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Connected Communities

Valuing Community-Led Design

Katerina Alexiou, Theodore Zamenopoulos and Giota Alevizou



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Giota Alevizou**

Executive Summary

The ideas and practice of community-led design, participatory design or co-design have a long-standing tradition, especially in the context of urban design, planning and architecture. Community-led design goes beyond the one-dimensional process of consultation, helping involve people in decision-making throughout the design process, from visioning to implementation. There are many benefits from this approach, from improving civic participation and ensuring more democratic outcomes, to creating a strong sense of community and strengthening people's attachment to their place and to each other, to producing more sustainable solutions.

However, despite this tradition, community-led design is not a mainstream practice. An essential part of this issue is that the benefits of the approach are not thoroughly understood, measured or disseminated.

The project aimed to grapple with this issue, and explore how a better case for community-led design can be made. The objective was to collate, articulate and disseminate evidence about the value of community-led design and bring the relevant stakeholders together to share good practice and form a research agenda for the future.

The project team delivered a series of focus groups and creative workshops with multiple stakeholders. It also created [Community Design Exchange](#) a bespoke social network site for sharing stories and showcasing achievements of community-led design.

Researchers and Project Partners

Researchers: Dr Katerina Alexiou and Dr Theodore Zamenopoulos, The Open University.
Dr Giota Alevizou, The Open University, consultant.

Project partners: The Glass-House Community Led Design, Architecture Centre Network.

Key words

community-led design, place-making, storytelling, community exchange, asset mapping, value

Valuing Community-Led Design

Background and research questions

The ideas and practice of community-led design, participatory design or co-design have a long-standing tradition, especially in the context of urban design, planning and architecture, originating in the human rights movement in the 1960s (for a historical account see Sanoff, 2006). Community-led design goes beyond the one-dimensional process of consultation, helping involve people directly in decision-making about their environment. There are many benefits from this approach, from improving civic participation and ensuring more democratic outcomes, to creating a strong sense of community and strengthening people's attachment to their place and to each other, to producing more sustainable solutions. However, 50 years after the first community-led design initiatives, and although the practice of professionals and organisations involved has matured, community-led design is far from being mainstream in design and planning practice. A big part of the problem is that the benefits of the approach are not thoroughly understood, measured or disseminated. Grappling with this problem is of particular relevance at this particular time, with the Localism agenda and the National Planning Policy Framework. The new localism act aims to bring important reforms in the planning system, a significant objective being that of *'taking power away from officials and putting it into the hands of those who know most about their neighbourhood - local people themselves'*. This new recognition of the need for early and meaningful engagement and collaboration with communities requires new research, new methods and new tools for understanding and supporting best practice.

The overarching question of the project was to explore *'How can we make a better case for the value of community-led design?'*

Understanding value and how to capture it is part of a larger concern within the field of creative economy and cultural activities in general. The 2010 DCMS report on 'Measuring the value of culture' highlights the importance of finding tangible measurements of the impact of culture, in order to make a 'business case' for spending and the development of new policies. This has been a concern for designers and artists alike. For example, Multrie and Livesey (2009) have produced an 'International Design Scorecard' proposing a series of indicators for measuring the value of design, focussing on design firms involved in services. Places Matter! has published a report (2009) providing evidence that better design produces added value, even in times of economic recession. The public art think tank IXIA (2010) has produced an arts evaluation toolkit for assessing outcomes as well as processes of public arts projects. In any case, at the core of the discussion is the challenge of finding methods to define and measure value in economic as well as psychological, social and environmental terms.

Putting aside the methodological challenges of measuring value, what is important for this project is also to understand challenges and opportunities that are specific to the field of community-led design. Although community-led design shares many commonalities with public arts projects, it is unique in that it produces long term effects in the environment. Community-led design leads to the creation of buildings, public

spaces, parks and neighbourhoods thus having a lasting effect on people – they are public goods whose impact reaches more than simply those who live or work there. CABE (2009) has aimed to raise awareness about the visible and invisible value of public spaces and parks but there is no study or toolkit capturing directly how community-led design impacts on the creation of quality public spaces. Consideration of the effects of community-led design through space creation should be important in any framework for valuing community-led design. An additional issue is that most measurements and evaluation methods look at the impacts of creative or cultural activity on individuals, the designers/artists themselves or the individual recipients of the activity (users, audiences etc), with a less regard to the impact on communities (Guetzkow, 2002). In the project we took a multi-level perspective of value, considering individuals and communities, and how the impact on individuals may scale on communities, and affect their ability to produce economic, cultural and social capital.

