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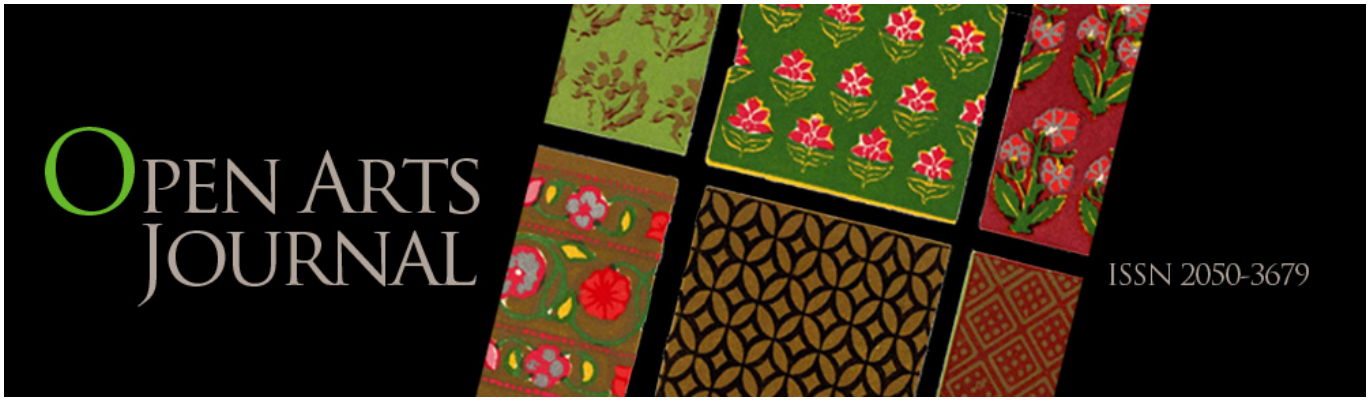

EMPOWERING DESIGN PRACTICES: EXPLORING RELATIONS BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE, FAITH, SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY

Katerina Alexiou, Theodore Zamenopoulos, Vera Hale, Susie West and Sophia de Sousa

Abstract

This paper presents and discusses some key insights derived from a collaborative research project called Empowering Design Practices. The project brought together a multidisciplinary team of academic and non-academic partners to explore the processes, resources and environments that support community-led design practice in the context of historic places of worship. The paper discusses barriers and opportunities surrounding the development and adaptation of historic places of worship as community hubs, and proposes a set of approaches that can help empower those looking after those places to re-imagine and design the future of their places while respecting complex faith, architectural, societal and community values.

Keywords: community leadership in design, historic places of worship, heritage management, architecture, empowerment, community engagement
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Biographical notes (continued)

Dr Susie West is a Senior Lecturer in Art History and Heritage in the Department of Art History at The Open University; previously working as a Senior Properties Historian at English Heritage. She has a strong interest in heritage values within official systems and the public understanding of heritage.

Sophia de Sousa is Chief Executive at The Glass-House Community Led Design and sits on a number of advisory groups and panels promoting design quality and collaborative placemaking. Sophia is an impassioned champion and enabler of community-led, participatory and co-design practice and research, with extensive experience in delivering hands-on training and support to community groups and professionals.

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Introduction

Places of worship, across different faith groups and denominations, are a valued resource for local communities and society at large. As buildings, they are omnipresent within both urban and rural environments and they have a cultural, social and architectural value that transcends the boundaries of a particular locality and the local faith group. Although the faith association of these buildings might create barriers for people of different faith or non-faith backgrounds, these buildings serve to connect people together through their social action and pastoral care activities. However, many places of worship, particularly historic ones, face maintenance issues and often remain underused and disconnected from civic life.

This paper aims to present and discuss some key insights regarding the barriers and opportunities surrounding the efforts to develop historic places of worship in ways that ensure their sustainability for generations to come. More specifically, the paper is concerned with the processes, resources and environments that empower community groups who are custodians of such buildings to unlock or develop their capabilities to lead projects to adapt and develop their buildings.

The insights are drawn from a research project called *Empowering Design Practices: historic places of worship as catalysts for connected communities* funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK between 2014 and 2020 under a cross-council initiative to support design research conducted in the context and with the active participation of communities. Further details about the activities and resources discussed in this paper can be found on the project website: www.empoweringdesign.net.

The context: historic places of worship as community resources

There are 14,800 listed places of worship, of which over 6% are in Historic England's register of buildings at risk. To better protect these buildings, advisory bodies and funders have started moving away from a model focused exclusively on repairs and restoration of their physical structure, to a model that puts a new emphasis on the long-term use and value of these buildings as community places. In 2009 a government report called 'Church and Faith Buildings: Realising the Potential' set out the potential of places of worship to deliver community services (Government and Church of England, 2009). The report primarily aimed to help faith groups identify sources of funding that could be used to develop their places as community hubs and stressed the importance of providing support particularly with regard to good design, sustainability and funding. This new emphasis brought to the fore the need to understand and support the engagement of the wider community in the design process and the co-production of solutions that will keep historic places of worship at the centre of community life.

