CREATING COMMON GROUND:
THE VALUE OF PARTICIPATORY DESIGN IN ARTICULATING A COMMON ETHOS

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INTRODUCTION
Philosopher Karsten Harries defines the ‘ethical function of architecture’ as that of articulating a ‘common ethos.’ From this stance, this paper considers how architectural processes may help to, as Harries describes, articulate a common ethos to help us dwell. Our close examination of an ongoing renovation of a small Bowls Pavilion in a popular neighbourhood park in Grangetown, Cardiff, led by a group of residents with the aim of gathering community, is set within the context of an ‘age of austerity’ in which volunteers are encouraged to ‘step up and take over the management of services and assets in their own communities.’ Our research scrutinises challenges and opportunities faced by residents taking on a Community Asset Transfer, and examines the challenges for participatory design and appreciative inquiry in supporting the pursuit of a common ethos for dwelling.

A Common Ethos for Dwelling
In his introduction to The Ethical Function of Architecture, Harries voices the hope that architecture may ‘help us to find our place and way in an ever more disorienting world’, defining an ‘ethical function’ thus;

"Ethos" here names the way human beings exist in the world: their way of dwelling. By the ethical function of architecture I mean its task to help articulate a common ethos.

The articulation of a ‘common ethos’ was core to a small group of residents as they first voiced ideas for redeveloping a 134m² vacant 1960’s Bowls Pavilion in Grangetown, Cardiff. Defining their aim as creating ‘a vibrant, friendly community facility where people of all backgrounds can connect and are made welcome’, all understood the task to be extraordinarily complex. In lieu of a predefined organization, the project was initiated by a loose group of individuals seeking to act as a catalyst, rather than as operators of the space. Making no claim to predict what ‘the community’ wanted, the group identified a first step as bringing together Grangetown’s communities, ‘To be experienced as a genuine centre’, Harries writes, highlighting this challenge, ‘a place must be experienced as gathering a multitude into a community.’ Our interest, as participants, partners and researchers, is how approaches to participatory design might support such a task.
A micro-study of a small project

As participants, partners and researchers, our embedded role in the project is captured by Kathy Charmaz’s description of Grounded Theory:

Researchers are part of the research situation, and their positions, privileges, perspectives, and interactions affect it. In this approach, research always reflects value positions. Thus the problem becomes identifying these positions and weighing their effect on research practice, not denying their existence.  

While our close proximity to the process and its participants allows for an ‘in-depth’ understanding of the process, it also raises methodological issues regarding how we might distance ourselves to see more objectively what is going on. To address this, we develop written and visual analyses of documentations, through which we attempt to see the world anew. Charmaz describes a cyclical process of collecting, closely reading and analyzing data throughout research, a process we used in exploring and confronting mechanisms and processes along the way. Documenting emails, meeting notes, event feedback, interviews, films, photos, flyers, newsletters, tweets and conversations, we treat all communications as valuable, with the view that even the most seemingly prosaic communications give insight into the messy actualities of the endeavor. Through close quantitative and qualitative analysis, the ebbs and flows of enthusiasm, optimism and progress of the project become more apparent. Visual analysis, such as Figure 2, captures the quantities and emerging themes of email correspondence over two years, tracking the project as it races ahead, stalls, or takes an unexpected detour. Analyzing daily communications begins to capture what is asked of those who ‘step-up’ to the complex task of taking over an asset in their community. At the Grange Pavilion, we began by trying to understand what ‘community’ might mean.
‘WE SHOULD INVOLVE THEM IN EVERY PART OF THE PROJECT’

Cardiff’s most ethnically diverse electoral ward, Grangetown is home to a population of 20,000 residents. While well served by facilities including Mosques, Temples, Churches, social clubs, and bars, a resident observed:

Grangetown doesn’t feel like it has a center where the whole community can meet. At the moment, the community is made up of pockets of different cultural populations who mix in either the mosque, the temple, the pub, church - but they do not mix in one place.