As part of the overarching question the project set out to explore how to:

- Understand the barriers and opportunities of community-led design
- Explore ways to capture the value of community-led design
- Support the sharing of good practice among practitioners and stakeholders
- Develop a creative way to collect and disseminate evidence of good practice in community-led design

Methodology

Methodologically the emphasis in the project was placed on a) bringing different disciplines and different perspectives together and b) visual storytelling.

The project involved multiple stakeholders in its activities: academics from different disciplines (design, architecture, (economic and cultural) geography, planning, media, cultural studies); professionals working in regeneration (urban planners, architects, artists, enablers); third sector organisations mediating, supporting and advocating community-led design; representatives from community/voluntary groups, organisations and civic societies; local authority representatives (involved in planning, regeneration, housing, policy) and independent organisations dedicated to promoting design.

This multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder exchange was considered crucial in order to achieve a more holistic understanding of the issues surrounding community-led design and the question of evaluation and measurement.

Creative workshops were used to connect research and bring academic and non-academic stakeholders together to consider the question of valuing community led design. The workshops involved hands-on design activities with creative outputs to help participants explore, visualise and disseminate ideas and knowledge.

The project also *developed a bespoke social network site and visual gallery* ([Community Design Exchange](#) or CDE) to implement a participatory, bottom-up approach to the task of generating and disseminating evidence about the value of community-led design. CDE was developed in order to collect individual stories from people who have taken part and

benefited from community projects, and provide evidence of the value of their activity and the impact it has been making to their local environment. In parallel the site aims to provide a space for sharing and learning and enable people to network and build on each other's experience.

Focus groups with communities were held at various stages of the development of the site to ensure that the outcome is useful and relevant to their practice.

Overall, the focus on image, video and storytelling was chosen to help make a distinct contribution to the theme of valuation, where emphasis is on articulation and communication rather than measurement. Text, images and video contributions from individuals and groups who have been involved in community development activities also provide a rich set of data, which can be further analysed to articulate quantitative evidence. As the CDE site grows we have the opportunity to collect data about participants' activity, interactions and content, which can be quantitatively analysed using statistical methods and social network analysis techniques. In this way the tool facilitates the use of mixed evaluation methods (both quantitative and qualitative).

The project engaged with over 50 stakeholders in the workshops, focus groups and discussions. The academic team worked closely together with the Glass-House Community Led Design throughout the project. The Glass-House helped shape the research, played a critical role in reaching relevant stakeholders by tapping into its existing network of communities, and helped deliver the focus groups.

For more detailed information about the activities and outputs, including participant lists and visual materials produced, visit the project website: <http://www.valuing-community-led-design.weebly.com>.

Insights and reflections

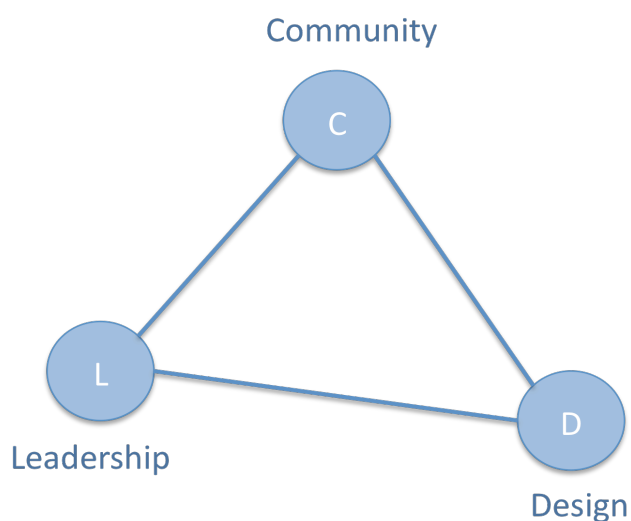
What is community-led design?

The project organised its exploration and activities around the term community-led design (CLD). Through the workshop discussions the meaning and scope of the term was itself explored and challenged from multiple perspectives. As it sits alongside other terms, like participatory design, collaborative design, or co-design, and because the practice is itself so diverse and open-ended it is difficult to attain an agreed definition. However, as a starting point and from an inclusive and practical perspective it is useful to think of community-led design as:

'a process through which local people are engaged in, and become responsible for, developing their environment, including buildings, open spaces, services and neighbourhoods'.

With this as starting point we can unpack some of its dimensions and areas of contest.

