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High Tea at the Conviviality Cafe: Research Tool or Design Intervention?

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Abstract

The FLEX project asked how we might age convivially at home. In response to concerns about an ageing British population, we looked at social factors of wellbeing in the ambient realm of neighbourhood encounters. We report on how we asked our research participants in Newcastle, north England, and Dundee, Scotland, about their understanding of conviviality, using a café environment to inspire a relaxed and friendly exchange of views over tea. We consider the way that questions were designed into the two courses of the meal and ask: is this perhaps a form of research-through-design for social contexts? Certainly, participants responded to the environment and subtle questioning style. And we draw a contrast between this form of designing - for use in research - and the more summative purpose of exhibits that also came out of the project.

Author Keywords

Ageing; social design; probes; questions; conviviality.

Research Imperatives

"Places make people. Thus when we ask questions such as, 'What kind of place do we want to maintain or bring about?', we are at the same time asking the question 'what kind of people do we want to be?'" (Brook 2012)

An ageing population and spiraling costs of care suggest that a challenge is living well at home for longer. And with the loss of meeting places, there is a need to ask what a serendipitous social life now looks like for people as they retire and beyond. How might people adapt their homes and lifestyles to experience the wellbeing of staying in touch with the neighbourhood as other horizons shrink? What are the private/public boundaries in sharing space and other resources? And what divides 'convivial' from 'invasive'?

The work was set in the context of diminishing numbers of places for people to meet serendipitously, with the rise of online activity, the erosion of High Street meeting places and the loss of social facilities such as community centres, pubs and other informal spaces in which people have traditionally gathered. As Hickman (2010) describes it, the 'third places' of 'neighbourhood infrastructure' are disappearing.

To collect people's opinions about the remedy for this trend pointing to social isolation, the *Connected Communities* "Flexible Dwellings for Extended Living" (FLEX) project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, talked with experts and motivated members of the public in Newcastle and Dundee over the course of a year. We used the opportunity to learn how housing (and ways of living in and around it) might accommodate public, shared and private life, being modified to make dwellings more socially flexible for people as they age in place.



Figure 1. Participants choose their own moment to pick a question as they talk and eat sandwiches at the High Tea.



Figure 2: Questions are stuck into sandwiches and cakes, hidden in saucers and placed under plates.

Probes and Questions

How does one enquire about such a topic without running long-term experiments? Wallace et al (2013) describe how designed objects are used to elicit subtle and thoughtful responses from participants in 'cultural probe' studies (Gaver et al 1999). These probes are one-off designs, prepared for a context, setting an agenda and anticipating types of response but not controlling them. Rather, probes are suggestive, given over to research participants to interpret. But, in real-time situations, when participants in a study are brought together to investigate a relational phenomenon, how does one relinquish control of ideas while setting a context? Is it possible to relax the conditions of face-to-face encounters, work on atmosphere and move away from formal semi-structured interviewing to a shape of event which lets a conversation develop - designing ones stimuli accordingly to inspire the necessary reflection?

Interviewing is not often regarded as requiring design skills. Methodological textbooks - such as Kaplan (2004) and Tracy (2012) - show how constraints, opportunities, materials and traditions meet in the preparation of questions, just as in projects that set out to design more conspicuous tools. Quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection both use conventions built on considerable design work. But questions are principally used in disciplines that do not wish to emphasise the idiosyncrasy of each situation. Rather than play up novelty, as design tends to, qualitative research, to which the technique of questioning often belongs, stresses comparability of conditions. Too much creativity serves to undermine the perceived accuracy of interviews, thereby threatening the validity of the findings derived from them. Nonetheless, questions, too, are interventions that change the status quo, just as design artifacts such as cultural probes do.

Research Process

The FLEX team was engaged in research on social design. As part of planning the research, we asked if social design can take a

research-through-design approach without imposing on our participants. By this we meant that we did not plan to test out a full set of new living conditions on a group of people who had not yet reached the stage in life we were considering – it would have been a major experiment and not guaranteed to reveal any more of their attitudes than a carefully staged set might elicit. So, we attempted to place people in a context that was suggestive of the atmosphere and issues we were considering.



Figure 3: Rustic styling, mixed tea sets and a candle in a cup all add to the relaxed feeling at the discussion table, softening the impact of the digital recorder in the midst of the event

A decorated café and ingeniously positioned questions invoked the conviviality we wanted to discuss. In this sense, it was research-through-design, but there was no artifact as such, as designing

social process does not necessarily involve *things*. That said, our methods, like Wallace et al's (2013), were designed specifically to fit the question that FLEX posed.