A number of toolkits and publications have emerged as a response, to offer support and guidance, particularly around project management, business planning and fundraising, and to help people navigate the complexity of the process (Payne and Withers, 2017; Payne et al, 2017; Rowe, 2009; Walter and Mottram, 2015). Little of this work has focused specifically on design, which is the focus of the Empowering Design Practices project. The project's aim was to explore how people can put their skills, knowledge and resources together to unlock or develop their capacity to engage in design work, and the conditions (physical, technical, social) that enable or hinder their ability to do so.

The focus of the study: enabling community-led design

The project is part of a wider research agenda which aims to explore community-led design, its impact, and the conditions that enable it. Community-led design (CLD) constitutes a civic action or practice, where ordinary groups of citizens take leadership in the design and development of their environment, whether buildings, places, services and activities, to serve the interests and needs of their local communities, in an inclusive, democratic and sustainable way (Alexiou et al, 2013). As a practice and field of study, community-led design is associated with a wide range of terms such as 'community architecture', 'community design', 'participatory architecture' or 'participatory planning', which emerged in in the early 1960s, as part of the

human and social rights movements in the United States, and as part of widespread community action in Britain against large redevelopments and rehousing programs that were considered a threat to local communities (e.g. Sanoff, 2006; Wates and Knevitt, 1987; Zamenopoulos and Alexiou, 2018).

Existing literature in participatory design in the general context of architecture and spatial planning presents a spectrum of creative participatory practices and methods such as visioning workshops, charrettes, or participation games (Sanoff, 2000). Such practices engage communities at various phases in the design process and in various ways and degrees, as documented in special issues published in recent years in Design journals (e.g. Luck, 2018; Binder et al, 2008; Greenbaum and Loi, 2012). While there is considerable emphasis on developing and proposing different programmatic philosophies, principles, approaches, methods or specific tools that could help people to engage in design, there is often little emphasis on how human and community capabilities can be developed in order to enhance the agency of groups to lead design tasks and projects. The project takes a 'capability approach' to community leadership in design by focusing on what communities value doing or being, and on building opportunities (environments and approaches) that enhance their capability to unearth and mobilise their resources to achieve those valued objectives.

The research team

Empowering Design Practices is a cross-disciplinary collaboration which brought together expertise in design, art history and educational technology from the Open University, with the practical skills and expertise of core strategic partner The Glass-House Community Led Design, as well as partners specialising in historic preservation of faith buildings and heritage management (including Historic England, National Lottery Heritage Fund, and the Historic Religious Building Alliance or HRBA). The design researchers in the team contributed expertise in methods and approaches exploring and supporting community leadership in design. The art history colleagues brought expertise in architectural history and critical heritage studies. Educational technology colleagues offered know-how in the creation of online resources to support collaborative learning. The Glass-House Community Led Design is a national charity that supports communities, organisations and networks to work collaboratively on the design of places and spaces and has many years of experience providing advice and support to community-led design groups. The project also had a number of consultants: Live Works, an initiative led by the Sheffield School of Architecture aiming to support socially-engaged projects in the city, Wright & Wright Architects, a practice with expertise in historic buildings and the facilitation of community-led design, and Becky Payne, an HRBA development officer and freelance consultant undertaking projects on different aspects of sustaining historic places of worship. The project also had an advisory team with experience in heritage management, religious studies and community architecture.

Working collaboratively across disciplines (art history, information technology, heritage management and design) and across sectors (academia, public bodies, civil society organisations and the private sector) is valuable for garnering a holistic perspective of the research question and programme of activities. It is also extremely challenging, because of diverse research traditions, ways of working, terminologies, perspectives

