

February 20th 2018

Stephen Brooke – So I'm a historian of sort of late 20th century Britain and I wrote a bit on feminism and sexual politics and became interested in what the GLC did in terms of women's rights, gay rights, anti-racist campaigns and so the research I was doing was on applications made to the GLC women's committee for funding and I came across the application that Dalston Children's Centre had made and that also involved Matrix as well for the Shacklewell Lane Baths and as I was thinking about the book, I mean I did a lot of, I think I looked at as many of the applications the DCC had made to the GLC as I could just to find out, and I thought it was sort of a fascinating organization, example of what happens when feminist and sexual politics on the ground and in receipt of at that point local state money, and the agenda – the anti-racist, anti-heterosexist, anti-sexist and anti-authoritarian, you know, agenda just because it's really interesting. And I also became interested in Matrix, so the idea of the book, when it comes about is to sort of probably use the DCC as a space to talk about what's happening in London politics at the time, but how this is reflected on the ground rather than a kind of top down story. I was interested in ...

Anne Thorne – A bottom up...

SB – ... a bottom up story. I think the first person I got in touch with was Nina Nissen and then sort of gradually built up a series of names. So I've talked to Nina, and Manju and Anna Sherwin, and I talked to Fran Bradshaw and Benedicte and Jos Boys, and Helen brown... so I'm sort of a the stage of..

AT – lots of people... [laughter]

SB - ... lots of people. You know I think it, I know a bit about the centre but anything you could tell me about the centre, because I understand you were a founding member of the centre?

AT – Yes.

SB – Anything you could tell me about that and I'm also interested in Matrix, so depending, I mean I don't want to keep you for too long but I'd love to talk about that as well. So that's sort of where I'm coming from, and I realize it's a more complicated story than it was when I started out, because I think one of the first questions I asked Nina was, Shacklewell Lane Baths was an amazing project and what was it like to work there and I understood that it was this, you know, big split in the centre just before you moved in. So my problem is that I don't know the names of the people who worked there after the split and so I have an understanding of what happened up to that point, not a complete understanding, but ... and I want to be really sensitive about that split...

AT – Yes, but also I can't help you a great deal on that because, although I was the main architect working on it, I ... by the time the centre was finished and that split had happened I didn't get that involved after that point, although I had been very involved in the whole organization before then but my ... I mean the reason I got involved was because I moved in locally and was looking for places to go with my son who was nine months at the time.

SB – Right.

AT – And I had a four year old as well and had moved into an area where I didn't know people we gradually found neighbours and people and found out about Dalston Children's Centre and thought it sounded great, so went round there and got involved. And that sort of happened simultaneously with starting up Matrix as well. It was ... Matrix had already begun a bit before that but very much as a theoretical group rather than as a practical group, and ...

SB – And that was out of those conferences in the late 70s and early 1980s?

AT – Yes... now [?] in the architecture movement which I had been quite involved in but I hadn't been as involved in fact as Fran, for example because I was busy having children and not able to go to evening meetings and that sort of thing. And, but yeah I had been involved in it. And then I was very heavily involved in setting up Matrix as an actual architectural practice as opposed to a theoretical practice, and so that started up in my front room in Hackney and Dalston Children's Centre, after taking my children there got involved in their management committee and everything else and ... well sort of first got involved in the building because they were in a temporary building which was in pretty rough condition, it was just a house ...

SB – Was that Greenwood Road?

AT – Greenwood Road, yeah. And although there was a lot of work from everybody involved to sort of make it nice, it was still quite a wreck. I think we got a grant though to do it up...

SB – Yeah, I sort of have a tracking of the various grants...

AT – So yeah, we did it up but I'd forgotten about that ... and so it wasn't too bad and there was a lot of voluntary work put in by everybody involved and ... But it was a really great bunch of people who were involved and then at some point the local authority, and I think this was before I'd really got that involved in the management committee or anything said 'oh we'll give you a new premises' because they wanted to take that premises back and they offered this building which was just completely hopeless for a children's centre...

SB – That was Sandringham Road??