Grangetown’s diversity is highlighted in consultations as a key strength, and the lack of a neutral meeting space is identified as both challenge and opportunity. An early email circulated amongst the group expressed ‘something of a question rather than a set of definitive expectations or resolved framework.’ From the outset, the group of residents voiced the need to first ask questions and listen:

Firstly we should get to know the local population to find out what they want. We should involve them in every part of the project so that they feel ownership and ultimately run the place.
Stepping Up and Taking Over

The Grange Pavilion project was formerly set into motion when a resident attended a local area Councilor surgery and began an ongoing discussion about the catalytic effect of quality, and the opportunity offered by a Community Asset Transfer. As guidance and context, Cardiff Council’s Stepping-Up Toolkit notes:

In an age of austerity, public bodies have been under increasing pressure to find new and more efficient ways of delivering their services. This has impacted across the board, but perhaps no more so than on community services delivered at a local level. The situation demands a creative response. Local communities have traditionally been very resourceful in acting to help themselves. Indeed, community organisations have been at the very heart of local service delivery for decades. The need and the opportunity, however, is to enable more community-led activities to take place. To encourage more volunteers to ‘step up’ and take over the management of services and assets in their own communities.14

Participatory Cities’ ‘Designed to Scale’ publication similarly highlights ‘that the state is a waning power in the lives of many, and it is seizing the opportunity to suggest that this may be no bad thing.’15 Recognizing the ‘implied risks’ of devolving civic responsibilities, the commentary proposes that the state should ‘not simply withdraw’ but rather radically redefine its role.16 Redefinitions are similarly urged in RIBA’s ‘Guide to Localism’ as ‘a radical devolution of responsibilities to the local level, giving new powers and opportunities to councils and communities to plan and design their places.’17 Localism, RIBA proposes;
requires a shift to partnership approaches with local people, requiring new skills in building
effective dialogue and developing a shared understanding of places, their challenges and their
potential.\textsuperscript{18}

RIBA advocates that Architects, ‘can emerge as integral design enablers and facilitators of localized
plan-making, helping communities helping communities and local authorities to maximise the potential
of their places.’\textsuperscript{19} At the Grange Pavilion, expectations - and fears - of collaborative working between
community members and external partners focused on how professional organizational structures might
give credibility to, or threaten, a community-led idea.

Despite advocacy for early engagement with professional services, the loose group of residents were
initially in no position to apply for funding for professional services at a meaningful scale. Recommendations in Stepping Up that ‘you may be able to secure some pro-bono work (provided by
professionals at no charge),’\textsuperscript{20} meanwhile, pose a challenge to hopes that professionals can resource the
time required to develop ‘shared understandings’ at a meaningful level ‘This project,’ a resident noted
in 2013, ‘could become an all-consuming project that would overpower those who were tempted to step
in such matters,’\textsuperscript{21} an observation extending to professional as well as voluntary services.\textsuperscript{22} Our role as
participants, researchers and partners through Cardiff University’s Community Gateway offered a
unique opportunity to quantify what developing a ‘shared understanding’ might demand of all.

\textbf{Community Gateway}

Our partnership with the Grange Pavilion project was formalized through the development of
Community Gateway as a Cardiff University Flagship Engagement project.\textsuperscript{23} In 2013, Cardiff
University made a long term commitment to Grangetown, launching Community Gateway as a three-
year pilot with an open call for ideas for Community-University collaborations. Over forty partnership projects launched to date include a Business Forum, Youth Forum, Philosophy café, and Mental Health networks, bringing together residents and area organizations with staff and students across Cardiff University.

From earliest discussions, residents proposed that the University should enter into ‘a relationship, not an affair’, emphasizing that knowledge, skills and resources should flow two ways, and that the University should support ‘creating the notion of belief in the people, in the area.’ Initial discussions with the Grange Pavilion group led to our first three-week co-produced live teaching ‘Vertical Studio’ in 2013, tasking twelve BSc students with gathering ideas for a community space, gauging interest and support, and spreading the word. We imagined, ambitiously, that the students’ output might form a design brief. It quickly became clear that our role was instead that of helping to gather community and collating what a resident identified as ‘a growing catalogue of local knowledge.’ Gathering stories in order to gather community would form the basis of co-produced public events over the next three years, framed by our introduction to appreciative inquiry.

Figure 5. A cycle of co-produced events, 2014-2017

Gathering stories
Appreciative Inquiry is defined by Mathie et al as:

a process that promotes positive change (in organisations or communities) by focusing on peak experiences and successes of the past. It relies on interviews and storytelling that draw out these positive memories, and on a collective analysis of the elements of success. This analysis becomes the reference for further community action.