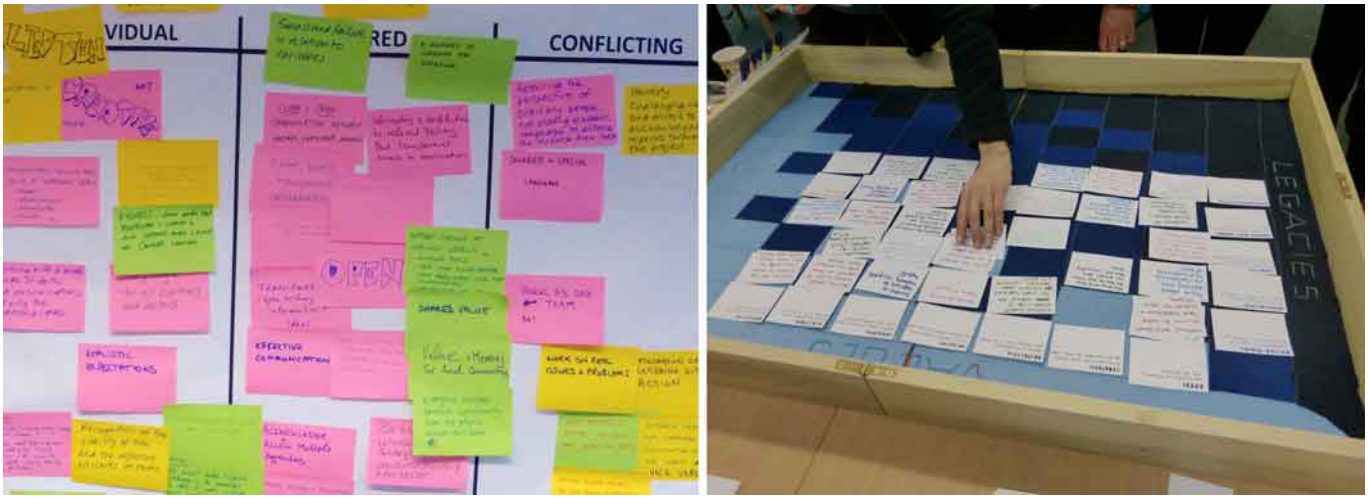

Figure 5.1: Examples of team activities undertaken to facilitate cross-disciplinary and cross-sector collaboration. Left: activity exploring individual, shared and conflicting principles of action, collaboration and success. Right: activity exploring shared values and expected legacies or impacts of the project. Image credit: Empowering Design Practices.

and motivations. From early on in the project, the team made a conscious effort to interrogate differences and commonalities and to work together to establish a common ground. This included explorations of individual and shared research interests and values, principles guiding collaboration, as well as criteria for success (Figure 5.1).

Through these reflective sessions, the project succeeded in establishing a collaborative research practice which valued the participation of all partners and their unique contributions to knowledge.

For example, ostensibly, art history appears to be at complete odds with design: in crude terms, the first is focused on looking at the past, while the second is focused on looking at the future. However the team found common ground in their shared knowledge that in the process of re-imagining a historic building and its place in society, it is important to understand a building's past as embedded in architectural and artistic objects and features as well as in people's memories, rituals and cultural associations and traditions, and to explore how these elements can be brought to bear in any future interventions. Similarly, at a superficial level, one can construe the idea that heritage is about preservation whereas design is about change: the two terms are deemed incompatible. However, through sharing and negotiating ideas, the team developed an understanding of the nuances of both terms and recognised their potential convergence in notions such as change management and sustainability, which see buildings and their meanings as ever changing, negotiated, re-interpreted and adapted in relation to their wider historic environment and changing social and cultural norms and values.

The research approach

The project aimed to directly engage with groups looking after historic places of worship and the professionals that work with them to explore the human, social and material assets and challenges that enable or hinder their capacity to engage and lead design activities. It also explored the constraints and tensions that arise because of different perceptions of faith, heritage and community as well as the constraints and opportunities that arise in relation to the physical characteristics of building in heritage terms and in terms of sanctity and ritual. Within this exploration, the primary objective was to develop and evaluate different types of support mechanisms, resources and ways of working that could build capacity for design leadership.

To this end, the project adopted a methodological approach which is rooted in two closely interrelated traditions: the tradition of Action Research and Theories of Action (Friedman and Rogers, 2008) and that of Reflective Practice and Research-by-Design (Schön, 1983; Cross, 2006). These approaches emphasise a process of learning by doing, that is, deriving knowledge through active engagement with a design question or problem, and integrating theory building and testing into everyday practice. More specifically, the project sought to create a 'community of design inquiry' including academic and non-academic partners, as well as people embedded in communities. The aim of this community was to create new practical knowledge through co-design but also new capacities to co-produce knowledge. The project followed a cyclic process where theoretical ideas and previous experiences were used to inform the co-development of hands-on practices that could build capacity for community leadership in design. Subsequent reflection with participants about the conditions underlying this capacity led to a further development of theoretical ideas and practices.

A mix of methods were used such as focus groups, storytelling, facilitated co-design and co-reflection workshops, as well as surveys, questionnaires and interviews. Data were collected through audio and video recording of conversations and interactions between participants, as well as through materials and techniques designed to capture and facilitate reflection on participants' perceptions, ideas and knowledge, such as custom-made cards, mapping toolkits, drawings or models.