AT – And I just realized that if we took it the whole building would be full of fire escape, and you know, there'd be no garden left, no place [?] to speak of. And that it was just hopeless, and

although it looked like a reasonable sized building, for various reasons all the means of escape and everything didn't work so then we started hunting for premises and found Shacklewell Lane Baths which was actually empty and just falling to pieces and we pursued the Council and went to town meetings and things until they gave in and gave up the building [laughter]. Which, in a nutshell, that's putting it all very quickly, but that was all quite exciting and the whole concept behind the whole idea which I'm sure, if you've read the papers that were submitted to the GLC as it was then, was all about trying to create a place where everyone could bring their children and be supported in childcare and very much on an equal basis regardless of sex, gender, or race or whatever. And that just seemed like the most fantastic idea because ... I think the level of isolation in bringing up children, particularly in those days was actually far more than it is now in a way because I can remember going to cafes for example with my children in pushchairs and being turned away, you weren't allowed to bring a pushchair in a café. Things like that that now seem extraordinary but that was how it was in London in those days, it wasn't in other parts of Europe but certainly it was a very English idea that children should be seen and not heard, and were a nuisance.

SB – One of the things I'm interested in, and this may sound a bit flaky, but one of the things that strikes me is that there's a kind of emotional community at the DCC which is about addressing questions of maternal isolation or parental isolation and as you say at the same time, kind of, and this is reflected in *Matrix* as well ... I was really interested in *Making Space* and the arguments for making less intimidating spaces and I wonder if that sense of, we're going to create a space, whether it's the DCC or through architecture that it going to be warmer and you know, more accommodating, was a very explicit one at that time ...

AT – Yes, definitely.

SB – I know it's true in London generally at that time when women's centres are making applications they really talk very explicitly about addressing women's isolation, as a ... it's rather like when people talk about loneliness now as a major social problem, so I just wonder how – sorry that was a very long-winded way of asking how explicit that was ...

AT – Oh it was very explicit and it was also ... the other thing that I think was particularly explicit was the whole thing about, you know, women were moving more and more into the job market, you know the generation before us had probably not been so much in the job market but we were moving in there. And the whole issue about if you weren't rich enough to have money what did you do when your kids were sick? Where did they go, who...you know, you were still supposed to be at work 9-5, what was going to happen, how were you going to be supported in that? And the idea was that there should be this place that was warm and friendly where even a sick child could go, where, you know it wasn't just a place to dump your child and leave it was a place that was part of your community and part of your life and that was a warm and friendly

[11:00]

place for your children to be brought up by the village not by yourself. But also that you got away from the whole nuclear family stereotypes of, you know, who was the best for doing what and what was happening. And that was particularly important for me at that time as well because my husband was actually ... looked after my children when I went back to college, on his own which again was really unusual in those days and he felt very isolated when he was doing that and got a lot of slack from other men, about what on earth he was doing and things like that because it was quite an unusual thing to do so it was very clear that it was something that needed to reach across boundaries. And that actually was quite controversial, I mean, I think that's something that now is quite difficult to imagine, was what antagonism there was towards, for example, men who were looking after children, people who had children with them, there was antagonism to them if they were using public space. And I think also, you know things like, gay marriage and that sort of thing was sort of, well we've hardly come through the whole anti-homosexual ...

SB – Yeah, it's really only recently ...

AT – ... it's really quite new, that whole idea. So that was quite a big thing. And I think the other thing that was really big then and again looking back on it, that we really broke the boundaries of, and that was, I think Dalston's Children Centre was quite implemental in that in a lot of ways, was looking at disability.

SB – Yes, yeah ...

AT – And looking at how important that was as part of equal opportunities and particularly Matrix was very interested in what that meant in terms of building design and focus on architecture and space.

SB – Yeah there's something from one of the annual reports about, again, it moves from that thing of like we want to be a space that's open to everyone but what we haven't thought quite yet about is disability and that, the Centre engages with that question and it's really interesting, the responses are [?] 'well we have to do this, we have to do this,' but also this psychological and emotional thing to understand, that the best thing to understand is children are children and it was really extraordinarily moving I think and open about that change.

AT – Yeah.

SB – And I wanted to, I mean it was interesting what you say about it being controversial, because I have kids who are quite young and it's very odd because what was happening at the DCC is actually their experience now in a very mainstream childcare centre so I think it was very pioneering in that way, and I was interested in what you said about it being controversial and

about being people objecting to... for instance, you said people objected to Manju looking after children or other ... ? I didn't quite understand in terms of people objecting to others [?] or what kinds of controversies there were ..

AT – No, no no that was more about ... no not objecting to Manju looking after children but it was more about, more the stereotypes of [?] women are looking after children, and more the stereotype of you know, whether you're gay or heterosexual what are the issues and are there any differences or similarities and if so, is that a joyful thing or is it a difficult thing? And that that was the important issue.

SB – Did you see it at the time as a very conscious experiment in diversity as well?

AT – Yes, definitely ... yes.

SB – What is now called intersectionality, but that kind of meeting of different people...

