EXPLORING THE FORGOTTEN:
THE EVIDENTIAL HERITAGE VALUES OF GRASSROOTS MUSIC VENUES

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The opening lyrics of "Elocution" by Sleaford Mods sung by Jason Williamson in his poshest, indie-est, and phoniest voice, brilliantly capture the state of British independent, grassroots music venues. In principle, scholars and industry professionals alike acknowledge the importance of grassroots music venues (GMV) with regard to local talent development, conceiving them as vital elements of the urban live music ecology (Van der Hoeven & Hitters 2019), understood as the local or broader networks of venues, audiences, music professional and their environment (Webster et al., 2018; Banks et al., 2000), and as "beacons of live music" (Music Venue Trust 2015). However, in reality, their nature is often primarily transitional. Many artists and bands pass through independent venues with the underlying goal of global, commercial success. It is the first step of their career. And often, once that goal is achieved, they do not return, forgetting the venues that once supported their initial musical explorations. This situation puts GMVs in a continuously precarious position that undermines their actual role within the music night-time economy – that is, the development of local talents and the planning of community-driven activities – and future development plans. In this night-time economy dominated by 'mainstream' places of segregated entertainment, hybrid and counter-dominant cultural outlets such as GMVs are neglected. More specifically, such outlets are overshadowed "by the dominance of a more 'mainstream' form that exploits existing cleavages in the population and segregates adults into particular spaces and places" (Hollands 2002:154). Moreover, their long heritage, which can provide rich evidence about local scenes and subcultures, is also undermined due to the constant precarious conditions that such venues are in.

Critically examining the importance of GMVs and challenging pre-constructed, dominant music industry views decried by artists such as Sleaford Mods, it is essential to broaden the understanding of their significance. This requires moving from the exploration of GMVs' role in talent development to a deeper focus on the heritage which exists in their material environment. With that in mind, and through a White Rose College of Arts and Humanities (WRoCAH) funded research project, I pose and explore the following questions: what if GMVs are approached as heritage sites within which local audiences and communities attach values and leave personal traits? What if GMVs are understood as "symbolic anchors in regions, as signs of community, belonging and a shared past" (Lewis 1992b: 144 in Miller & Schofield 2016: 138) based on their subcultural heritage significance?

The aim of this article, then, is to examine the importance of the Grassroots Music Venue by adopting a heritage significance lens. In doing so, I aim to forward the understanding of such venues as heritage sites which produce temporal and ephemeral heritage embedded within counter-cultural narratives. Through a series of photographs captured in The Fulford Arms – a small (180 cap.) GMV, situated in York, Northern England – and by rethinking GMVs as heritage sites, this article examines the evidential value of such venues. By providing this empirical evidence, I explore how GMVs retain evidence of past gigs and other cultural activities. Such exploration can communicate the temporal and ephemeral nature of live musical performances, as well as reveal a certain interior design style, which, by evoking past performances' remnants through material artefacts such as photographs, posters, stickers, and other ephemera, re-enacts and recreates embodied memories for audiences, performers and stakeholders.

These memories are strongly connected to the materiality of GMVs, which is characterised by a unique stylistic tone through a constantly shifting interplay between people and space. In other words, space is not approached as a fixed entity, but rather, as a fluid materiality which can be altered by people. This tone set by the material artefacts of venues within the space, having established its particular, unique style, is representative of the culture that thrives within GMVs while providing a rich, illustrative connection to each venue's past. That being said, the use of photos to capture the evidential value of GMVs in this article divulges the alteration of the built environment, responsive to the material surroundings of those that construct it by shedding light on the material artefacts of such spaces. Hence, this photo-based article vividly evokes the temper and texture of the subcultures that thrive in grassroots music venues. The heritage of GMVs is materialised and articulated through the counter-cultural narratives that are produced within these spaces. Such narratives, as explained below, often move against the authorised heritage discourse (AHD) which mainly considers the aesthetic beauty of a heritage site (Smith 2012: para.5). The notion of AHD is clarified in a later section where the evidential value as a marker of heritage significance is discussed.

By adopting a stance questioning the dominance of AHD and advancing a counter-authorised perception of heritage, this article places the process of heritage value attachment to venues by audiences at the heart of this debate. This approach to assigning and articulating value opens up further space for understanding GMVs as spaces that are produced through the ascription of heritage values, based on an interplay and interaction between people and objects (Low 2016). This synthesis of objects and people, taking place in spatial arrangements, illustrates the ways in which the physical location of the venues can alter the relation between cultural activities per se and the built environment within which, every day, lived heritage is produced (van de Hoeven and Hitters 2020).