Research programme and activities delivered

The project aimed to work with a large number of initiatives involved in adapting historic places of worship for community use, including completed, current and emerging projects at different stages of development. It also sought to engage with different faith groups in projects across the UK that varied in terms of scale, heritage value and management capacity. A programme of research activities was developed in order to explore the value and impact of different types of support, for example the difference between bespoke activities delivered to a place of worship focused on a specific problem, versus activities delivered to a group of places focused on generic themes and capabilities. The programme was also designed to help explore the effects of the quantity of support given, that is the number of activities delivered in different places, as well as their timing. It included a wide spectrum of activities, that ranged from half-day workshops to two-day training programs, site visits and public engagement events (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2: A range of EDP activities. From left to right, top: challenges, assets and opportunities themed workshop at London Lumen and design training in Manchester; bottom: prototyping utopias at Utopia Fair in Somerset House and public workshop at Tate Exchange. Image credit: Empowering Design Practices.

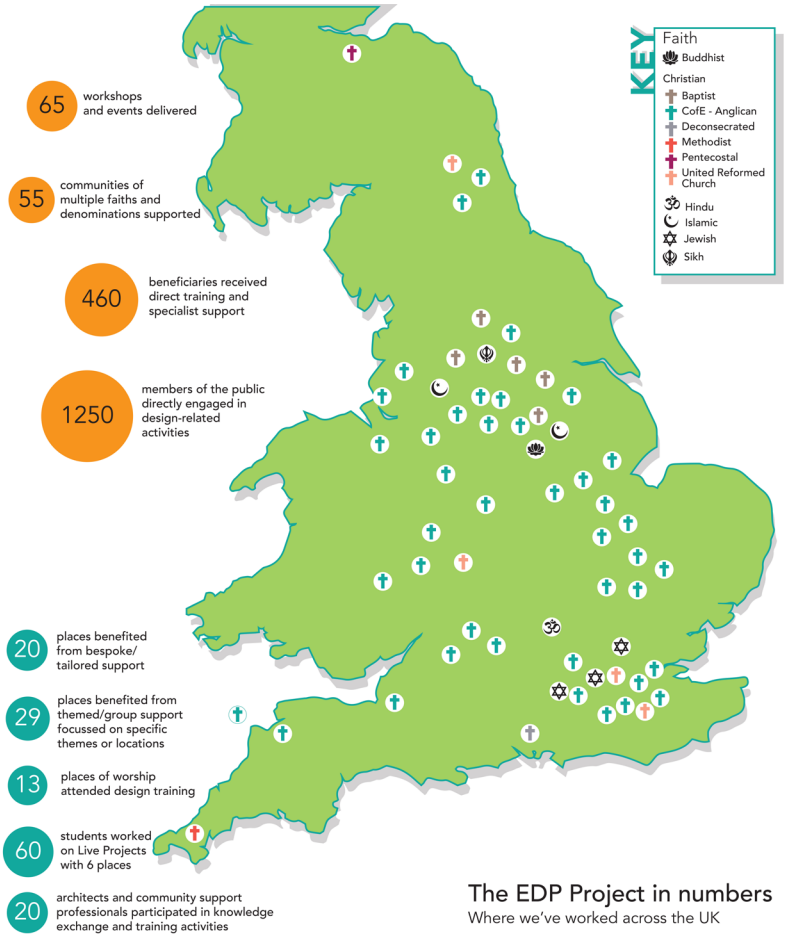

Figure 5.3: Graphic showing the distribution of places of worship the project worked with across the UK, with key information about faith groups and numbers of people involved in activities.
Image credit: Empowering Design Practices.

Activities supported groups to discover and articulate the challenges they faced and to identify their assets and opportunities. They also facilitated learning about design, how to engage communities in decision-making, how to develop a design rationale and shared vision, and how to prototype and test solutions. The project also engaged with students and professionals working in the field such as architects, community development professionals and heritage support officers. To date, the project has provided direct support, training and specialist workshops to over 460 people in over 55 communities across England and interacted with more than 1250 people through design-related public engagement activities (Figure 5.3).

Exploring community-led design journeys

The first stage of the project involved desk research and a number of visits to completed projects to learn from the journeys. Below we discuss some observations about institutional barriers and present key recommendations for other groups embarking on similar projects.

Establishing the significance of a place

In the last twenty-five years, the National Lottery Heritage Fund (formerly the Heritage Lottery Fund, from 1994 to 2019) has provided new opportunities for the public to work directly with their local historic buildings. Communities who are bidding for grants for their heritage buildings are however required to write bids 'as if' they had the knowledge and experience previously deployed by heritage sector professionals, as is exemplified in the requirement for statements of significance.

