

## Engage

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### Introduction

Social innovation is crucial as a driver for sustainable change. Design for social innovation requires new competences and skills; important among these are co-design tools and skills to critically and successfully engage with a range of stakeholders.

The paper summarises the pedagogy developed by Design Research Studio 07 (DRS07), part of BA (Hons) Interior and Spatial Design at Chelsea College of Arts, over the last couple of years, to enable critical participatory skills. It highlights key student projects and moments within these projects in which disbelief and resistance to the idea and process of 'engagement' transform into comprehension, appreciation and delight.

### Background

BA (Hons) Interior and Spatial Design at Chelsea College of Arts is one of the largest and most established interior and spatial design courses in the UK. It is unique as it is rooted in an 'art-school' context of creativity and experimentation and in that it has a strong inter-disciplinary approach to the subject. The course encourages spatial design practice that is contextually and intellectually adventurous, it develops students' skills in designing, creating and conceptualising new spatial situations.

During the second and third year students join a Design Research Studio. These are research-driven teaching and learning environments, consisting of clusters of staff and students working closely on a focused agenda framed by the unit design briefs.

DRS 07 was established in 2012 by Mariana Pestana and Shibboleth Shechter. The studio is concerned with socially involved spatial practice, working in real sites, through live, collaborative projects, asking students to critically engage with site and community. The studio explores spatial design as multi-authorial, a mechanism for joint creativity of designers and users. It encourages on-site participatory investigation through making of spatial interventions that engage diverse user groups and can drive change.

### Pedagogy

The journey of our students starts from an initial resistance to the idea of engaging with stakeholders as part of their design process, probably motivated by a general understanding of design as an individually authored practice. Through the process of the studio work, students' disbelief shifts towards comprehension and appreciation. This happens gradually over three key stages.

The choice of the site which the studio is going to investigate is critical. We choose sites where a process of change is taking place, where a need for intervention is identified with local stakeholders, where there is potential for students to explore design as a tool for social innovation. Sites are also chosen for accessibility as students are encouraged to visit regularly and become involved in and part of the local community.

We start by asking students to investigate the site through the identification of a social, environmental, economic or cultural issue and undertake participatory actions (such as designing an interactive tool or game) to engage local stakeholders. Their resistance, at this stage, to this method, has to do with their expectations: Why shouldn't they follow their own interests? Why do they have to listen to others from the beginning? Isn't design the expression of their individuality?

Once the students have identified the issues we group them according to those. Small groups (4-5 students) are formed in which peers collaborate and engage with each other, to construct a 1:1 scale spatial intervention. Each spatial intervention is at once a design proposal and a tool to further gain knowledge about the local context. By presenting their work to the public, observing and documenting their reaction, students further develop participatory research. They usually spend three to four intensive weeks in the workshop, building the intervention which is then installed on site. This is usually the turning point for most students' projects. Students begin realising the value of engaging with the public, and feel proud of seeing their work being used for real.

Experience gained from designing, installing and testing these interventions informs the final individual proposals which begin in the second term. Students are encouraged to design real interventions and continue to develop these

through critical engagement with stakeholders, using innovative participatory, co-design tools.

### Projects

Three projects are described. In each, the 'magical moment' following enjoyment provoked by the activation of projects on site, has led to the students choice to not only continue to use design as a tool to critically engage with site and community through their individual projects, but also, to possibly, continue upon graduation to use their skills to envision a different future, and pursue socially involved spatial practice.

#### *Hanna / Where Stories Meet*

Hanna's project took place in Meanwhile Gardens, a community garden in Northwest London offering local residents, in one of the most deprived areas of London, a place to enjoy safe, open-air leisure, play, training and education. The gardens started life 36 years ago, when crumbling terraces were being cleared, and a local sculptor imagined the derelict wasteland as a beautiful garden. Jamie McCullough approached the local authority with his vision to 'turn the rubble into a park'. Temporary permission was granted, hence the name, meanwhile. Over the years through the support of volunteers and a dedicated staff team, the gardens have continued to thrive. DRS07 students were asked to explore how the grass-roots spirit of Meanwhile Gardens can be continued and to collaborate with the garden community to imagine possible future garden narratives.

Hannah started her project by creating boxes to collect 'garden stories' from locals and visitors: a memory box, a garden tips box, a gossip box and a fictional crime detecting box (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Collecting garden stories in the play-hut

With her group Hannah developed the boxes into a spatial intervention. 'Stories under a Tree' was a space for the local community to meet and share stories both orally, through a series of recording devices hidden in bird houses and visually, using the chalks provided to write on wooden planks suspended from the tree (Fig. 2). The design was simple. It was a response to the DIY aesthetic of existing structures within the garden and it allowed for residents interpretations of its use. The concept for the project, its location within the garden and its design were developed through a series of formal and informal activities with local residents, garden staff and volunteers. The responsiveness of the team to the desires of the community led to the management allowing the structure to become a part of the garden for four months. For the group of students that worked on this project, this was a magical moment, when idea was transformed into reality. They engaged with local stakeholders in the process and were rewarded with the opportunity to observe how "the structure is a forever changing place, where old stories disappear and new ones appear".



Fig. 2. "We Love Ladbrooke Grove", Message written on 'Where Stories Meet'.

