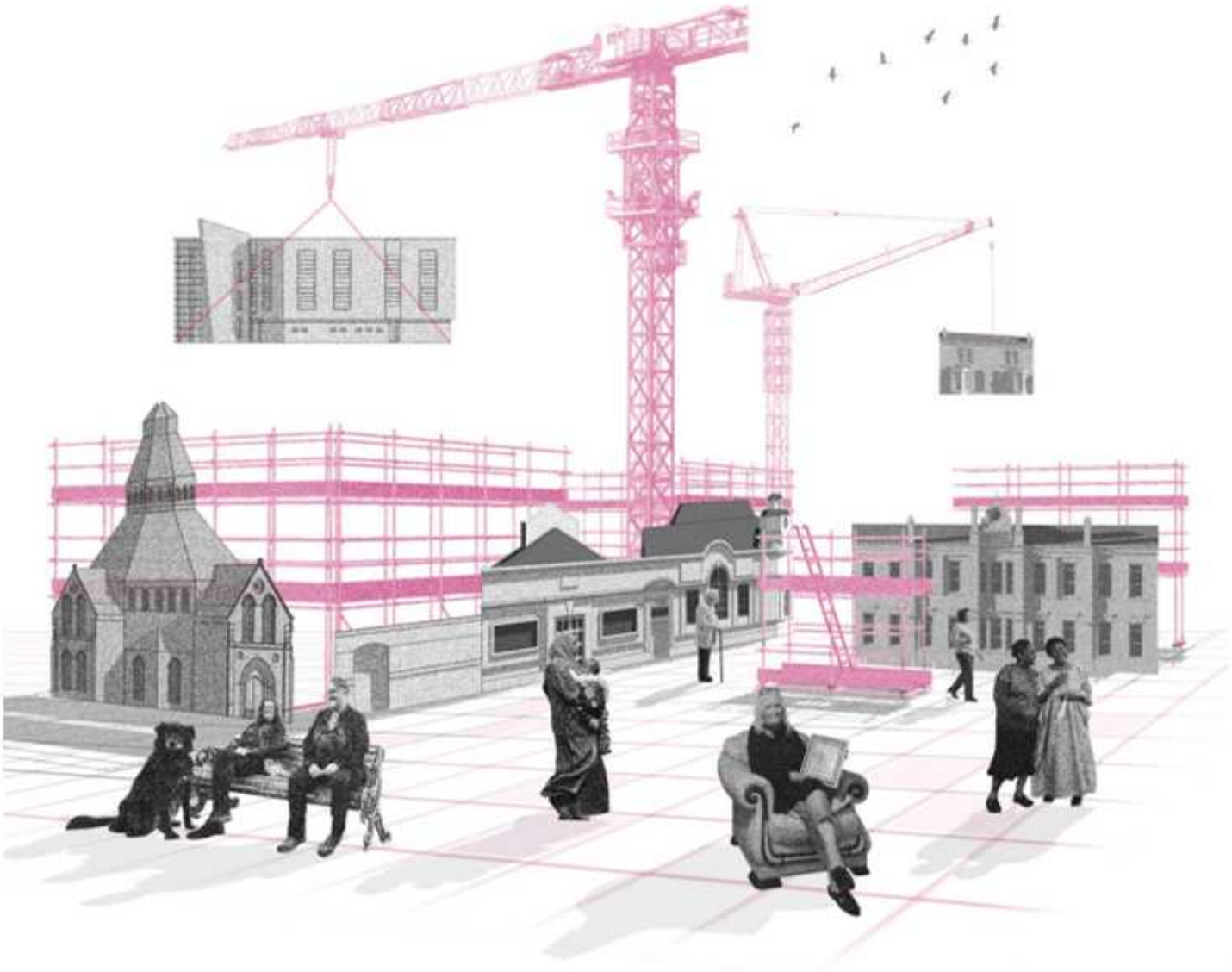
DESIGNING CARE

COUNTERING THE EXCLUSION OF OLDER WOMEN

Final Report



Dr. Francesca Piazzoni

University of Liverpool, School of Architecture
Piazzoni@liverpool.ac.uk

Table of Contents

Introduction

The RIBA Research Grant funded a two-year research project with women living in Liverpool 8 (L8), a long-marginalised UK neighbourhood that has been repeatedly demolished since the 1970s. The project engaged thirty-seven women, ranging from fifty-five to their late eighties. This combined focus on gender and age addresses a problem in the design of cities: architects and planners usually design streets, services, and houses for men, not for women, and certainly not for older women who may appear to be out of the workforce or family care.

