



HARTLEPOOL'S "CAN HOUSE," PHOTOGRAPHED IN 2011. PHOTO COURTESY [SUPPORT THE ARTISTIC CAN HOUSE IN RABY ROAD IN HARTLEPOOL/FACEBOOK](#).

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RIP the Can House, a Cultural Landmark Made from Empty Beer Cans

In 2005, Philip Muspratt started covering his Hartlepool house with empty beer cans. "Can House" became a folk art piece, a DIY social club, and an icon for the post-industrial town.

JR By [Jenny Rae](#)

The snow is melting in Hartlepool, and all is quiet. This is a town that sits isolated on the great North Sea, famous for its legend of a hanged monkey and booze-loving comic book anti-hero Andy Capp. Despite the boarded-up windows, promises are being made of a great rejuvenation to Hartlepool's waterfront and the old high street.

Last month, it was announced that the Tees Valley, which includes Hartlepool, nearby Darlington, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, and Stockton-On-Tees, would host games in the Rugby World Cup in 2021—the same year that the area will launch its UK Capital of Culture 2025 bid. For a region that has previously been described as “Britain's Detroit” and reportedly has one of the lowest life expectancies in the country, a renaissance is simmering.



BOARDED-UP BUILDINGS IN THE TOWN CENTRE OF HARTLEPOOL, NORTH EAST ENGLAND. PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR.

landmarks was torn down in the name of redevelopment. This will be Hartlepool's first year without the Can House.

In 2005, Philip Muspratt—dubbed Beernardo Da Vinci—began covering his semi-detached house with over 75,000 beer cans, arranged into intricate and beautiful patterns, before its eventual purchase and subsequent demolition by property developer Thirteen in 2018.

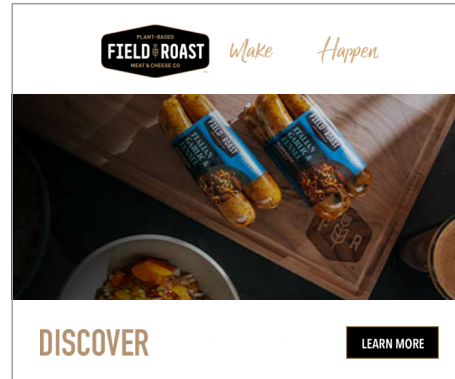


THE "CAN HOUSE," A SEMI-DETACHED HOUSE DECORATED WITH OVER 75,000 BEER CANS IN HARTLEPOOL, PHOTOGRAPHED HERE IN 2014. PHOTO COURTESY KEVIN MCGROTHER.

“Phil would tell me about how he'd originally started collecting cans to raise funds to refurbish a memorial at the local church,” says Kevin McGrother, frontman of four-piece The Artisans, who filmed a music video in Muspratt's home. “The price he was getting was so pitiful that he decided to start sticking them to the house.”

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a giant duck wearing a crash helmet, a starry sky wall of bottles, and a fully functioning can fountain. Growing up with deaf and mute parents, Muspratt learned to communicate visually.

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“The one thing I was interested in was art,” he said in a film made about him. Unemployed and unwell—he passed away in 2015 aged 63—Muspratt would channel his creative spirit with the only materials he had in abundance: Fosters and Carlsberg tinnies. “We’ve all done our fair share of drinking to get the cans,” he told the *Hartlepool Mail* in 2010. “But people come and donate their empties once they hear what I’m doing.”



PHIL MUSPRATT, FOUNDER OF THE CAN HOUSE, WITH WIFE SUE MUSPRATT IN THE BACK GARDEN, 2014. PHOTO COURTESY KEVIN MCGROTHER.

Others, though, scorned Muspratt's work as an embarrassment, or a symbol of moral decay.