AT – Yes, definitely, yes. And learning and respecting each other as being something that was a really important part of that as well. And I mean, Matrix at that time, 5% of architects were women so we were really unusual A) as architects but B) as a practice that was all women, that was very unusual ... so that all of those things were consciously thought about and were being explored as a way of thinking not just about Dalston's Children's Centre as a place and a building although that was definitely important and definitely, I think we were working from that point outwards, but also thinking about, you know, that really what should be happening was there should be a place like that on every street corner ...

SB – Yeah, yeah ...

AT – ... that it wasn't just an isolated idea, it wasn't just a bunch of people who were thinking about themselves but it was really thinking there has to be a better way of thinking about childcare and supporting each other...

SB – And working together...

AT – And working together and making sure that you're breaking down barriers between different communities and that that's something that's really important to do and I think as well that was another thing about that time in Hackney, it was actually ... there were race riots and stuff, it was really quite a fearful time at times. And that was a really important thing, that people were feeling very isolated in their own communities and wanting to find a different way forward and that was something that... everybody was coming together to try and do in rather an exciting way.

SB – There's a wonderful line from the GLC at this time about re-imagining London as a network of women's centres and speaks to that thing you were just saying about, this isn't isolated it's

actually the fabric of a different kind of city. And what you were just saying, one of the other things that I'm working on is racial harassment on estates and it's an extraordinary tragic period for the level of racial violence in the 1980s and I know in Hackney, very high levels of racial harassment and very poor relations with the police at that point...

AT – Horrendous, yes, yes.

SB – In terms of, can I ask what your personal political background, or, were you, for instance, how did you come to Hackney and were you involved in second wave feminism before this?

AT – Yes I was, yes, yes. I came to Hackney, well I've been in London all my life but I had several, I had some friends who were living in Hackney already and I knew it was a good place to live. And that's what sort of brought me to Hackney and I knew there were interesting people in Hackney, so that was all part of it.

SB – And you were consciously feminist in the 70s?

AT – Yes, well I suppose to a certain extent ... We sort of, Fran and I go back a long way, we were both at college together and I think the first time, well, I don't know, I can think of several times when it really hit me, but the first time it hit me particularly from an architectural point of view was when we were at college together and really unusually in our year at college, a quarter of our year were women, which given that 5% of architects are women, that was very unusual. And we were set a housing project to do in our third year at university and somebody – I don't think it was me or Fran actually – somebody said 'oh well what about all women doing it together to see what women think about housing' and all the women said, 'oh what a great idea,' with the exception of maybe one or two, so that was about 15 women who all thought this was a great idea. And so we put forward, it was supposed to be a group project, everybody was dividing into groups, it wasn't, we just decided to divide as women and the reaction from the staff was incredible, it was really extraordinary ... [laughter] we were really shocked by it...

SB – In a good way?

AT – No! They said 'you can't do this, why do you want to do this?' And we said 'well because men have often thought about housing and women haven't usually designed housing and it seems like it could be quite interesting to see what women think about housing.' And they said 'no you are a designer first, you shouldn't be thinking about things from that point of view.' I think it's all very different for a woman, your experience of life and stuff. I mean it was, honestly, incredibly naïve level but the principal, first of all the year tutor tried to talk us out of it and when we wouldn't be moved then the principal of the university came to talk to us and he tried to talk us out of it, and when again we said 'no, why should we,' then he got his wife to

come and talk to us, and she was an architect. And at that point it wasn't so much the being talked out of it that I think surprised me but the fact that they reacted so much to it.

SB – That the energy they expended was so great...

AT – Obviously the threat was so great, it was very very big, it intrigued me I have to say...

SB – And made it more desirable, I assume?

AT – Made it more interesting... So things like that sort of gradually made me more and more aware of politics and that sort of thing and yeah. I mean I was aware of politics, but of sexual politics and that was the part that I came to. And of course things were going on around, like *Spare Rib* magazine and that sort of thing.

SB – Well I mean in *Making Space*, there's this wonderful distinction made about how we're going to approach architecture which is very much as women and this great line about, we're going to approach it with our emotions, which may seem unacceptable but actually we have been taught by men and we've been sort of marginalized by men and so this is a way of thinking about space from the perspective that is about making spaces that are less intimidating for women, so I assume that's where, in some ways that experience fed into that approach.

AT – Yeah, yeah ...

SB – In terms of, I know there were men involved in the Centre, the Childcare Centre, I think Brad Cress [?] was involved, but it also seem to be, to speak to the point made, and about Matrix that it was a, these were largely female and Matrix was female only and can you talk a little bit about that approach and the virtues of that?

