Cultural activism and the reconfiguring of public space and identity in The Bearpit, Bristol.

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1.0. Introduction.

1.1 The Bearpit.

The Bearpit (F*igures 1,2,4*), a sunken roundabout, is of interest to urban geography as an example of people reclaiming a neglected public space, working to create a 'welcoming, safe, diverse and inclusive' environment (BIG, 2015a). The reimagining of this city centre space around such ideals is led by 'The Bearpit Improvement Group' (BIG) whose work forms the focus of this research. The group consists of nine elected directors and further members[1] formed in 2010 under Henry Shaftoe, former urban-design professor.

BIG aim to improve this area that 'local government has treated as a sink, the sewer of the city of Bristol' (PRSC, 2015b). The volunteer group is the UK's first 'community action group' (CAG), granted semi-autonomy in managing The Bearpit, a 'community action zone' (CAZ). BIG work in collaboration with the council managing the space but have predominate decision-making power - the council treating BIG as a 'client' for whom it works (Crowther)[2].

BIG's formation was partly inspired by the grassroots regeneration in nearby Stokes Croft where 'The People's Republic of Stokes Croft' [3](PRSC) have worked since 2009 bettering the area. PRSC painted the streets with politically evoking graffiti, improving the space visually under a 'DIY', anti-establishment ethos working to 'shame the council' (Chalkley) into caring for the formerly impoverished area.

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[1] Members are approved by directors and attend and vote in the yearly AGM where directors are elected.They do not have formal voting power in the group, and generally do not attend board meetings. Some members are very involved, others are not.

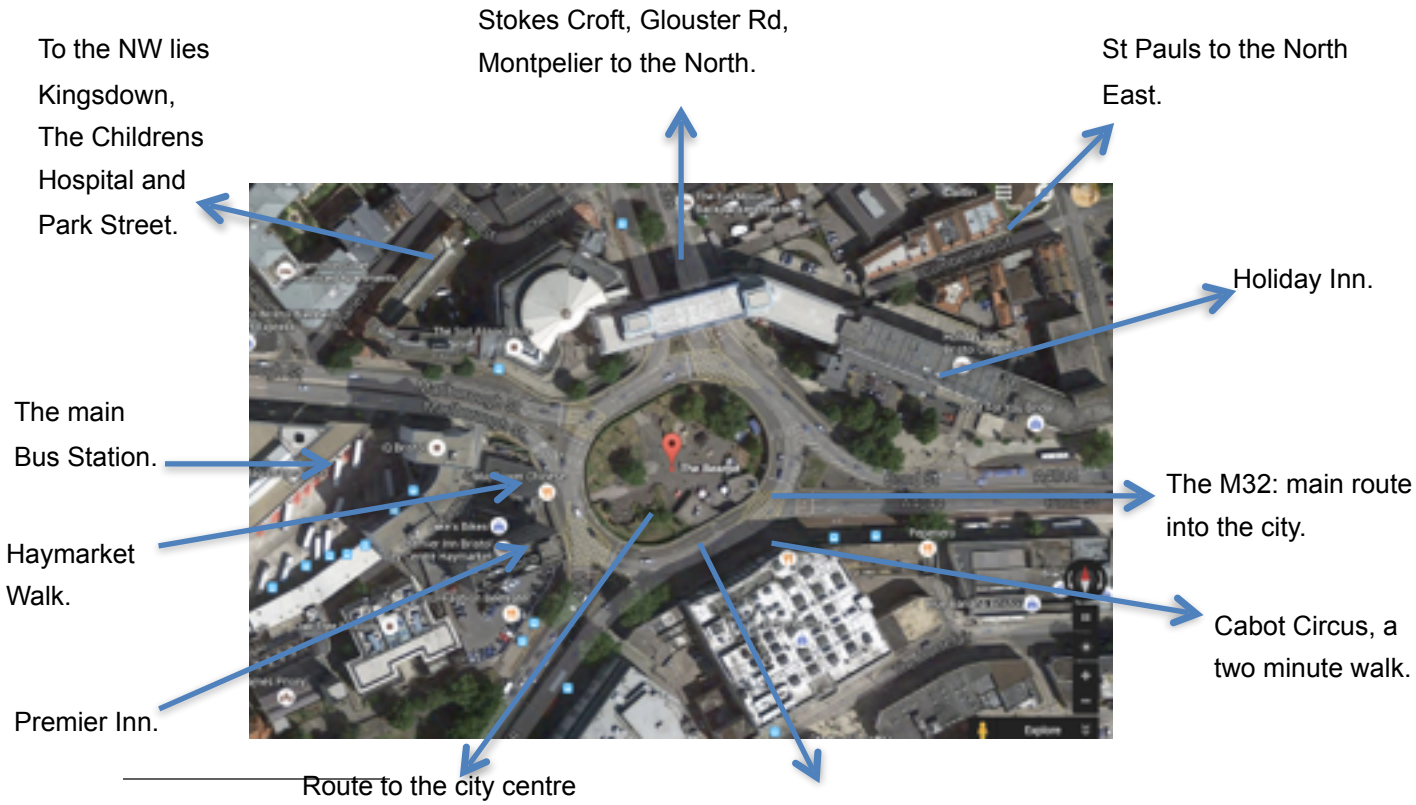
[2] Last names without a date refer to the respondent who I am quoting from the long interviews. Details of interviewees can be seen in appendix 9.

[3] A social enterprise now mainly run by one of the four founders, Chris Chawkley who is also a BIG director.

Stokes Croft is now desirable and arguably gentrified, yet operates semi-autonomously with radical visions that seek to run the area as a community commons. BIG and PRSC importantly differ, the former work *with* the council whereas the latter operate without permission, intentionally provoking the authorities. PRSC are directors in BIG but the board also hosts representatives of more traditional organisations like Bristol Civic Society.

Paramount to this analysis is a geographical understanding of The Bearpit, officially 'St James Barton Roundabout', which *Figures 1* and *2* visualise. The sunken roundabout is met when entering central Bristol from the M32 with the £500 million 'Cabot Circus' shopping development and high-street retail district 'Broadmead' lying directly to the south of the space. It is a main through-route for pedestrians and cyclists to and from the 'cultural quarter' and independent business areas to the north of 'Stokes Croft' and 'Gloucester Road'. To the east is Bristol's inner-city 'ghetto'[4] of St Pauls and leaving via the west subway of The Bearpit is 'Haymarket Walk' (*Figure 3)* and Bristol's bus station.

Figure 1: Annotated ariel view of The Bearpit and surrounding areas.



[4]Urban geography academics, Slater and Anderson (2012), argue that St Paul's is no longer a 'ghetto', but rather maintains the status as such, making it a 'reputational ghetto'.

Figure 2: Aerial views of the BP.

The old main commercial quarter, Broadmead directly South. Debenhams is the big white building.

Source: (Top Left) Bristol Post, January 13th 2013, (Top Right) http://www.davidgoddard.org/p455376052/h1a781538; 19th March 2016, (Bottom) 'The Bearpit, Bristol flickr.com; 16th March 2016.

Figure 3: Haymarket Walk ground floor (left) and three new restaurants and a vintage shop (right).

Source: My own.

Figure 4: Photographs of the space taken from inside The Bearpit.

Source: (Top Left) http://www.prsc.org.uk/mission/maps/; 19th March 2016; (Top Right) my own, (Bottom) 'The Bearpit, Bristol, Flickr.com.

Outlining a brief history of the space is also important because memory of the past is key to BIG's current work. The space has existed as 'The Bearpit' since 1967 when it was constructed in a redevelopment plan for the entire St James Barton area which had been bombed in 1940 by the German enemy campaign (BIG, 2015b). It has largely been ignored since hence its more recent history is overlooked. However, with the arrival of the Virgin Records store on Haymarket Walk in 1980, The Bearpit was a people in the underground art and music scenes in Bristol; Sean, a social drinker who had been coming to The Bearpit for forty years, recounted to me his time spent break-dancing in competitions in the space and hanging out with the Wild Bunch (now Massive Attack[5]) alongside other notable street artists and musicians - cultural icons Bristol is now famed for.

Figure 5: Punks outside the Virgin Record Store, 1977 which had moved from Haymarket Walk to Broadmead.

Source: 'http://www.bristolarchiverecords.com/photography/simon_edwards.html' ; 16th March 2016.

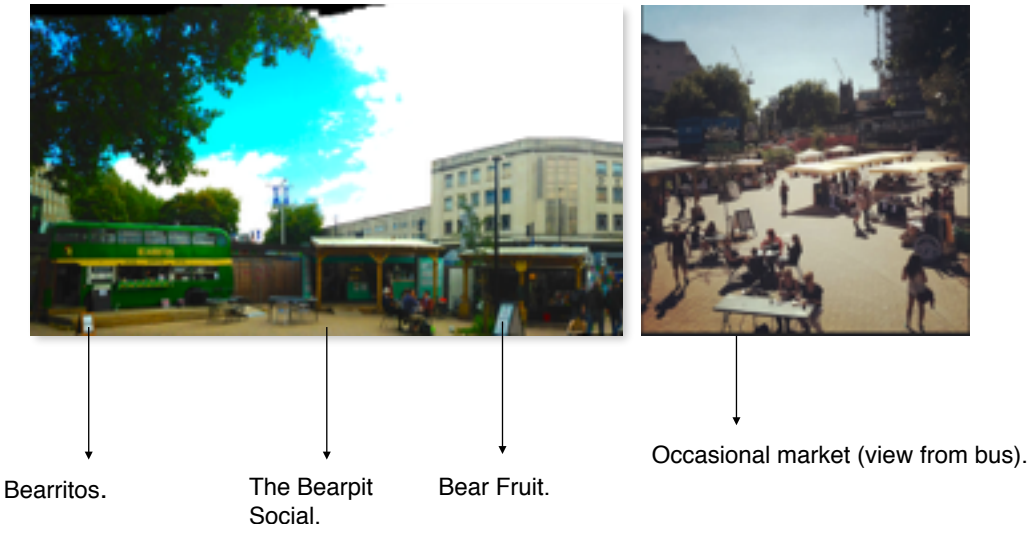
The name 'The Bearpit' is thought to either originate from street-cleaners in the space who thought it resembled one (BIG, 2015b) or because of 'its fearsome reputation' as a 'no man's land since its creation' (PRSC, 2015a). It is walked through by 14,000 people per day (Southwest Business, 17.08.12) and seen by thousands more drivers. The roundabout has been in disrepair for four decades, ironically ignored by local government whose headquarters overlooked the space until 1996. It has always been a

[5] Bristol band who founded trip-hop.

central congregation point for people with substance-abuse issues, the homeless and those pushed to the margins of society. This has in part cemented its long held reputation as a dangerous place despite relatively few reports of crime in such a central city location (BIG, 2015c).