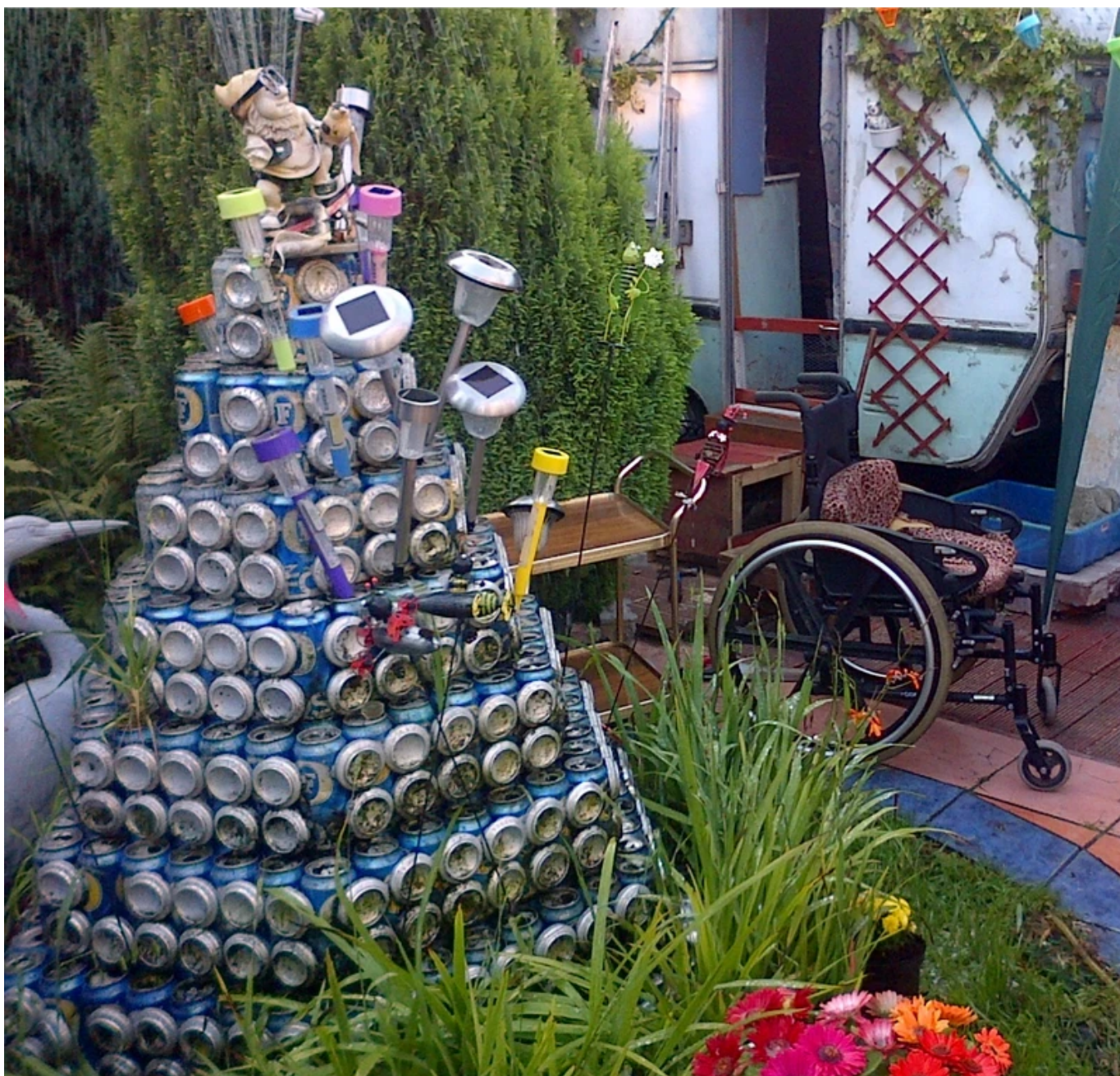
In Texas, a house covered with more than 50,000 beer cans created by artist John Milkovich was named one of America's top 50 roadside attractions in Time magazine. National Geographic lauded an off-grid community in New Mexico that grew from a house made of beer cans as "revolutionary." What was it about Muspratt's use of the medium that became so divisive?

The cultural significance of the Can House soon caught the attention of Maxy Neil Bianco, a filmmaker who lived nearby. He began making a documentary.

"A few years ago, I went to see Jeremy Deller's folk art archive, and then one day, I noticed that this had started to develop," says Bianco of Muspratt's home, drawing parallels between it and the Turner Prize-winning artist's collection of creative practices from outside the art world. "I think Phil had put a line of cans around his front door and I just thought, 'What the fuck?' So I went round."



MUSPRATT ARRANGED THE CANS IN INTRICATE PATTERNS. PHOTO COURTESY KEVIN MCGROTHER.

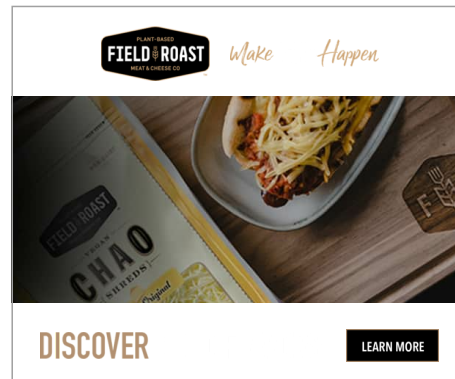


A FOUNTAIN MADE FROM BEER CANS IN THE BACK GARDEN OF THE CAN HOUSE. PHOTO COURTESY KEVIN MCGROTHER.