Yet older women are the backbone of our society. Almost one-third of the UK female population is over the age of fifty-five, and this number is projected to increase. Older women not only continue to carry out professional work, but they also regularly take care of loved ones—grandchildren, parents, partners, friends. While doing this work, which is usually underpaid if paid at all, older women are forced to navigate cities that do not meet their needs. They wait for buses without being able to sit, find no convenient services, walk on pavements with bumpy surfaces, and cross dark streets at night.

Even the memories of older women are erased by cities. While significant investments go to preserve and promote heritage landmarks that attract tourists (and money), other buildings get demolished or are left derelict. This is a slap in the face to residents who witness beloved spaces succumbing to the interests of people with more economic power. For older women, who already struggle to be heard by policymakers, seeing the old buildings they cherish being ignored is yet another affront, another reminder that cities are hostile to them.

Ethnographic fieldwork and archival research helped trace how, against hostile urban forms that seek to control, discipline, and expel them, older women manage to make L8 a better place for themselves and others. In particular, the women's recollections and enduring experiences of loss were found to affect everyday geographies, calling for architects and planners to consider memory as a force that could potentially help design more equitable urban environments. As discussed in this report, the project resulted in the following outputs:

- A short book titled *L8 HERStory: An Architectural Guide by Older Women*. Co-written with women living in the Liverpool 8 district, the book includes their memories of twenty-four landmarks (including a wide range of typologies, from entire streets to grocery stores, to demolished homes). The women's memories are accompanied by historic photographs, archival materials (e.g., eviction notes, city surveys), and architectural drawings. In addition to

being visible online, the book was distributed free of charge in key locations across Liverpool—the city's museum, a feminist bookshop, community centres in L8.

- An Exhibition, *also titled L8 HERStory,* showcasing the book's contents along with other, original materials such as collages, architectural models, large maps, montages of pictures, and the like. The exhibition was held in November 2022 at the Kuumba Imani Community Centre, itself one of the landmarks discussed by the women.

- One academic article, currently under review for *Urban Studies*. Titled *The Presence of Absence: Re-Making Home in a Disappeared Neighbourhood*, the article discusses how older women in Liverpool 8 weaponise their sense of loss, making material absence a force of space-making.

- Another academic article, currently under review for Planning Perspectives. Titled *"It's the Demolitions who saved me" Partnering with Destruction and Seeking Liberation in Liverpool 8,* the article shows how some women worked with—rather than parallel to or against—the demolitions, making L8 a better place for themselves and others. `

Variations from Original Research Plans

This project began as a collaboration with Dr. Frances Darlington-Pollock, a colleague in the Department of Geography at the University of Liverpool, who specialises in quantitative methods and critical GIS analyses. When we initially applied for the grant, our proposed methods and outcomes showcased our team's interdisciplinary expertise. These included qualitative interviews, observations of public space, and the mapping of large statistical datasets across the Liverpool region. However, just two months after we were awarded the grant, Dr. Darlington-Pollock decided to leave not only the University of Liverpool but also academia altogether. As a result, I have taken on the leadership of the Designing Care project independently.

I now believe that Dr. Darlington-Pollock's departure ultimately allowed me to develop a deeper and more rooted connection with older women in Liverpool, particularly in the Liverpool 8 area (part of the Toxteth District). The research's aims and objectives remained the same: (1) to explore the spatial preferences of diverse older women in Liverpool, and (2) to provide guidelines to make cities more welcoming to, and empowering for, older women. However, my expertise in ethnographic methods and archival research, combined with the data that emerged during the interviews, prompted me to narrow the geographical focus of my investigation to one district. Consequently, I conducted nearly 40 interviews with women living in the Liverpool 8 area (sampling criteria and interview scripts are explained in the methods section).

In addition to a narrower geographical focus and deeper qualitative analysis, another significant deviation from the original plan was the incorporation of archival research. Shortly after commencing the interviews in Liverpool 8, I realised that the demolition cycles from the late 1950s well into the 2000s had profoundly impacted the lives of the women. This aspect deserved dedicated scrutiny. To uncover the spatial memories of these women, I combined archival research with oral histories, aiming to trace how those memories continue to influence their movement, use, and production of the city. Given the extensive demolitions, with multiple sites being cleared and reconstructed over several decades, conducting archival research at the Liverpool City Records and the University of

Liverpool Library was essential. This research allowed me to recover surveys of housing conditions, demolition plans, as well as drawings and pamphlets of demolished landmarks.