BIG have now worked with the council for five years, improving the space incrementally under the five main streams ‘trade’, ‘art’, ‘play’, ‘greening’ and ‘heritage’. There are three local businesses in the space and periodic markets *(Figure 6*). ‘Bearritos’ is a Mexican cafe that runs from an old Bristol bus, run by a former BIG director. There is also a fruit and vegetable stall, ‘Bear Fruit’, and a coffee shop ‘The Bearpit Social’ which run inside shipping containers. Both owners are BIG directors but were traders beforehand.

Figure 6: Trade in The Bearpit, permanent traders (left) and ‘Co-Lab’, occasional Market.

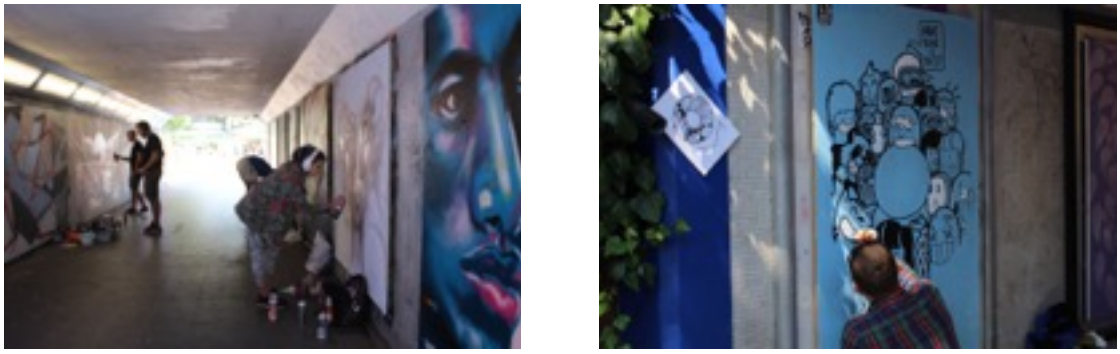


Source: ‘The Bearpit Bristol’, flickr.com; 16th March 2016.

Street art is central in reimagining the space, echoing techniques used in Stokes Croft - primarily because PRSCs founder is in charge of art in The Bearpit. Artists can paint boards in the subways (*Figure 7)* and ‘the cube’, a replica advertising board atop the toilets (thus at road level) is painted around a political ‘theme’ monthly. The two pages (*Figures 9 + 10)* following 1.1 display some of the art in The Bearpit (see also 3.1). Greening in the space is still underway, the end result being an ‘edible community

garden' while 'heritage' has created the 'heritage panels' in the space (*Figure 8).* A ping-pong table, life-size building blocks and plans for skate apparatus and life-size chess etc have been organised under 'play'.

Figure 7: Artists painting in The Bearpit at 'Co-Lab' local artist and trade Market, June 2015.



Source: My own.

Figure 8: Heritage Panels in The Bearpit (Left) and Table-tennis (right)

Source: My own and Bristol Post, 23rd October 2014.

Having hopefully provided a sense of The Bearpit, I will now look at the research questions that this dissertation aims to unpack in relation to this unusual public space. The main sections of this dissertation then explore the space as 'alternative', 'inclusive' and as a space that is feared.

1.2. Research Aims:

My first aim explores how artistic practice in The Bear Pit questions dominant spatial imaginaries and socio-political discourses. Politically charged street art organised at the bottom-up is a key technique in this regeneration and so I ask whether this effects how we think and live in society.

The second aim of this project explores how a sense of collective identity is produced in The Bearpit and whom this identity represents. Within this exclusion / inclusion will be considered, asking whether a truly ‘collective’ place can exist.

I will also investigate the relationship between BIG in The Bearpit and the local authorities with whom they work. Particularly focusing on how activist identities manage working with the council and whether this raises issues between community/ gentrification, public/private and solidarity/co-option.

Lastly through this work I contemplate whether cultural activism is a useful concept for understanding artistic practice in The Bearpit.

2.0 Literature review.

Richard Florida's 'creative city' manifesto, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), advocates reviving urban areas through top-down government initiatives attracting the 'creative class' - bringing 'technology, talent, and tolerance', prerequisites for thriving capitalist economies (Florida, 2002: 203). Many American cities have implemented plans based on the manifesto (Peck, 2005: 742) yet the strategy has drawn academic critique for inciting the consumption and commodification of creativity by capital, reinstating urban-elitist governance under the guise of grassroots effort (Peck, 2005: 767). My research presents a contrasting case-study where creativity is used to re-imagine urban space, *challenging* dominant political and spatial imaginaries from the grassroots.

Marxist geographer, David Harvey states that in such cultural resistance to capital there lies a 'key space of hope' for alternative global imaginaries, one in which 'the progressive forces of culture can seek to appropriate and undermine those of capital rather than the other way around' (2002: 109). This call is framed within the 'right to the city' literature in urban geography (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2012), a literature preoccupied with possibilities rather than actualities, speaking rarely of people taking, or attempting to take their right to the city, limiting the possibilities it advocates. In this gap my research presents an example of people taking the right to their city and their public space. Harvey's work demands widespread system change, which BIG's work does not fulfil, but instead The Bearpit demonstrates an important act of resistance at the local scale that Harvey often disregards. Here, neoliberalism is recognised as heterogeneous and unfolding differently at various spatial levels (Jessop, 2002; McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Ong, 2007; Peck and Tickell, 2002) rather than an all-encompassing homogenous system. It seems fitting then that resistance to neoliberalism is explored at various spatial levels rather than solely at the level of entire system change.

At the smaller scale (but not confined to the local) there exists a messy field of research around 'cultural activism' which Buser and Arthurs define as 'the use of arts or creative practice to challenge dominant discourses whilst offering alternative socio-political and spatial imaginaries in ways that challenge relationships between art, politics, participation and spectatorship' (2013: 2). This can entail anything from rebel clowning to subvertising, where irony and humour are common tactics used to 'disrupt commonly-held understandings and ways of constructing the world' (Buser and Arthurs, 2013:2). It

is practical and theoretical, the concept being built from its practice. Theoretically it is an elusive concept (Grindon, 2010: 21); rarely explicitly defined and commonly referred to as art-activism (Felshin, 1994), ethical spectacle (Duncombe, 2007) or activist-art (Raunig, 2007). The choice of 'cultural activism' here is not because of its 'rightness'; a fair argument could deem 'culture' too broad - Williams (1976) finding it one of the three hardest words to define in the English language. However it is the only phrase listed in the Oxford English Dictionary and is more commonly (although rarely) found in newspaper archives.

Cultural activism poses direct resistance to Florida's (2002) manifesto by reclaiming arts for the critique of global capitalism. This interplay of art and activism is not novel, rooted in the avant-garde movement of the Dadaists and Situationists International (SI) (Firat and Kuryel, 2010). SI's art used tactics of détournement and subversion, enacting an alternative to the regimentation of everyday life and to society as spectacle (Debord, 1967).

Verson traces art-activism back to *Diego Rivera* in 1920s post-revolutionary Mexico, who painted murals on public walls to illuminate pre-revolution indigenous life (2007: 178). Its roots are therefore relatively young, with Groys (2014) noting the importance of distinguishing cultural activism from critical art, the latter depicting a critique of socio-political problems without striving to alter such realities. Buser and Arthurs (2013) add that the identity movements of the 70s and 80s are prominent examples of art used to challenge politics. The 1968 student riots took critical art to the streets as a means of protest, *becoming* cultural activism (*Guardian, 23.05.11)*. The resurgence of cultural activism was found, again, in Mexico with the Zapatista Movement in Chiapas (Buser and Arthurs, 2013). It is here that many find the origin of 're-defined and revised ideas around justice and liberty for a post-modern age' (Buser and Arthurs, 2013: 4) which inspire modern cultural activist movements. Movements such as Occupy and the World Social Forum are often cited in cultural activism literature, their origin being in the anti-capitalism, alter-globalisation dialogue that Zapatista's revived. (Klein, 2012, Negri and Hardt, 2011.)

The above movements are crucial to the making of cultural activism and commonly share characteristics of mobility, temporality or transition. However Buser et al (2013) open exciting space in the cultural activism literature investigating it as situated and place-making; as a way to 'infuse place and urban space with meaning' on a permanent basis (2013: 624). It is on this theme that my research builds by looking at the situated form of cultural activism found in The Bearpit, Bristol. I also add to urban research focusing on mundane public spaces and the ways in which we negotiate, domesticate and are affected by everyday life (Koch and Latham, 2013).

Such cultural activist 'place-making' is a form of urban regeneration, yet can be seen as a 'counter-regeneration' movement, challenging typical large-scale, commerce driven revitalisations of city spaces (see Biddulph, 2011). Recent regeneration literature looks at issues relating to cultural activism, particularly the role of culture as a tool of redevelopment. Kana (2013) supports the use of culture as such a tool, advocating that it be embedded in *all* urban redevelopment. This work does not interrogate 'culture', rather focusing on efficient ways of rolling 'culture' out across cities. However, Dinardi (2015) warns against viewing culture as apolitical and the panacea to urban ills and instead advises questioning the politics of culture-led urban regeneration in regard to specific local contexts and actors. That culture has become 'a new orthodoxy by which cities seek to enhance their competitive position' (Miles and Paddison, 2005: 883) is something Dinardi (2015) urges not accept as given. This wariness of top-down cultural redevelopment is a foundation of cultural activism.

There is also focus on the governance behind regeneration in recent literature, with Biddulph (2011) exploring how urban design is led by private sector desires due a entrepreneurial governance turn that privatises public space. Barber (2010) explores how urban regeneration direction is dependent on wider institutional frameworks, especially in terms of sustainability where more traditional planning cultures are 'less conducive to sustainable place-making' (2010: 393). Thus, many of issues that cultural activism finds fault with are raised in recent regeneration literature. However, such literature examines problems without exploring alternatives - my research thus fits here, presenting an attempt to resist urban privatisation and commodification of culture.

As The Bearpit is a sunken roundabout, an unusual architectural form, it seems necessary to explore literature focusing on similar structures including underpasses, urban highways and subways. This field predominantly looks at re-imagining these relics of the 1970s, which problematically prioritised the vehicle over the human. Harnick and Welle (2007) explore the trend of turning highways into urban parks across America, where much of the research exists. Rochon (2013) similarly explores this in Toronto, Canada. Literature also looks at how underpasses are reconfigured as cafes, bars and nightclubs (Sohne, 2014; Green, 2015). The use of subways/underpasses as sites of art and light installations is also documented (Legge et al, 2004; *Chicago Tribune, 21.11.11*) but no literature exists specifically on sunken roundabouts – a rarer modernist phenomenon. This field, similarly to BIG, recognise subterranean design as problematic and in need of adaptation to function as good public space.