Statements of significance express cultural values associated with a historic building. Heritage professionals have, over the previous 150 years, developed a range of cultural values that classify heritage significance, although the language of these practices has only recently been codified. The 'traditional' values assert a building's historic and aesthetic merit, often through association with historic public figures or named architects/designers. These values have been enshrined in global heritage frameworks across the twentieth century, notably in UNESCO's World Heritage Convention of 1972. Critiques of this narrow definition of significance identified the absence of less public narratives and turned to the validity of local and indigenous cultural identities, particularly in non-western heritage and in settler societies. Additional formal values were introduced through the Burra Charter, created by the Australian National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), an advisory body to UNESCO, in 1979 (now in revised editions). The Burra Charter recognised that 'social or spiritual' contexts could be a formal category of value, incorporating indigenous heritage based on landscapes and living traditions. These new categories, however, also served communities associated with historical places in European contexts who were able to claim heritage value on the basis of their appreciation of the social or spiritual role such spaces play in their lives and traditions. The impact of the Burra Charter on how World Heritage is defined has been immense, leading to the recognition of the indivisibility of communities from their landscapes through the introduction of cultural landscapes as a category in 1992. From this global framework, the need to acknowledge social value has disseminated into national heritage frameworks, including the UK Heritage Lottery.

The Burra Charter therefore has made a significant difference in how communities who seek to care for their historic place of worship make a Heritage Lottery application to cover the capital costs of conservation and alterations. The current application process includes the requirement to say why the heritage in question is 'important to your local area … who the heritage is important to'. This is the user-friendly version of a statement of significance, working with the wider categories of value introduced in the Burra Charter. Now they are expressed non-prescriptively, with a simple prompt about locality and people, rather than a checklist of the Burra categories (historic, aesthetic, social, scientific). However, for the bidding community, establishing what 'important' actually is still poses a challenge.

Faith communities who worked with the EDP project reported a high level of concern about producing a statement of significance. Working with these groups is an important reminder that the everyday experience of an historic building does not translate into an understanding of the specific architectural and aesthetic qualities of that historic environment relevant for such bids. The groups that the project interacted with were often aware of the ways in which their building might not meet their needs, either spatially, as expressed in the lack of working areas or toilet facilities, or spiritually, exemplified in restrictions around a high altar as a reserved sacred space. These limitations became drivers for change. However, it proved much harder for them to approach buildings from the point of view of professionals who authored listing descriptions of such building, as they did not have access to the technical knowledge and skills required. While this is not surprising, it does mean

Figure 5.4: Workshop at St Luke's Church, Oxford. Image credit: Empowering Design Practices.

that the continued requirement for articulating why a building is 'important' to a broad range of stakeholders, ranging from users, tourists to guardians of the nation's heritage, continues to be a challenge.

Top tips from completed projects

The team visited eight places where projects to refurbish or adapt a historic faith building had been completed. We selected a mix of places of different faiths and denominations in rural, urban and suburban locations that presented a variable set of design challenges and characteristics in terms of listing and scale of architectural intervention. In each place the team delivered a facilitated workshop inviting members of the original development team and current users of the building to reconstruct a timeline of their project, note key milestones and distil top tips for other groups embarking on a similar journey (Figure 5.4). Below we synthesise the groups' key recommendations into six points. View the eight individual stories at https://www.empoweringdesign.net/design-project-stories.html.

Several participating groups spoke of **the importance of having a clear, shared vision** as the foundation for driving a successful project forward. They stressed the need to have a vision underpinned by well-articulated values and objectives and supported by a clear narrative about the 'big picture' before delving into detail. Such a vision not only helped to inform and guide different phases of their projects, it was essential to communicating their projects to others. It also constituted a vital tool in convincing potential funders that the groups were not simply chipping away at niggly problems but had a holistic view of the future of the building and the role it could play in its local community. Finally, having a clear vision was important for devising an effective strategy to get things done – as one participant put it: 'Think big vision to get the small things done'.

Many of the communities we spoke to also emphasised **the importance of leadership** and the need to ensure a good mix of skills within the project team. It was deemed important to have a clear project leader with authority to make decisions as well as working groups that support the overall project by providing leadership and focused work on specific elements of the project.

With regard to community engagement, the groups we liaised with stressed **the importance of getting people involved as early as possible** and taking the time not only to listen and speak to people individually but also directly involve them in the design process. As one community group member commented: 'Engage the community early on and continuously through the project'. A further aspect that was emphasised was the need to keep local people informed to prevent rumours from developing and spreading, and to avoid the building up of negative views that might stop a project in its early stages. In a nutshell, the suggested approach is one of listening and of working together to find a solution, as this will allow a shift from a sense of threat to one of opportunity.

Another point that emerged from discussions with successful projects was that in order to unlock opportunity **it is important to reach out and build partnerships**, to be open to new ideas and dialogue, and to investigate possibilities. One group suggested establishing a liaison group to identify and address anything that might come out of joint working during the process. As one member of such a group stated: 'Build relationships; good relationships are at the heart of transformation'.

A further area that was commented on is the design process. All of the groups that were consulted spoke of the need to identify early on which elements of the project can be executed by the group itself and which require external specialist expertise. They also stressed

the importance of establishing a good working relationship with their architects, and of being clear about their own expectations of them. They further emphasised that when developing a design, it is highly advisable to ask the architect to go over all the parameters of the final scheme with the group and to be prepared to challenge anything the group is not happy with.

