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Designing for reimagined communities

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Within place-based design research, the concept of community has become an increasingly important reference point, particularly in relation to the areas of co-design and participatory design. This Special Issue ‘Designing for Reimagined Communities’ developed outwards from a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council funded programme Design Innovation & Land-Assets: Towards new communities. Here, a review of the available participatory and collaborative framings of the community in design revealed a broad landscape of directions.

In Participatory Design (PD) alone, the two-decade move from the workplace to the civic arena (Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren 2012) has led to a proliferation of community-based approaches (DiSalvo, Clement, and Volkmar 2013). In co-design more broadly, community can be seen to mark a ‘coming together’ of individuals, citizens, and broader groups of participants (Steen 2013). This coming together may be a matter of geographical proximity – people reside in the same location and as such share similar place-based concerns – social, cultural, infrastructural, or otherwise (Calvo and De Rosa 2017). Alternatively, it may be that local concerns themselves take precedence. In this case, regardless of their grounding in a particular place, the ‘community’ will be formed around their involvement in a specific ‘issue’ (Latour and Weibel 2005).

In designing *for* and *with* communities, designers are tasked with formulating a response as they seek to support communities through the process of addressing their concerns and issues. The aim of such engagements may be specific and targeted, for example, exploring the best use of shared resources and land assets such as a building or public park (Halse et al. 2010). Equally, aims may be broader in scope, for example, there may be a need to examine specific democratic or institutional approaches or influence policy, perhaps at the level of local government or beyond (Huybrechts, Benesch, and Geib 2017; Kimbell and Bailey 2017).

On the face of it, such an account would appear to be more or less straightforward – communities take on their particular form based on their issues or concerns – and thereafter designers work with them to formulate a design-led response. However, what is missing from this account is an understanding of the steps that must take place beforehand. Specifically, how design supports the process of communities ‘coming together’, of establishing collaborations around issues or concerns. There is also the question of how, within the process of community engagement and beyond, design draws

community members into particular forms of association, alongside supporting particular types of interaction, collaboration, and exchange. What values emerge, what alternative economies arise and what sustainable capabilities are engendered?

This Special Issue was framed around an interrogation of these questions with an emphasis being placed on the role of the imagination. In particular, we aimed to explore how community-based co-design and PD enabled a *reimagining* of both communities as entities in and of themselves. In addition to how communities could and should operate as collectives of citizens and groups as custodians of the future. The original call asked for proposals responding to the following set of questions:

- How can design best support a *reimagining* of the ways communities and groups come together – accommodating and overcoming any tensions, working productively with existing cultural and physical/material assets – to envisage new associations and interactions, economies of wellbeing and exchange?
- How, within this, can we ensure that participation is equitable, representative, and inclusive, involving as many marginal groups/voices as possible, addressing inequalities, pluralities of value, and allowing for a sense of ownership?
- How is the process of decision-making best managed? What methods, tools, artefacts, frameworks, strategies, and tactics, are best in which situations, whether digital or physical, synchronous or asynchronous?
- How does design manage the potential spatial and temporal scale of engagement? How do the past, present and the future interact with each other in the process of innovation?
- How do we ensure that something happens, that commitments are made, that change is enacted and research projects have a legacy towards building new communities and informing policy?

Over 80 responses were received, with all five inhabited continents represented. The submissions were wide-ranging. Some presented novel approaches to co-design and PD. Others expressed consideration for the more-than human or the centring of sustainability and climate emergency as a guiding principle within co-design. Equally, various decolonising positions were set out. A point of connection woven across almost all was to be found in the emphasis placed on the opportunities of radical design–community relationships and how design’s responsibilities herein required critical examination.

This breadth of scope has been maintained in the eventual, 10 final contributions that appear in this Special Issue. In bringing together the perspectives represented, we identify the emergence of two common lines of enquiry: reimaginings of the form and meaning of what communities are or might be within crafting a collaborative design approach; and reimaginings of the role of design practice located within and alongside communities. Those focusing on the former category, the reimagining of communities, are: Fassi and Manzini who present their concept of project-based communities in the context of social innovation; St John and Akama’s proposal for renewed ‘onto-epistemes’ in co-design to enable the growth of a truly pluriversal understanding of community; Wu and Koskinen’s examination of how design can lend support to the ‘imaginary foundations’ of community through local initiatives; and Mauro Flude and Akama’s tracing of the potential of technologically enabled feminist community-making.

In the latter category, the reimagining of community-based design practices, we group: Huybrechts et al. who investigate the possibility of moving beyond community polarisation through an ‘ontologising’ PD; Reynolds-Cuéllar et al.’s consideration of participation through the lenses of territory, memory, and dignity; Wernli’s proposal for a model of human-non-human ‘collective wondering’ in agro-ecological co-design; Usenyuk-Kravchuk et al.’s exploration of how responsible place-based making can enable a sustainably minded ‘local adequacy’; Tjahja and Yee’s proposal regarding the emergence of the ‘sociable designer’; and finally, Dixon, McHattie, and Broadley’s consideration of how PD-based Design Innovation research holds the potential to support local democracy and national policy-making processes.

Addressing the design practitioner and researcher alike, we contend that, in its final constitution, this Special Issue offers the field-rich insights into the potential of the ‘reimagining’ lens. It explores the scope of design-led innovation within this context, offering not only a set of possible aims for community-based co-design and PD but also a suite of theoretical positions and methodological orientations for achieving these. It is our sincere hope that this moment marks a beginning and not an endpoint – allowing for further enrichment of the community concept – as well as future investigations of what design is or indeed can be. As always, the agenda must move outwards from where insight is gained, and the reimagining must continue.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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