One issue associated with such underground design is fear - this often being behind redevelopments. Shaftoe believes that ‘no one should have to face a blind corner’ and doing so is inherently scary. Attributes such as this result in people avoiding these spaces and so Jane Jacob’s (1961) theory of ‘eyes on the street’ fails, heightening fear of and/or actual crime. Urban research today focuses on mitigating such fears, instead creating convivial public spaces where ‘people can feel sociable and festive’ (Shaftoe, 2008: 5). Shaftoe views convivial spaces as ones where people linger ‘because ultimately public spaces are about people’ (2008: 9). Alexander (1979) argues that convivial public space is successfully created when it is designed by the community - as in The Bearpit - rather than through the dominant ‘master-plan’.

Such convivial public space is argued to be one of the last remaining strongholds of democracy (Sennett, 1970; Carr et al, 1992; Shaftoe, 2008) and Worpole and Greenhalgh (1996) believe it is one of the few places where we ‘can encounter difference and learn to understand and tolerate other people’ (cited in Shaftoe, 2008: 5). Shaftoe (2008) advises inclusive design when creating convivial space, contrary to mainstream urban planning that designs out ‘the other’ (Said, 1978). This is exemplified by the not-so-public spaces that Minton (2009) argues exist in city shopping districts where private corporations consume public space, restricting the way we use even the pavements.

However, Amin states that it is ‘too heroic a leap to assume that making a city’s public spaces more vibrant and inclusive will improve urban democracy’ (2008: 7) instead suggesting that urban public spaces are ‘politically modest… but still full of collective promise’ (2008: 8). He disagrees for example with Minton that privatised spaces cannot be spaces of collective social interaction and inquisitiveness. Amin (2008) talks specifically about the role of art in creating convivial public space, stating that it is a ‘powerful signal of the kind of urban public culture that is officially desired in a city’ (2008: 17) but that its potential for bringing real change is elusive.

Pinder voices similar concerns but calls for attention to how creativity is used to seek and promote greater democracy in city spaces (2008: 731). This research follows that call, exploring whether public spaces can be democratic and whether creativity enables this in The Bearpit. It hopes to build on gaps in the literature by offering an example of an alternative to dominant creative city trends, as exemplifying taking ones right to the city, and by building on the small field of literature that deals with cultural activism and the smaller field exploring it as place-making. The next section outlines the data collection and analysis used to explore ideas outlined above.

3.0 Methodology.

3.1 Collection.

My research draws on various methods including long-interviews, short-interviews and mixed observation strategies. My main method was in-depth semi-structured interviews (appendix 7) with ten current and former BIG directors and members. These averaged fifty minutes, taking a flexible funnel-shaped structure (appendix1) allowing the interviewee to 'develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher' (Denscombe, 2007:167). This was important to fully understand BIG's complex work in the space.

Prior to interviews I attended board meetings and spent time in The Bearpit with some interviewees, building rapport and trust allowing for more open dialogue. The interviews centred around key themes but questions were open-ended, allowing thorough exploration of ideas and fostering the grounded nature of this research. I recorded the interviews, transcribing shortly after and kept an interview diary detailing the experience in general.

I spoke to most of the group including the two ideologically divergent directors - those representing Bristol Civic Society and PRSC, so securing representative data. Other than directors/members I interviewed BIG's founder and the council liaison officer, providing more detached perspectives. I secured access through a gatekeeper, then Chair of the group, and was invited to a board meeting to propose the research - the board deciding I could proceed. I contacted people individually to arrange interviews, some via email with attached research outline (appendices 2) some in person (the traders) securing them was unproblematic.

As well as in-depth interviews, I carried out 35 short-interviews (appendix 8) with members of the public in The Bearpit, varying in length from two to fifteen minutes. These were undertaken at various sites across the space attempting to intercept people commuting. *Figure*11 shows the sign I used to 'advertise' my research - making clear I wasn't selling things. I conducted 1/3 during a market where I spoke with people who were spending time in the space. All took place during the day, those at the market in

late afternoon and those otherwise *between* rush hours (lunch time and commutes to/ from work) as during these periods people didn't stop. I did not conduct any during the evening which may have effected the type of people I interviewed.

Figure 11 : A board advertising my 'survey'.

The short-interviews were intentionally *not* questionnaires and were flexible (around themes) allowing greater exploration of ideas than a rigid set of simple questions which can 'force…the respondents answers into particular categories' (Valentine, 1997:110). I created two structures, one for those in the space for the first time, and another for regular users (appendix 3). I recorded (with permission) many of the interviews, otherwise taking notes and expanding afterward. I asked respondents to fill in their details (appendix 4) to analyse the extent to which I interviewed a representative sample to feedback to BIG.

Before undertaking surveys I asked the traders for input wanting to be useful to them and to gain advice from those who spent most time in the space. One trader put me in touch with someone who had conducted the last survey in The Bearpit (2013) who I met to obtain advice and data, demonstrating the 'snowballing effect' (Valentine, 1997). I mirrored some questions in the previous survey, allowing for comparison that BIG had expressed would be helpful.

I further conducted ethnography, or 'the work of describing culture' (Spradley, 1980: 3) whereby the 'researcher must become student' (Spradley, 1980: 4); immersing oneself in

the environment to learn from it. This intended to be participant observation but became a combination of participatory and straight for logistical reasons. The participatory observation allowed me to ‘learn about a particular socio-cultural space and those that inhabit it by taking part and continually reflecting on what is happening’ (Walsh, 2009: 77). I conducted this at ‘Art in The Bearpit’ events where I immersed myself in the activities. I also worked on a market-stall for a day, allowing insight into trade in The Bearpit. In these scenarios I discreetly took notes on my phone, expanding afterward. The board meetings were semi-participatory, mainly I overtly took notes and observed, but was occasionally asked my opinion.

I undertook straight observation in the space where I simply considered and recorded my surroundings. This was hugely beneficial in such a dynamic space as it allowed me, by ‘remaining in the background’ to observe ‘normal’ behaviour that is not affected by the presence of a researcher (Kitchen and Tate, 2000: 221). However this method can be problematic as it is ‘likely to lead to researchers imposing their own reality on the social world they seek to understand’ (May, 2003: 164). I tried to corroborate analysis from this observation with long-interview data to mitigate this.

Finally, in combination with short-interviews I took photos of respondents holding a board with a word(s) written on it that was their response to the question ‘what is The Bearpit to you?’. These are inserted in this work and should be read as a parallel narrative to the written analysis, similarly to the art throughout (see *Figures 9, 10 & 28.*)

3.2 Analysis.

After transcribing I annotated scripts with ‘memos’ and ‘ideas’ which Kitchin and Tate suggest is useful to ‘open the data up and start the process of analysis in earnest’ (2000: 237) - starting description immediately. This highlighted emerging themes, allowing time to reflect on these and develop links between scripts. To formally code I manually allocated what Cope calls ‘descriptive’ codes ‘that appear in the text’ (2003: 452) or ‘emic’ codes (Crang,1997: 189). I then applied ‘etic codes’ (Crang,1997: 189) that ‘emerge from a second level of coding that comes after much reflection on descriptive codes and a return to the theoretical literature’ (Cope, 2003: 452). From these I identified

the key themes; alternatives, public space and inclusion, fear, activism and art which I base this dissertation around.

3.3. Limitations and ethical issues.

I encountered few limitations securing access and did not find ethical issues arose in long-interviews. I did not detect a researcher-researched power imbalance, all of the interviewees being respected professionals and holding greater influence than myself. At the beginning of interviews I outlined intentions for the research, explained they could be anonymous sporadically or throughout, and that I would not use anything they wished me not too.

In conducting the shorter-interviews and participant observation, there was greater cause to acknowledge the effects of my positionally and be situated as I spoke with diverse peoples from various backgrounds. Here I followed Valentine's advice to 'reflect on who you are and how your identity will shape the interactions you have with others' (1997:113). The choice of the respondent to stop for the short-interviews meant agency was largely in their hands, something further encouraged by the flexibility of the interview.

I did however feel a power imbalance in relation to the more disadvantaged users of the space (substance abusers, the homeless etc) who I felt perceived my presence in the space as intrusive and 'important'. Because restrictions by UCL prevented me from engaging with those considered 'vulnerable' divide was heightened, something I would ideally have attempted to mitigate by involving such groups.

During participatory observation at an event ethical issues existed as I chose not to reveal that I was carrying out research - the point of the event being to sit with strangers at a picnic. I felt disclosing my link to the space and that I was observing would affect the aim of the event. However hiding my identity may have caused people to tell me things they otherwise would not have (Walsh, 2009).

I recorded my experiences of data collection in a journal (appendix 6) attempting to reflect on how 'the sort of knowledge made depends on who its makers are' (Rose,

1997:307). In reflection, I hope to counter performing a ‘god-trick’ (Harraway, 1988: 581), however, Rose notes that to be ‘so fully self-conscious and self-aware of the field and ones position…suggests a similar god(dess) trick’ (Cited in Mohammed, 2001: 108). Thus I recognise and do not assume that ‘transparent reflexivity assumes messiness can be fully understood’ (Rose, 1997: 314).

I will now move to analysing the data collected using these methods, firstly looking at The Bearpit as alternative. I will then explore BIG’s inclusive approach to public space, lastly focusing on fear. Throughout these sections analysis of art and activism is interwoven, reflecting the entanglement of art and activism with the other themes in reality.

4.0. The Bearpit: an alternative space?

A common theme across interviews conducted with BIG was desire for *alternative* or *different* space. Such difference was recognised by fifteen members of the public, four perceiving it negatively. Complexity lies then, in the various meanings attributed to 'difference' or 'alternative' by those creating and/or experiencing it, an ambiguity this section unravels. Importantly, a theme arising from this research was that anything different to what the space had been - what many described as 'heads down, earphones in, walk fast' (Delogu) was an improvement.

4.1 An alternative to corporate space.

'I mean yeah it's right to use it to try and tell the other side of the story, the rest of the city projects a corporate view and it's a thing (TTIP) that will affect us all not just a few of us.' (Kilroe)

Figure 12: TTIP murals on 'the cube' in The Bearpit, September 2015.

Source: 'Art in The Bearpit' flickr.com; 16th March 2016.

Figure12 depicts murals on 'the cube' as part of the 'Stop TTIP[6]' campaign - the bottom-right showing the protest that ran alongside the artwork in The Bearpit[7]. The placing of the cube creates stark contrast between the alternative political messages and corporate space behind (bottom-right), emphasised by the display mimicking corporate advertising. This subverts dominant techniques of control by claiming such methods for counter-movements, tactics used by SI, Dadaism and Socialist Realism (Verson, 2007). The above quote from the BIG director who organised the TTIP display echoes a unanimous belief in BIG opposing corporate dominance. Another director similarly expressed desire for equality of voice in Bristol, stating 'billboards should be fifty-fifty for commerce and for public amenity' (Chalkley).