AT – Well I think at the time we felt very strongly really that the environment in particular hadn't been described by women and that it really needed to be and that the environment wasn't providing a place that was a happy place for women actually and that you were supposed to be either in your home, in your kitchen looking out your window at some suburban fantasy garden or out of the way at any rate, that public space wasn't for women. So there needed to be a rethink about what the issues were, and particularly, I mean, from my personal experience I was working with ... I worked at the GLC and I worked at with the architects department there and I worked at Edward Sumner [?] Associates, both of which were doing large housing schemes, one in Milton Keynes and the other, the GLC doing big houses all over London and some of the things that I saw and raised as issues other people just didn't, they didn't know what I was talking about. Because I had children at that point, my husband was looking after them and I was working, so I was sort of saying, 'how would you get across that bit of Milton Keynes with a pram?' How would you do that? And they were saying, 'oh don't be ridiculous, you're such a

spoilsport. That was the sort of thing that came up and so because they said what this would do would make a really great racing track for kids on bicycles...

SB – BMX bikes... is it true that that's a picture of you and one of your kids...?

AT – Yeah, going down the subways, yeah. And so I was just saying, no they're not the only people. Yes you want some of that going on but you have to have another layer which is about how do you get from here to the shops, how do you get from there to... easily when you've got three children and a push chair, and blah blah blah... All of it, which was pretty much laughed at actually, whenever I said anything like that. It really wasn't taken seriously. And I can remember one incident at the GLC in the housing department where somebody told me that we'd got to provide doorsteps on the doors and I was saying 'well wouldn't it be good if they were accessible,' and they said well no, because if you have a doorstep, what women really like to do is whiten them, and clean the doorstep and then that gives them a chance to talk to the people next door. Well yes, it's good to have a [?] in public space where you feel safe to talk to your next door neighbour but you don't have to do that by creating housework or by making places not accessible. It's really ... and it just felt like there was a whole language, which wasn't my language, that was somebody else's language really.

SB – Yeah, again ... I mean this is a bit long winded, but I think that that view of the city is an interesting one and in the time that you are articulating, particularly the early 80s comes at a moment – and I think *Making Space* makes reference to these historical works – of people talking about the gendering of public and private space in America and Britain in the 19th century and to think consciously about how cities are mapped in those ways. And one is absolutely about parenting. I think one thing that struck me and I think it's in *Making Space* is the city as a dangerous place for women. I think there's something in *Making Space* about the blind alleyways that are built into plans for estates and around the same time there are, we know about this from the GLC, that violence against women on estates in South London and East London and that was something people were arguing had to be thought of in terms of planning and it's very much that perspective of gender, what does the built environment hold for women, right now which is either inconvenience or dangerous ... is fascinating ...

AT – And we did some interesting work on that later, when we actually got involved – this was as part of Anne Thorne Architects – when we got involved in Aldergate Subways, which was this huge subway network which had 38 exits which go underneath the ground and was built by the GLC for people to walk through. And we did this whole project about how do you get rid of it, and why, initially, was why weren't people going from one college to another college across these exits and what was the concern and what we established very quickly was the fear of going underground, but what we also established was [?] statistics, was that it was probably one of the

safest places to be in London because it was so torturous underground that I don't think even muggers would dare... [laughter] But there were interesting things that women were saying...

SB – I think that absolutely right. I was in London at that time and I remember I did a lot of work on Walworth Road where the Labour Party was and there's a whole network of tunnels around Elephant and Castle which I still remember was, you know, you didn't want to be there after a certain point... but it was different for me being a man, obviously than being a woman ...

AT – Well I think that was the interesting thing was that men, when we interviewed men and women, men said that they didn't feel unsafe but we noticed that they jumped through the railings and avoided going under the ... [laughter]

SB – You should have interviewed me... I would have said I felt very very unsafe ...

AT – Whereas the women actually had quite an interesting way of breaking down space into stepping stones ...

SB – Oh that's fascinating...

AT – ... which meant that they were safe because they knew that if they got as far as that, there was a newsagent that was open, so they would route their ... they were very conscious of it being unsafe but they made routes which were safe, whereas the men just tended to run across the road.

SB – That's really interesting. I work at a big campus now and one of the issues is violence against women on campus and it's very much about, I never thought of it as stepping stones, but its safe routes that are well lit and how things like shops along the way and stuff like that. Do you think when Matrix, I know that there are sort of two tracks of Matrix. One was sort of more the theory of it and one was the practice of it and projects, but how linked was that into the particular political climate of London at the time, and I'm thinking in particular of the GLC and the ability to fund projects on the ground from community organizations. Was it part, I guess what I'm asking, was it part of a particular local/state economy at that time?