Evidential Value of Grassroots Music Venues as Heritage Sites

Explorations of the importance and cultural significance of grassroots music venues through a heritage lens should be grounded in a theoretical framework that forwards their understanding as heritage sites. Through this frame, GMVs can be defined in terms of their characteristics and activities – as alternative urban playscapes of nightlife (Chatterton & Hollands 2003: 93) which, by offering niche and accessible cultural events, attract national and local communities. They can be distinguished from mainstream and profit-driven commercial venues on the basis of their accessible status. Big commercial venues such as O2 Arenas tend to be "profit-oriented places of capital accumulation, targeting cash-rich groups" (Chatterton & Holland 2003: 93). GMVs, on the other hand, are typically small, social hubs that play a significant role in the formation of personal and collective identities by facilitating the nurturing of the relationship between live music, performers and audiences. In terms of their capacity, they are small venues (100-650 cap.) while their interiors follow a similar form: posters, worn-out paint on the walls, and tired toilet facilities. Finally, some GMVs have different former uses such as working men's clubs, social clubs, industrial warehouses, railway arches, and libraries.

This definition is based on an understanding of the development of personal relationships within venues, their historical and architectural merit, and their distinctive interior style that is altered by the presence of audiences and performers. These traits reveal the venues' significance as heritage sites by highlighting the communal, historical, evidential and aesthetic values that audiences attach to them.

Evidential value as a marker of heritage significance

Following this line of argumentation, this article's focus is on the evidence and traits that audiences and performers leave to GMVs. Such traits are acquired through the a venue's capacity to gather information on these past human movements (Historic Englands n.d) and in doing so, evidencing value. While discourses of *evidential value* are interdisciplinary, they are mainly grounded within the field of archaeology, and through the discipline's close connection to heritage studies. More broadly, different sets of values can be applied to heritage sites, ranging from aesthetic values to economic and symbolic ones. Based on the ambiguity and plurality of heritage values and the need for the development of a value toolkit that will enable the assessment of different sites, English Heritage's Conservation Principles (2008) provides a framework that includes four core heritage values: the aesthetic, evidential, communal and historical (Mason 2002). Evidential value, that is, "the potential of a place to yield evidence about past human activity" (English Heritage 2008: 72) is an integral part of this toolkit and linked to traditional understandings of heritage which focus on the material aspect of sites.

Building upon the discussion around heritage values in relation to GMVs, it can be said that groups of people and communities revisit and reproduce the materiality of GMVs based on "the active negotiation of identities, as well as social and generational memories (Byrne et al., 2003: 58-59). This active negotiation on the grounds of a place's materiality opens the way for the establishment of a dialectic relationship between the notion of evidential value and cultural memory. Cultural memory is understood as a "field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history" (Sturken 1997: 1). It is also an activity that produces new stories and social relations without only preserving the stories of the past (DeCesari & Rigney 2014). Hence, "it attaches itself to sites" (Nora 1989: 22). If the physical spaces of GMVs are re-approached as culturally constructed (Brunow 2019) and, accordingly, a result of cultural memory, then the evidence of people's existence in the venues is constantly re-negotiated. In other words,

cultural memory, hinged on people's negotiations, turns the spotlight on different evidence of human traces in different periods of time. It can be "adapted, reworked and appropriated within multiple contexts" (Brunow 2019: 11). Hence, the evidential value of heritage is not fixed but ever-changing since its cultural memory is constantly re-negotiated.

The exploration of evidential values as an outcome of cultural memory indicates the continual development of GMVs, a development that, while looking towards the future, bears echoes of the past. And these evidential values are grounded on non-static, material heritage practices. Subsequently, within GMVs, evidential value can be manifested through heritage-as-praxis, or as Roberts and Cohen (2014) would call it, 'little-h heritage', that is, "a form of memory work encompassing everyday social and cultural practices, and a process of tracing influences, connections, and "inheritance tracks" (p.235)

This understanding of the ever-changing evidential value through everyday heritage practices highlights the direct conflict with authorised heritage discourse (AHD). Stemming from the field of traditional archaeology, such discourse tries to silence counter-cultural heritage values, imposing a dominant approach to heritage as "aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/or landscapes that are non-renewable" (Smith 2012: para. 14). The notion of non-renewability highlights a hegemonic understanding of static and fixed heritage values that should be inherited by future generations unchanged. Hence, AHD claims the existence of inherent heritage values within aesthetically beautiful objects that should be preserved and, in their passing on to new generations unchanged, guarantees that the dominant culture they represent will remain unchallenged.

Despite that, this article focuses on the often forgotten evidential heritage value of GMVs while trying to contradict any hegemonic, authorised heritage discourse attempts to silence counter-cultural narratives. It should be noted that by approaching GMVs as heritage sites, this article does not signify any attempts of appropriation by including them in an authorised heritage discourse which could be derived from the fact that evidential value is traditionally linked to AHD. On the contrary, by using the authorised heritage tools in counter-authorised terms and case studies, it challenges the dominant perceptions of heritage significance. As an outcome, posters, worn-out paint on the walls bearing performers' signatures, heavily used toilet facilities, old carpets, tired bar stools and damaged floors are approached as heritage and explored as signifiers of the evidential heritage value of Grassroots Music Venues.