Recognising the potential of this advertising space, BIG was offered and rejected £40,000 a year from a corporation to rent the cube. Beyond highlighting a desire to advertise here, this shows an example of capitalism attempting to subsume everything, even that which seeks to resist it (Hardt and Negri, 1994:15). This expands on original Marxian notions of capitalism subsuming labour. This is exemplified in *Figure13* showing graffiti consumed by multi-national corporations promoting capitalism, ironically an art founded as a voice for those marginalised by the exclusionary tendencies of such a system.

However, this subsumption is a dynamic relationship - the legal space created by corporations for a typically illegal art form that turns 'graffiti' into 'street art' (Guardian, 25.01.16) is subverted by BIG who harness this, using it to display alternative messages in public space legally.

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[6] TTIP stands for The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and is a series of negotiations between the EU and US which would create a bi-lateral trade agreement that would reduce the regulatory barriers to trade for big business. If countries did not comply with reduced restrictions after signing the deal big business would be able to sue the government of said nation.

[7] BIG have a condition that if the cube is used to portray a political message there should be an accompanying movement in the space to ensure cohesion between art and the space, and art and action.

Figure 13: Advertising campaigns by TNCs that use graffiti. (Crew: TATS CRU NYC)

BP - location N/A.

Pepsi campaign Moscow, Russia.

Bayer Aspirin campaign in a Romanian Subway.

Coca Cola, location N/A.

Source: 'Graffiti Ads', http://www.businessinsider.com/graffiti-mural-guerrilla-advertising-2011-10?op=1&IR=T; 16th March 2016.

One board member felt this attempt to acquire the cube demonstrated the *'power of visual images in a public space'* (Chalkley), stating that its worth of £40,000 to corporations meant the alternative messages were worth the equivalent in their ability to influence. Eight members of the public found that alternative messages such as those on the cube (*Figure*10) could affect the way people think and act, while two felt they could not, three being unsure. Commonly people cited the ability of these images to 'plant a seed' inspiring thought and action. Ingram advises a 'more critical' approach toward the perceived 'emancipatory' powers of art (2016: 2) and so I do not claim that art *does* equal change. However, there existed an optimism amongst respondents in The Bearpit about the potential of art to at least make people *think.*

In the example of the cube we see a successful act of resistance against the processes of subsumption by capital which Hardt and Negri (1994) suggest subsumes everything. This is achieved claiming typical capitalist technologies of governance (the advert), disrupting what can be seen as a powerful-powerless dichotomy between capitalist subsumption and that which is subsumed.

4.2 Alternative: the local economy.

Resisting corporate consumerism is unanimous in BIG, with all members instead supporting a local economy (*Figure14)*, something pioneered in Bristol through the introduction of the UK's first city-wide currency, The Bristol Pound[8]. BIG's second priority in their 'future strategy' is to generate revenue which is intended to be reinvested in the project, leading to 'self sufficiency' (Chalkley). However, an economy of sorts is still supported, distinguishing this alternative from more radical post-economy visions (Escobar, 1995).

Figure 14: Art in The Bearpit encouraging people to 'go local'.

'Middle Class' graffitied here, showing the tension between ideas of gentrification and shopping local.

[8] This can be spent only in Bristol with collaborating businesses such as those in The Bearpit, and is intended to promote the local economy.

One director however voiced concern about the way in which the group operated within the norm bounds of economics by operating as a 'Community Interest Company', stating that:

*'I think it's a pity that it has that sort of company commercial veneer attached to it, rather than just devolving it to the community for the community. It's the idea of it being a commercial entity, even if it's a not for profit commercial entity, I think its damaging to people's headspace. More of the cities … are taken over by big developers they are taking over the pavements and roads and everything! I think having it called a company, whatever sort of company, implies that it's part of that somehow. So it doesn't belong to everybody it belongs to the people who run the company.' (*Kilroe)

This reflection speaks to the role of discourses in shaping actions, with Kilroe showing that even within a 'community interest' framework, the structure in which BIG is created, imagined and lived is embedded in the very ideas it opposes. Such an idea evokes Marx's theories of ideology whereby the ideas of the ruling class have 'control over the means of mental production' (1932:19), limiting the way we think in everyday life. Acting within these boundaries means that the private interests of companies are not disrupted and therefore common-sense political thought (ideology) is not challenged. The group's attempt to challenge such privatisation is perhaps limited by the way in which they have themselves been created.

However, speaking to the traders there was a strong belief that the space should not be commercial led, rather a space balanced in its different uses to avoid 'people feeling like they have to buy something coming to the space' (Delogu). Per contra, one director felt that the traders wanted it to be 'shiny… like Covent Garden' (Kilroe), a more upmarket, corporate space in central London. This highlights a divergence, or at least lack of communication around what it is that the space should be under the broad ideal of it as alternative to corporate space.

Concerns that such 'alternative' visions could lead to a gentrified space were voiced by some of the public and indeed, urban regeneration processes are often guilty of such (see Ley, 2003; Cameron, 2005; Rousseau, 2009; Glass, 1964). One commuter in the space hoped The Bearpit 'didn't go the way of East Village'[9] where 'it's all cleaned up

[9] East Village, New York.

and it's not the same' (5)[10]. However, most people felt trade in the space was positive with eleven respondents praising current establishments, while ten felt that there should be *more* trade in The Bearpit, mostly as markets.

While an increasing focus on trade could lead to Zukin's 'pacification by cappuccino' (1995: 28), BIG overtly attempting to resist such processes distinguishes this urban regeneration from many. The Bearpit also exemplifies that looking *beyond* gentrification can be helpful in understanding more complex micro-geographies of resistance and urban regeneration. Koch and Latham pioneer this move challenging the binary of public-private, advocating a 'move beyond conceptualisations… that pose them as distinct opposites' (2013: 14) and instead toward an understanding of 'the public-ness of space as defined by how the relationship between the two is configured' (2013: 14). Similarly the gentrified-not gentrified binary may now be too simplistic.

4.3 Alternative to the system.

Another interpretation of 'alternative' was creating an alternative to the political system in a more encompassing way than remaking the local. However, 'system change' had various interpretations in itself, some perceiving it as increased devolution and bottom-up decision-making, while others sought broader structural changes. Below I recount an event in The Bearpit through which I explore how the 'alternative' narrative in this research is implemented, contested and experienced. 'An Everyday Party' (*Figure15)* was part of the Hand in Glove[11] programme of performing arts events that ran monthly over the summer. The one-off event, organised by artist Megan Clark-Bagnall, intended to turn the mundane experience of commuting into celebration.

Figure 15: Pictures from 'An Everyday Party'.

[10] Numbers (1-35) are used to refer to a respondent from the public, numbered by order.

[11] Hand in Glove are an organisation of artists and curators that facilitate spaces for artists to conduct work that particularly emphasises 'process, dialogue and exchange' (HIG). They were commissioned to run 'Art in The Bearpit', a series of performative events over the summer of 2015.

'An Everyday Party'

It was not in fact a typical day in The Bearpit, it was 'An Everyday Party' which, contrary to what the title suggests, is not everyday. The event sought to turn what we consider 'the everyday' or mundane into a celebration. Starting at 4.30pm it interrupted commuters in their routinised journey home with colour, fun and participation. There was a candy floss making station, a 'draw a stranger' table, a mini piano and 'party hat' making *(Figure 15)* There was a place to grab a balloon, tie it to a fence and on it anonymously write a message of what The Bearpit meant to you. The cake making station depended on those bringing back a party bag, handed out during the morning commute, each with an ingredient that when put with others, created a cake - a collective endeavour. It was jovial and it was *different;* normality was effectively disrupted. The first balloon I looked at said *'a transitory space, a heterotopia'* the

4.4. Heterotopia.

The event above disrupted the everyday, something advocated by Lefebvre (1947) as fundamental in resisting capitalism that so structures and systematises the 'everyday'. That a commuter (unknown) wrote on a balloon that The Bearpit was 'transitory', a 'heterotopia' is particularly notable. Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia' deems them 'other spaces' (1986:4), places that 'are something like counter-sites…in which the real sites… are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted' (1986: 3). Foucault states that utopias are nowhere and thus a heterotopia is rather an 'effectively enacted utopia' (1986: 3). The transient quality that is noted eludes to what Foucault writes is 'time in its most flowing' akin to a festival (1986: 7). The 'festival' is also something Henri Lefebvre mused on, speaking of 'revolution-as-festival' (1965: 21) which provided 'a term through which to imagine social change founded on the aesthetic' (Grindon, 2013: 220), this mirroring the art-activism in The Bearpit.

Such experience of the space is interesting because my experience of The Bearpit, and basis on which to conduct this research was a similar one. I felt that the work of reimagining 'utopia' by David Pinder (2005) and Lefebvre (1974) was something that The Bearpit could exemplify. A similar analysis of Foucault's (1986) 'heterotopia' is seen in Lefebvre's (1974) notion of 'differential space' that resists 'abstract spaces' of capitalism.

The Bearpit can be interpreted as such a differential space that ‘accentuates difference’ from inside what one could call the ‘ultimate’ abstract space - a sunken roundabout prioritising the vehicle over the body. Seen at once as the similar but different ideas of ‘heterotopia’ and ‘differential space’ reflects the similar but different notions of ‘alternative’ concerning The Bearpit.

4.5 Heterotopia-making: negotiating perceptions of the alternative.

Creating a *different* space is a collective aim yet the extent and direction of difference is contested within BIG. Chalkley is overt in his call for radical global system change and views The Bearpit as an opportunity for creating a ‘commons’ disproves Garrett Hardin’s (1968) ’Tragedy of the Commons’ theory (Chalkley) which propounds the inevitability of self-interest ruining the common good. Chalkley found that The Bearpit could be:

‘a commons where working and cooperating between everybody that uses it means that we get to a point where everybody wins, without the law. That is a very bold political experiment because there are a few examples in the UK of public space being treated this way and if we can get that to work then there is the possibility, of taking back throughout the city.’

This statement mirrors calls by Lefebvre (1968) and Harvey (2012) for people to take their ‘right to the city’, showing overtly political intentions for the space. Such political desires are not supported by everyone, with some members expressing firm views *against* use of the space for political ends (Morris), highlighting the contested nature of heterotopia-making.

However despite disagreement, the group commonly aspire ‘to work toward improvement of this space for everyone’ (Halpenny) something reiterated by all directors, even those with seemingly irreconcilable visions for the space. In fact, the importance of having such different people and opinions on the board was seen as positive by all of BIG interviewees who felt that negotiation led to a more diverse space. Arguably such negotiation, and often compromise, better represents the public’s views as it creates a space where elements of the radical, the more conservative and the

middle-ground exist harmoniously side by side. The founder of the group stated that bringing together different views[12] was deliberate, creating a space that was not a continuation of another, but a hybrid area negotiating various identities (Shaftoe). Shaftoe noted that 'to have a bit of anarchy is great' (from PRSC) but to have a working relationship with the council 'you can't just be a bunch of anarchists' but combining seemingly incompatible people engenders said relationship. The multi-faceted notion of alternative that is negotiated in the space is rendered possible by the way in which such alternative (to each other) people were brought together.