A further point that emerged with regard to the construction phase was **the commitment to investing in quality, local craftsmanship and to work with local artists.** Groups spoke of choosing the right materials and of thinking beyond essential repairs to the future sustainability of the building. They also highlighted the need to ensure that any changes being suggested respect the heritage, context and values of the building and what it represents both to its worshipping and wider community.

In conclusion, while the historic places of worship we visited had many different starting points and motivators, in the end, all of the projects were about unleashing the potential of these buildings for the benefit of people, both their congregations and wider communities. Many members of such projects, when looking back on their journeys, spoke of the partnerships and friendships that were forged and the role these projects had played in improving the quality of life for local people. The groups saw these projects as far more than updating buildings and understood that they offered a route to fostering social change.

Working with live projects: approaches that support community leadership in design

As discussed, a key objective of the Empowering Design Practices project was to evaluate, develop and use approaches to foster community leadership in design. Following the writings of Richard Couto (2010), a practitioner and scholar in community leadership, we see 'community design leadership' as a form of civic leadership that arises in situations in which communities face challenges or opportunities that require change, adaptation and ultimately the design of something new. Furthermore, we follow Duffy et al (2018) in perceiving the notion of community leadership as 'a set of practices' of a group of people rather than a formal authority or attribute of a group to hold power over others; community leadership is therefore about people taking collective responsibility to act. We thus approached community leadership in design as a set of group practices that are not (only) about the creation of solutions, but mainly about the creation of processes and environments that enable peoples' capabilities to engage in designing. Below we present a set of four approaches developed with this framework in mind that draw upon observations derived from our work with community groups.

Creating opportunities for building a leadership team

One important strategy for supporting the development of community-led leadership in design has been the active encouragement of the congregation to create a 'design team' responsible for initiating and championing actions to progress a design project. It is often assumed that a person in a position of authority (such as a vicar, or spiritual leader) would be a natural leader of the design process. However, there are many parties who have an interest and a potential stake in a project to adapt a historic place of worship for community benefit, such as religious leaders, faith bodies, heritage bodies, architects, the worshippers themselves, but also people in the wider community who have an appreciation for the building or use it for a variety of religious or non-religious purposes. These 'actors' do not always have the same interests, aspirations or power to influence the design process. Diverse needs and aspirations therefore need to be negotiated, and power relations need to be rebalanced, to allow everybody to contribute – a goal which may not tally with the leadership resting with one person.

Our approach to facilitating the formation of such leadership teams was to create opportunities and activities where people can work together and shape their working relationships in the process. Simple tasks such as building a physical model of their building or creating a poster to present the team's vision were instrumental in team building.

An example here is a church community that was able to progress their project by means of creating a building group. When the research team first approached the church, the vicar had very specific ideas about the development of the building and was about to appoint an architect to create a plan for the space. We designed and facilitated several activities to support the design process of the group, encouraging the active participation of the wider worshipping community. Activities included a workshop on mapping challenges and opportunities for the building, a heritage day and a workshop enabling the mapping of needs against objectives and design ideas. Through the process the realisation emerged that the needs of the community and building were more complex than originally thought, and a small team of people naturally emerged who took responsibility to steer the project. The vicar, moreover, gradually adopted a mentoring rather than a leading role in the design process. This development was perceived as 'empowering' for both the vicar who

claimed to have found the right level and way to engage in shaping the future of the building, as well as for the members of the team who were able to bring their knowledge, time and passion to the project to move the process forward. As they put it: 'it was such an encouragement at that time to have somebody come in and help us think [about] stakeholder processes and stakeholders, and that actually is still the foundation for that statement of needs document [it] came from that work right at the beginning, which then led in to us kind of getting together as a team'.

Demystifying design and the process of designing

Another important strategy adopted in the project was to provide advice, training and materials to help groups familiarise themselves with the language and practice of design and engage in design thinking: thinking about the form, function and experience of a place and how design changes can influence these elements.

We observed that community groups often felt daunted by the prospect of making design decisions, reporting a lack of understanding of the design process and how to engage with architects and designers. They often considered architects as the experts who

Figure 5.5: Design Training in Manchester and Sheffield. Image credit: Empowering Design Practices.

