Fenham Pocket Park

Design Activism: a Catalyst for Communities of Practice

Daniel Mallo & Armelle Tardiveau
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300-word summary

**Fenham Pocket Park** is a creative practice-led research by Newcastle University's School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape. The research sought to stimulate community action and bring about community-led change in the neighbourhood of Fenham, Newcastle upon Tyne through a creative practice process that draws from design activism as critical spatial practice. It is concerned with the largely under researched long-term transformative effect of design activism on everyday urban environments and socio-spatial dynamics. The project is critically underscored by a characterisation of design activism not as disruptive action, but as a form of ‘practice’ embedded in everyday life that catalyses and nurtures other ‘communities of practice’ in the neighbourhood. Through the process, a group of local residents of Fenham became key actors in the transformation of a disused urban space into a Pocket Park.

Initiated in 2015, the still on-going research project has unfolded in three phases:

- **Phase 1 (2015)**, developed alongside sustainable transport charity Sustrans, comprised a series of temporal and experimental design interventions drawn from a design activist approach.
- **Phase 2 (2016)** shows the transition of local residents into a ‘community of practitioners / makers’ leading the transformation of a nondescript grass area into a Pocket Park and the creation of a formalised community group, ‘Friends of Fenham Pocket Park’ including 5-10 key actors who manage and maintain the park, and have secured over £40,000 from multiple grants.
- **Phase 3 (2019-to date)** widens the scope of the project with an extension to the initial Park (currently under construction).

Over this elongated period, the research reveals design activism as necessarily intertwined with other everyday practices – such as gardening, celebrating, playing – that coalesce around a shared sense of citizenship. It also advances the role of design activism in forging communities of practice: mutually supportive and self-sustaining groups emerging out of the personal relations sustained and organised around a practice of place making.
Research Overview

Working alongside sustainable transport charity Sustrans, the research set out to explore a design activist approach as means to stimulate life in the public realm. Through a series of open-ended design workshops, street trials, and events along Fenham Hall Drive, a street in the Newcastle ward of Fenham, the project sought to:

• Understand the realities of people and gain insights of existing settings from an insider perspective (Mallo et al, 2016) through a design activist process of experimentation situated within the ordinary preoccupations of everyday life.

• Explore an open-ended and inspirational approach, using designed prompts and temporary interventions, which enabled to establish a new-shared language between participants. Such approach helped activate dialogue and opened up aspirations thus challenging closed briefs and agendas prior to engaging with community groups (Vigar and Varna, 2019).

• Debunk the myth around the activist designer and shift the emphasis from designer to ‘practices’, thus moving away from a central position of design activism and placing it in a constellation of practices – gardening, celebrating, and playing (Mallo, Tardiveau and Parsons, 2020).

• Deploy a theoretical framework adapted from social practice theory to shed light on social formations and collective practices catalysed through the activist impulse (Mallo, Tardiveau and Parsons, 2020).

The creative practice enquiry is articulated around a two-fold question:

• RQ 1: How does socially engaged design practice catalyse democratic place making practices and stimulate public life in the urban realm?

• RQ 2: How does design activism contribute to the long-term sustainability of co-produced spatial projects? How does design activism permeate socio-spatial spheres, contribute and sustain community-led projects?

References:

Mallo D, Parsons R, Tardiveau A. (2016a) ‘Participatory design methods in the co-production practice of urban space’. In: Challenges and Best Practice in Co-Production, University of Sheffield, Sheffield


A process of experimentation situated within the ordinary preoccupations of everyday life. Intervention, October 2015
Research Context

In recent years, design activism has come to the fore with numerous collectives whose actions have distinct emphases and foci. In the context of this research, design activism builds on temporary narratives of intensification, speculation or demonstration of international practices such as Rebar (San Francisco), known for initiating a yearly global design action with the aim of transforming parking spaces into temporary parks; Santiago Cirugeda (Seville) whose ‘urban prescriptions’ (recetas urbanas) project identifies gaps in urban regulations to create spaces for emancipation and subversion without breaking the law; in turn, atelier d’architecture autogérée (aaa) founded by Petrescu & Petcou (Paris) has been seminal in experimenting with temporary appropriations of urban space to intensify community and ecology; the emerging collective YA+K (Paris) work highlights the notion of ‘urban bricolage’ in the tradition of citizen-led or D.I.Y. urbanism.

