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Structuring Future Social Relations: The Politics of Care in Participatory Practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the political shifts that take place in participatory design (PD) when the focus is upon co-designing ongoing future societal relations, beyond the immediacy of designing objects or services during project-time. Reflecting on connectedness, it looks at the politics of participation through the lens of people's interdependence, using feminist concepts of 'care' to explore the ethical commitments of designing. In particular, it speaks to Greenbaum's claim, 20 years ago, that 'we have the obligation to provide people with the opportunity to influence their own lives' (1993:47). We explore the questions this raises now, as we design in an increasingly distributed and heterogeneous socio-technical context, to give a contemporary take on long-term commitments to political and ethical outcomes in participatory design. Three contrasting case studies are interrogated to discuss how structuring of social relations was enabled, offering insights into what the politics of care might mean.

Author Keywords

Politics, ethics, care, structure, social relations, becoming

ACM Classification Keywords

D.2.10 Design, Methodologies, Human Factors.

POLITICS IN A CHANGING DESIGN CONTEXT

This paper asks how far designers' participatory practice can and should influence relations in the world and what responsibility this brings. We open with a brief history of the role of politics in early participatory design (PD) to show that PD has long attempted to change social relations through designing, often articulated as a commitment to empowerment of the workforce.

As Joan Greenbaum put it, in 1993 there were three main motivations for conducting PD: pragmatic, theoretical, and political. PD was conceived in Scandinavian movements towards democratization at work, and the belief that those affected by introduction of new technology should have a say in the design process and joint decision-making. Ehn explains, 'participatory design sided with resource weak stakeholders ...and developed project strategies for their effective and legitimate participation' (2008:94). PD never aspired to be value neutral, but was concerned with the ethics of design as an integral part of any intervention.

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Looking at the present, the pragmatic argument for products that involve user input in design remains strong. The general uptake of designing with users, in part, is testament to what PD offered other ICT design (Kyng 2010) and the development of research insights goes on apace, as many years of the PD conference testify.

What has been the journey of the 'political' motivation in participatory designing? It is important to understand the historical context to see what has changed politically and ethically when we look at practices today.

In developing a custom workplace system, early PD practitioners were able to consider how much control workers could have over use of their tools and how this impacted on broader social structures of organisational decision-making, including the pace and processes of workflow. Design and use were tightly coupled, so the design's impact on social structures at use time could be profound. This awareness was reflected in how PD was presented, given as a tenet by the *Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility*: 'Find concrete ways to improve the working lives of co-participants by, for example, reducing the tedium associated with work tasks; co-designing new opportunities for exercising creativity; increasing worker control over work content, measurement and reporting; and helping workers communicate and organize across hierarchical lines within the organization and with peers elsewhere' (CPSR 2005, para 7). Honouring these responsibilities often led beyond implementing popular workforce solutions to articulating issues of structure and agency as part of designing. Within PD at the time was a recognition of the impact of infrastructuring as a socio-technical process, subsequently captured so well by Star who gives an account of how infrastructure comes into being relationally - always built on what exists by way of structure and organisation already - and is experienced relationally - depending on how you are positioned in terms of resources and access (Star and Ruhleder, 1996).

Thus, because the impact-horizon and the design process were enmeshed, the participatory designer was able to manifest their ethical position through intervening in the politics of the workplace. At the time, to deploy a system was to affect social relations and to do so consciously and considerately was a political stance. Every system could be designed with working conditions in mind and in this way, the PD contribution to wellbeing could scale.

But, as we contemplate the future, it is apparent that much of what we design is not only distributed, but explicitly mobile, generic and networked, used variously across contexts that we, as designers and researchers, may never see. The political and ethical commitments of participatory work are troubled by these changes.

Kyng comments on the tension in current rationale for PD work: 'Today most PD projects do not talk much about democracy, but focus on user participation and the results of design. At the same time a crucial part of their rationale is that they have positive effects for the participating and affected users and companies' (2010: 54). As Bannon and Ehn put it (2013:57); 'The main [PD] approach... has been to organise projects with identifiable stakeholders within an organisation, paying attention to power relations and providing resources with a view to the empowerment of weak and marginalised groups ... However, design today is rather heterogeneous, partly open and public, engaging users and other stakeholders across organisational and community borders. To capture this change we think it may be useful to shift the frame of reference...'.

