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Dialogical arts practice in place-making

Re:connections: a case study of Lee Bank, Birmingham

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Synopsis

Dialogical aesthetics is a term used by art historian and critic Grant Kester (2004) to describe a form of arts practice defined by the artist's ability to listen and catalyse understanding. My research explores how this arts practice can be applied to the understanding of people's emotional connections to their lived place, addressing the need to consider complex nuances of people's place attachment within existing built environment assessment processes.

This paper focuses on Re:connections, a creative place-making project that took place in summer 2017 where artists, through a dialogical approach, engaged residents in Lee Bank, Birmingham, an area that has been undergoing regeneration since 2000 and previously regarded as an area of poor quality housing and social deprivation. Re:connections provides an insight into the impact physical change has had on residents place attachment, and new knowledge regarding the value of dialogical arts practice as a tool for design professionals.

Key words: Dialogical aesthetics, phenomenology, place-making, housing, emotional attachments.

My case-study, Re:connections, explores how dialogical arts practice can be applied to understand more about people's emotional connections with a view to contributing to new place assessment approaches that reflect the complexity and nuances of people's in-depth relationship with their everyday places.

The area of study is Lee Bank, an inner city residential area and previously one of five council housing estates that formed Birmingham City Council Central Area Estates (CAE) before undergoing regeneration in 2000. Known prior to the regeneration for poor quality housing and social deprivation, it covers 38 hectares and is bordered by two major eight lane roads. The £550 million regeneration has been recognised by the Homes and Communities Agency as a flagship case study for mixed tenure, sustainable regeneration. The regeneration included the demolition of four tower blocks, refurbishment of seven towers, the building of new private and social housing, office blocks, a new school and the design and development of two parks. I chose this area as a case study as I had witnessed the regeneration and was curious how an area, considered by a government funded agency as successful regeneration, was perceived in the everyday experiences of the people who lived there. No relevant data existed prior to my research.

Re:connections involved artists in sound, poetry, visual arts and photography and they engaged with approximately 160 residents in parks, street corners and community hubs, exploring the impact the transformational physical change has had on their emotional perceptions. The artists prompted conversations through their art-forms, including a sensory practice within a dialogical approach. The artists are critical regarded in contemporary arts practice, validated by Arts Council England funding for the project. Re:connections culminated in sharing of art works in the local park where residents shared a picnic.



Figure 1. Branching Morphogenesis. Ars Electronica Center, Digital Art Museum at Linz.

The motivation for my research emerged from my own arts practice, principally from a Creative Health CIC project I directed called Bostin Chats in Sandwell, where artists facilitated participant's explorations into the places and resources they valued about where they lived. The depth and quality of responses from participants was notable and contrasted to the other forms of consultation Public Health Sandwell commissioned. The project reflected findings of an AHRC Cultural Value Project which identified a body of evidence to suggest that engaging in arts and culture builds qualities of empathy and reflective individuals (Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016). Sensory perceptions of lived spaces are commented on by Tuan (2002) who states that children perceive their spaces in a sensory way, unlike adults, and therefore have a different attachment to where they live. I was keen to explore how engaging in dialogical and sensory arts practice impacted on residents awareness and perceptions of the area.

There are a number of major studies published considering the development of new of sustainable and resilient places. These include the government commissioned Farrell Review (2015) and 'Building the 21st Century City: The Sustainable Urban Neighbourhood (Urbed 1999). None have included insight into place attachment, yet, in the fields of human geography and philosophy, place attachment and sense of belonging is recognised as being of paramount importance to wellbeing and the feeling of safety and security. Human geographer Edward Relph argues that design professionals need to understand the complexities of people's perceptions of their everyday places before they create new places (Relph, 1976).

The study has followed an action research approach using dialogical arts practice through a site-based case study. Grant Kester (2005) describes this approach as 'dialogue-based' and 'socially-engaged' art. Through this approach, artists have created a structured form of creative dialogue. The participatory sessions follow a sensory ethnographic approach, where artists collaborate rather than act as observers in other people's life contexts. (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Where informed consent has been given, residents encounters with the artists practice is documented through sound and video recording. The artist role as 'outsider' has been analysed through semi-structured interview before, during and after the project and through observation during arts engagement sessions. The action research has been supported by a text and visual analysis to analyse external perceptions of the area before and after regeneration and to explore how the area is portrayed as part of local government design strategies and housing developer marketing.

Through analysis of the data, findings have emerged which give insight into the value of dialogical arts practice as a contribution to place assessment: Dialogical arts practice provides a more in-depth understanding about people's emotional connections to Lee Bank. The collection of data including art works, interviews and observations reveal a complexity of perceptions which are collectively unresolved and in flux. Due to the sample size it is only possible to view the research as a collection of individual responses, however, it was notable that some of the established residents who previously lived in Lee Bank prior to regeneration felt angry, alienated and dislocated with a reduced perception of safety prior to regeneration. Many of the residents who moved into the area after it

was regenerated talked of positive place attachments.

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Biography

Jenny Peevers. An arts practitioner and researcher. Her practice explores the interaction between art, people and place with a specific interest in exploring how arts practice can reflect and respond to the depth and complexity of people's associations with their lived places. Rooted in site specific and socially engaged arts practice, she integrates the disciplines of urban design and human geography.

Jenny has trained in fine art, photography and urban design and previous employment includes the post of Public Art Officer at Arts Council England and Urban Designer at Bryant Priest Newman Architects. She is an executive director of Creative Health (arts and health) CIC, an RSA fellow and member of the national Art and Place working group.