Connected Communities

Creative Participation in Place-making

Antonia Layard, Jane Milling & Tom Wakeford

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Executive Summary

This project explored how three 'pioneer communities' in Newcastle, Cumbria and Bristol use creativity to involve themselves in place-making and planning practices after initial struggles to have a voice in the process. The key empirical findings from the project illustrate divergent approaches to creativity in place-making with each having some success. Sites in Newcastle, Cumbria and Bristol have been creatively transformed to reflect the needs and interests of older and younger people and to 'beautify' the environment in Stokes Croft.

As anticipated, the project revealed some difficulties in defining who 'the' community is, what creativity is and in whose name such creativity is practised, particularly when action is more individualised. However, the project tentatively suggested that creativity might be greater when groups are less representative and when decision-makers and funders are less involved. In particular, it raised the possibility that when community participants go from being 'outsiders' to 'insiders' and no longer have to struggle so much to be heard they engage in fewer creative practices. In Newcastle, however, where this happened, the Elders still use their creativity to attract new members to the forum.

This project found that when understood through the experiences of community participants that place-making is broader and more material than planning practices as conventionally conceived. In terms of the localism agenda this suggests that participation should be broadly understood, facilitating input on the 'felt environment' as much as the built environment. Future research should be focused on how neighbourhood creativity and representation can be interrelated and how participation in these broader conceptions of place-making can be facilitated at the local level.

Researchers and Project Partners

Newcastle Elders Forum, Young Cumbria, the People's Republic of Stokes Croft, Professor Antonia Layard, University of Birmingham, Dr Jane Milling, University of Exeter and Dr Tom Wakeford, University of Edinburgh.

Key words

Creativity, representation, place-making, planning, law, arts, public space, community participation

In this project researchers collaborated with representatives of three communities, the Newcastle Elders Forum, Young Cumbria and the People's Republic of Stokes Croft (PRSC) in Bristol, who are working creatively to improve their locality. The project consisted of interviews, observations, walking tours and a workshop drawing together contributions from each of the groups. An exhibition, *Creative Citizen*, curated by PRSC, was also held in Stokes Croft from Jan-Feb 2012. It was the focal point for the workshop and attracted many viewers from the local neighbourhood.

The project asked whether a more innovative 'turn to the community' (Duffy and Hutchinson, 1997) that rejects assumptions of 'responsible participation' (Paddison et al, 2008) and accepted modes of interaction, can engage participants in more meaningful and productive ways. *Creative Participation* aimed to deliver a productive and innovative evidence base on creativity to understand how local communities contribute to place-making and how these experiences can be harnessed to improve policy in this field.

As well as exchanging experiences and providing the empirical data for this research, the participants in the project assembled a range policy proposals. These included that:

1) Communities should be encouraged and supported to engage both in conventional consultation processes and through more creative mechanisms, including theatre, film, cartoons, music and art;
2) Both elected representatives and employees in local government should work with communities proactively. Officers should not become a hidden hurdle to reform;
3) Planning use classes should differentiate between socially and culturally beneficial uses and those that pursue solely economic aims. Local, place-based concerns should be capable of being 'material considerations' under planning law;
4) Outline planning permission should incorporate some commitments to principles of internal design rather than focusing solely on the size and location of the development;
5) Criminal laws and planning rules should not be used to stop bottom-up improvement of areas. Local communities should be able to adorn their environments – through planting, art and signage – without the consent of the local authority;
6) Support, both financial and logistical, should be made available to enable communities to see examples of good practice elsewhere;
7) The new neighbourhood planning proposals need to engage with the multiplicity of communities. There are many publics and communities that all need to be engaged, including more marginalised groups. This will require time and resources. Bottom-up initiatives need support if they are not to become simply a base for the most vocal;
8) Conventionally unrepresented groups, particularly socially and economically disadvantaged young people, can be engaged through more creative mechanisms such as music and art. This builds individual confidence and strengthens links with the local community and other related groups;
9) Communities often become most engaged in positive projects rather than critiques of existing policies. This requires some funding as well as access to expertise. It is more productive than a negative critique of planning applications and the scrutiny of planning documents.

These policy findings have been disseminated online and through social media and an illustrated newsletter about the project has been disseminated to interested parties.