4.6 Alternative in devolution.

BIG's alternativeness also lies in its form as CAG, a first of its kind in the UK and a contrast to the UK's highly centralised political system. Speaking to the public about their thoughts on the devolved power, thirteen (of nineteen asked) viewed devolution to the hyper-local as positive, one person wanting more openness 'so that it was more of a cooperative' (11). Two people disagreed with this, believing that 'somebody has to have a vision, somebody has to hold it' (16), with another (former board member) voicing concern that wide participation can mean such compromise that 'it ends up a bit shit, frankly' (35). These findings show support for more representative models of decision-making and alternatives that hand power to the people. Creating alternatives in the wider system may be enabled by making changes within the local, something foreseen by BIG who intend to create a blueprint guiding others claiming their urban public spaces.

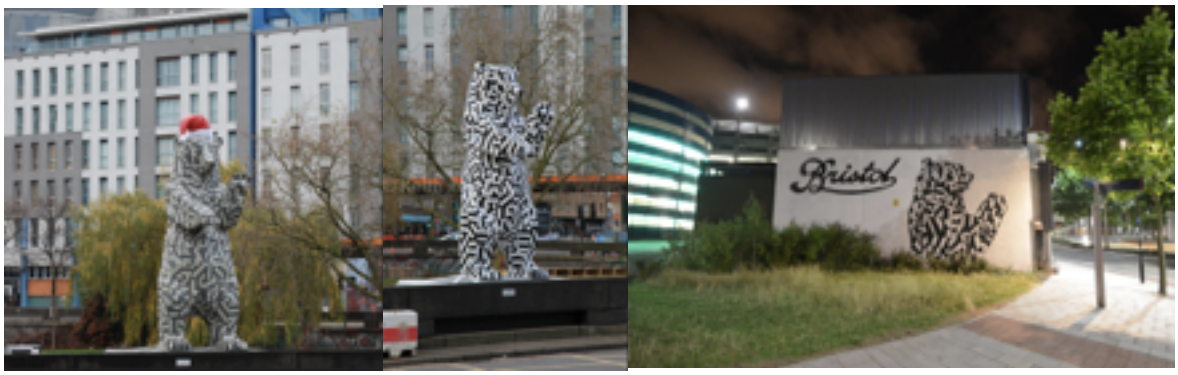
4.7 Situating the alternative.

Situating The Bearpit in its Bristolian context is important in understanding influences on the space. Drawing likeness with a wider alternativeness in Bristol was raised commonly across my research, with people noting a creative and/or politically alternative 'vibe' in the city. The Bearpit was cited as symbolic of this alternative sphere (4,23,26), suggesting in part that it has become a brand. This is demonstrated by the 12ft sculpture of 'Ursa Bear' (*Figure16)* in the space, who has become a *motif* representing Bristol, welcoming people to the city from the motorway and printed on tourist merchandise *(Figure17)*. Many recognised a link between creativity and the alternative in Bristol,

[12] As stated previously, PRSC are overtly radical and left-wing, the Civil Society (also represented in BIG) are not outwardly political and are conservative/traditional in their work.

challenging Florida' *Creative Cities* (2001) doctrine which rather views creativity as a tool in boosting capitalist economies.

Figure 16: Ursa Bear, designed by local artist, Jamie Gillman. Made from locally discarded materials. Right: Ursa Bear from the motorway, Left: Mural seen when entering Bristol from the M32.



Source: 'Ursa Bear, The Bearpit', flickr.com; 16th March 2016.

Figure 17: Ursa Bear on Tourist Merchandise, Screen Print (Left) and Mug (Right).

Source: 'Shop PRSC', http://www.prsc.org.uk/prsc-shop/; 16th March 2016.

While people identified this link between creativity and alternativeness in the present, surprisingly few spoke of Bristol's history in fostering challenging political street art, most famously seen in the work of Bristol artist Banksy. This was rarely acknowledged even in interviews with BIG, perhaps suggesting that political art in Bristol is seen as typical and taken for granted. This raises questions around whether familiarity of alternative

messages creates an apathy toward them, becoming just part of the background. Such a question could warrant further research.

Bristol also has a lesser acknowledged ‘alternative’ history rooted in social movement protest (*Figure18)* such as the 1793 and 1831 riots, the Old Market riots of 1932, the Hartcliffe riots of 1932, the St Paul’s 1980 and 1987 riots and the anti-Tesco riots in 2011. Speaking about this history, one board member identified a common theme - ‘fighting for equality of voice in the city’ (Chalkley), something continued in The Bearpit. Another board member looked to the anti-slavery movement in Bristol, a city built on the slave trade. Kilroe stated that a 20,000 strong crowd gathered to hear an anti-slavery sermon by founder of Methodism John Wesley in 1788, demonstrating Bristol having ‘long had revolutionary grassroots movements arising against injustices’ (Kilroe) which Kilroe found gave her ‘a tiny bit of hope’ for the present.

Figure 18: Anti-Apartheid protest in The Bearpit, 1985.

Source: ‘Beezer’, http://www.timeout.com/bristol/art/19-amazing-images-of-1980s-bristol-by-beezer'; 19th March 2016.

This history of alternative should inform the way we *now* think about the alternative in Bristol and in The Bearpit. It is not to say that without such history places cannot affect change; rather that understanding the roots of change and the ways in which memory still affects common-sense is invaluable. Banksy’s ‘Mild Mild West’ [13](*Figure19*) depicts the enduring legacy of the fight against police brutality during the rave era, becoming relevant during the Tesco riots for which the artist created a piece to reflect the protest

[13] Located in Stokes Croft on the wall of a now newsagents, painted in 1999.

and police violence[14] (*Figure20*). This shows how art and history intertwine and reflect each other in the city. It also demonstrates the ability of art to cement the memory of protest and related hopes for an alternative life, arguably inspiring action in the present.

Figure 19: Original 'Mild Mild West', Bansky in Stokes Croft, Bristol.

Figure 20: 2011 'Boycott Tesco Riots' and Banksy's response to the protests (right).

Source: 'Mild Mild West', flickr.com;16th March 2016. (Left) and 'Tesco Riots, Banksy', flickr.com; 16th March 2016.

4.9 Summary.

There are many interpretations of the broad 'alternative' vision for the The Bearpit. However, this is beneficial as it creates an array of alternatives at various levels, creating a space not dominated by one vision. The negotiation of different desires for the space produces severe frustrations in BIG, yet as recognised by the interviewees, it is this ability to accept difference that makes The Bearpit successful as a place that is at once alternative *and* inclusive.

[14] Tesco riots occurred on 21st April 2011 on Stokes Croft as part of the Boycott-Tesco campaign. Vast police forces were deployed (some from Wales) and the police were widely deemed to have been heavy handed.

5.0. Public space and inclusivity.

The idea that space is socially produced and thus political (Lefebvre, 1974) strongly influences human geography. Building on Gramsci's (1971) notions of ruling-class hegemony, Lefebvre argued that space was 'a means of control, and hence of domination, of power' (1974: 26). However, space is also seen as having counter-hegemonic capacity (Lefebvre, 1974; Foucault, 1986) and democratic potential, fostering diversity and participation (Sennett, 1970). This section looks at how BIG's work tries to create democratic, inclusive space that opposes the hegemonic, exclusive formation of public space.

5.1 Design: 'out of sight out of mind'?

'Designing people out' is an exclusive approach to city planning, deliberately working to remove certain groups such as skateboarders, gatherings of youths and/or rough sleepers etc. (Boden, 2001). *Figure 21* shows architecture built to exclude such groups using curved benches, individual seats and spikes.

Figure 21: Examples of exclusionary architecture.

Source:
'Exclusionary Architecture; http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/jun/12/anti-homeless-spikes-latest-defensive-urban-architecture; 16th March 2016.

This exclusion is inherently political, intentionally marginalising those deemed different to the 'norm' in society, concurrently creating binary perceptions of normal-abnormal. The marginalisation of who Edward Said (1978) conceptualises as 'the other', is distinctly spatial, forcing stigmatised bodies to peripheral geographic and economically disadvantaged areas. This spatial isolation at once constitutes and reflects the socio-political abandonment of those presented as harmfully different to ourselves. This approach to architecture is bound to the privatisation of public space, where even 'public'

streets around shops are controlled, dictating what bodies may use these spaces and how (Minton, 2009).

Such exclusionary design existed in The Bearpit prior to BIG, with anti-sleeping chairs and talking-CCTV (*Figure22*) (from which someone could shout at people misbehaving). The CCTV is reminiscent of 'Big Brother' in Orwell's (1949) dystopian novel, '1984', and Jeremy Bentham's (1791) 'Panopticon'. Foucault (1975) uses the Panopticon as an analogy for modern disciplinary power whereby the feeling of always being watched creates disciplined bodies .

Figure 22: 'Talking CCTV' camera, The Bearpit, 2011.

The official approach of 'scorched earth, make this place so unpleasant that even street drinkers don't want to drink in it' (Shaftoe) has been abandoned by BIG. Instead, attempting to create an inclusive space they replaced the anti-sleep benches and talking-CCTV with moveable chairs and picnic tables, encouraging congregation. Changes in the materiality of The Bearpit are small but significant in their message: they are no longer actively excluding certain bodies from the space.

'Play' has also been a strategy for encouraging gatherings and use of the space by diverse communities. The blocks in *Figure 23* were a research experiment in The Bearpit, organised by head of play and urban-design academic Michael Buser, he explained that 'play' was important in:

'giving people an opportunity to use the space in their own way… and to not to be too functional about it. And I think when we did these play blocks… one of the ideas was to let people do what they wanted with them. And to introduce some agency, and not be so prescriptive about what should happen in a public space. Most public space are quite prescriptive, and lots of them are about what you're allowed to do, or where, so playful activities can give you some way to use the space to appropriate it for your own… use' .

Figure 23: Play blocks being used in The Bearpit.

Source: Buser.M http://www.culturalactivism.org.uk/community/; 16th March 2016.

During my time on the ground I saw the blocks stacked five on top of each other, arranged in shapes, spelling out words, used as chairs, as a set for a photoshoot and simply as colourful obstacles dotted around The Bearpit. None of the blocks have been stolen despite being left out 24 hours a day, and they are used constantly in mundane and creative practice. The figure shows a mixture of use, bottom left is unclear but shows the blocks being used for parkour.