AT – Yes, definitely. We were funded to do three feasibility studies for community groups so that made a terrific difference to us as an organization but also to the groups, that people could put together quite realistic plans for doing things and taking things forward.

SB – And I assume it made a difference in terms of clients, because there were places like the DCC but also women's centres who were being encouraged and that they would be going to a group like yourself to get those projects planned.

AT – Yes, I mean the other big scheme we did was Jaganari ...

SB – Yeah, which is an amazing building...

AT – And that was all through the GLC women’s committee, so ...

SB – Was that the last big project you did through the GLC? I would assume so ...

AT – Yes, I think there were two. It was one of the two last projects the GLC funded for community groups, yeah. And I think was really interesting as a project about ... Well, a similar thing did happen with Dalston Children Centre, because I can remember when we said, when we were told we were given this building and I looked at it and thought it’s going to be all fire escapes and there’s not going to be any building left, and I thought we’ve got to do better than that, we can’t accept it, there must be something better than that and raised people’s expectations – and people agreed with me as well. So then it was a matter of looking for somewhere. Then when we worked with Jagonari it was a very similar thing, they were, they came to us because they were originally part of this group, the [?] Group, which consisted of lots of basically mixed, but mainly Asian groups who were trying to set up resources in the east end of London and the women’s group wanted a space which was for women only but the way that the historic buildings was, that the [?] Centre, it meant that it was quite difficult for you to get to a women’s space without walking through other spaces. So then they discussed that with the GLC and the GLC said, well look there’s this empty site next door and you can have that so then they came to us and said we’ve got this empty site and we could put portacabins on it and we could use those to ... you know, and how many portacabins would we want and we said why are you talking about portacabins, what do you actually want to do? And sat down with them to create this brief and they came up with this idea, that they wanted to do dance, they wanted to do drama, that it was a very important part of Bengali culture, that they wanted to have childcare, they wanted to teach English as a foreign language, mother tongue lessons .. There were all sorts of things they wanted to do and we said it’s not going to fit into a portacabin, why are you talking about a portacabin? And they said, well do you think we could ask for anything else and we said, let’s do an outline of what you want and we’ll put figures next to how big we think it is if you’re going to have a room for this and a room for that and send it through to the GLC and see what they say. So we did that, and the GLC said yeah sure, fine and gave us over a million pounds, which at the time was huge amount of money and completely shocked everybody and so we were able to build three story building with a crèche at the back. So it was very much a matter of not just ... I mean I think it was amazing up until that point and I still think it happens, was that women particularly thinking they could make do with what they were given. They weren’t thinking, this is my environment I’m going to have something that actually suits me, that is going to work but the things that I’m envisaging and that was quite a change really.

SB – And do you think that was a case of, in some ways a particular generation of women who are less deferential in some ways, of making do. But also there was a moment where you had a women’s committee of the GLC, an ethnic minorities committee who was willing to underwrite

that, and who believed so strongly... it wasn't just the financial will but also political will that this was a moment that that could happen?

AT – Yes, absolutely we were encouraged. When we said, what do you want from us and they said, well, tell us what you want. They didn't say, yeah you can have a portacabin ... it was definitely part of. And I still think, one of, I'm very proud of the fact that Jagonari was the first building in London which was fully accessible. And as a new build. And that was all part of the GLC and everybody pushing together to make that something that really worked.

SB – And I've never been on the inside but it's just such a subtle building too, because I know there was an attempt to have the, some Asian influence on the inside and more nuance on the outside because of the fear that it would be vandalized or whatever...

AT – Well all of the women who were involved in the project had all had, actually all had fire attacks on their own homes...

SB – Oh God ... yeah, yeah...

AT – And these were just ordinary women, there was a mixture of teachers and you now, local women and writers, all sorts of people there involved but all of them had had some sort of attack on them and so they were very fearful that if they put up an Asian centre and it was clearly, you know, clear that it was Asian, that there would be trouble. But we were trying really hard not to make it a place with shutters and prison-like, that that was important, that it showed some Asianess about it, that it, you could tell that it wasn't just an ordinary run of the mill new building but that also it didn't look like somewhere women were barricaded into the building.

SB – Do you think that – I know that Matrix put a great deal of emphasis on, and actually DCC did as well, involving parents, but that consultation ... was that very consciously part of the [departure?]

AT – Yes, yes

SB – Consultation with the clients in quotation marks...