As shown below (and discussed in the project's outputs), the women's memories of, and current relationships to, the demolitions still significantly impact their daily routines. These circumstances highlight the need for scholars and policymakers to closely examine memory as a powerful force that can help people, and older women in particular, rebuild their sense of home amidst threatened erasure.

Methods and Positionality

The project's research methods intended to reflect my commitment to assist people whose spatial needs are traditionally neglected in overturning the orders that oppress them. However, I am fully aware that this kind of good-intended research often ends up reproducing the very inequities it wishes to reverse. As scholars, we may find ourselves forwarding damage-centered inquiries that pathologise pain in the experience of overstudied Others (Tuck and Yang, 2014); obscuring the role that our emotions play throughout research processes (Blakely, 2007); or expecting our findings to fit into whatever "strong theory" framework we pre-emptively imagined fieldwork to confirm (Wright, 2015).

My work inhabited all of these controversies. Toxteth, the district where the Liverpool 8 area is located, has a well-documented history of dispossession. I admittedly knew little of this history before fieldwork. I moved to the UK right before the pandemic and encountered Liverpool 8 by living at its more privileged edges. L8 was the destination of my walks during lockdowns. Interested in researching intersections of gender and age as factors of spatial discrimination, I first realised that L8 could be a site of investigation for the Designing Care project when every day I saw an old woman feeding pigeons sitting on a pointed bollard, the only reachable object resembling street furniture. That relationship of acquaintance with L8 became a carnal one when I started IVF treatments at the local Women's Hospital. My engagement with the area and its women went hand in hand with walks to blood tests, scans, multiple losses and, finally, the birth of my daughter. Self-care in the form of hope, anxiety, and grief became an embodied agent of my research. And my treatment itself interlaced with L8's history of erasure: the Women's Hospital was built in 1992 on the site that was once occupied by the short-lived Falkner Estate social-housing complex, built in the 1970s to replace demolished Victorian "slums."

Personal and research experiences became so densely intertwined that I now find them indistinguishable from one another. There are some aspects of my investigation that can be straightforwardly described. Over more than a year (June 2021- December 2022), I gathered the experience of 37 women aged between 53 and 86 who lived in Liverpool 8. Sampling was initially carried out by convenience: I approached women on the street or at spaces of congregation including parks, community centres, and places of worship. Some interviewees soon started giving me contacts of friends interested in meeting me. I designed my interview script with open-ended questions across three sections. I first asked information about housing conditions, employment, and family status. Then, questions revolved around memories and experiences of space. Finally, reflections were prompted on how gender and ageing relate to the city. I took hand notes during interviews and literally transcribed only salient sentences.

Beyond these more descriptive qualities, however, methods changed depending on my relation to each woman. The shortest interview lasted approximately 25 minutes, took place on a street bench, and I never met my respondent again. The longest interview initiated a friendship that continues today. It took nine hours over several days, was carried out between my respondent's home, the now-demolished street she used to live on, and the public beehives she takes care of. When I met interviewees multiple times, I brought along L8's old maps and pictures to help spur conversations. This different engagement comes across in my outputs. All the stories presented in the articles as well as in the exhibition and booklet are unfinished vignettes, mediated windows onto much more complex material, temporal, and socio-spatial entanglements. But the stories of some women are given more detail than others. Sometimes materials present almost all the information that a woman wanted to share, while other times a book could be written with the stories I heard—a suggestion that one of my interviewees made.

And then of course their deprivations and my privileges were omnipresent forces at stake. Most of the women I met carried multiple traumas and faced matrixes of domination across class, race, religion, health, and other constructions of difference. It would be naive not to admit that my privileges as an academic and a white European probably directed me towards the kind of damage-centered research mentioned above. I seek to acknowledge and embrace these contradictions. While conducting fieldwork and writing about it, I sought to refuse neoliberal forms of research that commodify pain, solely emphasizing oppression in the life of underprivileged people while avoiding accountability for it. In academic writings, my refusal takes the form of both not reporting information that I overheard during interviews and neither I or other researchers "deserve to know," and avoiding disclosing vivid details (e.g., of abuse, violence, living conditions) that would indulge a colonial gaze onto deprived Others (Tuck and Yang, 2014). At the same time, I believe that there is value in using a resource I have, time, to trace and show how situated deprivations intervene in the spatial fabric of everyday life. To put it in Angela May's words, "there is some pain which we [researchers] need to know, particularly those expressions of pain that undercut or complicate its more dominant representation" (2021, p. 78).