This begs the question: do PD researchers principally enact their ethical concern and execute duty of care in the tight locus of the formal design phase, with only the participants directly encountered there? Whilst this would demonstrate commitment to PD values, Robertson and Wagner (2013) ask a pointed question on the benefits to participants when the future forms of ICTs may not yet exist within the scope of the project: 'Project time often ends before we can support users in integrating what has been designed with their everyday practice' (2013:77).

And, put bluntly, the users of participatively-designed products may see no additional benefit over other well-made products and services.

If we look at other responses to the issue of values and how they affect our political commitments, we can see that, as the contexts of design open up beyond boundaries of geography and organisation, it increasingly leads to a questioning of positions. Beck goes as far as to that '[r]ather than participation, concern with power and dominance needs to be stated as the core of the research field of PD' (2002). Karasti argues that, as agendas in PD become heterogeneous and fragmented, 'we should be more sensitive in our analyses about politics, and also more attentive and inclusive with regard to the various kinds of political issues involved in different PD contexts' (2010:87-8).

Now, if one of the great assets of PD has been to politicise strategies for people to become involved in designing, shifting from being merely consulted, to actively 'asked to step up, take the pen in hand, stand in front of the large whiteboard together with fellow colleagues and designers, and participate in drawing and sketching how the work process unfolds as seen from their perspectives' (Robertson and Simonsen 2013:5), then how can we take this aspect forward in current contexts and 'shift the frame of reference' (Bannon and Ehn 2013:57)?

Bannon and Ehn suggest concerning ourselves with 'things', derived from an etymology of 'assembly' around 'matters of concern', and the more contemporary form that includes material objects. Thus, *things* are 'socio-material "collectives of humans and non-humans", through which "matters of concern" or controversies are handled' (2013:57). They continue to explain that *things* are 'long-term relationships through artful integration, in which continuous co-creation can be realised'. This keeps the

focus on designing, but opens our understanding to the ecologies involved, thus looking at design as a relational activity. What if we go further in looking at the relational aspects of designing participatively?

This paper builds on the often implicit assertion that PD can effect an improvement of lives, while challenging its tightly drawn focus on the design phase. If we return to the sensibility of the early days of PD, might we find new means of considering the social structures that pertain in the world being designed upon? The studies presented here are constituted to ask this question.

From Designing ICT to Future Relations

Design 'is fundamentally, about designing futures for actual people' (Robertson & Simonsen 2013:5). The last section has argued that, for PD, making an ethical stand is necessary to examine the 'accountability of design to the world it creates and the lives of those who inhabit them' (ibid). From philosophy of technology, Dorrestijn and Verbeek look at political and ethical questions raised by designing for others' *wellbeing* and how far a designer's responsibility might extend. They ask, disingenuously, '[s]hould designer influence on user behavior be avoided at all times, or should we rather see it as a core responsibility of designers?' (2013:53), going on to employ Foucault's discussion of relational freedom to show that both positions are unachievable. They conclude with freedom 'not as a state of independence from influences, but as a practice of reflecting upon and seeking the transformation of the conditions of one's existence'. We hear a similar subtlety in Greenbaum's position. Both commentators thoughtfully address the structuring mechanisms through which people can interpret and manage their lifeworlds more fully, and more interdependently, if they so choose.

We note, too, that the domain of Transformation Design shows similar commitment to design interventions that support the social relations they inspire, but further emphasises legacy issues in its approach to building skills and capacity for ongoing change, so that people, communities or organisation can keep adapting and improving themselves (Burns et al 2006). To coalesce design practices that enable public service reform, Sangiorgi (2011) suggests an awakening of a self-reflective process, acknowledging that purposeful transformation towards a collective wellbeing can only occur if driven by people's willingness to develop new roles and practices. Individuals' transformative capacities underlie continuous radical societal transformation, reminding us that designing is a 'living change process' (Meroni and Sangiorgi, 2011), as opposed to a process that comes to an end when an issue is resolved, or in use of products and services.

In this spirit but closer to home, Brandt et al have argued (2013:170) that it 'is of vital importance in innovation projects involving many different stakeholders that new roles and relations can be explored as part of generating concepts for new directions and future scenarios of use.'

So we see that politics, in this landscape, concerns structuring current and future relations at a very local level. When this politics becomes the focus, we can contribute vision for a democratic future world. An earlier, related, participatory project that sought to enact this was

Democratising Technology (Light 2009), which had the goal of inspiring confident attitudes to discussion of digital networks, in turn to lead to democratic input into how they are designed with respect to relations between people, and people and systems. This presupposed that the act of changing infrastructure can change relations but also that speaking about relations can change relations. The project worked with people's values, their stake in the ways things are done at present and what they would like to see held as core in a move to digital networks in daily life, treating participants 'as experts on life experience, social relations and the ethics of technology' (Light 2009:134). 'Those involved were participating, through design, in the discourses and practices of the shaping of techno-science.' (DiSalvo et al 2013:196).