In fact, researchers, practitioners and community representatives take issue with all three terms: what is a 'community', who is the 'leader', what 'design' means.



The term community is an abstract and contested term. In the project discussions there were a number of questions about the term community that arose again and again. What are the boundaries of a community; are they administrative, geographical or conceptual? Who are the people that make up the community? How inclusive or representative are the groups that in reality take part in these processes? How can the hard to reach people be engaged and why should they, given the time limitations they have? But the major criticism against the use of the term community is the notion that community means consensus. All participatory or collaborative processes are intrinsically fraught with conflict, and these conflicts should be recognised and acknowledged, for the challenges but also the creativity they bring.

In parallel to the notion of community, the question of leadership is also very important. What does community-led mean? While there are many cases where local groups initiate and take forward community projects, many projects are instigated from the top down, due to big planning schemes or from local authorities and developers. An inclusive definition of community-led design should encompass different types of community leadership, where the community may play a role: as a user group (user centred design), as a client, as mediator (e.g. in neighbourhood planning) or as co-creator (perhaps the ideal form of community-led design?).

This in turn opens up interesting questions about design expertise and the role of professional designers. In CLD designers and architects become creative facilitators of design processes, helping engage people, unearth needs and aspirations, manage conflicts, communicate design problems and solutions, mediate discussions and help evaluate outputs and outcomes. It is also important to consider that there are different phases/stages of design: from visioning, to planning and implementation (the Glass-House uses the terms Design, Build, Make and Use), so CLD activities may materialise only at one particular stage or throughout the process. In any case and even as facilitation skills become central, independent design expertise remains highly valued and asked for by communities. On the other hand, for communities to become co-creators they need to gain some design training or at least gain confidence in their

ability to understand and imagine design solutions. So while the meaning of design and design expertise changes, the role of design becomes more and more important.

What is the value of community-led design?

At the project workshops participants (34 people) were asked to describe and discuss the impact community-led design has for themselves and others. The responses can be categorised along three general dimensions: *quality, social value and personal value*. Quality refers both to the design practice itself and the design outcomes. Social value incorporates community building, sustainability, civic values and creation of public goods. Personal value refers to skills development, personal growth and creativity. Table 1 provides a detailed presentation of the responses.

Table 1. Classification of participant responses on the value of CLD

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF CLD FOR YOU? (WHAT IS THE VALUE AND IMPACT OF CLD FOR YOU AND OTHERS?)		
Quality	Transforming/improving design practice	Spreading design practices. Better understanding of design. Broader design applications. More inclusive and representative. Bridging the "expert"/community gap/ between professionals, communities and government. Challenges assumptions.
	Better design outcomes, improving quality	Better quality. Uses knowledge that exists locally. Community are the experts. Spaces better tailored to local places and people's needs. Alternative to mainstream provisions. Sustainable outcome. Achieves places that are owned and wanted.
Social Value	Social capital, community building and sustainability	Empowering communities to engage and share. Community building. A tool for growing and shaping community, supporting each other. Bringing people together with a shared sense of purpose and mutual benefit. Helping people reconnect w/ themselves, environment and emotions. Sense of belonging. More pride/value in places. Sense of ownership. More fun. Long-term sustainability of communities. The value of CLD is to create a situation where the community feel empowered and are able to initiate, motivate multiple actions.
	Citizenship	Democratic. Local people determining the future of public spaces. Enables

		local people to have a say and influence. Potential to critique and strengthen government and to create a local network. Social Justice. Political value.
	Public goods	Creating free public spaces.
Personal value	Personal development	Growth. Development of skills and confidence, a chance to use and shape knowledge and skills. Self-actualisation. Skills for negotiation. Creative thinking, awareness of design.
	Everyday creativity	Spark ideas and actions for everyday people.

How can we capture the value of community-led design?

Participants shared their own experiences and ideas around approaches, methods and measurements for capturing the value of community-led design. Table 2 summarises the different propositions.

Table 2. Approaches and methods for capturing the value of CLD

HOW DO YOU CAPTURE VALUE? (WHAT APPROACHES, METHODS, MEASUREMENTS DO YOU USE?)	
Visual and creative methods	Visual and experience mapping Film, video, photography, digital platforms and social media (blogs, websites) Asset mapping
Case Studies	
Capturing stories and narratives	Interviews, recording stories, narratives, Ethnography, journals, action learning
Engagement with communities	Workshops, focus groups, visits, walks Consultations, meetings
Qualitative appraisal	Appraising, participatory appraisal methods
Quantitative analysis and measures	Network analysis Quantitative surveys Participation data Economic benefit, funds drawn Use of space/services

The major insight was an emphasis on creative and engaging methods (from physical modelling to walks) as well as the importance of capturing and sharing people's individual experiences and stories. Also there was an understanding that no single tool can serve all projects or purposes but methods and tools form part of a toolkit that can be appropriated, adapted to the needs of individuals and communities.

