that's not to say that all wastelands should stay the way they are. But it's to say that these sites already have something and exist and have a potential a sense of possibility which is not necessarily something which is only in the future, but it's also being lived in practiced and something that we can learn from and something that we can use to think about how we live in cities. Yes. So they become places that are often called non design. There's a paradox of, there's lots of regulation. And when you have these times or periods of openness, then they become something else, and they can generate their own kind of lives.

Les Back

It seems so much a reflection of the way in which we understand what's valuable in society.

Ross Beveridge

Yeah, absolutely. So when you come to these places, and you think about all these processes, which usually happen and you're kind of waiting for them to happen in this space, it gives you the opportunity to question them and think about them. And I think this idea of time is a really interesting one. I hadn't thought about that so much, because often these spaces are limited, you know, they get developed, this one may be developed as well. But the fact that then if they're left they generate their own kind of rhythm, and tempo, is something that is actually creeping into even planning logics and ways we think about greening the city, bringing nature back in giving nature its space and time. And so ideas of rewilding the city are already being connected to a little bit, at least, to these sites in

Glasgow. So ideas that you can create kind of green networks through, through these empty spaces that are often called wasteland.

Les Back

It seems, I don't know if this is true or not, but I'm still a relative newcomer to the city, I'm a New Glaswegian. It seems like there are more of these kinds of spaces in the city than other cities that I've been familiar with, like London, for example. Is that a reflection of where the city is?

Mary Redmond

There's a really high proportion of derelict land in the city, a lot of Glaswegians know and understand that and I think they do know about, they discuss derelict land. Would you say that's true? And a lot. Glaswegians do have a kind of way of accessing it or perspective on it

Jim Colquhoun

People find these places because they need them, you know, they make, they either find the hole in the fence that we just came through, or they make the hole in the fence. That hole has come and gone several times. So people are deliberately making their way into this place and they won't let the fence stop them. So that I think that indicates how important as you know, it's a range of people, isn't it? It's dog walkers. But it's also people coming in to, you know, hang out. Garden, have a party, you know, do illicit things that you can't do out there, like, drink, have sex, you know, all of that takes place in the year. Great.

Les Back

So tell us a little bit about the life of these kinds of places. And I know that you're that you've

Jim Colquhoun

It's full of weirdos!

Les Back

And they're the one we want to be with, aren't they? Just tell us a little bit about the social life of these places, I know that you've been paying attention to that.

Mary Redmond

It was really interested in the pandemic. I mean, it was used a lot more, this site and, in particular, there was a man who lives nearby called Andrew and he would come here with his son who must have been about six or seven. And they really sort of entrenched themselves into an area of the site, they built the most intricate, beautiful dens, crafted ladders, they made a pond, and I spoke to him and he was talking about he lives in a you know, in a flat, he doesn't have a garden. So this was his garden, he would come here and garden and nurture with his son, be involved in the green space, you could just see the benefit of that.

Les Back

So the sense of these places being empty, derelict, lifeless, is completely, runs contra to the ways in which these places are made anew in terms of the life and, and the dynamism of them. Is that why they've become such an interesting sort of place to think about what cities can become but also for artists and, and other kinds of people are interested in the creative dimensions of city life?

Mary Redmond

I mean, it's not regulated, you can come here and do things and not be overlooked, not be judged. Build dens, play, engage with nature, but in a really, like free way. Yes. So I guess Yeah, is that that sort of essential thing about being free but in a in a city space, and in a

way you're outside, if you're outside the hoardings, you're in a regulated space, you couldn't just go and dig a hole somewhere. You know, everything's so heavily regulated outside, but in here...

Jim Colquhoun

When you come through that, I call it a portal because the rules change as soon as you come in. It's like that going through the back of the wardrobe thing in the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. You know, you kinda come through and you...it gives you licence to play, I think.

Les Back

I wonder if I could just ask you to say a little, maybe take us for a little bit for a wander round. And tell us a little bit about, you know, during the pandemic, exactly what kind, how that became a different sort of, have a different importance perhaps.

Jim Colquhoun

If we go this way, it might be better because it's really horrible over there, mucky, but we can kind of walk around there. Well, this bit kind of processes round to a kind of open area that is kind of being reclaimed by woods; buddleia, birch trees, you know, all sorts of things. And then from there, that takes you into an even wilder area, where you can kind of, once you're in there, you can't be seen from these high flats, just there. So there's that kind of secret thing where you can go in there and when people go in there, and they get fire going in they you know, trash the place quite often. That's just normal. This this here, this looks like a kind of what it will it is a kind of green slime. Yeah. And it's, it's witches butter, or nostoc. And it's actually edible. But you have to peel off the gelatinous outer to get to the slimy, enter and then you can eat that.