AT – Yes, yes, absolutely. And that was very strongly part of the ethos of Matrix because we, when we went back again to the whole thing about - women haven't been consulted about the environment and buildings and so if we don't do it, who will? And also the whole thing about, we're a very diverse community and ... as a middle class white women who's been educated as an architect, I know that my life experience isn't the same as somebody who's been living in Dalston, working as a child miner for hundreds of years. That it's a different life experience, they've got different issues, that they can bring to the fore and that would actually enrich my life

as well probably, as much as theirs so if you talk those things through you find out about it and you can bring new things to the table and it's good for everybody...

SB – Did you feel that that was kind of the deconstruction of authority of the architect, in a good way? Sort of like dissembling ... I don't know what the word is, but giving up a certain amount of power to get somewhere different?

AT – Yes, yes absolutely. And that somehow that has to be, well there was an imperative to do that, to make, to try to come up with something that was a bit different that worked. Not just for the sake of it being different, but that actually worked for different people, and socially made a difference, that that ... yeah. I mean, I don't know, there was things that worked and things that didn't work in that framework. For example, in Jagonari, one of the things that we did, and there was a lot of controversy about this with the groups that we consulted with was we made an Asian kitchen with a low level sink and a low level cooker and Asian toilets, you know sort of squatting toilets, and some people thought that was a really good idea when we did the initial consultation and that it would make it feel more homelike for local Asian women and it would make it easier using the centre, but in fact in the end that was all taken out and changed and made into a western, inverted commas, kitchen because I think a lot of the Asian women felt that it was very condescending and that it, they didn't want to have something that reminded them of back home particularly. They felt that they were moving forwards into western culture and that ... that was interesting, you can't always get these things right and its flexibility to change [inaudible].

SB – Did you work on the Stockwell Health Centre? Because I found that very interesting ... I know that was never built but the thought about that strikes me as sort of very ... actually any health centre you go into now has many of the same idea about creating communities or providing spaces that are going to build communities between patients and unfortunately now it's all privatized and Costa Coffee or whatever, but it's very interesting plan at that time to think about the patients experience of the health centre...

AT – Yeah, yes

SB – And I can't remember who I was saying this to but I did a little reading about other health centres – like Peckham, and that was a very different thing about impressing you with the modernism of it all, but this was different, this was kind of creating a warm atmosphere ...

AT – And being a supportive place as opposed to ...

SB – Yeah, yeah ... Can you talk a little more about your experience of the Children's Centre? I don't know anything, did your kids like it, and how did you work within it, the management...

AT – Ah....

SB – Did you find it an exciting place to actually be a part of?

AT – Yes I did, and I used to go there regularly with my children and Sam, my youngest child, my oldest child had started school by that point but Sam my youngest child used to stay there for a couple hours a day initially and particularly really once we started, got going on the building as well I needed time to do the architectural work so that was very much sort of taken on by people there to give me the space to do that, which was fantastic. But it was, I really liked the fact that you went there and you actually participated in looking after the children as well as, you know I did the same for other women who then went off to do their work, you know, so I was there looking after the children on the days they weren't there looking after mine and I built up some very strong friendships with those women through doing that. And I don't know, if the boys remember it... [laughter] I had two boys, actually there were a lot of boys there... but it was, there was something about, there was also a deep respect for the children that I don't believe they got elsewhere, which they really responded to. There was one, Liz Cahn who worked there...

SB – Yeah, I've been trying to find her contact details but no one seems to have them, but I'd love to talk to her at some point...

AT – Well she was just amazing with the children. She's the sort of woman who could just walk into a sort of glass shop with five under-fives and none of them would break anything [laughter] ...you'd think, what? How did you do that?? [laughter] And there was no shouting or anything there was a lot of respect and calmness which the children really responded to. And a lot of careful thought about what the children were eating and what was good nutritious food, and looking a lot at diet and what were people cooking, and eating and making at home and what were different ways of doing things, which was fantastic. And doing cross-cultural things as well, which was lovely...

SB – Yeah I mean I do understand, especially talking to Manju and Helen was just how diverse it was among the children, in terms of race but also in terms of class. That it was local parents of ...you know, working class parents and middle class parents.

AT – And everybody who came really respected each other, in a very nice way which was great. I guess one of the interesting things was how did that change when it moved into the bigger centre and what was that about?

SB – Were your kids not there...?

AT – No, by that point, my youngest son was too old to go, they did go occasionally to events there but not sort of, weren't participating in the same way.