Developing methods for capturing and disseminating value

▪ **Asset mapping**

During the project activities, asset mapping was identified as an increasingly useful methodology for engaging communities, exploring needs and opportunities for design projects but also, importantly, as a method for capturing value for individuals and communities. By measuring the assets that people have at the beginning of a CLD process and then again at the end, we can understand potential impacts of the process, whether this be the creation of new assets or better utilisation and connectivity between assets.

In workshop 1 we focussed on asset mapping and explored types of assets, methods and process to support asset mapping. This fed into the development of a new methodology, which was carried out as part of the [Creative Citizen](#) project and in collaboration with the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design in RCA, the Glass-House and NESTA. In this method reflecting learning from the workshops we focussed on four items:

- to capture tangible and intangible assets
- to map relationships between assets
- to capture the stories behind assets
- to engage people creatively

A more detailed blog post about the asset mapping method and its development can be found here: <http://creativecitizens.co.uk/2013/02/23/developing-our-asset-mapping-methodology/>.

The approach has been adapted and used in other projects (e.g. Scaling up Co-design Research and Practice, Unearthing Hidden Assets).

▪ **Social media**

Community Design Exchange has been met with positive responses. Community and third sector organisations involved in design are rapidly embracing new media and to have a site dedicated to CLD projects and stories is seen as a useful asset. Of course there are many barriers and limitations and the most important one is that of time. CLD projects are led by volunteers and it is often hard to mobilise people with the interest and the skills and the time to contribute. As part of the project and through the Glass House programme participants are being provided with hands-on support through collaborative workshops, but this model is difficult to scale up. Additionally, as projects often have their own online spaces (websites, blogs, Facebook etc), groups find it hard to spread their communication activities over different media.

As the quote below shows, the promise is big but it will depend on how successfully a critical mass can be achieved.

"For me the Community Design Exchange is an important step forward in collaboration between committed groups of people who want to effect change in their local area, and tell their own stories.

While meeting face to face is very important, the physical distance between groups who are trying to do similar things can be too great to work in this way. We are all volunteers who are passionate about our communities but our time constraints meaning that it can be difficult to get together as a group, let alone with others!

The barriers and struggles we've faced, the knowledge and skills we've gained, and the inspiration and drive to keep us going can all be shared, whether it is a neighbourhood plan, a fight to save a building or re-imagining of a building as alive with local people and ideas."

Jane Hearn, Project Development Worker, Goldsmiths Community Centre and Glass-House beneficiary

Future directions

In workshop 2 participants were divided in groups to develop rough sketches of potential research projects, considering details about research objectives, context, project partners as well as cost and timescales.

The main areas for development identified were around understanding asset transfer practices; the potentials and limitations of neighbourhood planning; rethinking design practice (especially in the International arena); working on method replication; and understanding the effect of community-led design processes on the life of buildings, on people's wellbeing, safety and crime, and on fighting isolation. Many of these themes are currently explored in partnerships originating from these discussions (between and beyond Connected Communities projects).

While CLD is not new, we found that there is certainly a renewed attention to it and an increasing realization of its value and importance. We also found an invigorating willingness to share and learn from one another, and through academic, practitioner and community partnerships.

References and external links

Project links and media outputs

Project website: <http://valuing-community-led-design.weebly.com>

Community Design Exchange: <http://www.communitydesignexchange.org>

Short film: http://youtu.be/wY_zi5WR5g8, created by Madano Partnership for AHRC

Blog posts:

CDE launch: http://www.theglasshouse.org.uk/blog-entry/_/new-online-network-community-design-exchange-launches/81/, by Katerina Alexiou and Theodore Zamenopoulos, Open University

Asset mapping workshop: http://www.theglasshouse.org.uk/blog-entry/_/people-have-a-lot-of-assets-that-they-dont-realise-they-have/75/, by Melissa Lacide, The Glass-House

Twitter posts:

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<http://www.australiaday.org.au/event-organisers/knowing-your-community/community-mapping.aspx>.

The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx

