



Learning from the use of media in community-led design projects

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Abstract

Community-led design is a practice whereby people take the opportunity to engage directly and creatively in the formulation of solutions for their own environment. In community-led design, professionals, stakeholders and communities come together to develop sustainable solutions to complex design and planning problems. Such projects can include the co-creation of public spaces, communal and public services, as well as processes and tools for citizen participation.

Web 2.0 technologies and social media offer new opportunities for community-led design, potentially transforming the ways in which people take part in these processes and their ability to make an impact. This paper reports insights from the use of different types of media in community-led design projects and reflects on their role and their value for those involved, as well as for their wider communities.

Introduction

¹ The Glass-House Community Design is an independent national charity in the UK, supporting and promoting public participation and leadership in the design of the built environment. They were one of a number of community partners on the 'Media, Creativity and the Creative Citizen' project.

Community-led design has a long-standing tradition relating to participatory design, collaborative design and co-design efforts developed primarily in the context of urban design, planning and architecture (for overviews see Blundell et al. 2005; Sanoff 2006). Such practices emerged in the '60s as part of the human rights movement, and a growing sense that people should have the right to participate directly in shaping the environments they live in.

Community-led design (CLD) can be defined as a process through which people are engaged in, and become responsible for, developing their environment, including buildings, open spaces, services and neighbourhoods. It encompasses a variety of practices, by different types of communities organised together for different purposes. For instance, while most community-led projects involve geographic communities engaged in place-making activities, people often come together due to a common interest or concern (e.g. health and wellbeing or political activism). There are also different ways in which communities assume leadership in design activities. While there are many cases where local groups initiate and take forward community projects from the bottom up, it is true that many projects are also instigated from the top down, such as big planning schemes by local authorities and developers.

Communities may therefore be involved in design activities as clients, as mediators (e.g. in neighbourhood planning) or as co-creators (perhaps in the ideal form of CLD). Involvement may also come at different phases or stages of the design process. Again, while the aim is meaningful engagement in decision-making throughout the design process, from visioning to implementation, CLD activities may materialise only at one particular stage (e.g. a community group may develop a vision but commission an expert architect to design a plan). Finally, CLD challenges traditional perceptions of design expertise, by recognizing the value of the community's local skills, knowledge and networks. In CLD, designers, architects and planners become creative facilitators of the design process, helping engage people, unearth needs and aspirations, manage conflicts, communicate design problems and solutions, mediate discussions and evaluate outputs and outcomes. CLD taps into professional and everyday creativity to create more inclusive and more sustainable solutions.

As a type of creative citizenship, community-led design shares many commonalities with other creative civic engagement and civil action projects, but it is unique in that it produces long-term effects in the environment. Community-led design leads to the creation of buildings, public spaces, parks and neighbourhoods thus having a lasting effect on people – they are public goods whose impact reaches more than simply those who live, work or play there. Community-led design therefore is a type of creative citizenship which possesses a strong element of place-making and a strong element of community leadership, operating within a civic space. The overall benefits of CLD include the creation of social value (e.g. civic participation, democratic outcomes, social capital and

sense of community), personal value (personal expression, development of confidence and skills) and better quality of environments (Alexiou et al. 2013).

The starting point of this paper is the observation that civil society organisations and communities involved in CLD have been rapidly embracing new media in their practice. New media bring both new technical possibilities (e.g. more user-friendly and accessible tools for ‘making’, ‘sharing’, and ‘publishing’), and a more collaborative ethos (Bruns 2008) offering significant opportunities for citizen engagement and creative production (Harrison and Barthel 2009). However, despite the proliferation of social media, the landscape of media use in CLD remains largely uncharted, and the constraints and opportunities communities are faced with are not well understood.

The paper draws on three case studies in which the authors have been directly involved to reflect on how new forms of media are transforming CLD practice, and to discuss the constraints, the opportunities and the value generated.