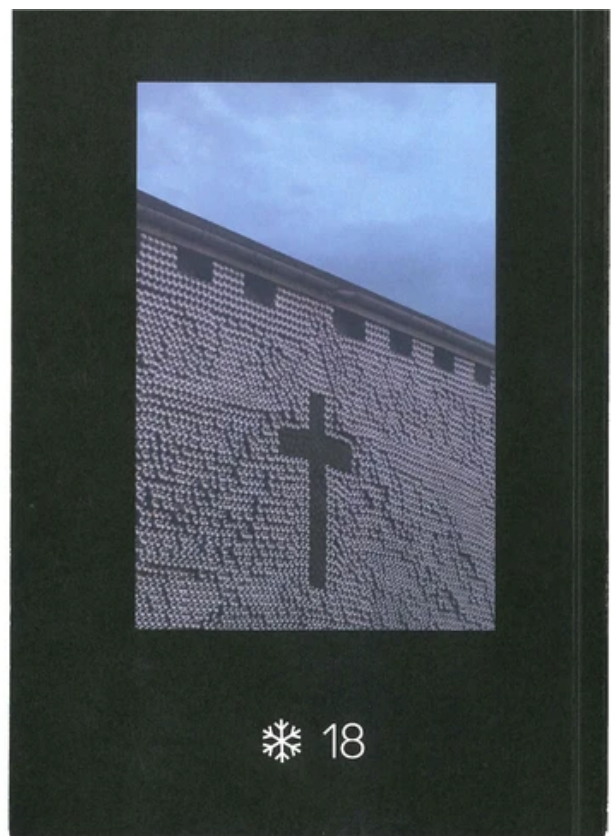
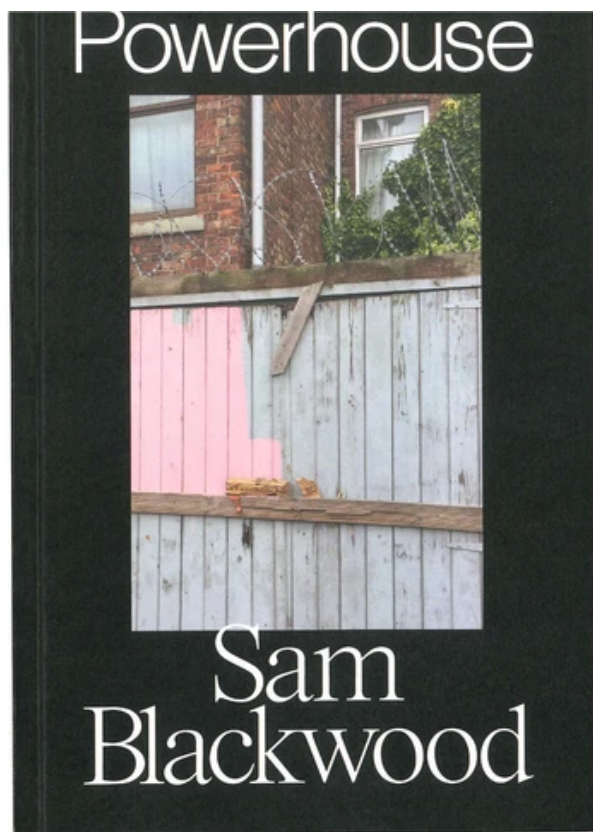
[Can House](#) has had over 20,000 views since its online release in 2015, as well as a screening at the Floating Cinema in London's Hackney Wick. Throughout the 52-minute feature, Bianco mixes inextricably with Muspratt, his wife Sue, their children, and grandchildren. There are moments of joy—the communion, the collective drinking and adding of cans to the walls. And then there are those that are harrowing: the toll of daily alcohol abuse, an infant looking on as a young girl is laid on the floor, paralytic, after vomiting and defecating in front of the group.

happens in the Can House.”

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“It created a bit of pride amongst people that we had such a thing in the town,” says artist [Sam Blackwood](#), who was born in Hartlepool. His practice explores the working class Britain, and how austerity has affected communities and people’s approach to living. Several of his works are inspired by the Can House, including *Powerhouse*, an art book that features its photograph on the cover.



POWERHOUSE BY SAM BLACKWOOD FEATURES THE CAN HOUSE ON ITS COVER. PHOTO COURTESY SAM BLACKWOOD.

“Phil would never have regarded himself as an artist until we did this show on Redchurch Street,” says Bianco, referring to an exhibition at a London gallery in 2012, during which *Can House* was screened. “They had this pallet of lager they were giving away, and they had Phil sticking the cans up on the wall. After that, there were other artists there who wanted to talk to Phil.”

Not long after this, tourists began turning up at Muspratt’s door. People were coming to Hartlepool purely to catch a glimpse of the Can Man’s creation, and of the outsider artist himself.

In 2015, Muspratt passed away. Now, an uncertain future lies ahead for the Can House. After being negotiated with years before, it was reported that his family refused to take an offer from the council to vacate their home, and so were issued a court order to leave.

