Fenham Pocket Park

Design Activism: A Catalyst for Communities of Practice

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Fenham Pocket Park is a creative practice-led research that sought to stimulate community action and bring about community-led change in the neighbourhood of Fenham, Newcastle upon Tyne. The project is critically underscored by a characterisation of design activism as a process and a practice: the process aims to promote experimentation and test alternative urban experiences, while the practice, embedded in everyday life, seeks to catalyse and nurture other ‘communities of practice’ in the neighbourhood. It is concerned with the largely under-researched long-term transformative effect of design activism on everyday urban environments and socio-spatial dynamics. Through the research, 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, this ongoing 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 that emerges from an ethnographic curiosity, a rich immersion in the everyday that allows an alternative appreciation of the familiar environment.

**Phase 2** (2016) sees 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

The research set out to explore design activism as a means to stimulate life in the public realm and shed light on the social formations and collective practices catalysed through the activist impulse. Through a series of open-ended design workshops, street trials and events that brought about the creation of a community-led Pocket Park, the project sought to:

- Understand the realities of people and gain insights of existing settings from an insider perspective (Mallo et al., 2016a) 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 the establishment of a new, shared language between participants. Such an 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 et al., 2020a).
- Deploy a theoretical framework drawn from social practice theory to expand the conceptualisation of design activism as ‘constituted in practice’ through performance or action. In particular, we adapt Elizabeth Shove, Mika Pantzar and Matt Watson’s (2012) characterisation of social practice as constituted by iterative actions integrating three elements, namely ‘materials’ (physical entities, artefacts, urban spaces), ‘competence’ (skills, know-how of both communities and designers) and ‘meanings’ (motivations, affects). The theoretical underpinning of the project is elaborated in the refereed supporting publication: ‘Design Activism: Catalysing Communities of Practice’ (Mallo et al., 2020a) - full text in Appendix A.

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

- RQ 1: How does socially engaged design practice catalyse democratic place-making and stimulate public life in the urban realm?
- RQ 2: How does design activism contribute to the long-term sustainability of co-produced design projects? How does design activism permeate socio-spatial spheres, contribute to and sustain community-led projects?

References:

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


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. Our research aligns with practices including 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) projects identify gaps in urban regulations to create spaces for emancipation and subversion without breaking the law; in turn, aaa’s work (atelier d’architecture autogéré, founded by Petrescu & Petcou, Paris) is seminal in experimenting with temporary appropriations of urban space to intensify community and ecology; while the emerging collective YA+K’s (Paris) work explores the notion of ‘urban bricolage’ in the tradition of citizen-led or DIY urbanism.

While these activist practices point at the temporal, spatial and experimental nature of design activism, our research expands on the practice and its conceptualisation and focuses on 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’, putting the emphasis on social relations that revolve around processes of making, learning and negotiating (Wenger, 1999).
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, 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. The research mobilises the concept of ‘habitus’ as a 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). By deploying site-specific temporary settings, the project aims to understand the social dimensions of a disused space.

‘From non-place to place in post-suburbia’, an exploration of city-edge office parks as loci for nature-based micro-interventions, 2014-2020

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, it 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 biodiversity 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., 2020b).

**References:**


Research Process

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 the community pool, perceived as civic hubs. The area is a socially mixed area with pockets of low-income council households with a high rate of dependence on state benefits. The project unfolded in three phases over a period of five years (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). The creative practice 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. An extended account of phase 1 can be found in the refereed supporting publication: ‘Design Activism: Catalysing Communities of Practice’ (Mallo et al., 2020a) - full text in Appendix A.
Unpacking affects, meanings and desires: sensory mapping:

Adapted from ‘cultural probes’ (Gaver et al., 1999), these designed prompts or tasks aim at enabling inspirational responses. Specifically, our method sought to map social and material assets, capturing the feelings and stories of the site. We created a physical scale model of the street, on which a provocative prompt stated: ‘Imagine Fenham Hall Drive as the best street in Britain…’, and located it on site. The model was equipped with ‘mysterious and elusive’ materials varying in textures and colours (such as tin foil, pipe cleaners, washing-up sponges and cotton wool) that were left freely as prompts for discussion or for interpretation to facilitate the sharing of perceptions, ideas and desires for the place. This sensory mapping aimed to awake existing senses and evoke an imaginary feel for the street.

Disrupting urban narratives: spontaneous temporary intervention

Two purpose-built mobile benches were installed along a car-dominated pavement over the course of three days. The temporary setting afforded opportunities for social interaction and activation of public space. This form of ‘provocation’ was ‘not [only intended] to understand the [urban environment], but to expose both the possibilities and constraints on future design directions’ (Blomberg and Karasti, 2013). This occupation of urban space, mainly pavement areas where unregulated car parking takes place, allowed for a disruptive tactic that revealed socio-spatial struggles (the permanent need among pedestrians for car-free public space) and raised awareness of alternative futures.
Enabling a new urban experience: temporary intervention

Together with local residents who had engaged in previous events, we collectively envisaged a temporary intervention focusing on themes previously discussed, including positive lingering, playing and greening. Local residents conceptually conceived the design of the temporary intervention as a series of stripes that could be ‘rolled’ out beyond the boundaries of the designated space. These stripes materialised as alternating bands of timber and artificial grass punctuated with furniture modules open to interpretation. The intervention, which lasted four days, transformed a grass area in between the library and the pool, an unused open space that cut through a drive leading to an allotment area located at the back of the two civic buildings. During that time, we observed that the modules, of various heights and lengths, accommodated a diversity of uses including sitting, lying in the sun, jumping or playing, as well as enabling comfortable seat heights for different age groups.
“To give people that experience is so important. How can you change your viewpoint about something, by commenting on a map and a Post-it? It is not the same as sitting on a bench and believing that it can happen”.
Sustrans volunteer
Phase 2: The Making of Fenham Pocket Park (2016)

After almost nine months of engagement with situated design interventions, a group of local residents took on the challenge of taking the vision forward and applied for a Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) grant, and were successfully awarded £15,000 for the construction of a Pocket Park. The group was constituted later as ‘The Friends of Fenham Pocket Park’ and have become carriers of a place-making practice.

