

Research Proposal

Title

How the Community Space Environment Shapes Behaviour and Relationships: A Community Participatory Design Toolkit

Research Motivation

I am not seeking to fix democracy, nor resolve its contradictions. My motivation is simpler and more urgent: to create a space—however small—where people can breathe.

Designers are responders, not responsibility holders (Thorpe & Gamman, 2011). In my design work, I've seen how citizens are often invited to "participate," but rarely empowered to shape. I've witnessed consultations devolve into performative checklists, and experienced—like many others—the frustration of being heard but not listened to.

This research grows from that frustration and from my past work in China with communities of children on the autism spectrum. I have maintained strong links with these communities, and they remain a potential site for future collaborative research. My more recent urban investigations in London have allowed me to observe public spaces, cultural expressions, and community behaviours through the lens of walking and informal observation. My experience as a visual communication designer has shaped this process—I understand design not as the act of authoring a solution, but as making others' voices visible.

I am particularly interested in how design can support groups who are structurally marginalized—those whose right to participation and expression is compromised by cognitive, social, linguistic or systemic barriers. This proposal builds toward a practical, visual, and adaptive design toolkit to strengthen their capacity to observe, communicate, co-create and document within their own communities.

Introduction

This practice-based research explores how a participatory design toolkit can be developed to empower non-designers in structurally vulnerable communities. It investigates the intersections of spatial, participatory, and social design through situated field research and co-designed workshops. The research specifically draws upon communities I have worked with in China and new local contexts I am engaging with in London. These diverse settings will serve as testbeds to develop and refine a toolkit that enhances expressive and participatory capacity among marginalized groups.

Key research question: How can an inclusive, cross-cultural and sensory-adaptive participatory design toolkit empower marginalized, non-designer participants to shape community space and social relationships?

Critical Reflection and Challenges

Participatory design's promise of empowerment often confronts structural challenges:

- The danger of power centralization in the figure of the designer or facilitator.
- Risk of reproducing bureaucratic rituals that simulate but do not support real participation.
- The complexity of designing responsive, adaptable, and rapid-use tools across different spatial, cultural and communicative contexts.

Aim

1. To investigate the boundaries and potential of Lucy Kimbell's two-stage social design framework in communities with sensory and cognitive diversity.
2. To design and test a participatory toolkit that enables non-designers to initiate and sustain local transformation.

Objectives

1. Review theoretical and practical literature on participatory and inclusive design, especially relating to neurodivergent and vulnerable communities.
2. Conduct spatial observations and interviews in local London communities and maintain remote engagement with communities in China.
3. Co-create and prototype the toolkit through iterative workshops focused on observation, storytelling, translation and visual recording.
4. Test the toolkit in two different contexts (UK and China) to assess adaptability, inclusivity and communicative potential.
5. Reflect on the role of visual design in shaping non-verbal communication and self-representation.
6. Articulate contributions to participatory design practice, especially in contexts where designers are absent or peripheral.

Historical Context

The research builds upon Henri Lefebvre's (1991) spatial production theory, Jane Jacobs' (1961) critique of top-down urbanism, and Michel de Certeau's (1984) understanding of everyday tactical practices, establishing a foundation for citizen-led spatial change.

Contemporary Context

Contemporary participatory design debates question whether co-creation genuinely redistributes power or simply repackages participation. This project situates itself within efforts to materially decentralize design practice by proposing a toolkit designed for non-designers, responsive to multiple sensory and cultural registers (Kimbell & Julier, 2019; Hodson et al., 2023).

Democracy, Power, and Design

The project critically considers how participatory tools relate to institutional and informal power structures:

- **Enabling agency:** The toolkit must enable action without reinforcing dependency on formal expertise.
- **Challenging tokenism:** Toolkit use must reflect lived priorities, not simulate participation.
- **Negotiating institutional power:** Partnerships with institutions (e.g., local councils, NGOs) must be critically reviewed to ensure alignment with the community's aims.

Theoretical Framework

Four key frameworks support this research:

- **Lefebvre's spatial triad:** Supports spatial analysis of conceived, perceived and lived environments.
- **Sanders & Stappers' co-creation:** Guides participatory engagement and toolkit development.
- **Kimbell & Julier's two-stage model:** Structures exploratory and developmental phases.

- **Mazé’s future-oriented design:** Informs the toolkit’s open-endedness and adaptivity.

Methodology

The study combines:

- Urban ethnographic observation
- Remote dialogue with previous collaborators in China
- Participatory workshops and iterative prototyping
- Continuous self-reflection and ethical review

Role and Contribution of Practice

The practice acts as both process and critique:

- Iterative testing enables toolkit validation and refinement.
- Visual design acts as a translation layer—enabling expression beyond language.
- Design’s role shifts from problem-solving to enabling others to shape their environment.

Ethical Dimensions

Ethical commitments include:

- Prioritizing local knowledge, especially among vulnerable participants
- Preventing symbolic participation
- Ensuring participants have agency over how their stories and environments are represented

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