Exploring the media landscape of community-led design

There are many examples of social media being successfully used to *create open shared resources for design actions* (like the Open Architecture Network: an online, open-source community established in 2012 with the vision to improve living conditions throughout the world through innovative and sustainable design), or to *mobilise people around planning issues* (like the use of social media to report and rally people in the demonstrations in Taksim Square in Istanbul in 2013). Other types of media used in CLD include blogs used to *report local news, events and achievements* relating to a particular place, civil social networks created to *showcase and connect community projects* of many kinds with business, local government and civic groups (like Synathina, a platform for connecting civil action groups in Athens that was amongst the winners of Bloomberg Philanthropies’ Mayor’s Challenge in 2014), *digital storytelling* tools, and tools for *participatory mapping, and public consultation* (like Mapping for Change and Stickyworld).

Since 2012, a series of interviews, focus groups and workshops have been held by the authors with over 20 community groups in Greater London, as well as with a number of professionals designing and maintaining such media, in order to understand prevalent use of different types of media and their associated challenges. Almost every single community group that took part reported using social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs or wikis) to share information and raise awareness and support for their projects, alongside project websites and traditional forms of communication and engagement. They also valued tools and processes for networking, peer-to-peer support and learning. However, many groups found keeping up with the developments in technology difficult and faced significant challenges in updating media sites regularly to maintain a strong

presence, as they rely on volunteers' time to run them. They also identified tensions relating to ownership, digital literacy and inclusivity.

It is impossible to understand the usage and potential of social media (or indeed any media) without reference to particular purposes, local factors and socio-demographic contexts. The next section presents three case studies that were carried out as part of three different collaborative research projects funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council in the UK (AHRC) in the period between 2012-2014.

Case studies

The case studies were set up as predominantly action research projects, and involved collaboration between academic and community partners. Each case study is discussed by providing the context, a description of the media and activities, and a consideration of their impact and benefits.

The online community plan for Wards Corner

Wards Corner Community Coalition (WCC) is a grassroots community group campaigning to save the market above Seven Sisters tube station in North London. The indoor market is home to a bustling multicultural community but has been threatened with demolition. The WCC has been active since 2007 and has fought a long legal battle against the plans of a developer for the area, which they view as threatening to displace the local community and businesses. In 2013, WCC proposed an alternative plan for the development of the overall site drawing on the aspirations of local people and seeking to enhance the local social and economic capital.

The Open University research team was introduced to the WCC through The Glass-House Community Led Design (a UK charity supporting and promoting public participation and leadership in the design of the built environment). The Glass-House had previously offered support in 2008 and 2011 to help the WCC develop their understanding of complex planning and regeneration issues, and to begin to create a shared vision for an alternative future for the space. Through a co-design process facilitated by the research team as part of the *Creative Citizen* project, WCC envisioned and designed a virtual tour of the community plan, using the Stickyworld platform². This online engagement tool allows people to virtually step into the space, explore the current market and find out about the design proposals and principles. It also provides a forum where people can provide feedback and discuss details of the plan.

When WCC embarked on the virtual tour project they were already using social media quite successfully. They have a Facebook and Twitter account, as well as a Wikispaces site that provides information about the purpose of WCC, its activities and links to related

² <http://tinyurl.com/wccstickyworld>

documents. At the time the co-design process started, many of the members were somewhat demoralised as their legal battle had resulted in a negative outcome for them. But to move their ideas for an alternative plan forward, they wanted to connect more with local people and to stimulate a meaningful dialogue around the future of the site. The idea of the virtual tour provided a new frame of reference for the group, helping them to concentrate on the community plan and their engagement with local people.

The Wards Corner Stickyworld was designed by two members of the coalition - one of the key people maintaining the website interested in design and new technologies, and the architectural designer of the plan - with support from the research team and the Stickyworld team. The content emphasised key dimensions of the community plan, focusing on heritage, arts and culture, community activities and local economy. For the WCC the tool offered an innovative and visual way to facilitate community-led planning:

Surveys and policy consultation don't engage people and don't allow much room to have meaningful discussion about what's best for the area. That's why it's so important that we work towards new ways of involving people in planning and empowering them to make decisions. (WCC member)

Stickyworld presents a real tangible way of engaging with people about developments before they occur, and I welcome this as a method of changing the way we conceive our built environment. (WCC member)

The Wards Corner Stickyworld was used alongside a social media campaign, and a series of face-to-face meetings, 'surgeries' and events to engage local people (particularly market traders) in the debate, and to record their views and comments. The content was replicated in booklets and flyers which offered a complementary way to help people gain a visual experience of the proposed plans and express their views. As many of the people working and visiting the market do not have English as their first language, automatic translation was often used to present the content and input the comments.