We invited strangers with different housing experience to come to tea. We let participants self-select after inviting people to register through extensive mailing lists. We only stipulated they should be at least 40 years old. Our intention was to catch the generation that is beginning to consider retirement and empty nest possibilities, but has not yet reached the situation we were discussing. Do people plan ahead and what types of changes would be required to make social wellbeing part of the planning for getting older?

After the events in the two towns, we transcribed the recorded discussions (fig 3) and analyzed them for consistent and divergent themes and how these related to our core question about conviviality and crossing physical and social boundaries to increase ambient sociality.

As mentioned, to engage our participants, we designed a convivial space and, quite literally, flagged up our questions. We ran high tea events that sought to capture the qualities that we were investigating. We decorated a café and served up savoury and sweet dainties. We used flags in the food of the two courses to set the agenda (fig 1/2) so people could digest the questions and respond at their own pace. There were two groups of flagged questions – colour-coded by course to add to the frivolity. The first, sandwich, course was concerned with *What do we and would we share?*, broken down into six sub-questions: *What do I share now? What could I share as I get older? What would I share? Where does sharing happen? How does sharing happen? How does sharing change as I age?* The second, cake/scones, course concerned *How do we live convivially as we age?* and the related discussion flags were: *What makes a home? What does it mean to live flexibly? What changes in living do I expect to make? What alternatives do I think should exist?* After each set of questions and a facilitated discussion by team members, we joined up the tables

for a plenary discussion so that participants could report to each other. We concluded each tea party by suggesting participants each take spare food away with them to share with others, continuing the spirit of the event.



Figure 4. Installation that picks up FLEX themes on display at Dundee

Research Outcome: Reflexive Environments

In one respect, this was a classic focus group – a diverse set of people being asked for their views over a finite time by researchers.



Figure 5: Detail of installation showing tea cup

In another, it could be considered research by design. We worked to make the encounters delightful and entertain our guests. We allowed people to stumble on questions and take them at their own pace, giving steerage without intrusion. This aspect of the work was rewarded when a participant, trying to explain how facilitated common spaces might work, waved her hand around her and said: *'Like we came in here today and there was an atmosphere with the candles on the tables, cakes and it invited you in and you wanted to come in. Some communal spaces are just dead.'* (participant comment, Newcastle event).

We can contrast the café environment used in the research with the installation shown at Dundee to share ideas that came out of the research and report back to participants (fig 4/5). In the exhibition, we showed pictures from the tea parties on a screen mounted in a large installation. This installation demonstrated symbolically the idea of 'porous design', being a frame made of insulation material with iconic elements, such as a hanging light bulb and tea cup (fig 5) to represent aspects of home. *Porous design* was the name we gave the social and physical elements that can be introduced into a neighbourhood to promote conviviality and social wellbeing, such as sharing schemes (social) and porches (physical) that allow others' actions to be visible and accessible to those living with them. This porosity was captured in the exhibit as a way to intrigue spectators, but the exhibit was not used explicitly as part of the research process. If it posed questions in the minds of those gathered, we only heard these in a small amount of feedback. This was design in response to research: we created these artifacts as part of the FLEX process of reflection; no loop was closed by showing them. That said, we hope that we may be able to work with a stage set, echoing the installation, in the future, to create physical spaces for discussion that further embody some of our questions. This was a thought experiment in that direction.

At our session reporting back in Newcastle, we stayed with the more familiar format of a tea party while we presented ideas and images from the research in a slide show to some of our

participants and others concerned with ageing well. Again, we found we were bringing together strangers in an accessible fashion.

So, the tea party scenarios were more ambiguous. If we are designing to increase conviviality, then there is a degree of reflexivity in inviting people into a convivial environment as part of talking to them about what it means to them. Did it work convivially? We did not pose that question explicitly. In the same way that we used tangible questions on coloured flags so that these, allowing conversation to flow, could be muted or hidden, we did not explicitly ask whether we had designed a convivial space of the kind that might encourage older people to gather. It was therefore all the more interesting to have the space acknowledged by a participant as exactly the kind of environment we were all talking about. Thus, in staging the High Tea, we asked about the boundary between research tool and design intervention, even as we researched how to stay socially engaged as we age.

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