Buser's ideas express the importance of agency in inclusivity, highlighting play as generative of such freedoms. The project intended to disrupt everyday life similarly to the Situationists International, showing cross-over between 'play' and artistic-practice and demonstrating how art can work 'to redistribute the domain of the sensible' (Rancière, 2004), challenging dominant perceptions of life. These examples show how in a variety of prosaic and playful ways BIG have altered the materiality of The Bearpit, creating greater inclusivity. The following case-study looks at the major architectural change in the space, analysing its message concerning inclusivity.

5.2 'The Walkway' development.

The now complete walkway (*Figures 24 & 25)* was under construction during my

research, imagined and designed by founder of BIG, Henry Shaftoe, who felt that a surface level route into the space was essential because:

'no one should be forced to face a blind corner in the tunnels … you shouldn't force people to go through and be fearful like that… there were stories about people taking huge detours around the back just to avoid it, that's just not ok.' (Shaftoe)

Figure 24: Plan of the walkway, aerial view.

The walkway has steps in from the North, the path goes around West side and steps in/out are at the SW side. Pedestrian crossings allow people to cross the road at surface level without going into the space.

Source: 'Preferred options' http://bearpitimprovementgroup.co.uk/2013/11/03/bearpit-walkway-preferred-option/; 16th March 2016.

Figure 25: View from the path into the space with opened steps.

Source: My own.

All of the then members of BIG except Chris Chalkley voted for the £1.2 million project, funded by a grant from the council for infrastructure works[15]. The decision caused huge

[15]An additional £5 million was made available by the Liberal Democrats in 2013 by then transport minister Norman Baker to the national cycling infrastructure fund. The council tapped into this extended fund for the project.

tension in the group (Shaftoe) and new directors on the board have expressed concern that it 'reroutes' people around a space 'that we are avidly trying to make better' (Hegarty). Others were fundamentally against large infrastructure projects at the expense of the the tax payer (Chalkley).

In talking to the public about the (then unopened) walkway, six people felt it would be an improvement for safety, allowing people to avoid the subways and the 'homeless', especially at night. Three respondents contested the project, while many felt they could not comment until completion. One poignant view against the development was:

'I think a lot of it is about how people feel about homelessness and the kind of people that would be hanging about here, because why have they built these steps?… they could have used the money to help homelessness or fund community projects… the steps, that's just making more of separation between people.' (11)

While I cannot assess walkway in action, this more conceptual point is important (also see *Figure26)*. What the walkway represents could be interpreted as affirming the fears that people place in certain groups, such as the homeless, and in The Bearpit itself. Allowing people to avoid The Bearpit and those considered 'other' potentially works against Shaftoe's vision of public space as where we 'encounter difference'. Contrastingly, the walkway could be viewed as simply 'corrective' of an architectural injustice of the past that prioritised vehicles over bodies, forcing people into dark underground spaces.

Figure 26: A comment about the steps, collected in a book of 'feelings' that was given out at 'Lunch With a Feeling'.

'It seems like what they're trying to do is make it appear more communal and progressive, while at the same time, what they're actually doing is making it less so. So for example they're putting up these lefty signs, when at the same time they're creating staircases which actually bypass the places where the buskers hang out, so what they're effectively doing it trying to separate the classes, that's what it looks like'.

Source: My own.

While conceptually the steps may create problems, the effects on feelings of safety and inclusion could be significant, working to counter such conceptual issues. What was apparent however, was the public's view that £1.2 million on such a project could not be justified. The large scale and cost of the walkway may work against creating a sense of the grassroots and even create distrust between people and BIG as they comprehend that this is what 'they're spending my money on' (22) works at may then polarise the public from BIG, working against purported intentions of being 'bottom-up', 'collective' and 'inclusive'.

5.3. Inclusivity: who is the space for?

'Inclusive' in this sense is defined as 'not to exclude any section of society or any parties involved in it' (OED) and explains BIG's aim in The Bearpit. Talking to one member of BIG they stated that the aim of their work in the space was:

'about connecting all those people who might not normally interact in their everyday lives and breaking down stigmas and marginalisation just in as far as you get to know people rather than walking past them or having preconceived notions of who they are or how they came to be". (Hegarty).

This view of inclusion desires interaction, whereas other members of the group had more modest interpretations, believing that inclusive public space should be space where we 'encounter difference' (Shaftoe). Shaftoe explained that this could reduce polarity in UK society as people learn to 'co-exist in harmony' through better understanding people different to themselves. Shaftoe expands, stating that this difference is only truly encountered in public space, because 'public space is the true locus of democracy… it's only in public spaces… where <u>everybody</u> has an equal status to use a public space'. Such democratic potential is questioned by some (Amin, 2008) but commonly in BIG there was a view that public space should be formed with democratic principles of equality, freedom and tolerance in mind.

However, the question arises as to whether any one space can be truly inclusive, can be for *everyone?* One BIG member found that it could not, as 'any inclusion includes

exclusion' because in creating a certain identity for a space you don't create another. (Buser). Recognising specific users of a space does not necessarily make BIG less inclusive, but rather makes inclusivity more realisable.

Speaking to the public, twelve people considered that The Bearpit was inclusive, two found that it was not and seven believed that it was in *some* ways. Three respondents implied that the space had become more inclusive because 'problem groups' had been dispersed, yet none stated this in a negative sense, rather describing an almost obvious process. One interviewee stating 'the busier and more sociable it becomes, the less crusty people will hang out here, if anything they'll probably feel a bit excluded' (9). This opinion was not problematised but accepted, alluding to Foucauldian notions of governmentally whereby power produces certain knowledges that seem given. The toilet attendant who had worked in the space for fourteen years similarly accepted such a 'natural' process, advocating filling in the tunnels to move the homeless and drug users, because 'people are a little bit frightened' (17). This was expressed despite stating 'I've got no disrespects…we could be homeless one day couldn't we?' These views assume the superiority of 'us' over 'them' while simultaneously expressing empathy and understanding for the 'other' in question; suggesting the inevitable and embedded nature of exclusion based on identity.

However, four interviewees (5, 7, 11, 35) expressed opposing views that 'people should feel less intimidated by the drug and alcohol users' (35), others noting that the rowdiness of the space is 'part of the character … we have to embrace all sorts of people that use this space' (10). This shows difference in peoples initial interpretation of *who* the space should be inclusive for, some emphasising the need to be inclusive for more vulnerable groups, others stressing inclusivity for those who feel excluded *because of* such groups. This difference of interpretation was mirrored within BIG. The difference is not incompatible, but demonstrates how even BIG's 'collective' aim of inclusivity is not straightforward.

While some people had expressed concerns about gentrification and exclusion of vulnerable groups, I often saw interaction between 'classic' excluders - the traders and the typically excluded, the street drinkers. Sean, a social drinker who had been coming

to The Bearpit for forty years, spoke with me on route to getting his 'cheese and ham toastie and americano coffee' from The Bearpit Social. The traders know, interact with and to some extent have bargaining power with groups that can be troublesome in the space (PO9[16]) highlighting processes *counteracting* gentrification.

BIG are constantly negotiating what inclusion means, how to create it and whether it is realisable in The Bearpit. The following account of participant observation at the one-off picnic amongst strangers, 'Lunch with a Feeling', explores how inclusivity is negotiated in reality. The event was part of the Hand in Glove 'Art in The Bearpit' programme, organised by artist-duo 'A-peg'.

Lunch With a Feeling.

Sunday meant trade was shut in The Bearpit, I had come bearing food for a picnic with strangers. There were thirty of us, I sat between a busker and James*, who was homeless.
Our orders were taken by the artists, from a menu offering 'pickled heart' etc. - the idea being to chose your feeling. I spent much of the picnic talking to James who chatted amongst the group of mostly middle-class, white and young people.

John* joined us, he wasn't homeless but hung out in the space with James etc. his ankle was broken, I said he was unlucky, he disagreed saying 'I use drugs and my blood is clean, I've got a home and I'm not dead!'. He explained although he had a home he didn't like to lock himself away 'even though I've got my own TV and stereo, because when you lock yourself away you build your own prison'.

John said he thought the change in the space was good, that tourists don't want to get off a bus and see 'a load of junkies with needles hanging out their arms'. A woman on the table said that shouldn't be hidden, John said it had become safer for the 'junkies' too, so it was alright.

Thirty minutes in, 'the crew' that James and John hangout with stormed through the Pavilion, a woman chasing after another of the group, screaming and shaking a glass bottle at him. They had been getting drunk all day. Someone called the police but the group had dispersed. They came back later, laughing together as if nothing had happened.
*NB: Real names not used.

[16] This indicates reference to data from observation work, see appendix 10 for a list of these.

Figure 27: Photos ‘Lunch With a Feeling’, September 2015.

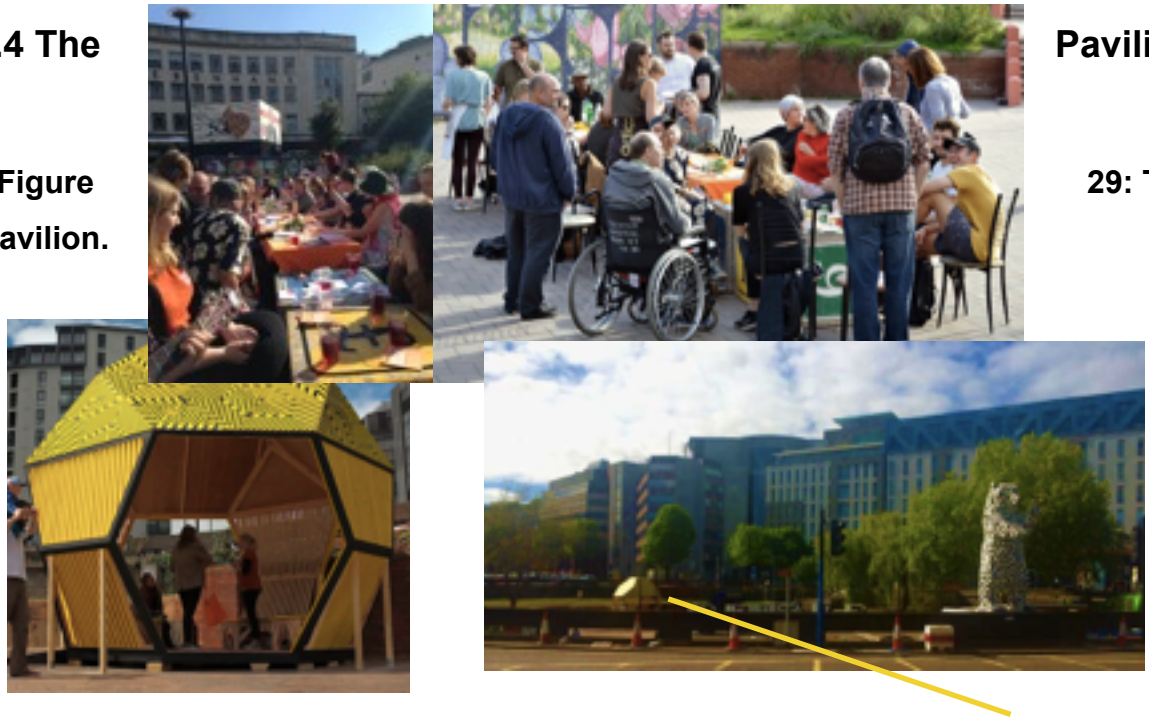
Source: My own (left) and http://artinbearpit.com/gallery/; 16th March 2016. (right).