The proposal received enthusiastic support and 222 comments on the Stickyworld fed into the consultation process for the submitted community plan. Haringey Council approved the plan in April 2014.

The Wards Corner Stickyworld was the result of a process of engagement and co-creation, which ensured that the outcome is tied to the aims and needs of the community. This media intervention worked well because it was embedded in the local context and activities, and the skills and talents of people involved were effectively utilised. The variety of communications practices and media outlets also contributed to the success of the project.

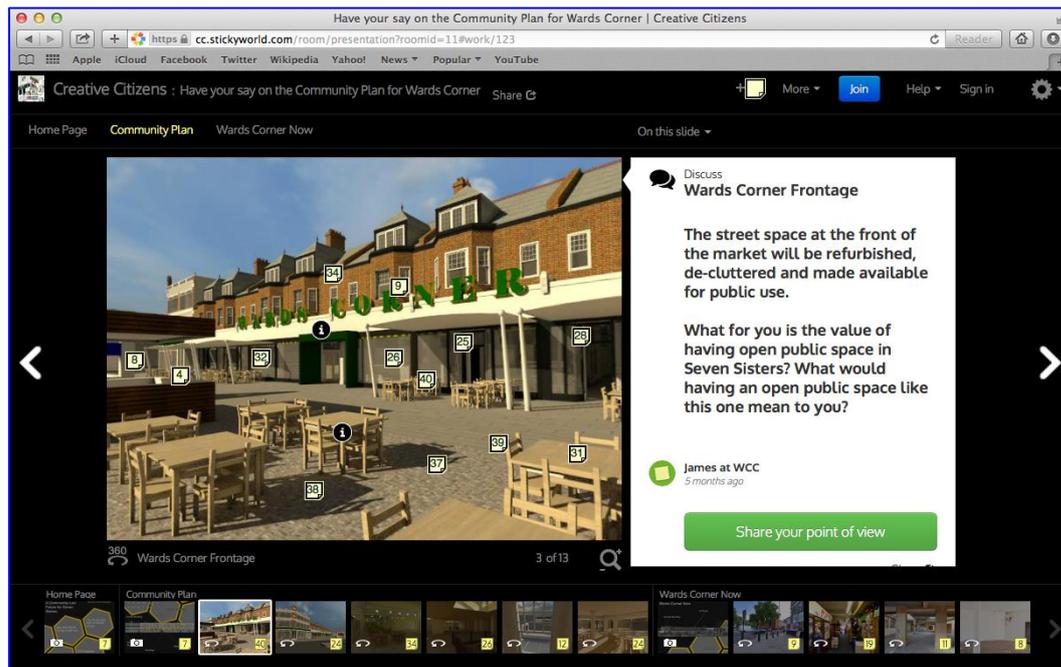


Figure 1: Screenshot from the Wards Corner Stickyworld

Supporting each other locally: Tidworth Mums

Tidworth Mums are a not-for-profit group in Tidworth (a garrison town in Wiltshire), dedicated to improving the emotional, social, physical and economic wellbeing of civilian and military families in their local area.

The group formed in 2012 after a media project run by the Wiltshire council called 'Tidworth Voices' which interviewed local women and gave them the opportunity to express and discuss the challenges faced by military families and civilian families living in the area. Shortly after they were formed, the Mums set up a Facebook group to share information about local activities and services with other members of the community, sensing that, in their local area, the majority of people access information these days through digital technology, often through their smartphones.

Initially, the Facebook group had a handful of members, but this quickly grew and two years later there are over 1600 members. Six admins – members of Tidworth Mums – monitor the group on a daily basis. The group is active everyday with up to 20 new posts added daily. Key groups within the local community including council representatives, youth groups and other community partners frequently use the Facebook group to promote their activities and share information such as job opportunities, council meetings and events and opportunities for local families. Importantly, the group does not allow any advertising of a profitable nature, which was an important decision to ensure the group

would serve its intended purpose and not become overwhelmed with spam and advertisements.