Case Study

In making claims to GMVs significance as sites of evidential heritage, this study draws upon a close examination of The Fulford Arms – a venue which has a long and interesting history both as a pub and a music venue. Situated in the City of York, North Yorkshire, England and more specifically in the Ward of Fishergate, the premise was built in 1801 under the name 'The Barrack Tavern' in order to provide leisure activities for local troops stationed at the neighbouring Cavalry Barracks (figure 1).

Figure 1: the Barracks Tavern, now the Fulford Arms. c.1890 Photo of private collection indicated by Chris Sherrington, former co-owner of the venue. Photo publicly available on this link: https://ffhyork.weebly.com/fishergate--fulford-rd.html

It became locally, notoriously famous in 1853 when its landlord John Hardcastle was charged with approving card-playing games in the pub. During the 1970s and more specifically due to an IRA attack on Strensall Camp on 11th June 1974, the pub's landlady renamed her premise to 'The Fulford Arms' inspired by the nearby village called Fulford (figure 2). Progressively, the Fulford Arms became a more neighbourhood-oriented pub & guesthouse, welcoming local residents and local policemen.

Figure 2: Article in the local newspaper about the pub name change (personal archive of Chris Sherrington.)

Slowly, the pub's popularity started to diminish, and in 2014, proprietors Chris Tuke and Chris Sherrington took on the tenancy and decided to create a music venue, following the closure of other venues in the city and their experiences of running venues and events in the York[3]. The Fulford Arms (figure 3) quickly established a good reputation for developing local young artists and welcoming acts of different genres, ranging from indie and folk to death metal and punk. On a more practical note, based on Music Venue Trust guidelines, The Fulford Arms can be categorised as a small grassroots music venue based on 4 criteria: Capacity, activity, infrastructure, and amenities. It is a 180-cap venue which has hosted more than 200 entry-level musicians and established acts headlining or supporting gigs. As far as its amenities and infrastructure are concerned, it has a big stage, mixing desk, PA system, stage microphones, lighting rig and dressing rooms. Moreover, it employs sound engineers and collaborates with promoters.

Figure 3: the Fulford Arms, 2019 (personal archive of Chris Sherrington).

Evidential Heritage Value at the Fulford Arms

Thinking about the unravelling of heritage practices and memories in a venue, I visited the Fulford Arms on the 27th of September 2022 for the event *Hoersfest* which offered a tapestry of electro-punk and drum and bass acts. During this all-day festival, the venue provided significant evidential markers that reveal the continual presence of audiences and performers on its premises. The richest marker of heritage values appears to be the black-board painted walls around the venue's interior which are signed by a selection of acts that have performed in the venue since 2014 (figure 4).

Figure 4: Wall signed by performers, 2022. Taken by author.

A closer look at the walls reveals the evidence of past events and gigs that have been hosted by the Fulford Arms through the eyes of the acts that performed. For example, Glass Mountain signed the upper right part of this wall during their show in the venue on the 9th of September 2018. On the same note, heavy metal band Pariah, who has performed in the venue several times, signed the wall on the 23rd of February 2018 and the Molochs on St. Valentine's Day, 2018. Hence, this 'wall of fame' plays a significant role in the production of the venue's heritage by providing evidence about past activities. More specifically, it does so through an unconventional and niche tangible heritage format which not only encloses the heritage practice of signing the wall by performers but includes a selection of acts that have performed in the venue. Hence, it appears as an in-situ collaborative archive of democratised heritage by creating a sense of the venue's situatedness in the local collective memory. This characteristic directly contradicts authorised heritage commemoration schemes. Such schemes can be understood as acts of consecration that "separate the great from the good while imposing discrete distinctions and producing 'discontinuity out of continuity'" (Bourdieu 1991 in Allen and Lincoln 2004: 873–874).

Moreover, as far as the materiality of these heritage practices is concerned, it also highlights the ephemeral and ever-changing nature of the venues' evidential value as opposed to static AHD perceptions of heritage. Names of new performers are added to the walls almost every day, enriching the value of the Fulford Arms as a site of heritage. Such enrichment is ephemeral due to the fact that all signatures are written with chalk. And in a venue that welcomes audiences, too often, evidence of past gigs vie for a place in the Fulford Arms' history and memory as they can be easily erased or accidentally destroyed. As an outcome, the signatures' fragility, manifested as a glimpse of cultural heritage ephemera, underlines the fact that this form of evidential value can be as temporary as the performers it represents (Strong & Whiting 2018). This situation however is not a direct threat to the evidential value of the venue since it is perceived as a non-static heritage practice that resists any attempts of authorised 'museumification'(Roberts & Cohen 2014).