If PD's legacy is not only impact on ICT design but the pursuit of how to best bring people into the design of the invisible mediating structures around them, then we must extend our examination to how participation is and can be on-going in the making of people's futures. A practical reflection on the *ethics of care*, through the politics of engagement is, in this light, something to offer participants, other than mutual learning about design.

STRUCTURING CARE

We invoke the idea of *care* from feminist studies of technology (Haraway 2008; Puig de la Bellacasa 2011) as a view where things and living beings matter, but that 'mattering' is 'always inside connections' (Haraway 2008:70), where 'interdependency is not a contract but a condition; a pre-condition' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012: 198). '[T]o care about something, or for somebody, is inevitably to create relation' (ibid). *Care* is 'not something forced upon living beings by a moral order; yet it *obliges* in that for life to be liveable it needs being fostered. This means that care is somehow unavoidable' (ibid). These concepts of care speak to our paper because they present care as intrinsically relational, situated inside interdependency. Though we are cautioned: 'we must be careful not to become nostalgic for an idealised caring world: caring or being cared for is not necessarily rewarding and comforting. ... but [situated] in vital ethico-affective everyday practical doings that engage with the inescapable troubles of interdependent existences.' (ibid).

This form of care accompanies, without negating, that of which Greenbaum speaks. When she says 'as system developers we have the obligation to provide people with the opportunity to influence their own lives' (1993:47), we see a duty of care for others in our sphere of influence, since we are intervening in their lives.

We are interested in both these notions of care, in that they are structured and enacted relationally and speak to the sense of relationality, obligation and connectedness that appears in much of the PD work we read, admire and draw upon. Though manifesting as politics, the movement that motivates much of this work would seem to be *obligation towards* and care, as characterised by Puig de la Bellacasa, is as much in the 'towards' as the 'obligation'. This sense of functioning in an ecology of beings and materials, which are necessarily related and interdependent in their growth and survival, comes across most strongly in the work by

Atelier (2011). And while, given this interpretation, care can be seen as active in designers' engagement with immediate participants, it extends intricately into the wider structures of production and consumption, living and dwelling with.

We embark, from this perspective, to describe three case studies that enact the participatory structuring of social relations. The studies were chosen from the authors' work to examine how such structuring can be brought about and encouraged to keep going, in other words, influencing ways that future relations are made in the moment and as a legacy of the intervention.

Several features characterise the selected case studies, which were conducted in different locations in Britain and Australia. First, all the studies could be seen as concerning the enactment of 'things', after Bannon and Ehn (2013), as discussed earlier. The projects are the manifestation of their theory, tracing an arc from Star's 'infrastructuring' to explore structuring of social relations in our practices. The case studies sought to fuse people's everyday realities, practices and concerns through their experiential participation, where enough motivation and enthusiasm was catalysed for those people to keep building their connection with others. The commonality in approach can be seen in the 'social lubrications' employed, explained in looking at the implications of this kind of intervention, below.

Second, they do not specifically involve the making of digital products or services as a means of structuring relations, but instead, they attempt to co-design awareness and understanding, and scaffold connections among people, some of which may manifest in enhanced design, deployment, customisation or use of ICTs. Designing in this sense, is no longer led or owned by designers, but becomes a co-articulation of concerns and issues in a highly mediated and mediatised world.

Last, in detailing the reasoning behind the design engagements that were developed, we look at how the projects address social relations and their structure, not only during the designing, but as a consequence of it, in negotiating re-configured societal relations as examples of care. The sequencing of the case studies speaks to this broadening in scale and structure: the first concerning ad-hoc and serendipitous relations of individuals; the second cultivating specific relations to support survival and addressing how organisational culture can nourish or undermine it; the third looking at capacity-building for community ventures making social change.

Despite the description of empirical work, this paper - as a discussion of ethics in practice - is intended to raise debate, and not provide instruction for replication. Consequently, we have avoided detailing the methods employed (see cited papers for these), believing that sharing critical reflection is valuable to think through how care and relational structures are considered, without necessarily attempting to offer detailed guidance. All engagements were recorded and the quoted dialogue and evaluative comments come from close reading of transcripts of the sessions and/or follow-up interviews.

