

## Fenham Pocket Park: a holding ground

Armelle Tardiveau, Senior Lecturer in Architecture, Newcastle University, UK (presenter)

Abigail Schoneboom, Lecturer in Urban Planning, Newcastle University, UK (presenter)

Daniel Mallo, Senior Lecturer in Architecture, Newcastle University, UK

Maud Webster, Graduate in Architecture and Urban Planning, Newcastle University, UK

### Abstract

Fenham Pocket Park (FPP) is a community-led urban space, founded in 2016 in a context of austerity imposed by the British Government. Beginning as a University-third-sector collaboration, the project transformed an undefined soulless space between a swimming pool and a library into a place for exchange, dwelling and celebrating. It also gave rise to a residents' group, the Friends of Fenham Pocket Park (FFPP), who became custodians of the space and committed to developing it further. Six years on, the area has suffered further from the impact of austerity and retreat of public services, and the FFPP group has experienced setbacks and a lull in participation. This study documents, through student journals and participant observation, the role played by BA Architecture-and-Urban-Planning students in re-charging the project through playful creative practice interventions and dialogue with residents. It explores the entanglement of civil society with students in a process that is framed by Freire's critical pedagogy and recent scholarship on lively materials. Here, making is theorised as a vehicle through which pedagogies of hope can embed themselves in the community. The paper thus meditates on the agency of emplaced student-led making in (re)kindling community action, creating collectively shaped social and climate futures.

### Introduction

Since 2008, an austerity agenda has decimated UK public services and removed resources from public spaces (Webb et al. 2021). This is part of a wider pattern of neoliberal development policy, seen in Europe and beyond, that has left neglected or abandoned parks and public buildings in its wake (Flood, 2019; Harris, 2015). While this process has taken its toll in terms of widening inequality and social exclusion (Bach, 2016; Casselden, 2019; O'Kane, 2010), it has also given rise to a range of citizen-led practices that unfold in the interstices and left-over spaces of the city (Sara et al, 2021; Tardiveau & Mallo, 2014; Teo, 2021).

While such activity – for example, mutual aid initiatives and food banks -- can be theorized as a functional part of neoliberal ideology since it plugs the gaps in a shrinking or absentee state (Bach, 2016; Fotaki, 2015; McGowan et al, 2020), it can also be framed as radical and progressive, embodying and enacting alternatives that make another world possible. Informed by critical theory and the literature on lively materials, we explore this latter view, arguing that particular forms of citizen-led urban placemaking are a vehicle through which hope embeds itself, carrying with it the potential for progressive social transformation. In particular, noting a gap in scholarship on the role of students in such spaces, we theorise the

significance of student involvement in an interstitial urban project as key in sustaining the energy and vision needed to carry change forward.

The study focuses on Fenham Pocket Park (FPP), which was created in 2016, in an undefined 90m<sup>2</sup> outdoor space located between a library and a swimming pool, located in an area of Newcastle Upon Tyne (UK) that has pockets of social deprivation. Focused on a car-dominated streetscape where there is a dearth of public space [Figure 1], the project was initially a University-third sector collaboration between architect-researchers at Newcastle University and Sustrans, a UK Sustainable Transport charity. It heightened community action and created a shared sense of citizenship (Mallo et al. 2020). Through creative practice 'actions' and 'interventions', the project has opened up "windows of opportunity for an imaginative and egalitarian place-making process" (Tardiveau and Mallo, 2014: 457). An ensuing residents' group (FFPP) that was formed through the project transformed an undefined soulless space into green space for exchange, dwelling and celebrating.

Six years on, the area has suffered further from the impact of austerity and retreat of public services with the closure of the adjacent swimming pool due to lack of funding and maintenance, and the ever-dwindling opening times of the local library. The FFPP members continue to plant, weed and sweep the space but, amidst these challenges, the group has faced a lull in participation and motivation. This article documents the role that a group of Newcastle University BA Architecture and Planning students played in re-focusing the project's energy through a Live Project that involved creative practice intervention at FPP, which unfolded over a 3-month period.

Noting a lack of scholarship on student involvement in citizen-led placemaking processes, this study explores the entanglement of civil society with students in a collective learning process that is framed by Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy in its radical commitment to challenge hegemonic neo-liberal discourses. Bringing together the literature on pedagogies of hope with recent scholarship on lively materials, we examine the role of hands-on making as a vehicle through which students and community members can embed hope, imagining and enacting alternatives in ways that release blockages in FPP's progress and secure its longevity.