Creative Localism

One of the key findings in the project was the appetite by these community actors for positive action rather than negative critique, preferring to constructively improve the locality rather than to review and object to individual planning applications. There are possible links here to current activities under the 2011 Localism Act, which now enables neighbourhood planning and introduces the 'right to build'. None of these groups had been working with neighbourhood planning, in part due to the scale of the work in Newcastle and Young Cumbria, which was city-wide and county-wide respectively. In Stokes Croft in Bristol, where a neighbourhood plan might be envisaged, frustration with the planning process means that a 'DIY' urbanism approach is preferred though PRSC engage with planning processes when time and energy permit.

While these are forms of localist interventions, the planning focus of the Localism Act means that there is little or no scope for the kind of activities these groups have been engaged in within neighbourhood planning. The activities these community participants have been concerned with; aesthetics, signage, gardening, health and safety, the availability of rural bus services and the internal design of buildings all contribute to place-making, yet they cannot be determined by neighbourhood forums or parish councils under the Act. Framed almost entirely by planning and property, localism in this sense is restricted to the built environment rather than to more subtle artistic and creative constructions of the 'felt environment'.

In particular, this project demonstrates the many ways in which 'place-making' goes beyond planning even though this is how it is often conceived, particularly by government representatives and policymakers. While places may be physically built or re-built and so require planning permission and building consents, as this project emphasises, place-making also occurs through other acts. Some acts, which may be quite minor, require (in theory at least) permission either from the property owner or from regulatory agencies, for example, to put up signs, to paint murals, to garden or to serve alcohol or food, to run a taxi service and to play loud music (in that noise 'pollution' laws can be used to limit such sounds) These acts are all central to 'every day life on the street' even they are not covered by planning laws or practices (Valverde 2012).

Localism (under the 2011 Act and associated policy initiatives) does not provide possibilities for micro-local licensing (of street trading or entertainment venues), the location or operation of traffic management devices (such as zebra crossings or traffic lights) or differential noise regulation. In part this is because of the 'technical' knowledge said to underpin these types of regulation, while planning at the neighbourhood level is increasingly recognised as drawing on both expert and local (lay) knowledges. This project suggests that if initiatives on localism are to engage communities in positively improving their environment it is useful to broaden the range of considerations community participants can determine to include aesthetic and the construction of the 'felt environment'. Each of the groups involved in this project took a holistic approach to their patch and were often involved in negotiating with a maze of (ever-changing) local authority representatives to try to put their points of view across. This project suggested that if localism is to encompass place-making and not just

planning, broader participation should be both encouraged and facilitated.

Creativity and Materiality

In this project community representatives engaged with locality and place in a highly tangible way, working from the ground up and using the built environment as a fabric. In Newcastle, for example, the Elders Forum were successful in negotiating for a scheme where lavatories in libraries, shops and pubs could be used by citizens rather than customers introducing an illustrative sticker that is fixed to windows. They worked with the Council to improve the size of font used for signage to make it readable for older people and persuaded managers of the main shopping centre to introduce slip-proof mats to reduce the risk of older people falling, especially when it was wet. In Stokes Croft in Bristol, 'guerrilla urbanism' tactics were used to acquire verges, walls and abandoned buildings to creatively improve the fabric of the neighbourhood.

As this project reveals, place-making is highly material for community participants. These practices differ from planning practices by planners and councillors who use site visits and consultations to collect impressions, data and opinions that are ultimately recorded in documents (including plans, permissions and character assessments). Again this questions the relevance of placing planning processes at the heart of place-making initiatives when for community participants, planning is often more tangential and less 'every-day' with material, creative practices having greater and often more immediate impact. It also emphasises the importance of understanding both arts-led large scale regeneration (Florida 2005, Peck 2005) and everyday creative practices that are materially constructing places (Pinder 2005).

Creativity & Legal Geography

When creative acts are undertaken by negotiation with property owners and the local authority, as for example the Newcastle Elders Forum have done, they clearly 'legally construct' the City as well as spatially and socially. Once persuaded by local theatre and cartoons as well as documents and reports, the property owner has given permission to put in lavatory signs or slip-proof mats. The local authority takes on Elders' concerns when commissioning new buses or providing additional housing through its regulatory practices. This confirms the central premise of legal geography that sites are spatially, socially and legally constructed and that law also helps to construct the site (Blomley 2004, Cooper 1988, Delaney 2011). Legal practices are a central component of place-making.

