Airport/Neighbourhood

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Heathrow is London's largest airport. For some, it doesn't count as a place. Rather, it is a hypermodern space of networks, flows and transit where routines and daily rhythms are structured around economic priorities. For others, though, it is more than a place. It is home.

When it opened as an international airport in 1946, Heathrow was bounded by agricultural land and rural hamlets. In the intervening years a conurbation has formed around it - Hayes, Heston, Southall, Hounslow, Feltham, and Staines – a vibrant penumbra that encircles an eclipsed centre. In this respect it invokes London itself where the City, a central zone all but empty of residents, and strategically calibrated to the requirements of capital flow, is encircled by districts that have evolved through the practice of everyday life. The analogy insists on an interdependence between centre and periphery, a conceptualization of the *urbs* which is only coherent when grasped as a whole. Yet in dominant imaginaries airports such as Heathrow are widely framed as quasi-autonomous zones (Easterling 2016) and non-places (Augé 1995) that have little or nothing to do with the cultural economies of their geographical milieu. This disavowal is perpetuated by epistemological tradition whereby their study belongs within the disciplines of architecture (Millar 1997) and/or landscape (Dümpelmann and Waldheim 2016), but rarely sociology. What though if we question this imaginary? What if we think the airport through the concept of neighbourhood?

To think the airport as neighbourhood is to subvert its hegemonic construction. It gives the lie to the truism that nobody lives at the airport. People do, just not in the centre. Furthermore, in the case of Heathrow, recognition of this fact exposes in turn vital qualities otherwise suppressed. For if, following Appadurai, the concept neighbourhood is taken to refer to a situated community that exercises power over a hostile environment (1996), then Heathrow must be understood in terms of environmental contestation.

It is at Heathrow, as at other frontiers, where state-sanctioned infrastructures - laws, barriers, scanners and identity cards - mutate into personal stories. Some speak to a time of differentiated mobility. The Guardian tells of a Pakistani stowaway, Mohammed Ayaz, who fell from the sky when the aircraft landing gear in which he had been hiding opened, and who crashed to earth in a Homebase parking lot (Addley and McCarthy 2001).

The lives of Heathrow residents are shaped by the airport's capacity to provide connectivity, employment, visibility and, on account of aircraft noise, relatively affordable districts within which to settle. It is here, particularly in Southall to the north and Hounslow to the east, that populations from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds are thrown together. The playing out of the global on Heathrow's (local) stage is powerfully illustrated by an anecdote told in the Sikh community: that when the Maharaja of Patiala visited the newly purchased site for a Sikh temple, he encouraged the association to think big with the words "let the gurdwara's Nishan Sahib (flag) be visible from London's Heathrow" (Baisakhi Brochure 1991, cited in Singh, 2006 p 148. This, like many other stories, is indicative of new architectures and forms of collective life which promise insights into human dignity, faith and public space.

The importance of Heathrow for understanding the resurgence of cities cannot be overstated. In post-industrial economies governments have sought to reinvigorate urban centres by intervening in natural economic cycles through policy and planning. One dominant model, the Creative City, first articulated by Charles Landry in the late 1980s and implemented by the New Labour government, placed artists and a public art programme at the centre of regeneration initiatives that were media savvy and iconic (Landry 2000). By multiple accounts, the Creative City failed because it was unable to redistribute aspiration downwards to a socially and ethnically diverse public (Vickery 2011).

A second model, advanced by the American urban theorist Richard Florida, proposed not so much the need for artists, as for a creative class, a body of educated, mobile, and self-motivated individuals who would bring economic growth through inventiveness in a broad spectrum of creative industries from fashion to technology. In a sense, Florida's version of renewal is descriptive as much as prescriptive of a state of affairs but his advocacy of its expansion has little or nothing to say about the relationship between creativity and public good nor, for that matter, about the cultural homogenisation that has taken place in inner cities. The shortcomings of both visions means that the way forward in urban renewal is, once again, up for grabs.

However, the direction it might take is far from clear. For the models of both Landry and Florida mobilise a notion of creativity by, on the one hand positioning the concept of creativity among the terms of the debate and, on the other, leaving the meaning of the term open. Various research initiatives have responded by identifying social potential in vernacular forms

of making (Edensor 2010, Miles 2013). The strength of these accounts is that they recast state intervention as itself market-driven, rather than motivated by the attempt to respond to the failures of the market and its social fallout. However, the endeavour to understand non-state-initiated forms of creativity in terms of the gift, generosity and conviviality would seem to mask the various forms of interestedness (economic or otherwise) at large in cultural production.

This project contributes to these debates through an enquiry into 'making' at Heathrow. Making is approached through four conceptual lenses: *activist, entrepreneur, homemaker* and *strategist.* […]

Heathrow is a significant site of making because it is neither a vision of government (for instance, via systematic, market driven large-scale public art programmes) nor of significant private finance aimed at attracting a so-called creative class (Florida 2002). Both these are reserved for Heathrow the destination. Rather, cultural production has grown out of the conditions of falling between commercially and economically driven shaping forces: of liminality. It could be said that, if place making in the Heathrow neighbourhood is inventive, it is *sui generis*, exclusively governed neither by the taste of young, middle-class professionals, nor by the aesthetics of display that has characterised culturally led urban regeneration. As such, it presents an opportunity to examine instances of acts traditionally valued as socially and/or economically productive, for example, art and music in both vernacular and elite forms, and an expanded field of suburban inventiveness under the conditions of the global.

The urgency of this work now is that Heathrow has emerged as a prime candidate to deliver aviation expansion in London. The conjunction of this ambition with Heathrow's political history mean that, more than ever before, it is here that ideological debates are staged on a wide range of issues: environmental sustainability, public health, economic competitiveness, national sovereignty, global terrorism, multiculturalism and humanitarianism. Heathrow might be described as a kind of test bed for how the complexities of metropolitan space in an age of global air travel might be negotiated, while the events which take place in the neighbourhood are both a focus of intense sentiment and a catalyst for debate on societal challenges more widely.

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