The following section reviews key aspects of critical theory that pertain to pedagogies of hope, linking this to scholarship on lively materials and community involvement in activating undefined urban spaces. This is followed by an outline of our methodology, which is based on participant observation and thematic analysis of student journals, and an overview of the Live Project. Analysis of our findings reveals four key themes (open-endedness, desire to connect, mutual facilitation and sense of ownership) that, we argue, underscore the impact of students in condensing and revealing the progress made by FPP, energizing the FFPP group to sustain and grow their activity, and moving hopefully forward in spite of a crushing austerity agenda.



Figure 1: Fenham Hall Drive, a car-dominated street, where public space is scarce. Photo taken in 2015, prior to the construction of Fenham Pocket Park. Photo credit: Daniel Mallo

### [Connecting pedagogies of hope and making in place](#)

This section brings together two strands of critical scholarship: a) pedagogies of hope and b) making and lively materials -- that are grounded in the notion of the collective as the basis of human emancipation. We adapt this to underscore the importance of undefined spaces in the city as test-beds for urban transformation. Noting a dearth in research on the application of these ideas in the context of urban design, we apply these ideas to a place-based context where the death of public space, wrought by neoliberal austerity, is challenged and potentially overcome by a lively (place)making process. This literature allows us to frame the relationship between students and community actors, and between the classroom and the neighbourhood, as overflowing, entangled, and therefore radical.

### [Critical pedagogy and the politics of hope](#)

Working within the context of an academic institution yet oriented towards community-based action, we mobilise Freire's critical pedagogy in its radical commitment to challenge hegemonic capitalist discourses (Freire 1970). While Freire's work is far-reaching and has generated a vast literature (e.g., De Beer & Oranje, 2019; Levkoe, 2006; Toolis, 2017), we highlight here several aspects of his pedagogical framework that are relevant to the case study.

Firstly, in considering the role of students and community actors in the transformation of urban space, we are inspired by Freire's dialogic conception of the necessity of real-world interaction with people, things and spaces. Pedagogy, as such, necessarily unfolds outside of the walls of the educational institution. For Freire, this interaction undergirds authentic learning and radical social change, in this case arising around a shared sense of citizenship.

For Freire, dialogue is not just a technique, it is a whole way of knowing related to a social rather than individualistic definition of knowledge (Freire, 1970:17). It cannot be isolated from larger societal issues or from the perspectives of other members of society.

Secondly, we are informed by Freire's conviction – grounded in the work of Marcuse, Fromm and other critical theorists -- that we are stuck in a domesticated reality that appears immutable. The overarching task of Freirian pedagogy is thus to pierce the immutability of *what is* and engage in the social task of imagining (and enacting) *what might be*. Through his dialogical position, Freire argues for “a reality founded on dialogue where individuals work in fellowship and solidarity to first envision their surrounding reality and then work collectively to change it” (Van Heertum, 2006: 46).

Hope is a central ingredient in Freire's pedagogy, and lies at the centre of the process of collective action through which subjects become aware of their oppression (Freire, 1998). Concerned with revolutionary struggle, Freire argues that hope becomes essential in order for people to “overcome the cynical and ahistorical fatalism at the heart of neo-liberal ideology” (Van Heertum 2006: 46). Bloch's *Principles of Hope* (1986) reinforces this claim by capturing hope as the reinvigorating strength that captures and channels “imagination and deeper desires of the people” (Van Heertum 2006: 47). This position is linked to Marcuse's (2002) thinking in its thrust for collective hope as a means of refusing the individualistic basis of neoliberal ideology. Indeed, the closing words of *One Dimensional Man* (2002 [1964]) – a key manual of the student movements of the 1960s and 70s – point to (irrational) hope as the remaining means for overcoming in a situation where contemporary capitalism has foreclosed progressive alternatives<sup>1</sup>.

In the tradition of critical theory, ‘pedagogies of hope’ have been noted for advancing a definition of hope as “a socially mediated experience” (Webb, 2013). Whilst recognising the contested and problematic characterisation of hope as form of human experience, we acknowledge the contribution of Webb (2013) who proposes a comprehensive categorisation of modes of hoping, two of which become relevant for our discussion, namely ‘critical’ and ‘transformative’ hope. Firstly, ‘*critical hope*’, “refuses to accept the completeness of the present while at the same time refusing to impose a predetermined vision” of the future (Webb, 2013: 403). In a pedagogical context, Giroux (2001) characterises hope as a critical experience that uncovers “submerged longings” whilst keeping an open mind as to what the future could become. The educator's approach is that of a facilitator revealing desires, and keeping them alive within an open-ended process; the emphasis being on “creating spaces of possibilities” (Webb, 2013: 403).