The account demonstrates inclusion and encountering difference on many levels, the making of new and unlikely acquaintances being positive on one hand, versus the uncomfortable atmosphere created by the scuffle which momentarily displayed difference as alarming. Such outbursts are not acceptable in public spaces as they exclude the majority who wish not to be around such malfeasance. The outburst was not just alarming, but also sad, highlighting the extreme inequalities that exist between bodies sharing the same space. One cannot be inclusive for such behaviour, which BIG recognise, but in order to include all users of The Bearpit means *actively helping* marginalised and excluded people, not accepting it.

Attempting to tackle this is the community hub project (section 6.5); also relevant here. Shaftoe’s ideal of co-existing works on a more equal footing, but coexisting in an era of such extreme inequalities, apparent in everyday life, is likely to prove challenging. This challenge is explored in the case study below, looking at ‘The Pavilion’, its social effects and the issues it created around inclusion. Firstly however the photos of the public, outlined in 3.0, are displayed, illustrating feelings about what the space is, who it is for.

5.4 The Pavilion.

Figure 29: The Pavilion.



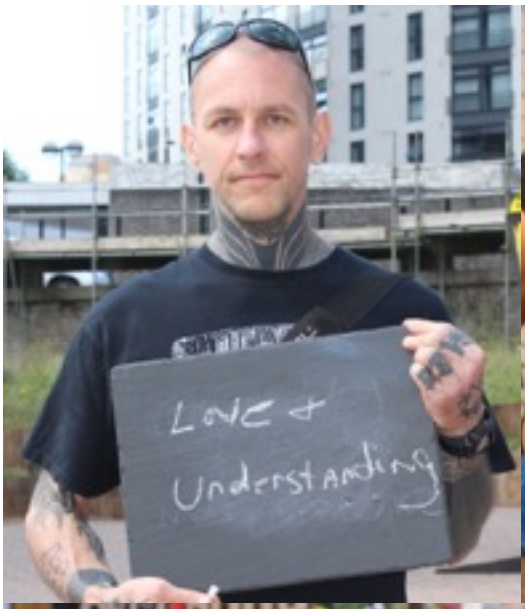
Source: http://artinbearpit.com/gallery/; 16th March 2016.

The ‘Pavilion’ is an installation by artist Philip Cheater as part of the Hand in Glove art programme, intending to be permanent after its erection and free to use as a space for events particularly for performance arts. In actuality the space was used, somewhat predictably, by drinkers, drug users and rough sleepers. This was not anticipated by some directors who suggested it should be removed as it was not being used for its intended performance arts purpose, instead encouraging ASB.

However, most of BIG considered the suggestion naieve, believing that groups using it would just sit elsewhere; growing substance-abuse issues and homelessness were the problem, not the structure. Many viewed the idea akin to the exclusionary design BIG aimed to counter and thus BIG decided, unanimously in the end, against removal.

Interestingly four directors noted that use by drinkers etc. was actually positive because it gave them their own space, moving them away from the tunnels where the public find them intimidating. Although this sounds similar to ‘sweeping away’, it was not expressed as such, rather Buser explained the common reasoning behind this, saying:

Figure28: Responses: What is The Bearpit to you?



'there's loads of little micro-geographies happening here, and while it is diverse in all of its interesting ways, it's also quite segregated in the way that people use mini spaces, so you've got a certain type of people here a certain type of people there … I'm not sure I really have a problem with that. Different people, from different hawks of life, using space in different ways in different spaces … I'm not sure they all have to be mixed together…(The Pavilion) it's something for people to stay dry in and people have been drinking in this space for forty, fifty years so' (Buser)

This view brings a realism to the aims of inclusivity and diversity, suggesting that integration between strangers is a romanticised, overambitious claim for public space. Rather, a harmonious state of co-existence (Shaftoe) is more achievable, recognising claims to the space by drinkers etc. who, despite the sadness of 'needing somewhere to practice your activity of being an alcoholic… they've got a right to use public space'. (Shaftoe)

However, in November inclusivity in The Bearpit became problematic when a BIG director and trader was assaulted during a rise of ASB in the space linked to the closure of a squat and the use new street drug 'spice'[17]. The council ordered The Pavilion to be removed, bypassing council liaison Adam Crowther and BIG's associated council department entirely (PO9). This implied that the group was not considered important enough to even be consulted by the very council it was remitted by.

The traders were supportive of it being removed - voicing their increasing frustration at having to deal with ASB every day on the ground. Everyone else expressed deep concern at its removal, some asking 'if this, then what next?'. (PO9) The decision was final so the structure was dismantled but with intentions for future reintroduction. During this period forty people were given banning orders, reflecting abnormal police action, perhaps instigated by media attention on The Bearpit. This shows that exclusionary approaches to public space are still embedded in higher authorities and shows the ease of reinstating such practice, highlighting the instability of BIG's 'autonomy'.

[17] Spice is a cheap legal high, 'spice', a synthetic cannabinoid which it is said acts similarly to cannabis.

5.6 **Summary.**

Creating an inclusive public space is perhaps an obvious notion to many, however exclusive architecture and attitudes toward those considered different to the dominant ‘self’ is the current cultural-hegemony. BIG’s work to challenge the status-quo is extremely progressive in an era where equal rights to space have regressed. This action in The Bearpit is counter-hegemonic, further supporting the idea of The Bearpit space as a heterotopia (Foucault, 1986) and a differential space (Lefebvre, 1974).

6.0 Fear.

The Bearpit is the most feared space in central Bristol (BIG, 2015), a fear *somewhat* rooted in crime with 211 reported in 2015 'on or near Pedestrian Subway' (Police.UK). This is an average of seventeen a month in central Bristol with the majority in every case being incidents of anti-social behaviour (ASB). *Figure* 30 shows a fairly representative weighting of types of reported crimes in the space across 2015. *Figure 31* shows a fairly representative weighing of crime in The Bearpit and those reported nearby, demonstrating slightly higher reports of crime in the shopping district.

Figure 30: Representative weighting of types of crime reported in The Bearpit and in shopping area.

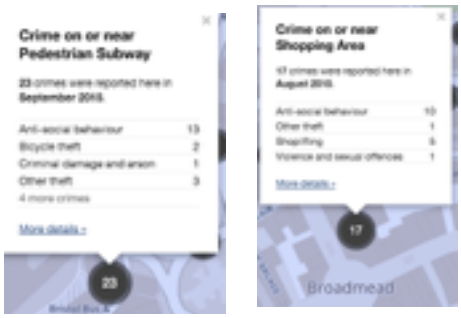
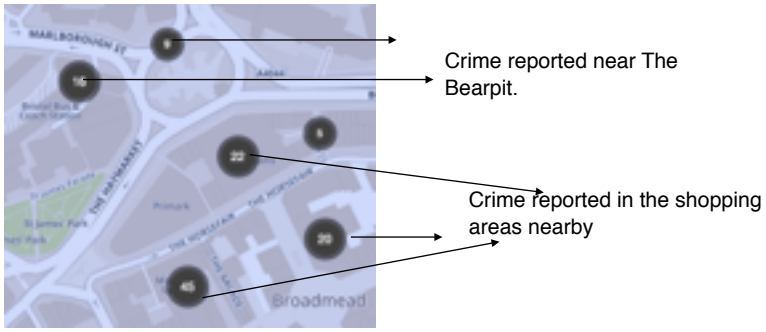


Figure 31: Representative example of reported crime near The Bearpit and in nearby



Source: 'Neighbourhood Crime Statistics', https://www.police.uk/avon-and-somerset/BE110/crime/+cCMSid/; 16th March 2016.

Despite similar amounts and ratios of types of crime occurring in some of both areas, the commercial areas are not feared yet The Bearpit is. This section looks at *why,* exploring materiality, 'the other', the notion of 'eyes on the street' and finally looking at a case study of 'the community hub' in The Bearpit. Before this a brief overview of my findings with the public are explored:

6.1. Findings.

Sixteen people found that there were aspects of The Bearpit they feared; all based on the tunnels and/or the homeless people and/or drug users. Of these sixteen interviewees, eleven personally feared aspects while five felt comfortable themselves but recognised that other groups such as women, youth and the elderly might feel apprehensive. This is a common perception despite young men being at greatest risk of experiencing crime (Valentine, 1989). Three respondents said they recognised that their

fear was irrational and stemmed from familiarity with The Bearpit's dubious past. Changing these stubborn perceptions of The Bearpit is a key aim of BIG. Seven people considered the space safe of whom four had recently moved to Bristol and so had not experienced The Bearpit before BIG Three found safety had improved. Tackling fear of crime and ASB is BIG's foremost priority in The Bearpit.

6.2 Fear in the materiality of space.

People fear the physical characteristics of The Bearpit, namely the tunnels and the subterranean level at which The Bearpit places bodies. Five people found the tunnels intimidating and four considered the space scary at night and often a combination of the two existed. *Figure 3*2 shows some of the subways at night and during the day, as one visitor to Bristol noted, as well as some board members, the tunnels are short and so not very intimidating compared to the more complex ones, such as those around the Waterloo IMAX, London *(Figure33).*

Figure 32: Subway at night and during the day in The Bearpit. (replace this with better picture).

Source: 'The Bearpit, subways', flickr.com; 16th March 2016.

Figure 33: More complex, long subway systems around the IMAX, Waterloo London.

Source: 'Subways IMAX Waterloo', flickr.com; 19th March 2016.

A survey on The Bearpit in 2013 found that better lighting was considered the most crucial improvement in the space, yet in my (more limited) survey only two interviewees mentioned lighting (9,17) suggesting that people find something inherently intimidating about the tunnels, something proclaimed by Shaftoe and the key driver behind the walkway.

I have presented this as a standalone section to draw attention to the fear felt by human bodies forced into dark, underground spaces. However, materiality of space should not be considered alone, instead as an 'assemblage' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980) or 'situated surplus, formed out of entanglements of bodies in motion and the environmental conditions and physical architecture of a given space' (Amin, 2008: 11). Sociality and materiality of public spaces are interwoven, and as the next section will explore, it is the placing of certain bodies within these subterranean spaces that solidifies the fears people have of The Bearpit.

6.3 Homelessness, substance-abuse and anti-social behaviour.

'The everyday sexism, racism, homophobia, emotional abuse, physical abuse, men being followed into the toilets by several women to exchange drugs for sexual favours – the things we witness on a daily basis is baffling when we are in the city centre, when there is a police station five minutes from where we are situated.' (Delogu, 2015)

The above quote comes from a blog that trader and BIG director, Miriam Delogu keeps on The Bearpit. It followed an extreme rise in ASB in the last months of 2015, outlined in 5.4. Such changeable behaviour, especially prevalent because of 'spice', led to local



papers asking 'Is The Bearpit reverting back to a no-go area once again?', with local radio hosting four hours of phone-ins posing this question *(BBC Radio Bristol, 08.11.15).*

Although an example of extreme and partly circumstantial ASB in the space[18], ASB has always been prevalent in The Bearpit. The centre of this comes from a core 'crew' who use the space socially, many have substance-abuse issues and *some* are homeless. These groups were what the public most feared about the space, twelve people finding

[18] As previously mentioned, the closure of a nearby squat evicted over 100 people.

them ‘intimidating’. Most people grouped the homeless, drinkers and drug users together when voicing their fear, referring to them as ‘crusties’, ‘drunkards’ and ‘homeless’. Three people distinguished between those that might be homeless and those with substance-abuse issues, *and* those initiating ASB. One respondent stated that ASB ‘could be one person from any … hawk of life’ (10).

The distinction between the homeless and those being anti-social (*often* but not exclusively those with substance-abuse issues) had been repeatedly reiterated by the traders at board meetings, stating that homeless people generally don’t feel safe in the space because of such groups and that most of the ‘crew’ have homes but live in ‘Swindon or Yate and they feel isolated so they come here to be with their friends’ (Delogu). Of the three people I spoke to who used the space socially like this, two had homes and both cited avoiding isolation as reason for using The Bearpit (27. PO7).

What the majority of people who feared these groups did however, was to ‘other’ them. Said’s (1978) ‘us-them’ dichotomy can be applied here, whereby people define themselves by characteristics that are opposite to these ‘others’ in The Bearpit, polarising and embedding stigmas in bodies and space. No-one questioned structural inequalities that might explain why such people were drunk in The Bearpit on a Monday morning, implying that the us-them binary has become common-sense, seen as inevitable rather than circumstantial. This may reflect Foucauldian notions of governance whereby power creates certain knowledges (us-them), using fear as a technology of control by which people are governed to marginalise those unlike ourselves.

Such discourse that embeds inequality creates everyday strain between people, something prevalent in The Bearpit. This strain has led to traders in the space becoming increasingly impatient despite trying to hold on to the values of inclusion, diversity and tolerance that BIG find integral. This strain increases with austerity as traders take on the roles of ‘police woman, social worker and cleaner’ (Delogu) as public support is rolled back. Such measures cleverly work to create greater gaps between people, making the management of difference harder, leading to reduced tolerance in society. Delogu stated that *‘My empathy barely exists anymore. And I suffer for that. I get angry at myself.’ (Delogu).*

Despite struggles to retain empathy by those on the ground, BIG work avidly not just to tolerate but to try and make things different for such people (see 6.5) who have been abandoned by the system, recognising that perhaps 'eyes on the street' (Jacobs, 1961: 45) works only on more equal footing. This worry is exemplified below:

'*We began with the core mission to be the eyes and ears on the ground so the public could feel safe. But it feels like no one is listening, no one is watching. How are we meant to keep the public safe when we are starting to feel afraid?' (Delogu, 2015)*

Figure 34: The eyes on the ground: Trade in The Bearpit (Bearritos left, Bearpit Social Centre, Bear Fruit Right).

That eyes on the street is not necessarily working (although people noted the traders made them feel more comfortable in the space) may be explainable by the fact that many of the perpetrators of ASB in The Bearpit feel like they have little to lose by not acting within the rules of a society that has excluded them. Belo I present the case-study of the 'community hub' which, in recognition that tolerance and eyes on the street is not enough, aims to offer help for those with addiction issues etc. in The Bearpit.

6.4 The Community Hub.

Figure 35: Hub digital design.

Source: 'Community Hub Proposal', from a BIG group email.

Table 1: Outline of the Community Hub.

	What?	Where?	Used for?
The Community Hub:	The hub is a proposal awaiting funding, that would create a community centre in The Bearpit. It would be run by a paid manager- a recovering addict has been scouted for the position.	The South West side of The Bearpit in two shipping containers that are already in the space, being used for gardening and performance arts space currently.	- Yoga - Choir rehearsals - Meeting space - Consultation rooms (EG addiction counselling services) - Drop-ins. - Information services (EG on sex, disease etc.) ETC.

As the table outlines, the hub specifically aims to be used diversely by and for the community. Recognising that The Bearpit is a focal point in the city for the homeless and/or people with addiction issues, the hub intends to be a place where support services can be run by charities making it as easy to seek help as possible. BIG expressed that this was a deliberate stand against the normal council approach of 'sweeping away' people with problems from public space, leaving their issues, and entailing problems unsolved.

BIG also felt the hub must cater to a wide spectrum of the community, allowing different groups to encounter each other and eroding the us-them dichotomy. It is also seen as key in giving people a reason to use the space. The use of the word 'community' to truly advocate the *collective,* challenges the way in which the loaded term is often used for exclusionary and political ends (England, 2011).

The hub is BIG's biggest priority for The Bearpit in the belief that it will make a difference to peoples lives *and* work to reduce fear of crime and ASB. While offering support to the marginalised and troubled may seem an obvious move to some, it should be heralded

here as progressive in a society that has moved backward, destroying support networks, creating bigger problems for individuals *and* society.[19]

6.5 Summary.

Fear of The Bearpit is rooted in forty years of neglect, materiality and in the governed minds of fearful peoples. Challenging this fear through extending the definition of community to include *everyone* is a positive step, working to challenge exclusionary notions of community at the level of discourse and in practice. It is in working to break down the stigmatisation of people different to ourselves that fear will be most effectively diminished - resisting the dominant discourses that govern us to think as such. Offering support to those in need must go hand-in-hand with working to prevent ASB, allowing people to coexist. This will prove ever more difficult in times of austerity and makes the securing of funding for The Community Hub unlikely. In an ideal world this is an ideal strategy for reducing fear and associated stigmas, but with such powerful forces working to create fear of the other, BIG face a difficult task implementing such an ideal.

[19] Homelessness stats:

7.0 Conclusion.

BIG.

Before addressing my research questions where I explore the *effects* of BIG's work, I note findings *about* BIG and dilemmas they raise as an organisation.

Firstly I found that not everyone in BIG easily identified as activist, some being distinctly uncomfortable or unfamiliar with the label. A few directors pointedly dissociated themselves from political activism, one describing it as 'crass'. This was surprising to me, perhaps naively, but I still struggle not to see BIG as activists and political ones at that - opposing privatisation and exclusion being inherently so. Research that explores the notion of activism and how people define themselves as such (or not) would be intriguing.

Secondly, there is need to emphasise that BIG are unpaid volunteers. When thinking about replicability of groups 'taking the right to their city' this raises issues as most people cannot provide such vast amounts of skill and work for free, limiting the potential of such groups to be representative of the community they act for. To partially counter this in The Bearpit BIG could confer more with the public - not just through occasional public consultations, but rather in a more casual form such as feedback boxes, public meetings etc.

Lastly, I raise the same dilemma as Buser and Arthurs (2013) in their work on DIY cultural activism - does DIY activism 'perform good neoliberalism' by plugging the gaps created when the state pulls back; do DIY activists fulfil ideals of the 'Big Society'? One suggestion for BIG to counter a perhaps inevitable contradiction, is simply to inform the public that BIG, a community group, are behind the work in the space - not (really) the council. None of the public with whom I spoke knew about BIG, yet to rectify this would take just a sign. This is a shame because it misses opportunity to inspire others by example.

Overview.

I now look toward my research questions and the effects of BIG's work in the space, firstly looking at whether the political art in The Bearpit challenges dominant spatial imaginaries and socio-political discourses. Before answering whether this is achieved, there is a link to be made that if we take space to be socially-made and political (Lefebvre, 1974) then the the challenging of dominant *spatial* imaginaries may intrinsically challenge wider socio-political discourses. I argue that in The Bearpit creative practice (including play) does play a part in challenging the way in which we think about and use space, inviting freedom to paint, spectate and participate in public space that is normally prescriptive. Actual effects of such alternative creative practice on actions and thoughts are impossible to quantify, but certainly, the use of art to reimagine a space under aims of inclusivity and heterogeneity challenges the dominant exclusive and homogenous discourses that prevail.

Exploring BIG's relationship with local authorities, and binaries of community-gentrification, solidarity-cooption and public-private revealed that actually blurring the distinction between these binaries is the most fruitful way to approach analysis of The Bearpit and BIG. The dichotomies are not simple opposed realities but are rather entangled and productive of each other. Recognising the space in-between recognises 'new' space and potentially new sites of resistance that simplistic binaries disregard.

Looking at the creation of collective identity in The Bearpit, what is apparent is Chantel Mouffe's notion that 'the creation of identity implies the establishment of difference' (2005: 15), recognised by some of BIG. However difference is widely encouraged by BIG in The Bearpit, meaning that despite the creation of difference by reconfiguring identity, difference is invited and celebrated rather than excluded.

BIG's emphasis on difference eludes to more than their call for democratic space, rather to notions of 'radical democracy' (Mouffe and Laclau, 1985) whereby 'difference' is inserted alongside the democratic principles of 'freedom' and 'equality', viewing the latter

two to be susceptible to neoliberalisation. Democracy built around difference is argued to better reflect society, a society neither rational or consensual. Furthermore Ranciere argues such radical democracy avoids the systemic exclusion that can come from consensus (Ranciere, 2004). Thus by building The Bearpit around difference (and freedom and equality) the space challenges oppressive forces (exclusion etc) similarly.

Cultural activism, although in the title of this dissertation, has rarely been referenced in this work. Rather, the art in the space has been a continual theme throughout, narrating the broader analysis. That it has not been a focus reflects the cultural activism that is occurring in The Bearpit which gets on with the job rather than dwelling on 'cultural activism' conceptually. This is especially emphasised in The Bearpit as such activism becomes everyday rather than exceptional or transitory, instead place-making and permanent.

Having now offered a discussion of BIG and the effects of their work, I conclude by suggesting that The Bearpit is a Heterotopia (Foucault, 1986), a 'differential space' (Lefebvre, 1974). These spaces of counter-hegemony are not identical, yet applying the two reflects the heterogeneity of visions for, and experiences of the alternative in The Bearpit. This study of a outwardly mundane space has aspired to provide a hopeful account of people taking back their right to their city, their public space and creativity, challenging the powers that be.