The project's outputs sought to honour and forward all these commitments, centring the women voices beyond the academic realm. In addition to writing the two articles currently under review for leading journals, I partnered with some of the women. Using my technical skills, I assisted them in amplifying their voices by both publishing a free-of-charge booklet and organising an exhibition on their memories and experiences of L8.

An Introduction to Liverpool 8 (and its Women)

Most of the women I met were in their 60s (15 out of 37), followed by those in their 70s (9), 80s (8), and 50s (5). Each woman embodied a constellation of characteristics across ethnicities, countries of origin, faiths, and housing tenures. Their many differences spoke to Liverpool 8 as a site of loss and hope: a space that minoritised groups occupied and learned to make home amidst repeated destruction.

The population of Liverpool is whiter than the rest of England (88.8% against an average of 85.8%). Yet only roughly two-fifths of my respondents called themselves White (15). Twelve identified as Black, four as Middle Eastern, four of Mixed Heritage, and two as Asian. While 23 women were born in the UK (20 in Liverpool), 14 migrated either from Africa (10), the middle East (2), or Europe (2).

Religious faiths reflected this diversity with eight women identifying as Muslim, two as Jewish, and 27 as different kinds of Christian (17 Anglicans, 6 Pentecostal, and 4 Catholics).

Such a plurality encapsulates the enduring role of Liverpool 8 as a racialised space within the city (Uduku and Ben-Tovim, 1997). Toxteth was erected between the 1840s and 1890s. Liverpool was a center of colonial power then, a city thriving on economies of slavery where urban forms reinforced classed, racialised, and gendered subjugations (Brown, 2009; Caslin, 2020). A mile south from the congested center, the new district offered from large mansions for the rich to hyper-dense terraced houses for the working poor (Belchem, 2015). Residents were mostly white at that time (visible minorities were confined nearby the docks), except for some West and East African seamen residing in lodgings (Frost, 1999). The post-war period marked the construction of L8 as a Black space. With White residents fled to outer districts since the 1940s, Black Scousers displaced by war-bombs and newly arrived migrants moved to L8's affordable, if derelict homes (Costello, 2001). Excluded from anywhere else in Liverpool, Black and White poor residents made L8 a rich microcosm of social clubs, restaurants, and spiritual places (Clay, 2020).

By the 1970s, L8 was home to the highest percentage of single mothers in Liverpool and among the highest in the UK (Gardner and Graham-Jones, 2021; this trend continues today, with 24 interviewees being single, usually after one or multiple divorces). Those women and their loved ones could not find jobs; they faced racial profiling; they hardly saw streets repaired; and, as the city council demolished their homes, they were only offered alternative housing in distant, exclusively White neighbourhoods (Uduku and Ben-Tovim, 1997). These and other injustices prompted protests throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Spurred by yet another police stop-and-search on a Black man, the uprisings of 1981 gained national media coverage and stigmatised the neighbourhood further (Frost and Philips, 2011). That stigma continues to impact residents today as they struggle to get jobs with a L8 postcode, insurance companies charge higher fees, and banks deny mortgages (Catney et al. 2019; Vathi and Burrell, 2021).

My interviewees brough up living, or not living in L8 at the time of "the riots" as an indication of their seniority in the neighbourhood. Twenty-two interviewees lived there before 1981; nine moved between the late-1980s and early 2000s; four arrived after Liverpool was nominated capital of culture in 2007; and two women moved during the pandemic. Having lived in L8 for a long time did not guarantee house security. Eighteen women lived in a rented home, evenly split between those who had lived in L8 for more than 30 years and those who arrived after. Most tenants (15) rented publicly subsidised terraced houses (11) or bungalows (4). Of the 17 owner occupiers, 11 lived in the same unit they used to rent from a Housing Association before buying. Two women did not have a fixed house. One stayed in a sheltered accommodation while the other at a friend's house.