Secondly, a pedagogy of ‘*transformative hope*’ places the stress on “a sense of responsibility grounded in a confidence in the powers of human agency” as well as on the capacity and “transformative power of collective action” (Webb, 2013: 409). Following a Freirean spirit, this form of hope is oriented towards doing and fuels the collective task of piercing the immutability of the present, thus becoming explicitly political (p.410). A ‘transformative

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<sup>1</sup> As a coda, Marcuse offers Walter Benjamin's observation, at the advent of insuperable fascism: “It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us” (p.261).

hope' gives traction to performative processes, thus becoming tangible and material, in our case, creating the basis for the collective endeavour of making FPP.

In the following section we explore community-based placemaking as constitutive of critical and transformative hope. Through its open-ended, overflowing quality, this process links actors to possibility through a collective engagement with lively materials that awakens the human capacity to transform the world by working on it.

### Making and lively materials

Making may be defined as 'the composition and/or manipulation of materials that brings into being new or revised objects' (Carr and Gibson, 2016: 302). Here, a conception of the material world as active and fluid is central to theorising the link between making and hope. Recent literature on making (Carr and Gibson, 2016; Paton, 2013; Schoneboom, 2018) has theorized the ontological connection between making – conceived as an overflowing, open-ended process – and a conviction that another, better, world is possible. Here, the close relationship that makers can develop with materials and the surrounding sense of social vitality and possibility that this gives rise to is understood as a vehicle through which place and organisation are continually renegotiated towards sustainable outcomes (Schoneboom, 2018). Importantly, such a liberatory process can take place in the interstices of a hegemonic capitalist system where the dominant mode of material production appears to foreclose alternatives.

Ingold's (2012: 438) critique of the hylomorphic model of reified subject-object is important here, usefully privileging 'leaky' things as 'gatherings of materials in movement'. Through a Heideggerian conception of the thing that treats materials as lively instead of passive (Bennett, 2010) or as lines of flow (Deleuze and Guatarri, 2004: 451-452) the material world is enfolded in a sense that "being something is always on the way to becoming something else" (Ingold, 2011: 3).

Drawing on such analysis, the mode of making privileged by hegemonic capitalist interests can be understood as a blockage that stands in the way of change. Here, industrial capitalism is seen to have generated a mode of production that cuts off the vitality of materials. Its instrumentalised mode of production and consumption, which obscures the provenance of things, destroys, in Hudson's terms, the ability to "imagine alternative ecologically sustainable and socially just visions of the economy" (Hudson, 2012: 374). This argument aligns with, and draws upon, Marx's youthful Hegelian writings (2001 [1844]), where capitalism alienates us from the productive activity that connects us to nature and to each other, enabling us to share in the riches of our fellow men and of the earth. Making under capitalism is thus often a fragmented and impoverished process, severed from dynamic of positive self-becoming that allows us to become at home in our world.

Recent scholarship upholds that emancipatory forms of making in place can keep possibility alive, even in the interstices of a hegemonic system. As Carr and Gibson (2016: 306) underscore, those who work intimately with materials sit comfortably in a world threatened by ecological crisis since they view "things-at-hand as only ever temporary gatherings of

matter and ideas, which can disperse and be reassembled elsewhere in new combinations.” As Paton (2013: 1084) argues, where sensual, creative interaction with materials prevails, making is a mode of familiarity that keeps space relatable, rendering hard surfaces porous and accessible to the senses.

For Paton, this familiarity, which comprises an “accumulation of bodily knowledges, where dense and fibrous relations with spaces and materials grow” (p. 1076), can be easily broken and disengaged by economic and technical upheaval. However, if nurtured, this intimate relation can foster a sensual relationship that connects us richly and meaningfully to each other and to place. Drawing on Paton’s work and examining the dynamics surrounding an urban makerspace, Schoneboom (2018: 713) argues that via a lively engagement with materials, “the type of place that is created is found to be consistent with a mode of urban development that involves people more richly in their local environment, militating against the political amnesia and social atomisation that occurs in overly corporatised urban centres.” In an urban built environment depressed by neoliberal austerity policies, intimate hands-on making practice thus aligns with the theory of critical and transformative hope (Webb, 2013) that we introduced in the previous section.

#### Citizen-led transformation of undefined urban space

Our discussion is grounded in the, almost endemic, context of austerity that Western European cities have endured since the financial crisis in 2007-2008. Many cities have suffered the devastating scars of the austerity measures inflicted by the retreat of the public sector by local authorities (Webb et al., 2021; Tonkiss, 2013; Mayer, 2013). The physical manifestations of austerity urbanism can be found in the abandonment and disrepair of urban spaces and public buildings. Scholarship points out at myriad of open urban spaces that, as a result of austerity, remain in an idle status of neglect, such as interstitial urban spaces (Petcou and Petrescu, 2007), interim spaces (De Smet, 2013), gap sites (Haydn et al, 2006), or simply indeterminate, unregistered, spare or left-over spaces in between buildings (Tardiveau and Mallo 2014). Yet, these spaces have also become the setting around which many citizens groups have sprung in an attempt to mobilise, denounce and explore alternative forms of ‘urban activism’ that alleviate the devastating failure of the welfare state (Purcell 2003) [Figure 2]. It is within this context that the case study that follows has become an arena for experimentation and the ground for emancipatory forms of making. While existing research explores the radical potential of such practices through examining citizen DIY, makeshift and temporary urbanism (Tonkiss 2013, Andres 2012, Tardiveau and Mallo 2014), we note that the role of students in such projects is under-researched.

In summary, this review has explored how existing scholarship on pedagogies of hope provides the theoretical groundwork for empirical study of how such ideas may be applied in practice. Bringing together these ideas and the literature on lively materials we have shown how existing literature connects critical theory’s framing of hope and place-based entanglement through making. Noting a research gap in exploring the role of students in such urban transformation, this study therefore reflects on the role of students in energising and deepening this entanglement, allowing interstitial urban interventions to act as testbeds for change.





Figure 2: Fenham Hall Drive, temporal and experimental design interventions exploring ways of inhabiting the street, 2015. Photo credit: Bryony Simcox

## Methodology

Drawing on the ethnographic tradition, the study employed an inductive, interpretivist methodology based on thematic analysis of student field diaries and participant observation in FPP activities by members of the research team. As part of this process, one of the students acted as a key informant, co-producing the article, as detailed below.

The research involved 22 students who each kept a field diary, recording in-the-moment experiences as well as writing longer reflective pieces and a blog at key moments in the engagement with FPP. The field diaries were used by the research team to witness FPP through the eyes of students taking part in the project, providing ‘insider’ accounts of their engagement (Burgess, 1981; Hyers, 2018). In Hyers’ (2018: 75) terms, these students were informants but also acted to a certain extent as co-investigators by creating a chronological and reflective record of their activities. The events at FPP were also video recorded by the students, offering a convenient way of referencing key moments from these activities, as decided by student videographers.

Additionally, two members of the research team (Tardiveau/Mallo) were engaged in an ongoing attachment to FPP while Schoneboom, who grew up in the community under study, offered nuanced understanding of the social context in which FPP was unfolding. These

relationships created rapport and a rich understanding of the field in keeping with contemporary ethnographic practice (Hammersley, 2017). All members of the research team were present for the student-led events and engagements at FPP and carried research journals in the field. Directly after each engagement, the team met and created an audio-recorded discussion of the day's events.

As noted above, one of the students, Webster, acted as a key informant during this process. This relationship emerged organically through Webster's very active and reflective engagement in the project and her ongoing rapport with the research team. After leaving the field, Webster participated in an audio recorded discussion with the research team offering key insights for the data analysis, helping to make sense of the data and offering respondent validation (Bloor, 1978; Duneier, 2000). The result was a team ethnography (Erickson, 1998), which allowed the team to pool and organise their reflections collaboratively.

The student journals, blog, video recordings and research team discussions were analysed thematically (Braune and Clarke, 2013) through an iterative process of coding the journals and transcripts and interpreting emerging themes (Cresswell, 2009). This included visual analysis of visual material (e.g., sketches from student journals and video recordings) emerging from the project, attending to patterns in dialogic and archaeological elements of the visual data (Shortt and Warren, 2019).

### Fenham Futures: a Live Project exploring a pedagogy of hope

The 'Fenham Futures' project took shape out of an Architecture and Urban Planning (AUP) undergraduate module/course at Newcastle University that explicitly includes a Live Project, a pedagogical model that has gained traction in the last two decades within the art and architectural disciplines (Bishop, 2012; Watt and Cottrell, 2006; Harriss and Widder, 2014). Live projects (Live Projects *no date*) showcase a trend within academia to expose students to clients, stakeholders and communities and put their skills and expertise into motion for the design and/or construction of a real life brief – mostly within collaborative or participatory settings. Over the years, Tardiveau and Mallo have been involved in Live Projects that explore performative engagement in the urban realm in the form of 'actions' and 'interventions' that seek to unpack existing socio-spatial practices, foreground power asymmetries, claim forgotten spaces, revive past memories or open up new possibilities and capacities (Tardiveau and Mallo, 2014). The Live Project is thus situated as a 'field' of material and social experimentation where participants interpret (Rancière, 2009) and draw from their embodied experience of making, sharing, learning, and projecting future imaginaries.