The Group has become a source of local knowledge for the entire community – both military and civilian families. One of the aims of Tidworth Mums was to integrate the two communities, and the Mums have championed this through their Facebook group and the various activities they run throughout the year. While the Tidworth Voices video was a catalyst for the creation of the group, the Facebook group was important for reaching far more people than they would be able to through traditional media.

The Facebook group has helped a lot of mums to have the confidence to actually come to the toddler groups and other activities through meeting someone online and coming along with those mums.

As the group grew bigger, the Mums began to use their combined individuals skills and strengths to contribute to new services and spaces in the area of Tidworth. From May 2013-June 2014, the Mums were a partner in the AHRC-funded *Unearth Hidden Assets through Community Co-Design and Co-Production* research project, where they worked with Wiltshire Council, Army Welfare Service, The Glass-House Community Led Design and the Open University to uncover and build assets to support the case for soft play in their town. During this process, the Mums built on the strength of their Facebook engagement to create a network of supporters for a soft play facility and gather valuable feedback from the community about their needs and aspirations for local play.



Figure 2: Screen grabs from Tidworth Voices video (left) and Tidworth Mums Facebook Page (right)

Media training with pupils in Elephant & Castle

This project was initiated as part of the activities of the *Scaling up Co-Design Research and Practice* project which looked at how civil society organisations can scale up their

practice and extend their impact and reach. The approach followed was to create a space for the participant organisations to create new projects through sharing and cross-pollination of existing practices, skills and resources. In this project, The Glass-House Community Led Design and Silent Cities (a social enterprise that uses media to help isolated and disadvantaged people have a voice and develop their creative capacity) came together to support a young people's project that had been initiated by a partnership between The Glass-House and the Citizenship Foundation for developer Lend Lease.

The Glass-House and Silent Cities developed and delivered a one-day media training workshop to a group of twenty young people (aged 14-15) at Sacred Heart Catholic School in Elephant & Castle. Prior to this workshop, The Glass-House had delivered a workshop to participants in Silent Cities' Community Journalism programme, exploring issues around how place can include and exclude, an exercise which revealed the value of using media as a tool for people to explore their places and express experiences. Two of the Community Journalism 'graduates' acted as trainers for the media training workshop in Elephant & Castle. The workshop aimed to enable the young people to develop their digital media skills (photography, film and audio) and to use them to explore their immediate surroundings, think about the design and qualities of these surroundings, and envision how they can be shaped in the future.

Feedback collected revealed that almost all students thought that as a result of the workshop they were able to look at things differently and appreciate their environment more, but also that they were more interested in media and would apply their skills in the future. They also reported having more confidence talking about place and a good understanding about how to use media to tell stories about place and voice their opinions.

I heard and watched many unusual things that I wouldn't normally think in depth about.

They have changed the way I feel, see, hear, smell and describe things. It revealed to me that everything has a design and detailed meaning.

The rain first brought the emotion of gloom but I then felt the rain on my skin and realised that each raindrop was a story. Each photograph captured these memories and in that created new memories.

I learned and noticed how places can intentionally and accidentally exclude or include people and groups.

The Glass-House team from their perspective thought that the use of media as a way to think about place added another layer of learning to their own design thinking and training.

Media can also be another way of just helping people to understand and explore some of those issues around place. It's an experiential relationship with place, rather than an analytical relationship.

I think that media can be a very powerful voice tool for young people in placemaking because there are a lot of young people, who won't want to step into a traditional public meeting but whose voice can actually have a huge impact on those meetings.

We changed our attitude towards and understanding of the value of those creative outputs/media, seeing their value as an artistic process and not just as an output in placemaking terms, as well as being a powerful empowering tool.