The research presented here expands the practice and conceptualisation of the long-term effect of design activism. It investigates how design activism influences socio-spatial dynamics and can lead to enduring social formations described as ‘communities of practice’, bringing the emphasis to social relations that revolve around processes of making, learning and negotiating (Wenger 1999).
Fenham Hall Drive: temporary narratives of intensification. Daniel Mallo & Armelle Tardiveau 2015
Research Context

As such, the research employs an inspirational and open-ended approach that harnesses social capital and brings to the fore the role of citizens in the place-making process. The exploratory approach is underpinned and adapted from previous research by the authors in the field of socially engaged design practice – past projects include:

- **Action Research in Gateshead, UK, 2010-2011**
  Funded by the European research network SPINDUS, this project examined the role of temporary interventions in revealing socio-spatial struggles in the semi-private outdoor space of a deprived social housing estate. To analyse in the ways temporary settings shape the social dimensions of a disused space, the research mobilises the concept of ‘habitus’ as means to unpack personal and collective dispositions as well as challenge the socio-spatial status quo embedded in a contested open space (Tardiveau and Mallo 2014).
‘From non-place to place in post-suburbia’, an exploration of city-edge office parks as loci for nature-based micro-interventions, 2014

This study attends to possibilities inherent in micro-level, bottom-up interventions in the context of city edge office parks. The exploratory approach is inspired by sensory ethnography as well as socially driven design practice, in particular, calls for open-ended, provocative engagement. The research is infused with an inspirational, imaginative sensibility in order to intensify and open-up opportunities for conversation, reflection and engagement. Tapping into the rich bio-diversity of the office park setting of the case study, the authors adopted an approach that reframes the problematic of ‘placelessness’ and brings to the fore the lack of interaction of park denizens with the natural environment (Mallo et al. 2020).

References:


Research Process

Fenham is a socially mixed area with pockets of low-income council households with a high rate of dependence on state benefits. In particular, the research focused on Fenham Hall Drive, a car-dominated street, where parking on pavements occurs and where public space is scarce. Along the street stand two key civic institutions for local residents and neighbouring communities: the local library and community pool, perceived as civic hubs.

The project unfolded in three phases over a period 5 year (2015-to date):

- **Phase 1: Revisiting Fenham Hall Drive (2015)** Embedded in the everyday realities of the life of the street, the research adopted an open-ended approach to gain insights into the use and perception of the existing settings and to create a new-shared urban experience in common for all participants and community actors. Multi-layered methods using a variety of design prompts in temporary interventions augmented the experience of the area, thus provoking an opportunity for a new reading of a familiar environment (Tardiveau and Mallo 2014). More specifically, the authors devised methods inspired by participatory design research, including the process of ‘making, telling and enacting’ (Sanders 2013). The methods were structured around three thematic areas: unpacking affects, meanings and desires through sensory mapping methods; disrupting urban narratives through spontaneous temporary intervention methods; and enabling a new urban experience, through methods of temporary intervention.

Top: temporary intervention floor plan. Bottom: enabling a new urban experience through a temporary intervention (October 2015)
Top: sensory mapping as means of unpacking affects, meanings and desires. Bottom: spontaneous occupation of a pavement area where unregulated car parking takes place: disrupting existing urban narratives (March 2015)
Temporary intervention (October 2015)
Phase 2: The making of Fenham Pocket Park (2016)

Almost 9 months of engagement with situated events and interventions interspersed with conversations and focus group meetings, revealed a collective desire to create an outdoor space in which to pause, play and enjoy a quiet moment. More importantly, this engagement granted opportunities for socialising, which in turn, galvanised a group of local residents who took on the challenge of taking the vision forward. Constituted later as ‘The Friends of Fenham Pocket Park’, the group became carriers of a place-making practice. With the support of the authors, the group were successfully awarded £15,000 from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) for the construction of a Pocket Park, which opened up a new set of considerations with regard to responsibility, daily maintenance, and insurance. An external contractor undertook the groundworks and both skilled and non-skilled participants contributed to the construction of planters and benches. Residents, ward councillors, engagement officers, as well as, park and allotment council officers, all in their different capacities became involved in the making of the park. Children from the local school planted flowers, fruit trees and bushes with an amateur horticulturalist from the Friends who introduced them to basic growing principles.
• Phase 3: Fenham Pocket Park Extension
  (2019 – ongoing)
  This phase converges towards the physical extension of the Pocket Park and more importantly heightens their role as a community of practitioners who thrived to extend the initial park with view to provide new ground for community-led events and actions and regroup the local community, post-COVID-19 pandemic.

The research underpins a reading of design activism through the lens of social practice theory. It is not until design practitioners engage with communities that they become aware of participants as carriers of a range of practices. The contribution of design activism to the socio-spatial dynamics of place making is substantiated by the two main findings of the research:

• Design activism identifies, draws out, and nurtures everyday social practices that co-exist as bundled practices. Furthermore, it becomes the glue that catalyses the interrelation amongst practices through its distinct set of ‘materials, competences and meanings’ (Shove et al. 2012).

• Design activism forges communities of practice: mutually supportive and self-sustaining groups emerging out of the personal relations sustained and organised around a practice. The iterative and performative character of design activism allowed socialisation and mutual engagement; the process of ‘making, telling and enacting’ (Sanders 2013) supporting negotiation of differences and contributing to collective decision making; as well as, familiarity and trust developed through learning and sharing crystallising a form of shared repertoire, a modus operandi for working together.

