

Why 'Public House'?

Written by ON/OFF members Nick Green, Alison Hugill, Michael Maginness and Dan Dorocic

On our first visit to Lincoln and the Ermine in November, we developed the idea of the 'Public House' over a pint in the "snug" of the Struggler's Inn. After meeting with members of the local Ermine community during a mapping workshop in the Ermine United Reformed Church, we were struck by the rapidly dwindling spaces for social congregation on the estate. Many of the people we spoke to lamented the disappearance of various shops, churches and, most recently, the closure of the Imp Pub on the estate. We had read about the flourishing of these types of spaces in an article by Lincoln-based historian, Andrew Jackson, in which he detailed the heyday of the Ermine in the 1950s and 60s. Today, it felt that there were fewer and fewer of these kinds of places left.

We often describe our own practice not as "social architecture" - as it doesn't aim to find blanket solutions for social problems, in the vein of earlier traditions of social housing or newer neoliberal models - but rather as an architecture of socialising. By this we mean: the objects and encounters we initiate disrupt or distort the usual flow of our urban lives by creating new social engagements. They prompt people to critically reconsider the spaces and frameworks that they occupy and act within.

We were drawn to the Public House as a concept partly because of its history and partly because of the invaluable role it plays in contemporary British society (and beyond). Recently, many long-standing pubs across the UK have been listed as "Assets of Community Value" (ACV), protecting properties that "have a main use or purpose of furthering the social wellbeing or social interests of the local community, and could do so into the future." A group of self-professed "pub evangelists" has surfaced, campaigning to have pubs nominated for inclusion on these lists.

The first alehouses were established in domestic spaces in the 10th century. They quickly evolved into meeting places for people to socialise, gossip and arrange mutual aid between communities. In this sense, they played a major role both politically and socially. But what role does a Public House serve today?

Inverting the historical role of the Public House as a domestic space that invited the community in, we wanted to create a warm, home-like hearth that could be brought outside, into public space. The contradiction is already inherent in the name 'Public House' as it blurs the distinction between the public and private sphere. Our response to the question is a playful and experimental one: to parade the public house through the Ermine's residential neighbourhoods.

Public House is a project and piece of social architecture developed for and with residents of Lincoln, created by ON/OFF design collective members Nick Green, Alison Hugill, Michael Maginness and Dan Dorocic, with the support of Lulu Lentini, Andrew Jackson (Lincoln historian & Geographer), Selina Tarnowska (Art & Architecture Intern at MotF), Ermine Community Action Group, Ermine United Reformed Church, St John the Baptist Church, Ermine Community Action Group, the citizens of the Ermine Estate and the University of Lincoln.