Case Study 1: Structuring Care for Conviviality

The first study discusses the structuring of neighbourhood relations through researching conviviality and modelling it in a reflexive manner, offering simple ways to address ageing and social isolation in both form and content. It is the most open-ended of the three case studies.

Flexible Dwellings for Extended Living (FLEX) was set up to address concerns about an ageing British population and trends that encourage social isolation as people grow older in urban areas – from the erosion of the High Street and its meeting places to the sealed, environmentally-sound, socially-barricaded tendencies of smart homes. (Seen this way, ICTs are a double-edged sword. Deposit of pensions directly into bank accounts has done away with serendipitous meetings in the post office.) To counter these trends, the research team looked at the social factors of wellbeing in the ambient realm of neighbourhood encounters and how neighbourhoods themselves might tackle the promotion of sociality.

FLEX worked specifically with the idea of conviviality, meaning ‘living with’ but also making merry. To explore the question in a way that would link the ‘what’ with the ‘how’, researchers asked participants about their understanding of home and feeling ‘at home’ and worked to inspire a relaxed and friendly exchange of views over tea. The tea party was set up to embody conviviality in environment and activities as an attempt to place people in a context that was suggestive of both an atmosphere and the issues that the research was raising. This series of encounters, between willing strangers supported by tea, became the opportunity to learn how housing (and ways of living in and around it) might accommodate public, shared and private life more interdependently and keep people ‘ageing in place’.



Fig. 1: Tea party with embedded questions

Small independent cafés in two cities were used as venues – reflecting those critical ‘third places’, like community centres, pubs and cafés, that used to trigger informal conversations but are now disappearing. The cafés gave a high-tea experience, serving guests with sandwiches and cake made on the premises. Food was decorated with questions on the themes of ‘home’ and ‘sharing’, presented as little flags (see fig. 1). Urban dwellers, aged 40+, from a range of backgrounds and lifestyles (sourced through mailing lists to very different housing areas) were invited to talk about how they might like to live as they age. Everyone who attended had volunteered, so they were not a typical cross-section but people with a degree of existing motivation to join in events.

FLEX participants reflected together in these ad-hoc groups, fuelled by the prompts placed in the food and

looked after by the research team and café staff. They explored how social and spatial elements of their world can be configured to improve a sense of shared space or time (e.g. street-parties, BBQs on communal land, clearing litter, or co-gardening) and how these afford strangers an occasion to meet and talk.

Participants noted that many events draw people together, such as snow, floods, lift and transport failures and planning consultations, and may encourage people to talk to each other. However, they also saw that the benefits of these encounters may not persist into less dramatic times. Society’s increased desire to protect vulnerable members, such as young and very old people, was felt to work counter-productively. It makes behaviours seem risky that have traditionally strengthened social networks at a neighbourhood level (neighbours involved in childcare, sharing, acts of kindness or ‘popping in’). In the face of this trend, and the erosion of casual encounters, participants were asked how encounters could be brought about through designing the social, as well as physical, fabric of life to trigger serendipitous conversations and awareness of others, thus supporting convivial ageing (for more detail, see Light et al 2013).

It was noted that mere recognition of the issues by individuals and groups can make a substantial difference to how community reliance is formed and how life develops. At present, health and finances dominate discussion of ageing and epithets describing a neighbourhood, such as ‘safe’ or ‘quiet’, mask the social relations this represents. 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.’ (*tea party two*). In this way, the reflexive nature of the events’ design was taken on board and used to further discussion.

The spirit of the tea party also affected the design of the follow-up activities, leading to impromptu action on the part of some early participants and a subsequent modification of plans for future evenings. During the first event, the group was left with spare cake and after hearing stories of sharing food, it became obvious that these portions should go out with participants to share with others. Later, participants reported back where they had taken it and what the response had been. This gave participants an extra challenge, causing them further reflection and leading to conversations about sharing with the recipients of the food. As one participant put it ‘Generosity of spirit encourages people to communicate better. But it almost always takes the odd eccentric in a group to start the ball rolling. You have to be a bit batty to do it - cheeky, a bit pushy. I believe that if you take that first step people will be grateful. Take the risk, because in all sorts of ways we’re really becoming such a risk-averse society, aren’t we?’ (*tea party 1*). This feature was then added to the tea parties as standard and opportunity made to hear back from the participants if they chose to act on it. Both the act of sharing and the reflection on it served to strengthen the impact of talking about ways to build bonds in the neighbourhood.

It goes without saying that people who attended the tea parties were already disposed to join in. Interestingly, as well as raising issues for the research team to consider, most people left the event they attended more intent on enacting the changes they wanted to see. Though the tea parties did not advocate for specific new structures of organisation or ways of living, they modelled conviviality, both in atmosphere and in bringing people together, and simultaneously suggested a simple mechanism for promoting it. The invite was welcoming and humorous ('Come hungry!'). The flagged questions (fig. 1) had been designed to stimulate reflection in an unhurried way and worked to intrigue the guests. The tea and cake evoked a mix of tradition and caring, elements that could be easily repeated, or adjusted to meet cultural expectations. The combination prompted reflection and offered the chance to rethink relations with other local people. Any actual change was in the hands of the participants, as a result of their deliberations. In this way, the research process was one that both collected data and modelled conviviality in such a way that it supported ways to connect. The experience enabled others to take new ideas for social structures out into the world, based on what they learned through their encounters.

At time of writing, a council in another major British city had picked up the methodology of the tea parties to use with older people in working on the future of services. Not only is this an encouraging outcome for the research, but also enables it to move beyond the ad-hoc instances to be structured and supported more widely. The council hopes to involve participants as active collaborators and improve older people's services, thereby altering the ecology of service design and delivery in the city.

Case Study 2: Structuring Care for Survival

Our second study examines structuring social relations on two levels, cultivating neighbourly relations for survival in fire, and addressing the dynamics between the fire authorities and the community. The designers' approach, studied over the last 5 years, shifted from mapping a geographical place to mapping significant people as part of moving relations towards less dependence on authorities and more interdependence locally.

One of the issues identified by Akama and her team in helping Australian communities prepare for fire was the strained relationships. Akama & Ivanka (2010) describe the tension between individualistic self-sufficiency in a disaster and the neighbourly co-operation needed for preparedness. Non-permanent residents and holiday-makers were yet more reticent in connecting with others, preferring to 'switch off' from the demands of work and busy social life and avoid 'social engineering' attempts at community-building. These residents' deliberate disassociation from local activities through their frequent absence (and desire to disconnect socially and technologically) had made them especially vulnerable to fire risk through their lack of knowledge of people and the local environment.

At the time, the fire authorities had been taking the traditional disaster response model of a 'top-down' approach to communication and engagement aimed

broadly at the community, further reinforcing dependency and resulting in passivity in the residents. Care for both people and outcomes were genuine, but highly directive and duty-bound. Any 're-structuring' had to address the dynamics and disconnect in such social relations.

Several workshops were undertaken to address this issue, involving the residents in a visualisation activity to map risk and resources and share knowledge through dialogue. Sharing with each other what they knew and speaking out loud their concerns, such as overhanging branches along the roadside that need clearing or the possibility of installing a generator at a nearby safe house, naturally coalesced a group of action, introducing neighbours who knew little about one another and providing a reason to take collective action.

Of particular interest to this paper is how Akama & Ivanka (2010) describe the transitions so that the community became less dependent upon the fire authority in order to build stronger resilience. They recount how two elderly ladies came to the workshop feeling vulnerable and isolated. They did not want to be cared for or become a burden on others. However, by the end of the workshop, they joined a Community Fireguard Group with others who lived nearby to be better prepared and provide support to one another. Their change in status came about through mutual recognition of a need for action among neighbours who discovered the importance of connecting for survival. This is a small example of a bigger phenomenon as people took the initiative and reorganised existing relations into more versatile trust-based groupings ready to anticipate fire, rather than wait to be told what to do by the authorities.



Fig 2: Mapping social relations using Playful Triggers

The early workshops focused on using maps of the local area, gathering people around each to identify the location of their homes and noting features in the neighbourhood that would have implications if fire approached. As the series of workshops matured, the design researchers witnessed new relations being formed and considered how these might be structured further beyond the workshop so that the emergency agencies could play a central support role. They iterated an approach to bring further attention to interdependency by mapping social networks instead of geography (fig. 2). Emphasising awareness and understanding of social relations became a focus to ensure

preparedness. This approach was then incorporated into a training programme for emergency agencies in Australia (see below), recognising the central role they also play in strengthening resilience.

The new phase of the study examined social networks in more detail, motivated by the countless stories of people helping one another in disasters and the critical role social networks play in knowledge flow (Akama et al, 2013). Participants visualised who they are connected to, whom they would seek advice from in a fire, and who they trust the most. Residents who had already experienced fire in their local area shared their stories on how others had helped them in an emergency. It was an opportunity to reflect upon their relation to their 'community of place' and distinguish between the general trust they might give to most of their connections and the particular trust needed in an emergency. For example, female A, living on her own, shared a story of being shocked by her immediate neighbour who did not assist her in the fire. '[M]y immediate neighbour could see the fires behind my place, didn't even come over to see if I was all right. ... I was gobsmacked... Knew I was on my own, so that was just sheer thoughtlessness on his part ... So the person who did actually ring me up was in fact [Female N], to make sure that I was okay ... I think [my immediate neighbour] was more worried about getting his hay out'.

When the fire came close to their house, female N was critical to female A's preparation and risk mitigation, such as helping her clear out the gutters and filling them up with water. Female A now knows not to rely on her immediate neighbour in a fire, visualising her trust and reliance by drawing on other members in her network, and particularly female N, who actually assisted her.

This visualisation exercise is not about capturing or measuring social relations out of context; it is not a sociological exercise. Instead, it centres the conversation about disaster preparedness in neighbourhood relations, and in complement to concern about equipment and property (safe places, water pumps, hazardous vegetation and so on). As described, earlier workshops that visualised these location-based features were effective in facilitating awareness, catalysing dialogue and coalescing action. Yet, the social mapping exercise brings an extra element, one that can be challenging for people to confront, as it can highlight that some plans are ill considered, for example, the person you most rely upon may not be contactable, or live too far away to provide immediate help.

Talking about social relations in this context places an equal yet different kind of importance on the resources, knowledge and the assistance people provide one another. It shows that connections are also central to survival. The story shared by female A reminds us how dynamics can change drastically in an emergency, and anticipating changes - as well as building dialogue earlier with others - can assist in being better prepared. By stepping through such conversations, local residents were able to see the significance of resilience built by a mesh of people. Discussing these aspects is a first step to acknowledging these truths in a way that builds strategy rather than hope.

The visualising of social relations has been a method used in a training programme for emergency agencies through the Australian Emergency Management Institute since 2011 as a way to help them shift from a top-down model to a co-created and situated engagement strategy, presented in a community-centred way. This capacity building is important, given that the complexity of a natural disaster, like fire, requires a collective effort that no single community, government or organisation can tackle alone. These efforts shift the ethics of care from authority-centred to human-centred by emphasising the latent strength of social relations.

Feedback from emergency staff equipped with this approach suggests they have continued to address local relations for preparedness (Akama, 2014). Relevant to this paper is how they had, in turn, 'designed' their own way of structuring social relations with their local community. For example, several council staff initiated a series of engagement workshops using the visual approaches they had learnt. This then led to the residents being motivated enough to follow up conversations with their family and neighbours about being prepared. Materials provided during their workshop became a useful physical conduit to build further connections with neighbours. One facilitator called these a 'gift' that can become a bridge across social barriers in an urban neighbourhood, lubricating a tricky dialogue about bushfires. They report that one resident was so concerned for his neighbours who missed the workshops that he sent a personal invitation to everyone on his street and hosted a gathering at his home. He organized the local emergency staff to come and relay the information he had gained. Such efforts are continuing, revealing how local relations can continue to be structured through learning and capacity building.

Case Study 3: Structuring Care for Growth

The final study builds on the last point, that of how learning and capacity building can be supported, looking at how social activists co-researched designing futures. A distinction in this study is that the workshops that took place did not offer pre-shaped reflective spaces, but participants collaborated to produce them. The resultant co-created learning platforms are then, richly, the product of the learning of multiple activists together, giving all participants insight not just into learnings from each other, but how to design similar learnings for others. In this, it owes much to action research, but might best be termed *action design research* since it enabled people to become more 'designerly' in their interventions, both in their production of creative activities with place and in their dealings with others to promote such activity.

Stimulating Participation in the Informal Creative Economy (SPICE) worked with people engaged in 'place-shaping' activities, such as guided walks, hyper-local blogs and community-generated tourism, who do not formally run cultural heritage work and exist outside the main cultural industries economy. Participants identified as social entrepreneurs, artists, photographers; poets, trainers, local authority staff responsible for the cultural sector, retirees, small businesses, and voluntary sector representatives, engaged in their location in designing future social and physical landscapes. Examples of

innovations by participants included designing future landmarks in Second Life and organising a not-for-profit digital library for antique photos of local places. In other words, through the places where they lived, these activists were working to give life to ideas that would affect and inspire those they lived amongst and, in turn, build place. The structures in which these came about varied, but were dominated by community ventures with little formal organisation but strong local networks.

Given a research question about the growth of creative practices linked to place, the most useful answers would be locally situated. Acknowledging this located-ness, the project was conceived with self-selecting participants from four distinctive, widely-flung locations (London, Oxford, Sheffield and North Yorkshire/East Cleveland) of very different geographies and economies. The extent of the plan was to invite activists from different regions to encounter each other, thereby using place as foundational and provocative. The decision was taken together to run a workshop in each of the four areas, with “visitors” invited from the other three. This shape allowed participants to encounter difference across many dimensions of place and practice, offering the chance to reflect more profoundly on their own needs, opportunities and challenges by coming up against regional variations. Within these parameters, workshop activity was chosen by the “hosts” and someone with responsibility for the next workshop would always be part of a visit, so that each could be designed using insights from experiencing the previous one. As the workshops evolved, two notable activities emerged as useful learning encounters:

‘Peer Surgeries’ – host participants brought a live issue (or several) to the workshop and laid it out for the visitors to respond to, both as illustrative of local experience and as an opportunity to receive feedback and ideas. Issues included financial viability, volunteer motivation, repurposing of material resources and next steps in more general terms. All ‘surgeries’ experimented with versions of intervention in the form of shared idea generation.

‘Talking and Walking’ – as the workshop series went on, so did the amount of situated discussion and walking. This activity grew in significance when people realised that showing their terrain and their ambitions for it *in situ* helped others see its potential. It started as a breakaway activity in the first workshop as visitors asked to see the issues they were hearing about and became such an integral feature that by the fourth workshop, nearly all the trip was experiential. This last visit involved an overnight boat trip to learn of life as a ‘boater’ and viewing a strip of land that had been a boatyard, now closed by the local council and resulting in long, inconvenient annual voyages for those living on boats to use a dry-dock (fig 3). Incorporated in this dramatic encounter was time for discussion and reflection in place.

What emerged was that not only the visitors learnt about the environment, but the hosts saw matters and places differently as they moved through them physically, allowing greater projection into possible futures for the area, supported by the informal conversations possible and the discovery of similarities and difference in context.

At the end of the year-long project, participants spoke of the value of stepping outside their usual walks of life and roles, both as visitor to new parts and as host in places that could be (re)presented as part of showing them to others. Surgery sessions had built competence and given tactics for progressing, helping participants see how to grow their organisation and activities in manageable ways and also recognising aspects of their geographical location that made political and economic issues unique.

However, the biggest impact came from moving through the area(s) of interest. As participants encountered issues embodied in the terrain, they responded emotionally and imaginatively to the texture of the encounter and the people they met. This happened for both visitors and hosts, but the long term impact was most discernable in the hosts, who talked of renegotiating their relationship with their environs and the action they were taking in it. Examples include new service offerings and campaign strategies, but also, more nebulously, a greater sense of purpose, new ways of engaging others and, simply, a recognition of the work done, the effort spent and the developments still possible. In this way, the participants actively constructed place and their care for it, even as their plans and networks were being constituted by it.



Fig 3: Visitors to Oxford see the disputed, closed boatyard

What we see here is highly networked groups, who do not need (or may be challenging) municipal intervention to progress. These self-organising groups and their actions were both sustained and amplified by these encounters, as was their understanding about how to promote this interest in others. As grass-roots change-makers, the SPICE groups are future-making not just for themselves, but for their perceived catchment groups (even if working without formal mandate). The insights gained into the transformative effect of encounter in place - and the platforms they built to learn this - have the potential to come together in greater capacity to capture others’ imagination and grow groundswell. The relationship with locality, here, acts as more than catalyst. The theme of the workshops in the previous example moved from geographic maps to social mapping to catalyse stronger bonds for action. In comparison, here, the workshops moved from locating concerns in learning encounters to making literal learning environments, acknowledging that people and places are co-constitutive, and revealing more about how to share this insight.

In this way, the politics and design of place met and helped structure social relations relating to innovation. Co-producing these workshops resulted in an evolved model for providing people ‘with the opportunity to influence their own lives’ (Greenbaum 1993), perhaps more profoundly than mediated encounters through local

agencies could have done, while still feeding into a tier of local organisation sufficiently well organised to effect change. By designing their environment and generating creative responses to cultural heritage, these tiers impact other people's worlds and bring them into engagement. In working so closely with issues of how we live, how that is made sustainable emotionally and economically and how the resources of motivated citizens could be made more impactful, this project went to the heart of co-designing future relations by co-researching the means, while offering participants greater experience of how to share these insights and inspire care in those around them.