Karsten Harries notes, too, that architectural language ‘is inevitably mediated by particular landscapes, particular histories, particular stories.’ As residents waded through the logistical hurdles of developing an expression of interest for a CAT, our second co-produced Vertical Studio in 2015 opened the Pavilion for an Ideas Picnic, with students baking cakes and collecting stories. A resident summarized:
A bit of free cake and tea was always going to draw a crowd, and Grangetown excelled itself. We are now sorting through the comments and ideas that were flying about on the day.30

Comments and ideas confirmed wider support for the idea, the need for tangible things to happen, and the ongoing importance of the project being ‘community-led.’ While the Ideas Picnic gave an impetus to carry on, the complexity of the endeavor was becoming clear:

As our project relies on pulling together many threads from within the community and other interested parties, for us to provide such a comprehensive business plan within an indicated and limited time frame would be very difficult.31

Emails identify the barriers involved in progressing from speculative conversations around kitchen tables to that of forming an organization. Defining ‘who’ an open group consisted of led a resident to observe that ‘Our list of emails/members is a bit chaotic presently. I'm trying to figure out who exactly is a (willing) member of our group, officially or not.’32 ‘Any project of this diverse constituency’, another emailed, ‘needs to maintain public momentum and cohesion when things are apparently not happening.’33 ‘Anyone can be positive towards an ‘idea’ such as this’, it was noted, ‘it's how that positivity translates into committed action.’34 These observations align with Participatory City’s list of eight ‘reasons why projects die’, the burdens of ‘too many meetings and too little action’, of enthusiasm lost through ‘waiting too long’, and of an over-reliance on one or two people to carry responsibility.35 Progressing the project demanded early, tangible action, as well as reaching out for wider participation and support.

*Figure 6. Storytelling Booth, 2015
Image by Marius Dirmantas*
Gathering community

Our third co-produced event, Love Grangetown 2016, paired architecture students with community ‘gatekeepers’, identified through previous consultations to represent faith, ethnic, age and interest groups in Grangetown. Visiting mosques, temple, bingo, and family settings to gather stories, student-resident teams connected over 100 community members to set strategic aims for partnership working. Identifying nine themes of value in Grangetown, the participants prioritized community meeting spaces. Co-produced community-university events continued with a Storytelling Day in October 2015, the installation of a Storytelling booth as a first architectural intervention in the Pavilion (Figure 6); a second Love Grangetown in 2016; a 2016 ‘Vision of Grangetown’ walking day; and a third Love Grangetown 2017, establishing a regular and repetitive cycle of public events to gather ideas and stories, invite commitments to action, and update all accurately on progress. As use of the Pavilion progressed from pop-ups to regular activation, community-led programming began: a cinema at an annual Festival, an Eid celebration, a seasonal solidarity evening, a winter Fayre, a weekly Friends and Neighbours group, Tech café workshops, a locally-led Café running regular culture café sessions inviting representatives of Grangetown’s many communities to have conversations over coffee.

Often knee-deep in paperwork and stalled by seemingly insurmountable barriers of the logistics of individuals and small and large organizations coming to agreements, in the midst of real life carrying on within the group - births, deaths, moving out, jobs changing - every co-produced event brought in new members to activate and progress ideas. Every event brought a slightly different energy and direction; each offered a visible, celebratory reminder of what the project was about; each reaffirmed how much input and support was still needed to make things happen over the long term.
Our research started with the intent of tracking an architectural design for a Community Asset Transfer. Instead, three years of engagement focused, before any design proposal, on first gathering community. That this took three years and is still ongoing aligns with Participatory City findings that it takes an estimated three years to build ‘a dense participatory ecology at scale.’ Micro-level participation, Participatory City observes, requires 10-15% of local residents at any one time, with costs of ‘building and maintaining a participatory ecology in an area with approximately 50,000 residents’ estimated at £300,000-£400,000 per annum. These findings align with our own experiences in Grangetown, highlighting the depth of commitment and resource required to establish relationships critical to the emergence of shared understandings.

Interviews we held with the Grange Pavilion group similarly emphasized expectations that architects should take the time to get to know the area and offer an ongoing relationship. An architect, a resident noted, should:

engender a confidence to demand better of everything from the client, the architecture and the funder […] an architect can raise the game and the quality of thinking to answer the question that has been posed.

