

In spring 2017, the South London Gallery (SLG) invited artist Jessie Brennan to collaborate with residents of Pelican Estate on a project titled YOUR WORDS. Jessie spent time listening to residents' experiences which, in different ways, celebrate the value of public housing and speak to the broader challenges often faced by those on council estates.

*A broader context of the project, including Jessie's introductory text and examples of further conversations between Jessie Brennan (JB) and Pelican residents, can be found on the South London Gallery website:
<https://www.southlondongallery.org/projects/jessie-brennan-words/>.*

PAUL (b. 1966, UK), caretaker of Pelican Estate

JB What's your relationship to Pelican Estate?

P I started with Southwark on the agency in 1994, and that was on an estate on the Old Kent Road. And then after that I spent a year on the Heygate, the one they're demolishing. [...] I've been here [Pelican Estate] since about '97. [...]

JB What would you say you enjoy about working on Pelican Estate?

P Well, it's a reasonable size. Because I've worked on some estates which are going to take you a hell of a long time to get around. It's sort of compact. You know which are the dirtiest areas and which are the cleanest. So you hit the dirtiest areas first. [...] And I think what I like about this job is [...] basically, if you know that, you're managing yourself. [...]

JB What are the challenges, what don't you enjoy about this job?

P Oh, it's the messy stuff. [...] When I first started, some of the cleaning fluids had a stronger smell. So if someone urinated or did something else and it stank, you put the stuff down and it killed it straight away and it made sure the smell didn't come back. But now the stuff they [Southwark Council] give us, you throw it down, it might mask the smell for a day and a half but then after that it starts ponging again. So they're just buying the cheapest stuff they can get. It's the same with the buckets. The buckets they used to give us were bigger. Big square ones. But now they give us the cheapest buckets, which end up getting broken very quickly. And other stuff, I mean, they used to have a specialist team, outside contractors, to unblock the chutes if we couldn't [...] But now the cutbacks are setting in. [...]

JB You've worked here a long time. Has the area changed much?

P As far as this estate, when I first came on here there was a lot more – how can I put this? – a lot more criminal activity on here. A lot more people selling stuff, weed. You'd find lots of stolen bikes dumped in the bushes. You'd find people's emptied out wallets in the play area where they must've [been] robbed someplace, and then they came into the play area to divide the spoils, as it were. [...] It's gone quieter now, a lot quieter. I mean there hasn't been a killing in here for a long time. [...] I wouldn't say Peckham is a violent place. [...] I just think certain areas have got certain problems. And if the politicians and police all worked together to help tackle those problems and help the people in those areas, those problems would go away. But they don't seem to want to do that, so that's their tough luck. [...] They don't want to spend the money, or they don't have the money. But then for them, most of these politicians, they don't live anywhere near where their constituents live. [...] If we was to say, 'right, I'm going to hammer the big boys – the multi-nationals for the tax, I'm going to hammer the ones earning big money, by the same token I'm going to cut your small business rate and help your firms', maybe that would attract more votes. [...] I used to vote. But I'm one of those people who thinks 'politician – liar', if you did a word association game. [...] Write that on top [of Heron House]. I don't think you'd get that past Southwark Council...

JB What do you think needs to happen politically, in terms of housing?

P I think they should start building more social housing, because there's a chronic need for it. But they keep on, all the Conservatives seem to be doing is talking about first time buyers. How's that going to help people on council waiting lists? That ain't going to help them. And then they moan about the housing benefit budget. The reason the housing benefit budget has gone through the roof is that councils are having to place people with private landlords who charge twice as much as a housing association or a council would, for accommodation that would be dodgy to say the least. [...] It's getting a decent place to live at a rent you can afford: that's what it should be about. [...]

JB What are your views on the regeneration of Peckham (the Five Estates or Peckham Rye station, for instance)?

P Well, it's gentrification. Because if you talk to the people who are going into these new blocks, they're not the people who used to live there. It's people with money. So they're pushing the people – the tenants who were there, the 'riffraff' – away and it's all about money. [...] It's the same on the other side of this road. They've demolished a lot of the flats, and [I believe] they're going to keep on demolishing all the way up to where the Heygate is. Because there's a whole programme, even this area, this block. But this estate will probably be one of the last to go, because they've decades worth of work on the other side of the main road, north Peckham. [...] Private developers aren't going to help

with social housing. I keep on hearing about affordable housing. Affordable for who? [...] As far as Peckham is concerned, I think it's a nice area. Shouldn't put it down, it's a good place. Is full of people who are just trying to make ends meet, maybe juggling more than one job. There's hustling and bustling, people moving. It's one of those areas that's always been a sort of melting pot and probably always will be – unless gentrification mob move in, of course.