Les Back

Well, Jim, it doesn't look very enticing. It looks like sort of I'm gonna have a touch if I may, because I don't think anybody could have told me not to. It's kind of slimy it feel's like there's like a small, quite dark green deflated balloons. But it's delicious. You say?

Jim Colquhoun

It's edible, but I don't think it tastes very nice. But it was actually one of the things... when they were trying to think about how you might colonise another planet like, or the Moon or Mars. They actually, they hit on this stuff as something that could be grown in those conditions. And, and eaten. Because it's neither a plant nor a fungi, it's some peculiar thing in between. And it can grow in places like this like a dirty puddle. On Mars

Les Back

You know, listening to you talk it makes it reminds me of George Orwell's lovely essay Thoughts on the Common Toad about how, regardless of where in cities, the natural world endures. It comes back, it stakes its claim, it brings it brings life.

Jim Colquhoun

A nice word for it. I can't remember the guy's name but he's a Dutch artist, and he calls them crypto forests. And the idea is that anywhere you go, you'll find one of these things, they can be they can be even microscope, they can be this size, this vast area, but they can also be this tiny little thing. And if you look close enough, you will see a forest, you know, and then you can have this. Yeah, crypto forests.

Les Back

Even slightly underwater. Yeah. Amazing. Amazing. You know, there's so much of our talk that's been about the power of these places for play for enchantment, for imagination for, you know, a sense of, a different sense of of possibility. But I imagine they're also quite

contested places too, and that they're places that aren't all that are struggled over is that right?

Ross Beveridge

Yeah, so I would say that, well, wastelands, they bring together lots of these competing logics about the city. So with, we're thinking about planning logic to develop this economic logic, which drives much of what happens in city to maximise profit from urban space. So these kind of logics, which are generally dominant, come up against these spaces, and of course, try to, to get rid of them. And so that'd be one kind of classic competition over these spaces. I suppose these spaces are also contested in the sense that there are some people who want to keep them largely as they are. And you know, there's this small group of kinds of artists and as Jim said, weirdos or we should be more generous to people who can cherish these kinds of spaces of difference. But then there are people who want to want to maybe develop them into different kinds of spaces, maybe more formalised green spaces, places where you have then more of the regulation, which is missing here, but still are used, maybe for more public uses.

Les Back

So closing them down is closing down some of those aspects of the life of the city too. But Mary, I know that you've been doing some projects in the local community too, and I'd interested to know what's come out of those and and that sort

Mary Redmond

The views, the local views on the site? Yeah, it's pretty mixed. I mean, so there's a big sort of development near the site of residential flats, reasonably expensive private flats, and they expected the brownfield site that they overlook to be all sort of developed and that that was their kind of promise. So I think they look at this site as a bit of an eyesore and a promise that wasn't fulfilled. Whereas there's other people who kind of on more peripheries like more maybe in the, if you go into further into the city, maybe more social housing and they're accessing the site, in their random, interested way. But I think that community that are overlooking the site would like to kind of eradicate that behaviour

Ross Beveridge

They want it, they want to return it to some what we see as sort of normal space of some kind of landscape, or there's some buildings populating which, which make it seem like a kind of standard urban space. And I think one of the things that draws us to these spaces is they're not like that. And one of the things we're trying to do through our work in the university with the artists is, is to try to, to rethink these spaces. One of the great benefits of working with artists or being around artists is that they can imagine these spaces in different ways indeed, they're already doing it. And yeah, I think that's, that's important for us to break, those sort of very standard ways of looking at urban space. But if through these different lenses, which we have, artists, academics, writers, they can help us to rethink these spaces as places which might be incorporated in the urban fabric rather than eradicated from the urban fabric.

Jim Colquhoun

You know ,the last thing, that the developer wants is for a rare snail to be found, or a special toad, because that puts a stick in the spokes. So they don't want that. And I think that's partly what's happening here. You know, as that little crypto forest over there developed, they just came in and knocked all they just cut it all down.

