

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 do I claim to resolve its contradictions. My motivation for this research is simpler, and perhaps more urgent: I want to create a space—however small—where people can breathe.

Designers are responders, not responsibility holders (Thorpe & Gamman, 2011). In my work as a designer, I have seen how ordinary citizens are often invited to “participate,” but rarely empowered to shape. I have witnessed how processes of consultation turn into performative checklists. And I have felt, alongside many others, the frustration of being heard but not listened to.

This research is my attempt to plant a seed: to imagine and prototype a participatory design toolkit that gives power back to people—not as a grand gesture, but as a quiet, practical, usable tool. A toolkit that helps people observe their environment, connect with others, co-create responses, and document change. A toolkit that does not require designers to be present all the time, but allows design to become everyone’s practice.

I don’t yet know whether this research will succeed in creating the “right” model. But I hope it will help others grow their own ways of shaping their communities. This is the land I hope to cultivate during my doctoral journey.

Introduction

Building upon this personal motivation, my practice-based research will systematically explore how such a toolkit can be effectively developed and implemented, navigating the intersections of spatial, participatory, and social design through structured workshops and observational field research. The central research question guiding this investigation is:

How can an inclusive, cross-cultural and sensory-adaptive participatory design toolkit empower non-designers to actively shape community spaces and influence social behaviours and relationships?

Critical Reflection and Challenges

Despite the democratic intentions behind the participatory design toolkit, several critical challenges must be addressed:

- The persistent risk of centralization of power through the need for a representative with design or organizational skills, potentially leading to bureaucratic structures.
- The danger of participatory design methods devolving into performative democratic rituals that lack genuine empowerment and responsiveness.
- Complex demands of rapid responsiveness, efficiency, and scalability of the toolkit across diverse community contexts, presenting significant practical implementation challenges.

Aim

This research aims to directly address the central research question by exploring two core areas:

1. To examine the boundaries and challenges of applying Lucy Kimbell (2019) two-stage social design practice within real-world participatory contexts.
2. To design, prototype, and evaluate an inclusive and adaptive participatory design toolkit that empowers non-designers to become active co-creators of their community spaces.

Objectives

1. Conduct a comprehensive review of spatial and participatory design literature to identify theoretical and methodological gaps that hinder non-designer participation in community design processes.
2. Carry out observational field research and ethnographic case studies in diverse community settings to understand how spatial environments influence behaviours and relationships.
3. Collaboratively design and prototype an inclusive, adaptable toolkit through participatory design workshops grounded in Lucy Kimbell (2019) two-stage social design practice.
4. Test the prototype toolkit iteratively in culturally and sensorially diverse communities, collecting feedback to evaluate its usability, inclusiveness, and adaptability.
5. Define the operational boundaries and contextual adaptability of the toolkit across different communities, cultures, and spatial environments.
6. Reflect on the practical application of the two-stage social design methodology and assess the toolkit's broader contribution to participatory, inclusive, and social design theory and practice.

Historical Context

The study engages with Henri Lefebvre (1991) spatial production theory, Jane Jacobs (1961) critique of modern urban planning, and Michel de Certeau (1984) concept of tactical urbanism, laying a foundation for understanding participatory urban transformations.

Contemporary Context

Contemporary participatory design is undergoing a shift from designer-led processes to models that empower community members as co-creators. Current debates highlight the tension between participatory rhetoric and actual empowerment, with critiques focusing on institutional co-optation and superficial engagement. This project situates itself within these ongoing debates by proposing a toolkit that operationalizes Lucy Kimbell (2019) two-stage social design practice in real community settings, embedding flexibility, cross-cultural relevance, and multi-sensory engagement.

Democracy, Power, and Design

Democratic participatory design inherently interacts with existing power structures, complicating the ideal of community empowerment:

- **Source of Power:** Real empowerment often requires institutional support from governments, developers, or other stakeholders, introducing potential compromises.
- **Avoiding Power Erosion:** The toolkit must clearly define democratic boundaries and maintain transparency in power interactions to prevent becoming another tool for superficial or performative democracy.

- **Ethical Considerations:** Ethical responsibility lies in maintaining clarity about whose interests the toolkit serves, continuously balancing democratic aspirations with practical power dynamics.

This research will critically explore how the toolkit can navigate these tensions, seeking a sustainable equilibrium between grassroots democratic practices and necessary institutional support.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in four interrelated theoretical frameworks that inform both the development of the participatory design toolkit and the analytical lens through which data and outcomes are evaluated:

- **Lefebvre (1991) spatial triad (conceived, perceived, and lived space):** This framework enables an understanding of how space is not only designed and planned (conceived) but also experienced physically (perceived) and imbued with meaning by users (lived). It supports the analysis of how different communities interpret and reshape their environments, guiding the observation and reflection phases of fieldwork.
- **Sanders and Stappers (2008) co-creation frameworks:** These theories underscore the necessity of engaging users not just as informants but as active creators in the design process. This directly shapes the workshop structure and the iterative feedback model of toolkit development, ensuring that the toolkit reflects users' diverse inputs and priorities.
- **Kimbell and Julier (2019) two-stage social design practice model:** This framework structures the research process into exploratory and developmental phases, guiding both methodological progression and practice implementation. It supports a reflective practice model, helping to critically assess when and how community participants can take ownership of design decisions.
- **Mazé (2019) future-oriented design strategies:** These strategies inform the long-term vision of the toolkit's adaptability and sustainability, encouraging the development of tools that are open-ended, evolvable, and responsive to emerging community needs.

Each theoretical lens is applied at specific stages of the project—from shaping the toolkit's structure and interface, to evaluating its real-world adaptability and social impact. Together, they bridge theory and practice, enabling a critically engaged and context-responsive design process.

Methodology

The research methodology emphasizes critical reflection, continuously evaluating the toolkit's efficacy in genuinely empowering participants, and recognizing and addressing the risks of superficial democratic practices and power centralization.

Role and Contribution of Practice

The designer's role transforms into a facilitator of democratic practice, maintaining and iteratively improving toolkit functionality and accessibility without asserting control over community decisions. This approach innovatively decentralizes traditional design power structures.

Ethical Dimensions

Ethical practices involve ensuring genuine participation, transparency, and meaningful empowerment. Continuous vigilance is necessary to prevent the toolkit from inadvertently reinforcing existing power dynamics or superficial engagement.

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