'Fenham Futures' Live Project comprised 22 students, aged between 20-22, and lasted one academic semester (11 teaching weeks) in spring-summer of 2022. Few students were familiar with the area and most discovered the neighbourhood through the project. The Fieldwork took place over 3 separate weeks (spread across March and May 2022) leading to a full day of intervention in the field in the form of a celebratory 'Parliament' event that brought the community together.



Fenham Pocket Park (FPP) was chosen as the setting for the Live Project, due to the ongoing involvement of Tardiveau and Mallo with the group of residents managing the park (FFPP) since 2015-2016 (Mallo et al, 2020). Despite the enthusiastic and buoyant beginnings of the pocket park and the invigorated motivation of the FFPP that led to the transformation of a nondescript grass area into a space for the community [Figure 3], FPP faced in 2021-22 an ebb/lull in activity. This was due to the closure of the nearby Fenham Swimming Pool in 2018 as a result of austerity cuts, which signalled the loss of a sense of hub and a key stakeholder in the area, one that brought footfall to the park and supported the FFPP in maintaining the space. The loss of this much-loved community resource also resulted in lower motivation among the wider community to support the FFPP's engagement with the area.



Figure 3: Fenham Pocket Park opening celebration (May 2016). Photo credit: Daniel Mallo

Tardiveau and Mallo introduced to FFPP the idea of bringing in students in order to give new traction to the project, refuel the energy in the group to keep on working together and rekindle the community motivation post-Covid 19. The FFPP also saw the Live Project as an opportunity to enlarge the reach of the park making it a more visible and welcoming space in the area. In particular, there was a desire to extend the breath of activities and communities that engage with the park, bringing forward the intention of creating a more inclusive space for a wider range of social, ethnic groups and a wider age range.

The focus of the Live Project was therefore to create an opportunity for bringing back lost momentum. This required engaging with residents in unlocking the potential of FPP as a hub for the community and collectively developing a vision for the future of the area. The project started with students engaging with residents to deepen their knowledge of the neighbourhood and the community through playful, open-ended creative prompts, as well as hands-on engagement with food, vertical planting, repurposing of furniture and thinking

about carbon footprint [Figure 4]. These initial scoping interventions took place in March 2022 and gave rise to a series of initial ideas for discussion including opportunities for creative reuse of the boarded-up/closed nearby swimming pool, the potential of boosting the social economy in the area, and the role of the FFP in tackling climate change [Figure 5]. Those broad agendas, that were developed in the initial phases of the project, became the lead for a community discussion that the students called ‘Fenham Parliament’.



Figure 4: Fenham Futures Live Project (March 2022). Decarbonising Fenham Interactive Map. Photo credit: Daniel Mallo

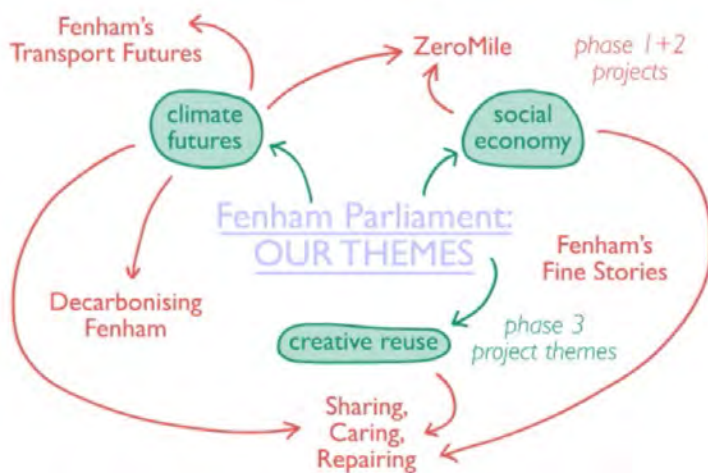


Figure 5 Fenham Futures Live Project (May 2022). Fenham Parliament Themes. Image credit: Maud Webster

The initial Interventions were followed in May 2022 by a celebratory event in the form of a ‘Parliament’ debate that focused on bringing the collective together and helping local residents have confidence in their ideas for the future. This event featured a stage

constructed by the students out of reclaimed pallets and timber posts, alongside a range of making and hands-on activities [Figure 6]. Tea and food were also provided adding to the informality of the setting. From the stage, the students broadcast interviews that they had conducted with leading researchers on creative re-use, importance of biodiversity in urban design and social economy. The community, including local residents and pupils of a nearby school, stakeholders of the adjacent Library, FFPP and students then engaged in a discussion about connecting FPP with social and climate imaginaries. Here, the aim was to underscore the impact of FPP to residents and Council officials, giving credit to and legitimising the importance of the work of FPP in the city and beyond, hence advocating for increasing the capacity and reach of this citizen-led space into the future.