As this project also illustrated, creativity and particularly public art (including street art) can also change the way legal decisions are made even if they are initially undertaken illegally or 'against the law' (Fritsvold 2009). If criminal consequences follow (as they did for painting the 'Welcome to Stokes Croft' sign and some graffiti) street art may decline. Where, however, as in Stokes Croft, the street art continues and is of a high quality, adding aesthetically to the neighbourhood, this may persuade decision-makers that they improve the fabric of the neighbourhood, changing the context within which governance decisions are made. This has led to graffiti being widely allowed with designated 'free walls' and with the Arts Council and Bristol City Council commissioning new street art. Decision-makers in Bristol accept graffiti's 'cultural value' throughout the city, including in Stokes Croft.

Both observance and non-observance of the law consequently construct the neighbourhood with legal practices central to ongoing place-making even if they are not always immediately evident. While legal aspects are evident when plans are made or planning permission is sought there is little provision here to take aesthetics or creativity into account. In particular, planning applications are determined in accordance with the local plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Yet local or cultural concerns are not material considerations. Some of the participants in this project were highly critical of this inability to refuse planning permissions to businesses (including Tescos or Costa Coffee) in their neighbourhoods. This led to a spirited discussion at the workshop and indicated the strength of some participants' feeling to see cultural concerns placed more squarely at the centre of planning law.

Creative Place-Making & Representation

Planning theory and practice has grappled with questions of representation for many years (Healey 1997, Sandercock 1997, Arnstein 1969) as well as the balance between the private landowner and the public interest (McAuslan 1980). Representative practices including consultation and a wide range of participatory techniques are undertaken at the local authority scale to source public opinions, particularly in the plan-making process. This project found, however, that these processes do not always engage local groups partly because participants felt that their voices were not being heard and partly because planning was just one aspect of place-making, focusing on a single one-off building or project, rather than the ongoing construction of city centres or neighbourhoods.

While communities' understandings of place-making were broader than planning processes, questions of representation remained significant. One of the tensions posed by these examples of 'DIY' place-making is how to negotiate between individual and collective senses of place. This is a live question in the context of artistic practices where art may not attract community-wide consensus. One person's Banksy may be another person's vandalism.

Understandings of the phenomenology of place (Relph 1976, Seamon 1996) are often personal. Yet people experience places both subjectively and as part of a collective 'ballet'. This raises questions about the extent to which there might be a 'collective' phenomenology of place and, if this can be captured, how such a shared experience might be represented. Such questions of capture are amplified when it is not just a question of representing how the place is currently felt, perceived and understood but also how it 'should' be. This can call on claims for authenticity or a *genius loci* (Norberg-Schulz 1980) which can privilege some actors over others.

For example, our research found that where a group acted entirely independently from existing local authority procedures with only limited engagement with other groups sometimes the most progress was achieved on the ground. In the case of Stokes Croft, for example, urban gardening, sign restoration and street art or graffiti drew on creative processes to significantly transform the neighbourhood. These changes, however, were not uncontested particularly as they were often undertaken by individuals who worked in the neighbourhood and had a longstanding stake there but did not live locally. This caused some concern to local residents, some of whom were not in favour of the graffiti and did not appreciate all of the artistic installations. In contrast, the Newcastle Elders Forum worked more transparently and collaboratively with Newcastle City Council and

achieved real successes in making the city more 'elder-friendly'. By becoming more closely allied with the Council however and falling in with more established processes and consultations, the group gradually became less creative, as it had to work less hard to gain the Council's attention.

This research suggests that the more formally representative a group becomes, falling in with established processes, the less scope there is for creativity. This can produce a tension. As in Stokes Croft, the most creative groups may themselves struggle with being truly representative of the neighbourhood as a whole and may impose their vision of a place on the neighbourhood. Certainly, all three organisations had acquired institutional personality. The People's Republic of Stokes Croft are a Community Interest Company, the Newcastle Elders Forum are a registered charity while Young   are a Registered Charity and a Company Limited by Guarantee. In practice, however, this paper documents appeared less important to how the group was governed than the ethos of the group. In the case of Young Cumbria it was also striking that some creative practices were seen as potentially discouraging to future funders.

This project started from the premise that conventional processes may not always acknowledge the realities of power nor the difficulties inherent in 'formal' practice and deliberative approaches (Brownhill and Carpenter, 2007) and that existing participatory mechanisms can exclude women and young people engaging overly with gatekeepers in society (Bolt et al, 2010). It found, however, that informal processes can also create informal cultural gatekeepers particularly in actively creative groups as in Stokes Croft. Live questions on the relationship between creativity and representation remain.

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Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

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