Describing architects as ‘orchestrators’ who can create ‘an intellectual envelope in which things occur, spaces or events occur’, a consistently expressed concern was the fear an architect would impose a design, and then leave the residents to deal with positive or negative consequences. ‘Better Architects will stick around and genuinely create a relationship’, a resident commented:

…who would we trust to come and sort out the mess the day afterwards because it is a year down the line and it’s not working, who is going to come back and say, actually ok we went too
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far and we are going to pull it back [...] who is going to correct the correction that needs to be made? 40

Prior consultation experiences underpinned cynicism regarding how feedback might be implemented. ‘How do they act upon that?’ a resident questioned. ‘It is one thing to have post-it notes on the wall, it’s another thing to actually look at them and feed that to inform your practice.’ 41 The key criteria for the Architect was, finally, ‘not about the visions but how they understand the ‘us’ of us.’ 42 Such understandings take time, and suggest rethinking processes more suited to formal organizations. A resident described the barriers posed by external expectations that formal meetings should be necessary:

It’s the actual culture of the machineries the way that the meeting happens I think is for me quite difficult and draining. If you for a walk and you had a rant or you go for, I don't know… you're making something or if you're gardening. It’s, you might spend longer having a cup of tea. But I would say that as the community group, the way we’ve displayed ourselves, as being serious, to demonstrate our properness, we go to a meeting… and it's a really delicate thing, isn’t it? 43

‘Gently revolutionary’ space
We are still unpicking the wealth of evidence underlying the ongoing evolution of the project. From the first voicing of an idea by residents in 2012, the project has so far directly involved over 300 individuals in the community, university, council and external partners, working through over 500 emails, 50 ‘formal’ meetings and uncounted cups of tea around kitchen tables just to reach the point of proposing a design brief which might be responsive to community ideas. The task of ‘stepping up’ from the bottom up is enormous and often overwhelming, delicately balancing the task of carefully maintaining multiple communities’ trust, belief and resources against the often contradictory demands of externally-imposed deadlines and procedures.
Karsten Harries ends *The Ethical Function of Architecture* with recognition of the complexity of any claim that architecture can resolve the problem of community. ‘With good reason’, he argues, ‘we have learned to be suspicious of all architecture that confidently embraces architecture’s traditional ethical function.’ Harries proposes ‘introducing into the context of the modern city theatrical and festal spaces, punctuated by works of architecture that, lacking authority and responsible to no one, are gently revolutionary and let us dream of utopia.’ In Grangetown, having tentatively gathered a form of community to reach a first agreement for a design brief, the project proceeds towards nurturing a relationship between communities and designers in pursuit of a space which may balance the certainties demanded by external agencies of planning and funding, and the open-ended, incremental and uncertain processes which support a community in gathering in a small civic space.

REFERENCES

7 Harries, *Ethical Function*, 199.
9 This stance towards prosaic communications is with reference to Paul Emmons' work on *Architectural Graphic Standards*, which notes that 'Diagrams, even those purporting to be objective, are inevitably culturally influenced [...] diagrams, like history, are not thin and factual, but rich with meaning.' Paul, Emmons, "Diagrammatic Practices: The Office of Frederick L. Ackerman and Architectural Graphic Standards," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 64 (2005): 14-15. The analysis of prosaic language for cultural meaning is also indebted to Katie Lloyd Thomas, "Specifications: Writing Materials in Architecture and Philosophy," *Arq: Architectural Research Quarterly* 8 (2004): 277-83.
11 Resident feedback at May 2013 consultation.
12 Resident email, 18 May 2013
13 Resident feedback at May 2013 consultation.
16 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
21 Resident email, 20 August 2013
22 In anecdotal conversations with the authors, architects engaged with long-term community partners have consistently reported taking on this work on a pro-bono basis.
In 2014 Cardiff University launched ‘Transforming Communities’ with five ‘Flagship Engagement’ projects, operating at local, regional, national and international scales, of which Community Gateway was one. See http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/about/our-profile/who-we-are/engagement/transforming-communities

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Love Grangetown 2017 was led by Community Gateway project manager Rosie Cripps and Neil Turnbull.


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BIBLIOGRAPHY