As outlined in the methodology, our findings draw on student and researcher journals, transcripts of research conversations, and visual/audio data collected during the Intervention and Parliament. The section below identifies key themes that emerged from this data set, relating these to our discussion of how students become entangled through place-based making practice in a pedagogy of hope.



Figure 6 Fenham Futures Live Project (May 2022). Celebratory ‘Parliament’ event that brought the community together. Photo credit: Luke Leung

### Emerging themes: intensifying energy and action at FPP

Four overlapping themes emerged from the study. First, working with the community on a previously undefined space was experienced by the students as **open-ended** and therefore open to possibility, as opposed to agenda-driven. Second, the students were attuned to a **desire to connect**, on the part of community members; through making activity, they were able to indulge this desire and engage in productive dialogue about the space. Third, as the



project moved from dialogue to action, **mutual facilitation** was evident, with strong flows of motivational energy and creative inspiration moving back and forth among students, staff and FPP actors. Finally, a sense of community members realizing their power to transform space was legible to the students, articulated as a growing community **sense of ownership** of the space. These themes, and their connection to the existing literature on pedagogies of hope and lively materials, are unpacked below.

### 1. Open-endedness

The students were keenly aware of the sense of unpredictability that accompanies a Live Project. While academic staff were deeply familiar with FPP through previous work on the site, the changing socio-political context since the project's beginnings, as well as considerable unknowns about FPP's ability to sustain itself or expand in the wake of the swimming pool closure created a strong sense of unpredictability in the setting. Journal entries from the students acknowledge the difficulty of the Live Project yet also register the sense of possibility that arises from this. Furthermore, the lack of staff-imposed restrictions on the methods of intervention or suggested outcomes meant that students' felt freer in the directions they could take their work.

As they moved through the planning stages for the day of intervention, students recorded a sense of uncertainty about the project in similar ways. Here, the students grappled with unpredictable challenges. For example, their plan to cover the unwelcoming metal fence with paper flowers, proved difficult in situ due to the way that materials behaved. Gabriela noted, "it is impossible to predict everything while organising a live event" while Megan observed the "importance of contingency planning," and Will felt that he had quickly learned from the early planning stages of the project that improvisation is needed, noting "I learned to expect the unexpected." Students efforts were sometimes frustrated when reaching out to the community because of unforeseen obstacles, such as the uneven ground on which the Parliament had been planned [Figure 7]. Finding a way through such challenges required students to put in extra time and effort yet this was perceived positively. As Maud stated in her final reflection, "This Live Project was rewarding, though more difficult than the other design modules." Similarly, Megan commented that, while challenging, the Live Project's potential to impact a real community was energising: "This [...] approach offer[ed] a new motivation, knowing that our outputs would impact the lives of real people." These students were keen to highlight how different a Live Project is from 'traditional' methods of teaching delivery in the university setting, and they emphasised the benefits that can be earned through an open-ended approach.



Figure 7 Fenham Futures Live Project (May 2022). Dealing with unforeseen issues, such as the uneven ground on which the Parliament had been planned. Photo credit: Armelle Tardiveau

## 2. Desire to connect

Initial contact between the students and FPP was a relatively informal encounter that took place during a site visit, which involved some interaction with passers-by. Although some limited conversation about the undefined space outside of the swimming pool emerged from this encounter, the students sensed among local residents a keenness to engage more deeply in dialogue about the lack of usable public space in the neighbourhood. As Maud commented, “We found local demand for a connectedness of different communities and understanding of diversity.” Here, richer exchange appeared blocked partly by the brief and relatively fleeting nature of existing social encounters in and around the space. The need for richer exchange led to the plan to hold a day of intervention followed by a ‘Fenham Parliament’ event, hosted by the students.

The making activity that took place in the first day of intervention created a means to lengthen these encounters and enrich the social interaction between students and residents. It also offered residents an opportunity to dwell in the place. For example, residents were invited to assemble pre-cut colourful petals into flowers held together by a string [Figure 8]. Saksheetha recorded in her journal the benefit of time to achieve this small task, ‘The flower making activity acted as a perfect ice-breaker to help communicate with the locals by engaging their time in an activity.’



Figure 8 Fenham Futures Live Project (March 2022). A flower making activity as prompt for discussing climate futures. Photo credit: Daniel Mallo

Here, there was a keen awareness that design interventions could be used as a way to ignite interest among community members that would otherwise not find expression. Rather than the sameness of the ‘usual’ space that residents would encounter when passing by FPP, students sought to present passers-by with something other than the expected in order to allow conversation to flow. For example, during the student-led interventions some of the students set up a large and inviting wooden table on which they laid a map of the world alongside pens, strings and paper plates on which participants were invited to draw and write a recipe to add to the Fenham cookbook in order to inform future planting of herbs in the Pocket Park [Figure 9]. Other students defined the perimeter of an imagined community ‘workshop’ repair space facing the disused swimming pool and engaged participants in assembling disused furniture. This allowed collective reflection in material re-use of things and buildings, such as the now closed swimming pool. Here Matt noted that design events should “be appealing and intriguing enough for conversation to spark.” [Figure 10].





Figure 9 Fenham Futures Live Project (March 2022). Inviting participants to draw and write a recipe to add to the Fenham cookbook, exploring Fenham Pocket Park as community space for growing and cooking. Photo credit: Daniel Mallo

Through the making activity, members of the public opened up about their experiences of living in Fenham and their hopes for what sort of place it could be. This unfolded as an exchange of ideas, between the playfully creative input of the students and the lived experience of residents who used the spaces in and around FPP. By being engaged in a making activity and inviting passers-by to join in making flowers, re-assembling a chair or drawing the picture of a dish in a paper plate, Gabriela noted a rich flow of ideas and opinions: “I was amazed by the fact that people were so willing to share their opinions and ideas and by the depth of their reflections.” In particular, Gabriela was struck by the way in which the hands-on activities that the students had laid out in the space were able to feed curiosity and connect to local people: “They were also open to our ideas so we might have given them food for thought. We mutually benefited from this experience.”



Figure 10 Fenham Futures Live Project (March 2022). Enacting a community 'workshop' repair space facing the disused swimming pool - a collective reflection in material re-use of things and buildings. Photo credit: Armelle Tardiveau

### 3. Mutual facilitation

As well as acknowledging the mutual flow of ideas, students articulated the movement of energy and inspiration between themselves and academic staff, residents (including members of FFPP), and the experts they interviewed for the Parliament event. Ultimately, this flow manifested as a shared sense of ability to transform the space through collective effort.

As well as the 'expected' role of students learning from the academic staff, students switch from the usual task of delivering a piece of academic work to satisfy academic staff to taking responsibility of their action/engagement as they worked to share their ideas with residents [Figure 11]. Students were appreciative of the non-didactic approach of their tutors, who positioned themselves in a way that one student, Sajid, described as "less leading but more connecting/bridging ideas and people together throughout the project." Another student, Matt, reflected that while tutors acted as enablers for the student group, the students, in turn, "were the facilitators for the Fenham community."

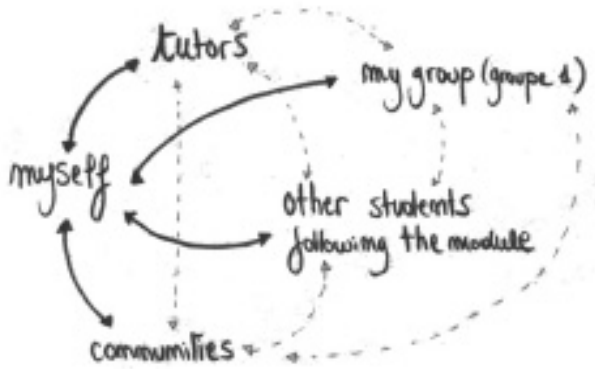


Figure 11 Fenham Futures Live Project (May 2022). Aurore’s reflection of her own role in relation to peers, community and tutors. Image credit: Aurore Henrotte

Here, language related to a positive leap of the imagination was used to describe the student-tutor relationship as well as the relationship between students and community members. Megan described the tutors as acting as a “springboard” to enable students to try out playful or creative ideas. This was reinforced by Aurore’s reflection on the sense of possibility that was conveyed through working at the micro-level in a very localized context: “Tutors push us to ‘think big. I really think it got us to where we are now because having this optimistic and enthusiastic vision gave us the energy to act even if it is on a smaller scale at first.” At the same time, direct engagement with the community was felt as a force that, as Maud put it, “propelled the project forwards.”

Within this relationship, students felt that a buzz of energy developed where the potential to transform space was felt to be made possible by communication and bridging of gaps. As Sajid reflected, civil society engagement in Fenham was boosted by the intervention, drawing attention to the significance of under-used local spaces, and creating interest in “rejuvenation of these places by communicating with each other.” This pooling of energy in space was brought into focus by the Parliament event which, as Matt commented, “created a great foundation and space to grow.” Recalling the event in her reflection, Megan noted that residents appreciated the Fenham Parliament as an emplaced way to “facilitate vital conversations within the community.”

#### 4. Sense of ownership

A conviction that change is possible became palpable through the student-led events at FPP. Students were keenly aware of the capacity of a Live Project to, as Maud put it, “create a space for collaboration and shared practices.” However, staff and students were also attuned to the challenges faced by FPP and the loss of momentum and energy that the project was facing following the pool closure and further austerity cuts that threaten to deepen social deprivation in Fenham.