In the process of designing the tree house, the 'Meanwhile Gardens' staff insisted that the group designed the tree house in such a way as to 'deter the homeless from using it'. Hannah became interested in this community, the homeless, and how they use the garden. For Hannah, this was the second magical moment, when she realised that she can use design as a tool for social innovation. Hanna's final proposal was a soup cafe, to be designed, built and run by homeless people. A space that would provide a means for storytelling between this neglected community and local residents; built with what can be found in the area and ingredients grown on site, this self-sufficient cafe could become a new social hub, inclusive of those who are usually excluded. Although Hanna's project was speculative, she worked closely with James, the chief gardener, and various local homeless charities to develop the idea. The project was presented as a new chapter in

the book 'Meanwhile Gardens' written by the local sculptor who originally developed the gardens; as a manual and a resource for how such projects could be developed.

Hanna's experience in Meanwhile Gardens helped her decide to pursue a career in working as a designer in developing countries and she is currently completing an MSc in Urban Development Planning. As educators, this is perhaps, the most rewarding of magical moments.

#### *Elliot / Splinters Cafe*

Elliot's project took place in the Old Tidemill School in Deptford. Since it ceased to be a school this site has been home to property guardians and artist studios. 'Assembly', a group of artists, gardeners, designers, makers and bakers has recently opened the gates to the public, instigating projects and events to investigate social, cultural and environmental issues.

Elliot's initial intervention on site was a simple poster asking the local community 'what would you like in Deptford High Street?'. Considering the responses he received, Elliot developed an interest for analysing critically the process of gentrification and the role coffee shops play in that process.

With his group, in collaboration with Assembly, Elliot designed a coffee machine from dysfunctional objects bought in the market (Fig. 3). The 'coffee shop' was open for one day, during a Christmas food market event organised by the local council and Greenwich Development Agency. The coffee shop attracted locals to an area of their neighbourhood they had never visited before.



Fig. 3. Elliot's Coffee Machine, Old Tidemill School

Elliot decided to continue investigating coffee and regeneration in his final individual project and designed 'Splinters Cafe', a DIY kit for making local cafes as an alternative to the high street coffee chains, which could be bought and run cheaply and could easily be stored and transported by an individual. Elliot installed Splinters Cafe as part of Deptford Free Film Festival (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. 'Splinters Cafe'

His project subverted the gentrification process and interrogated the economic forces that form it. As an alternative to the brands that usually initiate gentrification processes, such as, Costa or Starbucks, Elliot proposed that local residents get there first and build their own cafe. Besides making a 1:1 prototype, Elliot built a website with an open source guide to all the necessary information for anyone interested in opening a cafe: from building instructions to information about licenses, marketing, social media, sourcing of milk, coffee, etc. For Elliot the magic moment was to see people using his cafe but particularly when Assembly decided to keep his 'Splinters Cafe' in the Old Tidemill School. Since then, Elliot has had other approaches for possible coffee shop collaborations.

#### *Celia / DF Mobile Workshop*

Celia's project took place in Deptford Market, a food, antique and bric-a-brac market in South London. The area is currently undergoing a process of regeneration and the market, which has been in the same location for centuries and was until recently a thriving thrice weekly market, is in decline and under threat from new shops and facilities.

Celia was inspired by a local artist working with recycled objects and started her project by buying a broken alarm clock, a chipped coffee cup and a broken light bulb. She asked visitors, locals and traders to draw: "into what would you transform this broken object?"

With her group Celia developed the concept of transforming 'dysfunctional into functional'. They designed, installed and operated a one day cafe, made entirely from dysfunctional objects bought in the market. Celia's contribution was a 'sound trolley' that travelled through the market, inviting the public to follow the procession towards the cafe (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Sound trolley in Deptford Market



Fig. 6. DF Mobile Workshop

For Celia the magic moment was the positive public response to the 'fun' atmosphere the sound trolley created. This prompted Celia to continue working with the local community, on a real, live project. Her final project, DF Mobile Workshop, is a mobile artist workshop on which artists and visitors to Deptford Market can collaborate to transform broken, 'dead' objects into something new. The workshop consists of two parts: a 'shopping trolley' that can be taken around the market to buy objects and a mobile workbench, into which the trolley slots (Fig. 6).

Following a successful day with of DF Mobile Workshop in the market, Celia has been invited to participate in 'Deptford X' art festival and has been offered full funding by the University of Arts London.

### Questions

Spatial design is a fundamentally social practice; it exists in the relationship it establishes with and between people. To engage students in the process of acting in real sites and presenting their work to be used by real people seems a relatively obvious thing to do. Yet it is not. Students still arrive at higher education thinking of design as the creation of one illuminated individual, and it is only through the experience of making and presenting that they are convinced otherwise. We believe that it is important to introduce them to methods of city-making that are collaborative, shared and discussed between different agents. When they realise the joy that is seeing their work in action, the satisfaction of sharing their work with others, of challenging their beliefs and in the end celebrating its success together with local people, then we have our magical moment.

We are interested to further explore the reasons behind the initial disengagement of students with participatory design, to explore whether this is a shared experience in other educational contexts and to explore different pedagogical approaches to overcome this resistance.