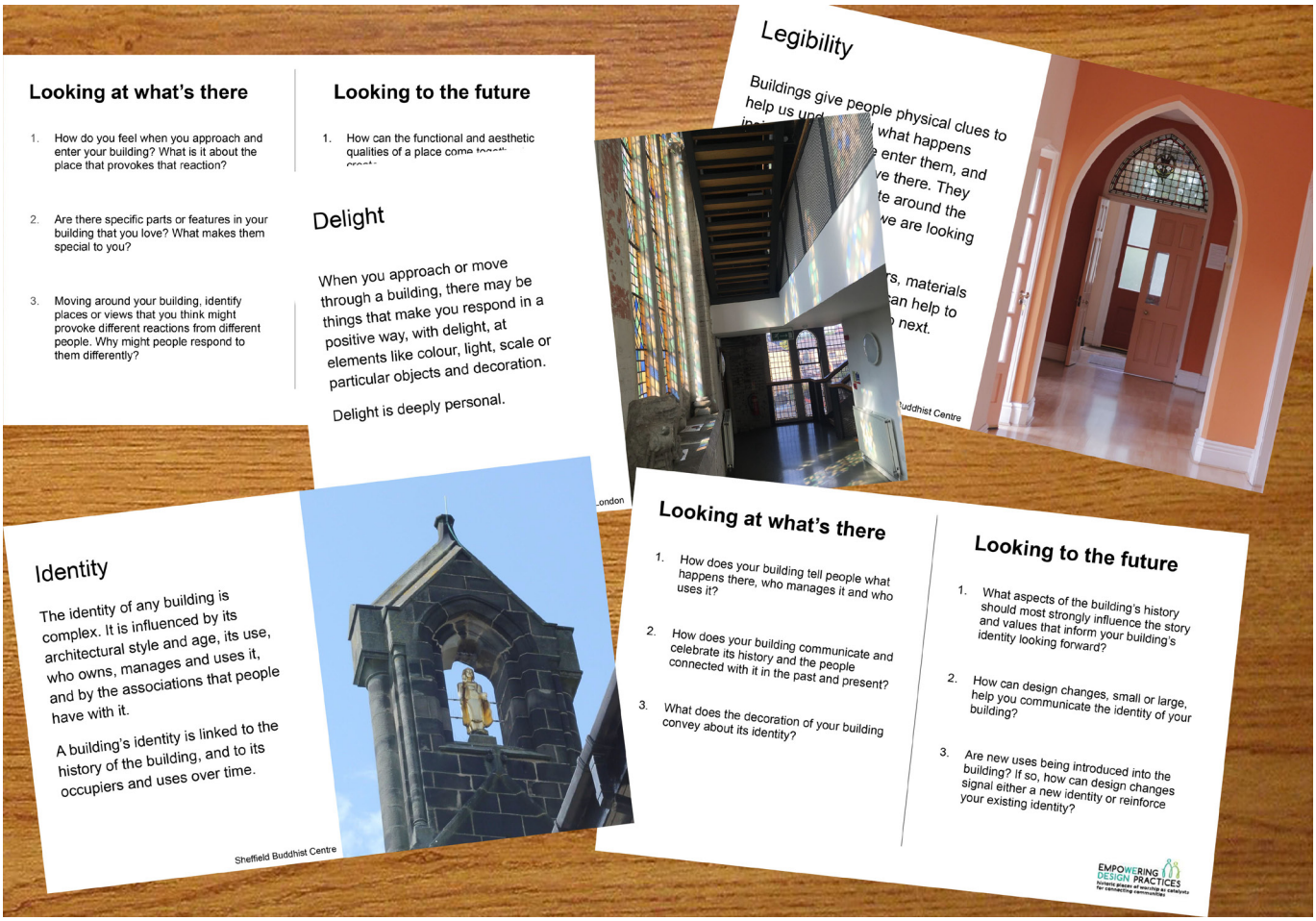

Figure 5.6: Cards developed to explore design themes. Image credit: Empowering Design Practices.

will magically solve their problems. However, people who use and care for buildings hold knowledge and experience that can be extremely valuable in the design process, yet often these remain tacit.

Our approach focused on engaging groups directly with the 'object' of design – that is the building and its activities – and help them experience the design process, rather than simply attaining a theoretical understanding of it. To that end, the project organised 'design training' workshops (Figure 5.5). These were 2-day intensive workshops based on the Buildings by Design course, developed by the Glass-House Community Led Design, which aimed to help the groups to engage in key elements of a design process such as mapping issues and assets of a place, developing a vision, and defining options using physical models. Other materials and resources developed by the project to help community groups engage with design terms include a website called *Explore Design* (2019b) and a set of cards that help participants explore key design themes such as access, flexibility, legibility and identity. The cards contain prompts and questions that help design teams and users to explore a variety of design solutions and their effect on the fabric, form and function of the building and on peoples' experience (Figure 5.6).

Participants in the workshops reported that they were transformational. They helped them develop confidence in their own creative and critical skills and delve deeper into the design problem they faced, enabling them to explore alternative solutions as well as the impact of design decisions on the everyday use and feel of their building. Participants often reported that they left the workshops feeling they had gained a focused understanding of the limitations and feasibility of their original ideas and a sense of the wider set of options to consider: '[the course was] a helpful catalyst to just get some thinking going again and to actually start to dream a bit bigger than simply replacing what is already there with something a bit newer and fresher; but thinking more wholeheartedly about actually how are we using this building, what are the spaces might we want to create'.