SB – Were you shocked at... I mean when you heard about the split, did you find it surprising? Or, I mean...

AT – It... was really difficult to tell in a way, because I think there was a thing that, a cohort of children that had grown through the centre and in a way the new centre had come too late and so all of those people who had worked really hard together to get it, their children had sort of grown up and gone to school at that point, pretty much. And so then there was a new lot coming through... and I don't know, Liz would be a really interesting person to talk to, and Manju was there, so I don't know what she said about that... about that change.

SB – Yeah, I think her, I wouldn't want to misrepresent her but I think her point was that there seemed to be a kind of almost generational change in the people who were running the centre, from the people who believed in a sisterhood that overcame racial divides to a group that maybe saw it in starker terms, and I mean that parallels what was going on in feminism in general and in London at that time, that the major divide is about race and things do start to get very tense on either side of that divide and I would want to be very sensitive about this because I know in Hackney, it's a very deprived area at that time for Afro-Caribbean people, and there's a lot of anger ... And so I get the sense that this is a very difficult issue and there may have been, I don't know, but there may have been a kind of underlying sense of who's space is this, and what is the most important issue here... but the sense that I got, and again I don't want to misrepresent anyone, but I was talking to Nina and Helen was there, but Manju, was just how upsetting it was, you know, of course, how could it not be... that what was a very creative happy place suddenly kind of runs aground...

AT – Yes, yes. But that did happen to a lot of women's groups, and there was a whole thing about, how many things could you tick off that ... criteria that you met and ... quite a sort of ... partly as well of that came about because of the demise of the GLC and the rise of Maggie Thatcher and there was a whole issue about those groups being pressed and being in competition with each other ...

SB – Absolutely ...

AT – ... and that really sort of set a background as well. And a lot of backlash actually as well, about, you know, who are these women, jumped up women, what do they think they're up to, and therefore what gives you the right...?

SB – Yeah, and I think it's very difficult to recreate the level of, the sense of oppression in black communities at that time from the police, from the economy, from Thatcher, but also that that is absolutely coming into competition with feminism and sexual politics and what is the most important thing to do at this time... I mean it's an era, a period of crisis... It does seem of course, very tragic, the divide is within the left, or at least between groups... that a space like the children's centre would kind of be kind of divided along those lines. But it is very [common?], the other ... even the women's committee of the GLC had a similar rift in 1984 about, along racial lines, so it's a very common thing at that point, yeah... but it's very, I think one of the

things I said at the beginning, it's very hard to know what happens after 1985, I mean I understand it was run in a particular way and no one from the earlier cohort, or one or two people in the early cohort was involved, but there's no record. I know it's now a private children's centre which is, I think started around 2000 or something like that. But there's no ... the DCC, it's charitable status ends in 1988 and it's just not renewed so presumably by that point it just becomes something different...

AT – Yeah, and I, by that point wasn't involved with it at all ...

SB – When you were working with them on the plans, was that... that was a good experience?

AT – Oh yeah, I was great. Had really good fun doing that yes. And we made models and had workshops..

SB – Yeah there's a really great photograph on a Matrix publication, must have been a meeting with some of the members of the DCC and Matrix looking at the models...

AT – Yeah we made a model the size of a dollhouse which the kids could use afterwards, and yeah it was really good fun and it was really interesting as well, and quite challenging at times as well, because people did challenge our ideas, which was great. And the building was quite hard work too and I think the other thing that was quite difficult which was one reason we made that model which was when we first saw the building it was full of [?] and a lot of people couldn't imagine at all what it would be like empty and they were saying, surely the house, because the house that we'd been offered was ostensibly in relatively good condition, but knowing what I knew about, if you put in a fire escape there'd be nothing left, I knew that this was a much better option, but for a lot of people that was a huge leap...

SB – And also presumably in terms of accessibility, this would have been a much better option...

AT – Yes, yes, much better. You got level access and everything else, and that was probably the thing that swung it in fact, was that it was all level ...

SB – Did you see the inside of it when it was finished?

AT – Oh yeah, I mean we were involved quite a long time. And I mean, people like Manju worked there for awhile and Liz Cahn worked there for a while as did Nina. I can't remember now, but I would think they had worked there for two or three years...

SB – Nina worked for two or three years, but she never saw the inside of Shacklewell Lane Baths...

AT – Oh, really?

SB – She was sacked before that, before the structure opened... I can't ... I don't think Manju worked there...

AT – No, no Manju definitely worked there, I'm sure she did...

SB – Nina didn't anyway, so I'd have to ... I may have got that wrong...

AT – Maybe I have, but I'm sure Manju worked there...