The brief for Fenham Pocket Park aimed to address the different visions that had been shared during the exploratory interventions to create a place for relaxing, playing and enhancing the presence of nature in the area. The design concept of stripes as a structuring element for the ground was taken forward: the Friends felt it allowed the statement of a clear intention in terms of potentially enlarging the park at a later stage onto the remaining unused grassed area by the library.

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. An extended account of phase 2 can be found in the refereed supporting publication: ‘Design Activism: Catalysing Communities of Practice’ (Mallo et al., 2020a) - full text in Appendix A.
Phase 3: Fenham Pocket Park Extension (2019 to date)

This ongoing phase converges towards the extension of the Pocket Park, but more importantly stresses the Friends’ role as a community of practitioners whose main remit consists of promoting the use of the park and ensuring maintenance. Their experience of working collectively over the last three years led them to apply for new funding in 2019 to extend the Pocket Park. The bid was successful and the group was awarded £12,000 from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

This opportunity marked a significant shift for the Friends’ mission to improve the public realm around the Pocket Park, as well as increase community reach. Building on Phase 1, they planned this new phase to become, not just a park extension, but rather a blank canvas on which to deploy events and design engagement sessions with the local community with a view to widen participation; a much-needed approach post-COVID pandemic.

References:


Pocket Park extension. 2020
Conclusion: The Rippling Effects of Design Activism

It is only through the immersion in the everyday that design activism can be responsive to the ordinary, the mundane affecting people’s lives, as well as revealing existing social practices in an area. Through the creative practice process, we shed light on the potential 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. The iterative and performative character of design activism has allowed socialisation and engagement; also, familiarity and trust has developed through learning and sharing.

Fenham Pocket Park, in this regard, neither emerged out of a predefined plan nor happened as an unforeseen outcome; indeed, it came into being through shifts and ripple effects elicited by design activism in the sphere of social practices. As such, we contend that the significance of design activism, as a sustained and iterative process, lies primarily in the creation of settings that give rise to communities of practitioners, in our case arising around a shared sense of citizenship.

Top: Christmas event organised by the Friends of Fenham Pocket Park. December 2016

Dissemination

**Web: Design Research Portfolios**
A version of this portfolio has been available since 2020 at https://www.ncl.ac.uk/apl/research/case-studies/creativepractice/

**Exhibition: Community, Design, Practice**
Boiler House + School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University, 29 March - 26 April 2019

Carried out by a research team from Newcastle University’s School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape led by Daniel Mallo and Armelle Tardiveau, this exhibition gathered the creative practice material and revealed the design process that led to the making of Fenham Pocket Park, funded by ESRC IAA. More specifically, it showcased designed prompts as well as the temporary furniture deployed as part of the research. The commitment of the Friends of Fenham Pocket Park was documented with large social portraits by photographer Damien Wootten.

The exhibition was an opportunity to celebrate the work and bring together all those involved in the project including local stakeholders, community actors, ward councillors and Fenham residents. Visitors stated their interest in understanding the process that led to the Pocket Park as an urban space shaped by local residents.

**Exhibition Catalogue**
A publication entitled *Fenham Pocket Park: Stories, Practices and Processes* accompanied the exhibition. It captures the making of Fenham Pocket Park: a community-led project located in the west end of Newcastle upon Tyne that saw the transformation of an unused urban space into a lively park. 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/006096643d954a55eef7?page=1

Top and bottom: exhibition “Community, Design, Practice” documenting the process of making Fenham Pocket Park. March 2019
Appendices

A – Refereed Supporting Publication
B – Publications / Conference Presentations
C – Citations
D – Funding sources during REF period
E – Exhibition Poster
A – Refereed Supporting Publication

Abstract
Over the last decade, we have witnessed renewed interest in design as a socially engaged practice. Much of the debates around ‘social design’ point towards myriad approaches and disciplinary fields interwoven with grass-roots initiatives and social movements. Among these, design activism has gained traction as critical spatial practice that operates on the fringes of commercial and institutional spheres.

The temporal, spatial and experimental nature of design activism is well delineated in scholarship but its long-term effect on everyday urban environments remains elusive. Moreover, the influence of design activism on socio-spatial dynamics is indeed largely under researched. By mobilising social practice theory, this paper proposes a novel theorisation of design activism that sheds light on the social formations and collective practices catalysed through the activist impulse. This ontological shift embraces an understanding of the socio-material world through practice. Such characterisation of design activism underscores collective moments of integration of the constitutive elements of practice, encapsulated by Shove, Pantzar and Watson as ‘material, competence and meaning’.

The authors’ own empirical research, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK, reveals design activism as necessarily intertwined with other everyday practices – 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.
### B – Publications and Conference Presentations


### C – Citations

**[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:**

**[IM4] 2016:**
Article by the Chronicle, the local newspaper on residents being awarded funding from DCLG. https://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/fenham-pocket-park-opens-thanks-1137617

**[IM5] 2016:**

**Social Media:**

**[IM6] 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].”


**[IM7] 2016:**

**[IM8] 2019:**
Marion Talbot, Ward Councillor (testimony); “Quite a few wards have got in touch with us and asked how we did it so we could share what we did - the process, the practice, the organisations that were involved.”
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 approximately £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.
• £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
Community, Design, Practice
Boiler House + School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University, 29 March - 26 April 2019

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

Citations (cont.)