Figure 5: Interior of the venue, 2022. Taken by author.

Capturing the venue's history of live performances, the signed walls function not only as unauthorised archival resources which connect the past with the present but as sites of heritage-as-praxis which provide tangible evidential memorialisation of the venue (fig. 6). While the 'Sherlocks' sign the upper part of the stage at the Fulford Arms after their show, they are engaging in the production of the venue's heritage by attaching evidential value to its material environment. Subsequently, it can be understood that the evidential value appears as an outcome of heritage-as-praxis which is rooted in the everyday activities of the venue. More specifically, since The Fulford Arms hosts multiple shows almost every day of the year, the act of signing the walls enables heritage practices to be an integral part of the day-to-day performances in the physical space. This practice-oriented activity indicates a high level of engagement between performers and heritage-as-praxis since it is produced so as to capture a specific moment in the history of the venue.

Figure 6: The Sherlocks sign the walls at the venue, 2021. Copyrights: Rhona Murphy. Photograph publicly available on https://www.thefulfordarms.com/gallery.html

Finally, as far as their aesthetics are concerned, the signed walls seem to connect the Fulford Arms with a variety of musical identifiers that enable a visual representation of the venue's heritage. These musical identifiers provide rich information about the acts that have been hosted in the venue and their unravelling can reveal important traces of the subcultures that thrive in the venue. This is succeeded through the identification of the music genres presented in the Fulford Arms and their connection to local subcultural scenes. Hence, as an essential part of the site's interior design and decor, the walls materially depict the plurality of musical genres and subcultural aura that exists in the venue, represent its unique stylistic tone and distinctive identity and ultimately suggest how the venue is going to be remembered.

Limitations

While this examination of the Fulford Arms offers an example of the evidential value of GMVs, it is important to provide insights regarding the limitations of the research. Firstly, the sample is by no means representative of all independent music venues in the UK. Hence the analysis can only offer a deeper look into the Fulford Arms and its distinctive evidential value. Secondly, the act of signing the walls was not discussed with artists. As a result, this article is unable to provide a full sense of what it means to sign the wall as a performer, instead exploring this act through a heritage-as-praxis lens. Thirdly, it should be acknowledged that having opened in 2014, the Fulford Arms is relatively new as a music venue. This comparatively short lifespan of the venue could be considered as a possible limitation, given that notions of 'heritage' are more conventionally associated with the exploration of a more distant past (see Bennet and Rodgers 2016; Strong & Whiting 2018; Graves-Brown 2012). These points notwithstanding, as Harvey (2001) notes, heritage does not only concern the past. It is manifested, shaped, negotiated and produced completely in the present while aiming to reproduce itself in the future by looking critically towards the past. Hence, the years that a venue is open do not seem to directly influence its heritage production and significance. Such traits are influenced by audiences, stakeholders and performers who inhabit the venue, attach values and offer rich information about the venue per se. As such, this article can be understood as the first stage of a more developed, intensive dive into the heritage values of GMVs, which will address several other important questions regarding the collection, curatorship and preservation of ephemera, and the aspect of forgotten cultural memory.

Conclusion

Focusing on the Fulford Arms, a grassroots music venue in York, UK, this article has explored independent music venues as heritage sites. Through examination of their evidential heritage value, it has explored the potential of GMVs to carry material evidence of past performances and gigs – evidential heritage value of their physical spaces. In this case study, evidential value is manifested in a particular and niche way via the signatures of a selection of past performers which adorn the walls of the venue.

In the series of photographs presented above, the venues' walls become a rich marker of evidential heritage value in three key ways. Firstly, they provide a unique material heritage format that functions as a cooperative physical archive. As a result, by giving the opportunity to bands to sign the walls through unofficial curatorial activities, the Fulford Arms participate in a counter-authorised, democratised form of evidential heritage values that goes against the authorised heritage discourse and hegemonic, top-to-down, commemoration schemes. As an outcome, the co-produced evidential value exists in a physical space in which memories and experiences can be acknowledged and made material. Secondly, the act of signing the walls is linked to the notion of heritage-as-praxis, embedded in the everyday activities of the venue and producing evidential heritage value through the collaboration of performers and the venue. Thirdly, the evidential value of the Fulford Arms is also manifested through the understanding of the signed walls as an interior design and decor which represent the subcultural vibe of the venue, highlighting the unique aesthetic identity and stylistic tone at the heart of collective memories of the Fulford Arms.

As such, this article explores the forgotten. It examines the physical environment in order to find evidence about people's activities. Finally, it argues that the evidential value of grassroots

music venues has the capacity to shape notions of musical space and place, while highlighting the embeddedness of the venue in the musical collective memory of local scenes and communities.

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