References:


Top: Regular weeding and planting event (July 2018). Bottom: Construction of Fenham Pocket Park Extension (December 2020)
Dissemination

Exhibition

Community, Design, Practice

Boiler House + School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University,
29 March - 26 April 2019

This exhibition celebrated the making of Fenham Pocket Park, an ESRC IAA funded project in the west end of Newcastle upon Tyne. Carried out by an interdisciplinary research team from Newcastle University’s School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape led by Daniel Mallo and Armelle Tardiveau in collaboration with Abigail Schoneboom and Damien Wootten, the exhibition highlights the contribution of socially engaged design practice in bringing about change to everyday life urban environment. Stakeholders, community actors, local councillors, residents, local activists, students and colleagues at Newcastle University attended the opening event that attracted visitors from a wide range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The exhibition included portraits of the residents involved in the making of Fenham Pocket Park as well as designed prompts deployed as part of the temporary interventions. The exhibition was accompanying by a research report.

Research report

Fenham Pocket Park: Stories, Practices and Processes

The publication captures the making of Fenham Pocket Park: a community-led project located in the west end of Newcastle upon. The research highlights the transformative power of socially engaged design practice, an approach process that enhances the role of community members in bringing about change to their everyday life urban environment. Available at: https://en.calameo.com/read/006096643d954a55eef70?page=1
Top and bottom: view of the exhibition “Community, Design, Practice” documenting the process of making Fenham Pocket Park (March 2019)
References to the research: Publications and Conference Presentations


**Conference paper**_ Mallo D, Parsons R, Tardiveau A. (2016a) ‘Participatory design methods in the co-production practice of urban space’. In: Challenges and Best Practice in Co-Production, University of Sheffield, Sheffield.


Citations

Citations in Publications and Policy Documents:

[IM1] 2019:
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Press Office, Email Request for Image Use, 14 February 2019.

[IM2] 2019:
Cambridge City Council, Email Request for Image Use, 8 February 2019.

[IM3] 2017:

- “Research on community engagement and socially engaged design was used to involve Newcastle residents in thinking beyond preconceived ideas and to transform their perception of the area.
  Daniel Mallo, Armelle Tardiveau and colleagues at Newcastle University arranged a series of design workshops and street trials to help people imagine how they could improve Fenham Hall Drive, a street in the Newcastle ward of Fenham.”

Social Media:

[IM5] 2016:

[IM6] 2016:
PwC Foundation (2,051 followers) “WINNER: #pwcstars environmental volunteering winner is Stuart Stephenson based in Newcastle, for Friends of Fenham pocket park — well done! [photo].”
1 December 2016 — retweeted 4 times and liked 5 times (including by Bill MacLeod Ethics Partner at PwC with 1,401 followers and Caroline Roxburgh NED Edinburgh International Festival, Visit Scotland with 961 followers).
<https://twitter.com/pwcfoundationuk/status/804408130121633792> [accessed 22 May 2019].

[IM7] 2016:
Newcastle City Council: “The Lord Mayor of Newcastle, Cllr Stephenson is switching—on the Christmas Lights at Fenham Pocket Park with Carol singing and a display of paper lanterns from young people at English Martyrs Primary School and Sacred Heart School [video].”
12 December 2016 — Viewed 1,500 times, liked 45 times, shared 8 times and commented on 13 times.

News Media:

Article by The Chronicle, the local newspaper on residents being awarded funding from DCLG.
Central Government and Local Authority funding:
The research has helped to leverage funds for community benefit – from the initial application to build a pocket park to the subsequent grants, the research was instrumental to secure funding.

- £15,000 awarded from the Department for Communities and Local Government to build a Pocket Park (January 2016)
- £2,058 were granted by Fenham Ward towards the construction of the Park (January 2016)
- £800 were granted by Blakelaw Ward towards the construction of the Park (January 2016)
- Friends of Fenham Pocket Park have fundraised an approximate £9,000 for on-going maintenance and seasonal community events (May 2016 – to date). Grants were awarded by Communities Aid Foundation, PwC Volunteering Award, Fenham Ward, etc. [IM6]
- £12,500 awarded from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to extend the Pocket Park (January 2019)
- £1,000 match funding by Public Health to extend the Pocket Park (January 2019)

Research funding:

- ESRC IAA (Co-Production Fund - Autumn 2014) BH142131: £9,930 Project title: DIY Streets (Fenham): creating and evaluating inspirational participation. PI Armelle Tardiveau [with Daniel Mallo and Geoff Vigar]
- School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University, Engagement committee: £2,946.25
- School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University, ARC (Architecture Research Collaborative) : £500
Exhibition poster

Exhibition

Community, Design, Practice

Boiler House + School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University,
29 March - 26 April 2019

Community
Design
Practice

Featuring work by:
Daniel Mallo
Armelle Tardiveau
Abigail Schoneboom
Damien Wootten