Les Back

But even the developers are having to face up to the fact that even them that, you know, we can't develop cities in a way that destroys the environment and the ecology, the planet. So

the carbon footprint of those kinds of dreams for profit and use have consequences. And so in a way these spaces might become the lungs of Glasgow, in a way,

Jim Colquhoun

I think they will, I think they will I mean, this place is probably already dead, in the sense that it will be developed into a kind of hybrid retail housing. And the plans are, you can already look at the plans online, it's already been designed, you know, and it's there's a, I think that's been shelved, now, it's going to be some kind of

Mary Redmond

luxury wellbeing destination with a kind of slant to the eco I mean, the planning application because they're like, Oh, we're going to have living walls, or we're going to grow some food that will then serve in the cafe. But actually, ecologically, what's here at the site at the moment is really beneficial and really interesting. But the planning application is gonna make an all these kind of ecological claims and ticks all these boxes

Jim Colquhoun

This site has, it has white throat, a bird that Glasgow doesn't see very often they are around, but you know, they've got them on the site in season. They come in the summer, you know, and the other day I was in here, and I saw woodcock, you don't get woodcocks around here, but there it was.

Mary Redmond

And then there's amazing insect life here. There was the man that found the rare of amber snail. I mean, we were joking about it. But he did, an entomologist that lives nearby who comes to the site has found many rare insect species,

Jim Colquhoun

And fantastic plant life, you notice the most amazingly diverse flowers, wild flowers

Les Back

That's a very compelling phrase: the life that within a place like this, the white throat, the kingfishers, the woodcock, the plant species as well as the, the human life, the social lives of these places, too.

Ross Beveridge

So people like Jim and Mary and other people, they're kind of explorers in a way, explorers of these sites and but they also make these records of the site and they give it this its own kind of value, if you want to use that term, they bring that life to our eyes in a way, you know, and that's, that's something I think that art can do better than, you know, science can do, I think with these kind of difficult to read spaces, you know, to create our, our links to them, we need different ways of doing it. And that's why, that's why we thought working with the artists and not just social scientists, not just ecologists, we need everyone of course, but with special lenses and the people who know the sites, they're the ones who can bring them to life for us.

Les Back

I couldn't resist joining in with Jim, Ross and Mary and I chucked a few cobble stone into a massive puddle. It wasn't the beach under the cobblestones as the Situationists slogan goes, but rather a mundane pleasure in the midst of a pile of rubble. It was joyful and entertaining and we didn't feel the cold or driving rain, and it got Jim and Mary reflecting on another kind of social life made possible in the wasteland...

Jim Colquhoun

Perhaps these places might become important because in the sense of given free rein to kids to come to a place like this, because at the moment, kids are, have been enclosed, childhood has been enclosed, basically. So there are no kids on the streets. But perhaps these are the kinds of places they could come to and perhaps they might lose an eye but you know, a price to pay!

Les Back

They might but yeah, they might dream differently.

Jim Colquhoun

Yeah, exactly. Yeah. It's a free imaginative space, and you fill it up. You know, that's what we do. We come here and we just kind of you know, we make it into something usually just in our heads but

Mary Redmond

There's so much to discover every time we come back to the site, there's a new plant that you haven't seen before or some kind of strange insect crawling around

Jim Colquhoun

Strange human

Les Back

So we have to back through the portal now which I feel a bit sad about I must say. Maybe I've just grown too much Jim, I was be able to get back through the gap in the fence. Thank you so much for bringing us here, it's been such a wonderful experience.

What an extraordinary experience going there. There's a world of enchantment behind that blue fence, really, and it's such an interesting place to think about the different sorts of values that are at play in cities and city life. The fortunes of cities that are made and built through economic values and interests, is only one aspect of, of the life of a city and, and the claim that the natural world has on these places that we call cities.

The natural world has its own values, has its own rhythm, its own commitments, its own ways of shaping and claiming the places that we call Glasgow. One of the things that I learned today was how important it is to be able to open one's eyes, clear one's ears, and sense that possibility, and those different kinds of not only pasts, but the different kinds of conditions of the present and the possibilities of the cities of the future.

Thank you for listening to this episode of Recovering Community.

I'm Les Back and I want to say a huge thank you to Ross Beveridge, Mary Redmond and Jim Calquhoun for taking me through that portal and giving us a new way of thinking about wastelands.

You can find out more about the Wastelands and the City project and the seminar series from the link in the show notes.

I hope you're enjoying this new series of Recovering Community, it makes a huge difference if you subscribe and share it.

Next time we're in Castlemilk, talking about food solidarity



Bridget Crossan

We all want the same goal, and the goal is to make our community better and bring it together and help each other. And make each other happy. We do voice calls to each other, if we know we've got a challenge in the day ahead then we give a wee voice call and just say "up and at 'em, let's go and give out soup!" You know, and that's us back to smiling and getting on with each other. But every time we feel downtrodden, it's amazing because someone in the community seems to, or something happens that restores it back, that what we're doing is right.

Les Back

Thanks also to the staff in the School of Social and Political Sciences and the College of Social Sciences who helped with this project.

Recovering Community is produced by Freya Hellier.