These different dwelling conditions speak to the demolition-reconstruction cycles that transformed L8 since the 1970s and throughout the 2000s. A tool of austerity, "demolition can drive the final nail in the coffin of a disposable neighbourhood" (Koscielnak, 2021, 146). This was evident in L8 where, especially under the auspices of labour city-governments, entire street-grids were replaced by curved cul-de-sacs (Hatherley, 2010). Alongside terrace-houses, schools, churches, and pubs were supplanted by suburban-like, semi-detached dwellings. Bollards at the end of streets cut off the area from surrounding arterial roads. While the closures were initially requested by residents to contrast kerb-crawling and car-racing, they ended up isolating the neighbourhood further, condemning the few remaining businesses to death (Hughes, 2015; Thompson, 2015).

Residents, and women in particular, did not endure destruction passively. Building on L8's legacy of radical experimentation (Toxteth birthed one of the UK's first and largest housing cooperative

movements in the 1970s), a group of women mobilised and opposed clearances. In the late 1990s, through demonstrations, guerrilla gardening, and DIY restorations of properties, women-residents managed to save four streets from demolition (the so-called Granby Triangle), ensuring those houses to be re-sold for less than market value in the future (Thompson, 2020). Civic success came at a price, however. While ground-up advocacies in L8 convinced the municipality to institutionalise community-led regenerations, those formalizations seem to have reduced, rather than enhanced, residents' ability to control change in their neighbourhood (McGowan at al. 2020).

Moreover, if the Granby Four Streets project drew much-needed attention to the neighbourhood, it also turned L8 into a destination for new (richer, whiter) residents. Tensions between the need to revert deprivation and fear of displacement are tangible today. Community associations operate relentlessly to promote activities in support of residents, and city authorities have recently turned their attention to ameliorating some of L8's street furniture. While residents would of course welcome any fixture of streets and parks, they also fear that improvements will attract people who will displace them.

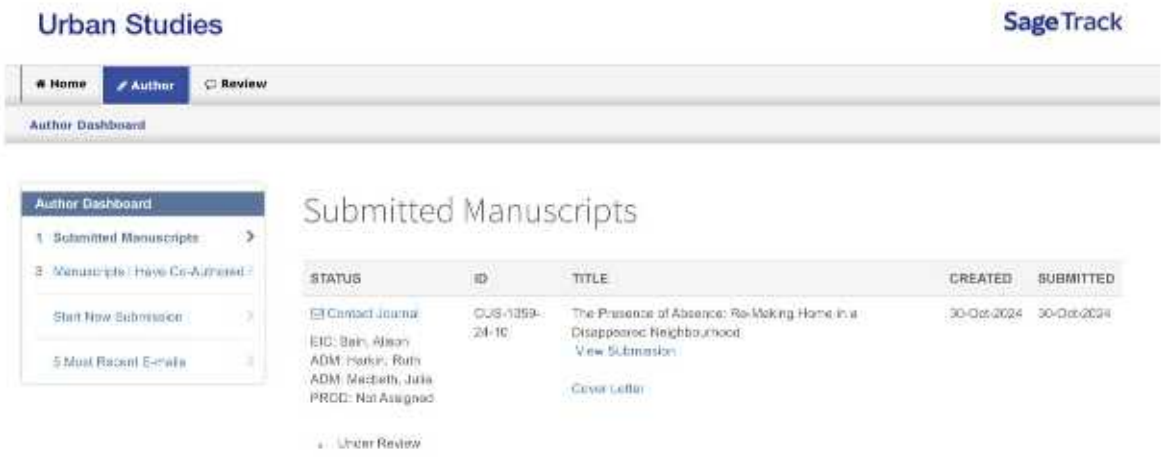
Outputs

It is in this context of long-endured deprivation, but also fierce resistance, that the women lived, survived, and at times managed to thrive in Liverpool 8. The four different outputs described below aimed at sharing the women's stories with both academic and general audiences.