“As identified within the Hartlepool Housing Strategy 2015 to 2020, the Raby estate is a key housing regeneration site within the town,” a Hartlepool Council spokesman told the Teesside Gazette. “[A]nd so this move forms part of our wider ambition and ongoing commitment to housing renewal in the

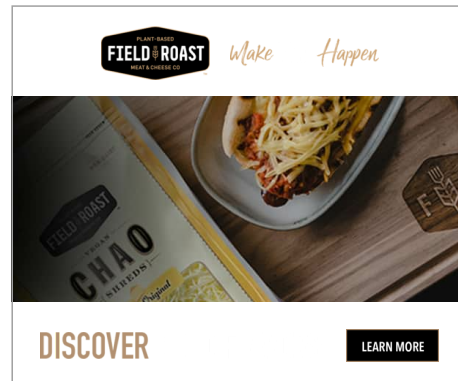


THE CAN HOUSE IN 2016, SHORTLY BEFORE THE MUSPRATT FAMILY WERE FORCED TO VACATE. PHOTO COURTESY IAN JUSTICE.

Before the council were granted full approval in 2017, legislation that would condemn the Muspratts to finally vacate their home, the Can House remained a solitary figure on the flattened lot. Lucy, an art therapist who lives in North Yorkshire, may have been one of the last people to see it.

sat in the car and had a look for only a minute or two and then drove away. I remember feeling sad wondering about the people who once occupied it.”

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The advertisement features the Field Roast logo at the top left, with the tagline "Make Happen" in a script font to its right. Below the logo is a photograph of a bowl of spaghetti topped with a plant-based meat sauce and cheese, next to a box of Field Roast Chao. At the bottom left of the ad is the word "DISCOVER" in a bold, sans-serif font, and at the bottom right is a black button with the text "LEARN MORE" in white.

Bianco remembers the frosty reception he received from Muspratt’s neighbours across the road, who he reasoned were probably happy to see it fall.



“They were inches away from it. How would you feel? It wasn’t the quietest house on the street.” Over the course of the filming of the documentary, people would shout, beep their car horns, and mock as they drove by.

“If I’m honest,” admits Bianco, “I thought it was a beautiful thing, a great thing. And I was very interested in it. But I wouldn’t want my neighbour to start doing it.”



THE CAN HOUSE HAS NOW BEEN DEMOLISHED AND IN ITS PLACE STANDS A NEW HOUSING DEVELOPMENT. PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR.

In *Can House*, a man passes by the camera. He stops. “It’s modern art, isn’t it?” he says, pointing to Muspratt’s work.

Back then, the plants of the Raby Road estate danced in the summer breeze. Today, scaffolding has been constructed where Muspratt’s home once was, the skeleton of an attraction that shook up this town and gave many a reason to visit Hartlepool. New houses wait to be finished. The snow melts on a symmetrical ghost town.

House. RIP.

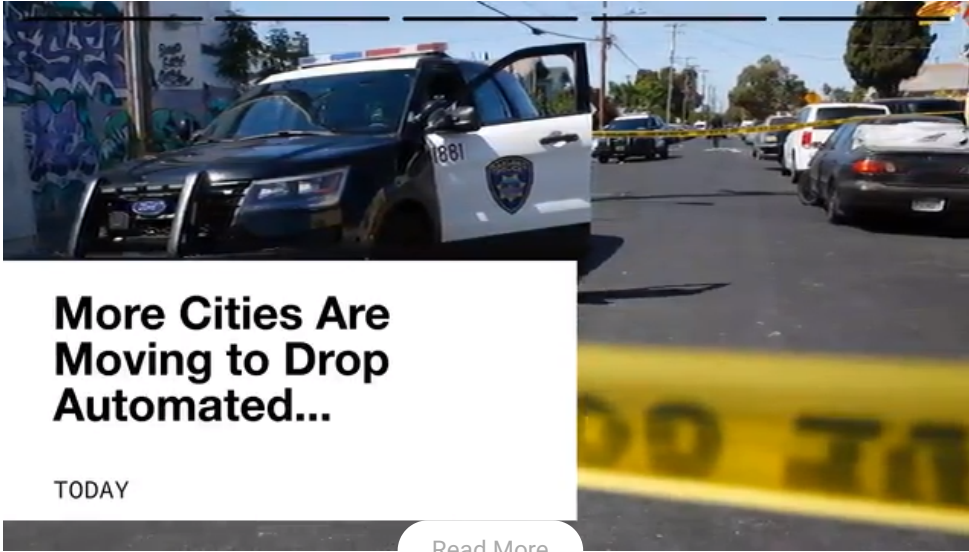
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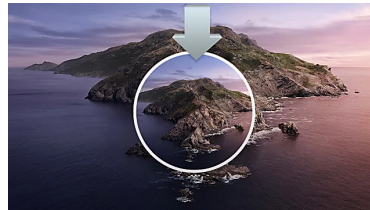
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