SB – Nina is pretty clear that she, cause like I said, that was one of the first things that I asked her, and she just said no I never saw the inside of it... and again I may have totally got the chronology wrong about this but it seemed that the big change happened before or just as they were moving in, so Nina didn't see the inside of it but then I also understand that, well Manju said that, I hate using these terms, but that she was sacked for collaboration with racism, and all that in quotation marks, that that was why people were sacked...

AT – Right ...

SB – And I think that that's what Nina said, as a white worker, that she was sacked for racism. I want to be careful, but those are the terms, so... and clearly that was why it was so traumatic for them...

AT – Yes, yes. Well as I said I really wasn't that involved, I mean we did, we saw people moving in there and we were involved in the [?], so everything took years and years longer than it was supposed to, you know the actual buying of the building and then there was a big issue about getting planning permission and [whether?] a bunch of women should be allowed to get planning permission [laughter]... So there were a lot of campaigns to get there, it took forever... I really can't remember who it was that we did the sort of final thing for... can't remember...

SB – Well I don't want to take too much more of your time. This has been wonderful and I'm sure I'll follow up. But is that anything else that you think that I haven't asked about that you think is really important?

AT – Well one of the things that was quite innovative that we did at DCC which was very much something that came out of the consultation, was the whole thing about making a little platform for the children to use which adults couldn't actually get into [laughter] and it was actually child size...

SB – [laughter] ... child size, yeah...

AT – I mean you could if you really needed to you could take the wall off, but that it was definitely a child's space and that it respected them being able to go off and do things on their own.

SB – Yeah, it gives them ownership of... I have a five year old and she loves spaces like that, that are clearly designed for, it's more of a [?] where parents can't get anywhere near... oh that's brilliant...

AT – And that was sort of before people were really doing you know, ball game places and things like that, so that was quite unusual. What else...? I don't know, I think the other thing that worked quite well was the inside-outside space in the courtyard which was just fortuitous that it was there.

SB – Have you seen the childcare centre that's there now? The Bathhouse...

AT – I have, but I haven't been for a long time and they've done a complete refurbishment now...

SB – They did something on the inside...

AT – So I haven't seen it since it's been refurbished. But that was only a couple of years ago...

SB – Yeah... it looks very new...

AT – Have you been in?

SB – I've walked by it, but I don't, fair enough, it's not like they want a 50 year old man coming in and looking around. I wrote to them and said that that I was interested and if they could tell me about it but I just never got a reply so... you know the DCC is ancient history you know. It's very expensive, you know it's like everything, all childcare is... and that's another thing that really strikes me about the DCC is that this was largely free, and childcare is still kind of hard to get, and is really expensive, and is something that should be part of the welfare state and isn't and that, sort of an obvious point, but it makes what happens, something like the childcare centre so radical and so fundamental in addressing the needs of mothers and fathers but mostly mothers...

AT – But I think the other thing that was really radical about it as well was that parents were, or carers, and there wasn't... we tried really hard not to have a distinction between parents and carers...

SB – Yeah, that kind of non-hierarchical approach...

AT – But was, you could be there with your child and you could also experience looking after other children and actually these days that couldn't happen, you know, you'd have to ... As you said, the idea of it being a problem of a 50 year old man coming into the children's centre would never have actually been thought of in fact. Things were much more open then than they are now...

SB – It's much more highly regulated now, I used to be on my childcare board and I think the ethos is actually very similar to kind of what the DCC did, was change is a kind of level of regulation which may be absolutely fair enough, but ...

AT – Yes, yes... And I think that that, I don't know, I think that some of the newer people that came in just sort of having been at the very end of that, had got a very different idea about childcare and that some of that is also a cultural thing, that West Indian approach, I mean this is not necessarily all West Indian families, but there is this idea of string discipline and that a child is definitely, is there to be told what to do, which particularly among some of the white middle class parents who were attending those, carers, it was a completely different approach which, you know, people found it hard... people do find politics over their children very difficult [laughter]

SB – Absolutely, absolutely. Well and I think, I think it was Nina, we were talking about this and she had a point that the ethos of the childcare centre was, not everyone signed up to all of it. Many of the white working class mums weren't going to sign up to this but they tolerated it, for awhile everyone sort of got on and accepted that this was, this was acceptable

AT – Yes, yes,

SB – But as you say, there's often nothing more political that childcare, even in very banal ways.

AT – Yes, yes ...

SB – Well thank you so much, this is...

AT – I hope [?] it's useful...

SB – I hope that you don't mind if I do have follow up...