[1] JOURNAL ARTICLE, UNDER REVIEW FOR *URBAN STUDIES* *(submission screenshot below)*

Title: *The Presence of Absence: Re-Making Home in a Disappeared Neighbourhood*

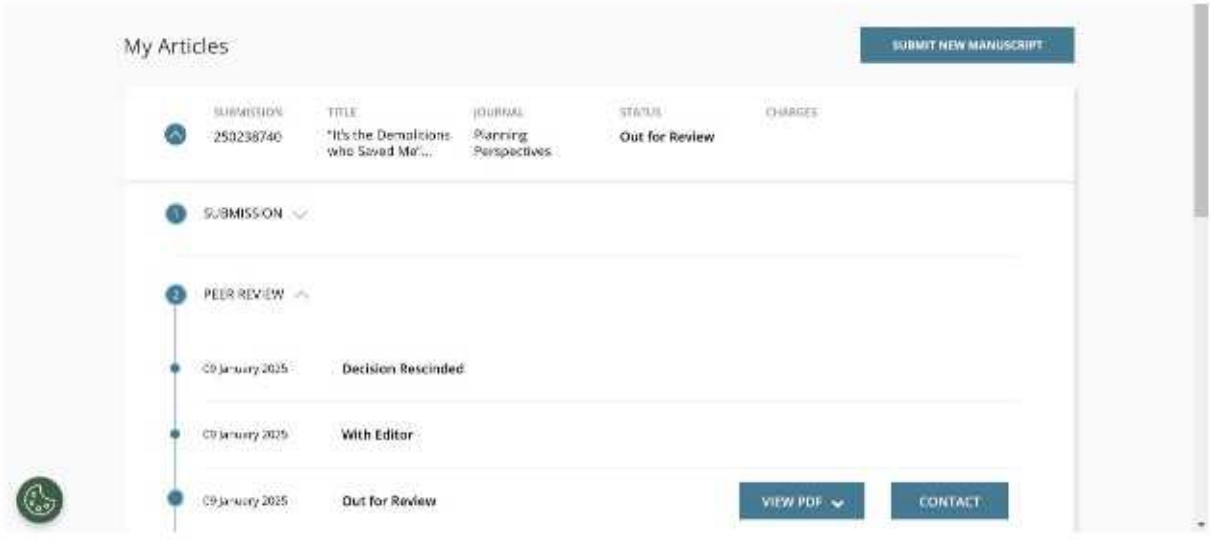
Abstract: What do you do when state-led demolitions erase the only streets, houses, places you called home? In this paper, I explore how older women get by in Liverpool 8, a long-marginalised UK neighbourhood that has been repeatedly demolished since the 1970s. While invisible to most people, the erased buildings remain present to the women. They collaborate with them in articulating material configurations that make the neighbourhood less hostile to themselves and others. Emplacing modest, yet potent responses to spatial violence, the women teach us how to weaponise loss as a force for re-making a home in the face of erasure. Speaking to both post-displacement debates and scholarship on demolitions, and highlighting the need for connecting these sets of inquiries, the lesson of the women calls for better understanding how loss configures cities: how the dispossessed react to the erasure of built environments, making material absence a force of space-making.



[2] JOURNAL ARTICLE, UNDER REVIEW FOR *PLANNING PERSPECTIVE* *(submission screenshot below)*

Title: *"It's the Demolitions who saved me" Partnering with Destruction and Seeking Liberation in Liverpool 8*

Abstract: This paper documents the stories of three women who lived through large-scale demolitions in Liverpool 8 (L8), a UK neighbourhood subjected to clearances since the 1950s and well into the 2000s. Scholarship on clearances tends to emphasize how, against demolitions that seek to control, discipline, and expel them, underprivileged urban dwellers resist destruction. The data presented here complicate this narrative: confronted with different kinds of oppression, the women did not oppose demolitions and physical dilapidation; instead, they partnered with them, making L8 a better place for themselves and others. Eager to free her street from crime and keep friends close, Josie surveyed properties for the city, speeding up the destruction of homes including her own. Selah, arrived from Nigeria in the 1990s, saw the clearances as a blessing which afforded her family a home, and helped turn a dilapidated building into a community centre. Rose, still cherishing positive childhood memories of clearances, supported demolitions to escape an abusive relationship and created a nursery in an abandoned laundrette. By working with—rather than parallel to or against—the clearances, the women show how demolitions may not always be unambiguous tools of domination, but at times they may become allies for liberation.