Connecting the dots: developing a shared design rationale

Supporting groups in developing a shared and well-evidenced rationale for change was integral to their strategy and aims. We noted that while groups have important insider knowledge about how their building works, or have good connections in their community, they often get entangled in the complexity of the details and have difficulty in seeing the bigger picture. The complexity and range of the issues and ideas that a group tries to respond to often leads to fragmented actions and/or a tendency to disengage.

The response of the project team was to support groups in exploring the following three key questions:

- **Why are changes needed?** This question was typically broken down to questions such as: what are the key issues that compromise the aspirations and future of the place? What are the assets in the community and building to be sustained or enhanced for the future?
- **What changes are needed?** This was a question about the ideas that the group had for the future of the place.
- **Who needs to be engaged and how?** This was a question about the people, experts or organisations that need to be engaged in order to develop these ideas and garner more support.

The project developed ways to help groups engage with these questions in a structured way and create a coherent narrative that can be communicated to others, particularly to experts such as architects, development officers, heritage officers and other statutory (faith) bodies who can offer further support (Figure 5.7). One of the key outcomes of applying this

Figure 5.7: Workshop exploring key questions for developing a design rationale. Image credit: Empowering Design Practices.

strategy was that groups were able to engage with the development of a 'statement of needs' and find a renewed sense of conviction and energy to invest in their project.

Building on this work, the project team developed a website called Design Thinking Guide (2019a), which provides a step-to-step guide to the key questions that groups need to engage with to connect the dots and develop a design rationale for change, accompanied by a set of external resources and practical tools.

Prototyping ideas and activities

Finally, an essential approach that the project adopted was to focus on promoting an experimental attitude and encouraging groups to prototype and test ideas about new activities, physical alterations or indeed new partnerships. Prototyping is simply a process of trying out things (activities, partnerships or physical changes) in a much simpler and scaled down way before taking significant or long-term decisions. Examples include testing different materials for flooring using temporary installations or inviting a local business to run a month-long pop-up café.

We found that the fear of the unknown or unfamiliar often held groups back from taking action to progress their project. Introducing new activities or physical alterations in a building can have a big effect in the way a place works and is experienced by people whether from a liturgic perspective, or a historic or communal one. In many cases, groups were also uncertain about the value of developing new collaborations or partnerships that could deliver new activities.

In one of the places that we worked with we facilitated a number of public events to help garner interest in the space and test the feasibility of different ideas (Figure 5.8). One event saw the church open its doors on a Saturday to engage passers-by in ideas about the place. Some 140 people crossed the threshold within three hours and the church had the opportunity to evaluate its capacity to welcome visitors for community activities outside their Sunday service. At a later stage, the research team helped develop a brief for a community competition, inviting local people and organisations to propose new activities that could be held in the building. We also facilitated an open day where the winners were able to run their activities as taster sessions, helping them as well as the church to explore the possibility of offering such activities on a regular basis.

The feedback received showed that the approach helped the group collect evidence about the potential of the church space in a tangible way and explore their own 'red lines' – the boundaries of what they can or cannot negotiate given their own values, beliefs and preferences, for example with respect to aesthetics or the types of uses or users they can accommodate.

A booklet on 'Testing ideas for your community building' (2020) is available on the project website, alongside other resources helping groups and professionals think about community engagement more broadly and plan their community engagement activities.

Final reflections

As we have seen in the previous sections, through our research we visited and heard the stories of numerous historic places of worship. This showed that these places harbour an abundance of cultural and social assets, such as the religious beliefs and faith values that bring people together in a place of worship, but also the strong ties and social networks they maintain with local people and organisations. The buildings are valued for their history and heritage, as well as for what they represent to the faith community. Nevertheless, we also saw that places of worship face important challenges such as long-term maintenance and financial stability, a

Figure 5.8: Images from engagement activities delivered at the church. Image credit: Empowering Design Practices.

shortage of volunteers and complexities surrounding building restrictions linked to religious, heritage or planning regulations.

We found that projects that successfully transform places of worship require those looking after them to develop their capability and confidence to engage with others (people and organisations in the community, professionals, funders and policy makers) to help them form a vision for building, explore design ideas and understand the challenges involved. Not all the places we encountered were able to progress well with their plans. One of the groups we worked with decided to sell their building; many other groups are still trying to find a way forward. Even though the duration of the project was five years (quite rare for standard research projects), we realised that the development time for such building projects is painstakingly long. This reformulated our own understanding of the potential impact and nature of our contribution as researchers and brought to light the importance of building a network of people who can champion design long after the research funding ends. Transforming a place of worship into a more sustainable community asset requires a holistic approach to the future of the building and its connection to local people, and a greater investment in building design capacity early on in the process.

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