The presence of the students, and their ludic approach to design interventions added a spirited feel to the project that served as motivation to residents to get involved and stick around to talk about possibilities for the space. The gathering of materials for the event – paper plates, hessian aprons, wooden pallets for construction of a makeshift stage --

rendered the space a space of possibility. Sukesheetha commented that the students involved felt a sense of ownership and responsibility for the space. However, they also attracted residents into these making activities in ways that allowed community members to inscribe themselves in the space, whether by re-assembling a discarded piece of furniture, adding a plate design and recipe to a community food map, or suggesting a new bus route which would benefit their daily activities and routine.

Students translated earlier ideas that they had gleaned from residents in the day of Intervention into hands-on activities that helped to animate these visions. For example, one group of students created an interactive map and directory of local businesses that had been highlighted by residents during the first intervention, inviting further contributions. Another group engaged in an interactive process to turn resident ideas and comments into sketches and plans for repurposing the disused pool, which could be then taken to the council. Through hands-on activities across the two events, residents were able to express and see the beginnings of realisation of their desires for the space. As Aurore commented, this imparted to residents a sense of the possible: “Students can bring to civic society [a way of] thinking beyond and having a meaningful vision for places [...] to turn their desires into reality.” Again, although the focus was upon the micro-level, re-fuelling an interstitial space in a local neighbourhood, the impact of participation in the action was felt profoundly. For Will, this translated to a movement from being a passive to active and connected citizen:

“Fenham community [...] has learned that you don't need to be an urban planner or a city council member to initiate change within the community. Through collective action, communities can have a tangible impact on the future of their local environment.”

### [Towards an emplaced pedagogy of hope through student-led making](#)

Using thematic analysis of student journals, this study resonates with existing literature on pedagogies of hope while also throwing light on the role of lively materials and making practice in driving community-led change. Engaging in a Live Project in an undefined urban space with an uncertain future exposed participants to challenging degree of unpredictability yet also liberated them from prescriptive pedagogy and reified design outcomes. Such an engagement resonates with critical theory's emphasis (Marcuse, 2002) on overcoming, through hope, neoliberalism's foreclosure of possibility. It also reflects the Freire's (1970) emphasis on the need for pedagogy where, as far as possible, learners are also teachers and are immersed directly in the ongoing struggle for social justice in our urban communities.

Through engagement in place, students were able to discern residents' desire for collective dialogue and action. Through hands-on, place-based making activity threads of ideas and action they became more tightly woven together in a way that energized those involved. In keeping with existing scholarship on lively materials (Carr & Gibson, 2016), the fluid making practice that took place at FPP during the day of intervention and the Parliament, offered an overflowing definition of the space as something where any bounded thing could potentially, through making, become something other than its current state. Resonating



with Paton's (2013: 1076) conviction that working with materials in place can connect us to each other as well as to place, the making activities devised by students created a way for residents to dwell at FPP, fostering free-flowing conversation about the place, its meaning, and its potential. Here, inspiration and motivation moved among academic staff, residents (including the Friends of FPP group) and students so that the roles of teachers and learners were only loosely defined and social/spatial transformation was privileged over instrumental learning objectives.

This overflowing realm, in which residents were able to inscribe themselves through making and dialogue created purchase for a sense of possibility that, while operating at the micro-level, fomented among residents and students the idea that community-led change is achievable. Importantly, at a moment where the FFPP group's initial energy had flagged, students were able to harness a ludic sensibility that focused creative energy and jolted the group back towards a hopeful vision of what could be possible for Fenham. While the community remains under-resourced and volunteer-run public services can be theorized as a 'race to the bottom' that is functional for a neoliberal agenda (Bach, 2016; Fotaki, 2015; McGowan et al, 2020), we argue that such student-led action can be powerfully framed as part of a rhizomatic vision (Daskalaki and Mould, 2013) for grassroots urban transformation.

Here, intervening on a small, neighbourhood scale is understood as a powerful method of challenging dominant narratives and achieving social change by moving "along the periphery of constraints" (Schrijver, 2011, p.247). The micro-level of everyday reality is thus conceived as "a space for freedom without the demand for total deliverance" (Schrijver, 2011, p. 255), where spatial and social transformation can be playfully yet powerfully explored and enacted. Taking place in marginal, undefined spaces, such interventions can nourish a conviction that change is possible. We uphold that, through playful place-based making, students can channel and focus such a conviction, enacting a politics of hope and reminding us that such a politics is most important at moments when it seems most irrational and foreclosed.

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