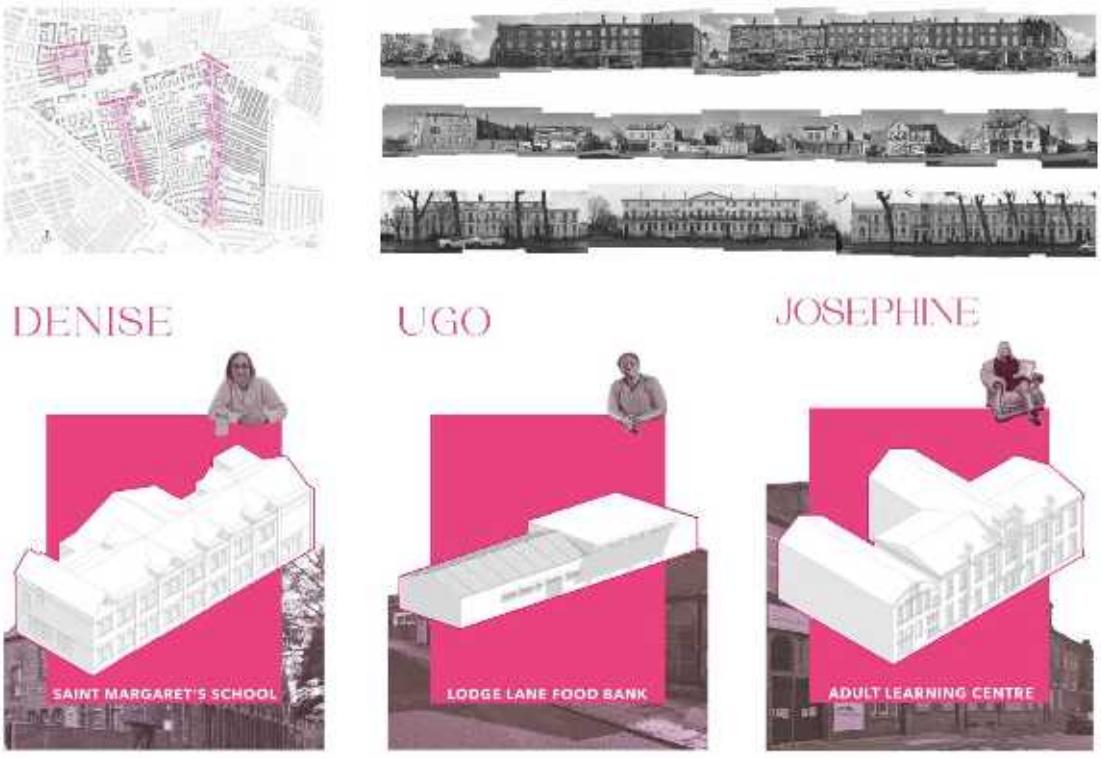
[4] BOOKLET

Title: *L8 HERStory: An Architectural Guide by Older Women.*

The architectural guide showcases on twenty-four landmarks chosen by thirteen women in L8. It highlights the spaces the women like, those that matter to them, and some they prefer to avoid. The guide is organised across three focus areas: Granby Street, Lodge Lane, and Falkner Square. These streets are relatively close to each other. A walk between them takes around an hour (although, the curved closed-ups that replaced Victorian streets in the 1980s/90s intentionally made connections longer and counter-intuitive). Despite their proximity, Granby Street, Lodge Lane, and Falkner Square are microcosms in their own right.

Each area of focus contains eight landmarks (a building or a street). Every landmark is presented through an architectural drawing, the words of the woman who chose the building for the guide, and general information on the site found in books, archives, and websites. Of the twenty-four landmarks described, four were demolished, six stand abandoned, and three are former collective structures that have been converted into apartments. Three buildings were erected during the past two decades on sites that had been cleared.

Buildings vary greatly in their material and architectural dimensions. We see from listed historical sites waiting to be restored (once, and if funds are allocated), to low-cost, modern structures that would hardly make it into an architectural guide. Functions also differ. Some women wanted to talk about the street they lived on, others wanted to celebrate a school, a social club, a spiritual space, a grocery store. All these landmarks bear different meanings. They may remind women of happy memories or of struggling times. Some women still deviate their walks to pass in front of the landmarks, others have intentionally avoided them for years.



[4] EXHIBITION

Title: *L8 HERStory: An Architectural Guide by Older Women.*

The Exhibition was held in November 2022 at the Kuumba Imani, a community centre in Liverpool 8. Integrating the materials discussed in the book, rotating panels, printed banners, hanging urban models, and 3D collages showcased the 24 architectural landmarks across three sections.