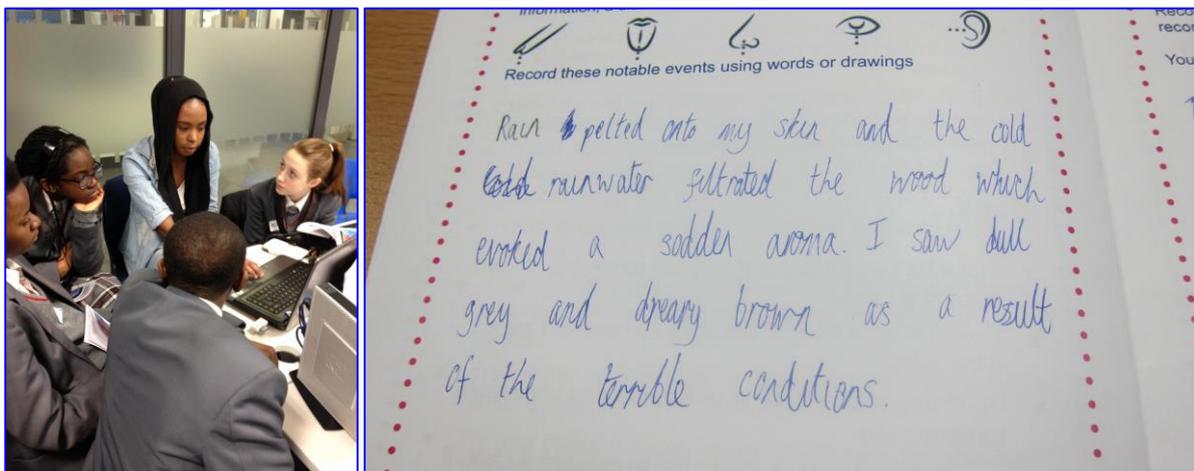


Figure 3: Images from the media training workshop in Elephant & Castle

Insights and reflections

Each case study focuses on a different type of medium. The WCC case study focuses on the use of a bespoke tool for public consultation, the Tidworth Mums case study focuses on the use of a widely available social media platform for networking, and the Elephant & Castle case study focuses on the use of more 'traditional' media (video, audio and photography) for story-telling and personal expression. The contexts of the case studies are also quite diverse, involving different people in community-led design in different ways. But there are also many similarities between the case studies. They all aim to use media to do more than simply broadcast or communicate something outwards: they aim to engage people in creative and meaningful activities. They all also look at engaging those considered to be ignored or excluded from traditional planning and place-making processes.

Media (and particularly social media) are an important part of the practice of groups and communities involved in place-making. The case studies show that media can be instrumental for achieving milestones these groups could not achieve before. However, it is important to recognise the effects of people's relationships with technology. Social media are becoming widely available and are a key aspect of everyday communication and social interaction of many people. This is a clue to their success (as is obvious in the Tidworth Mums case study). Nonetheless, this success also hinges on media literacy: both the ability of people to use or engage with certain technology or software, but also the ability of people to design and run these media outlets. The WCC understood that the innovative and highly visual consultation tool would attract, but also inevitably exclude certain people, and made an explicit effort to overcome this by holding 'surgeries' to take them through the process. Designing and running/updating the various media also requires a dedicated group of people with the relevant skills – Tidworth Mums have a distributed admin system and so do WCC. In Elephant & Castle, the media training was instrumental in helping students become confident and enthused about their place and their own contributions, while providing them with useful skills that they could apply in their personal and educational lives. Training in the use of media is important for the sustainability of projects, for allowing the activities and reach of these groups to scale up and for empowering people to a play meaningful role.

Finally, the case studies reinforce the observations from the interviews and focus groups that social media are part of a toolkit that groups use, and strategic integration with other forms of engagement, communication and action is important. The media landscape of community-led design combines social media and online presence with face-to-face meetings, small media (pamphlets, newsletters) and private online communications. The variety of outlets is necessary for reaching people which may otherwise be excluded. Digital access is one parameter of exclusion – despite the fact that computers and Internet access are becoming cheaper, many individuals especially in deprived areas still can't afford them. But variety of outlets is important also for engaging with people from different age groups or with different abilities (for example visual communication often helps surpass language barriers) and for engaging people at different times and settings (at home or in the evening).

Successful media use in CLD requires not only a variety of outlets, but it also requires these outlets to be embedded in the particular context and purposes of each group. The case studies show that strategic thinking about the use and integration of media is instrumental in that respect. Both in the case of WCC and in the case of Tidworth Mums their involvement in a research project provided space for reflection and strategic planning of communications. The Tidworth Mums had a set of principles on how to run the Facebook group and what to share online already established, but were able to think strategically about how to use it as a vehicle alongside the research project to promote

their initiative and engage people in conversations about play. Similarly, the WCC with the help of the research team, orchestrated an intensive engagement operation, both online and on the site and through a variety of media.

Acknowledgements

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