

## New Museum School Podcast Transcript– 2019/2020

**PODCAST TITLE:** *Topophilia at 575 Wandsworth Road*

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**HOST INSTITUTION:** *National Trust – London Creative Team*

### SCRIPT

#### **NMS INTRO STING**

#### **LINK 1**

*Topophilia* is a term coined by poet WH Auden in 1948. It comes from the Greek word *topos* meaning "place" and “-*philia*”, meaning "love of". It describes the way people experience a strong sense of place, which often becomes mixed with their sense of identity and an underlying sense of belonging.

*Topophilia* is a term that isn't currently used in our vocabulary. But there could be a value to it being used as it allows people to express the significance of a place and its emotional gravitas.

#### **LINK 2**

I'm Siobhan Williams. Welcome to *Topophilia at 575*. I'm a trainee with the New Museum School, based in the National Trust London Creative Team and at Osterley House in South West London. In this podcast, I'm going to talk about my experience of *topophilia* at one of the National Trust's London places - 575 Wandsworth Road - and why further exploration of *topophilia* is important in the Trust's ambition to reach Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (or BAME) audiences.

## LINK 3

After visiting 575 once, I had decided that the early 19th-century, terraced house was a special place for me. While I appreciate all National Trust places that I visit, I have never felt a deep connection with a Trust place before, making 575 an anomaly. I was interested to find out why this was.

## LINK 4

575 Wandsworth Road belonged to Khadambi Asalache, a poet, novelist, philosopher of mathematics and British civil servant. Born in 1935, in Kaimosi, Western Kenya, Asalache acquired 575 in 1981, while working at the Treasury. From 1986, as a means of disguising persistent damp in the basement dining room, he began fixing pine floorboards to the damp wall. Over a period of 20 years, he gradually turned his home into a work of art. I connected with the house through the aesthetic: the skilled hand-carved fretwork and paintings, embellishing nearly every crevice of the house, including the ceilings, creating an ambient vibe. This was upcycling taken to a new level!

Asalache passed away in 2006, leaving his home to the National Trust. The Trust acquired the house in 2010: everything is as Asalache left it, including his carefully arranged collections of beautiful and functional objects.

## LINK 5

My initial response when entering 575 was, "How quaint!" From the exterior it looks like a normal 19<sup>th</sup> century terraced house, but once inside its eccentric and extraordinary interior, you find yourself immersed in a visual feast and a multicultural experience. This hidden house is an art installation! Was there a Moroccan, Middle Eastern, African or Moorish connection? Was whoever created this a designer, artist or carpenter? My curiosity was piqued as I tried to guess who this artist was and where his inspiration came from.

## LINK 6

We cannot assume that people connect to a place on one wavelength through their identity, whether it be race, ethnicity or nationality. People who find a love of place can discover it in multiplicities of their own identities and interests. For example, for me, as an artist who has recently started working with wood, exploring the art of the African diaspora and symbolic objects, this artistic house really spoke to me. My art at present has looked at the central themes of acquisition, collection, restitution and repatriation. So, I find it interesting how this place became part of the National Trust's collection and has everything preserved as Asalache left it.

## LINK 7

Here's **Laura Hussey, House and Gardens Manager at 575 Wandsworth Road**, reflecting on her topophilia and experience of the house:

### INTERVIEW CLIP 1 | Interview with Laura Hussey

"I did have a really strong response because I can still remember it even to this day."

"I was at the front door, waiting for someone to invite me in. And, because I was a bit curious, I went and looked through the letterbox and I couldn't believe what I saw. I think I was really awed by its beauty."

"I had an emotional response, because as a creative person who's never really fully allowed myself to pursue an artistic career, I was struck by a person who did that in their own home, and that feeling has stayed with me much longer."

## LINK 8

As a young Black British, African-Caribbean woman, I am aware that my ancestors could not access or enjoy National Trust places as visitors or guests at the time they were built or indeed after they were opened to the public. There are very real historical reasons for this, such as slavery, race and class. Also, a history of stately homes and private houses leaving certain people feeling excluded from them.

Now, there is a potential to enjoy these places that shape our identity as British citizens, although low visitor numbers from Black people suggest that these historical reasons still remain. So, 575 Wandsworth Road is a welcome anomaly because it represents the history and life of a person of colour as the main protagonist in its story. This is not currently the case with any other existing National Trust place.

## LINK 9

Historically, from an external perspective, it often feels that there has been a reluctance for the Trust to be wholly transparent about the origins of its wealth and its global connections. Nevertheless, I feel that transparency in addressing this will act as the first step to encourage and welcome more people with BAME ancestry to visit Trust houses and outdoor spaces.

The London Creative Team will be looking more closely at topophilia in an upcoming project called **Places That Make Us**. This will be looking specifically at what aspects of a place foster a sense of belonging or not belonging. This will help create more transparency. As part of the London Creative Team, I will be researching, documenting and highlighting places that reflect the identities of people of BAME ancestry.

## LINK 10

**House and Gardens Manager Laura Hussey** has her own take on this. At 575, she has worked closely with local communities and the wider London community.

### INTERVIEW CLIP 2 | Interview with Laura Hussey

“We did quite a lot of community work before we opened to try and understand what this place meant to people and there was a really strong response. I think this place, people just get, and the reason why they get it is because there isn’t a set narrative.”

“I think the biggest thing about the work that we’re doing is that I’m here talking to you, using my personal experiences of working here and being here and that journey that I’ve been on. But I think the really important thing is that I’m not speaking on behalf of everyone.”

“As an organisation, you can be aware that you can be a 'quite hard to reach' organisation for lots of different people, for lots of different reasons. Your approach could be honing in on those audiences and trying to be more relevant. I think here, there are so many people that could benefit from being in this place, and we have a limited number and I think that’s what’s maybe changed our approach. We’ve taken a really local approach. The demographic of Lambeth is naturally quite diverse, but also not saying “I’m going to reach this audience because I want to be more representative of that group”. One of our approaches has been based on need as well; and what public benefit are we providing? So, we look at things like loneliness, social isolation and social connectivity as a counterpart about loss of voice and the importance of being able to express yourself, and how that can provide opportunities for you in the future.”

## LINK 11

Directly after my first visit to 575, I felt inspired with a creative impulse to make art and express myself organically. One of the things that I took away from visiting 575 was to revisit my own practice. I hope this might lead to something as breathtaking as 575 in the future.

This for me has undoubtedly created a stronger sense of belonging in relation to the Trust. Looking at 575 allows us to better understand topophilia and how our work can highlight multiple narratives to connect people to our existing places. I wonder what places the National Trust will acquire in the future? How can the Trust make its portfolio more diverse?

## NMS OUTRO STING

## END OF SCRIPT