DISCUSSION

In this section, we return to the ethics and politics of designing to offer a way of exploring the contribution presented here and also to Puig de la Bellacasa's notion of *care* as 'not something forced upon living beings by a moral order; yet it *obliges* in that for life to be liveable it needs being fostered.' (2012:198). In other words, the three case studies do not demonstrate *better* forms of care in the relations that were structured. Rather, they describe how relations were structured openly and sometimes serendipitously for on-going configuration, working with an *a priori* and primordial condition of caring.

Here, care is manifested as and in support of 'sustainable and flourishing relations' (ibid), distinct from *caring for* or *being cared for*, conditions which describe a directional, instrumental relation, suggestive of a premeditated agenda and even the promotion of inadvertent learned dependencies. The next section begins with a critique of such directed forms of structuring relations.

Confronting the Question of Social Engineering

The case studies highlight how interventions change social relations, not just people's awareness and understanding of them, but also how they continue re-making them beyond initial encounters. This must not be confused with 'social engineering' in the sense of dictating how certain relationships ought to be: we do not consider that desirable or even possible. We are not advocating a technologically deterministic view, suggesting that impacts can be known ahead of intervention and are independent of many competing socio-technical factors. Social engineering is not part of the ethical vision of participatory practitioners, who are especially careful to explore options for involving the people implicated in decisions affecting them.

But, in some design traditions, naivety, squeamishness or a sense of limited jurisdiction as to impact may curb efforts to examine how social relations can and will change through designing. After all, who is the designer to say what should ensue? There is a sense that social relations are beyond the touch of designers and belong in the world of social psychology, on the one hand, and established party politics, on the other.

Yet some interventions can be quite overt in aiming to achieve particular social outcomes, and this calls for prudence. The 'nudge' approach towards wellbeing that Dorrestijn and Verbeek (2013) critique drew their notice because it explicitly aims to change people's way of living and to do so possibly without recourse to those being changed by it. By contrast, we have sought to show how

the politics of care in participatory design can be structured openly, where the outcome of deliberations is a collaborative effort in a particular direction that has not been determined by the designer. If we understand, after Foucault (Dorrestijn and Verbeek 2013), that we will never be free of influences, we can engage in and promote a practice of shaping one's life in interaction with these influences, knowingly and collaboratively.

We build on Light's (2011:437) proposed means for disrupting the design of infrastructure to 'make a space for flexible interactions of the future', allowing the values of openness and evolution to dominate so that other values do not become hard-wired into systems and prevent future citizens making wide-ranging choices. The case studies discuss the opening up of spaces to re-examine relations and enable participants to address pressing concerns with how they live. This is design, not to generate solutions or concrete outcomes, but to intervene 'from within' (Lindstrom and Stahl, 2014), acknowledging that we are already entangled. In FLEX's case, the choice and customisation of a physical place (a café) played a significant role in creating affective comfort, providing encouragement for the group to strategise ways to prevent social isolation. For residents sharing the same risks, providing assistance for one another is obvious for survival so a catalyst helped them look carefully at how.

Designing is Never Completed

We look towards designing for the future and speak in the same spirit as Robertson and Wagner (2013:66), who concern themselves with PD's limited examination of the ethics of envisioning the future. They 'recommend that increased attention be paid to the ways that design is completed in use as a way to contribute to resolving ethical issues/conflicts that arise in use'. Yet, we depart significantly from seeing the future 'through use' - the case studies do not describe the designing of products, systems or services that are 'used'. Inspiring the design of relations is intangible and we see it as on-going and never completed, spreading through encounter and exchange.

It is this spreading, its roots in participatory practice and the initiative this fosters, that makes this impact scalable. In the first case study, we see that what inspires one group may be adopted by others. The second study points to how organisational culture or neighbourly boundaries that seek to separate, rather than link, can be dismantled. But some boundaries are no longer clear cut; instead new networked forms support the spread of practices in rhizomatic, as well as more direct, ways, as seen in the last study. And, in extending Transformation Design's emphasis on building capacity, the last case study, in particular, describes the co-creation of learning environments as platforms that can further support new structuring of social relations and enable broader societal impact.

Each case study reveals an on-going designing, where transformation locates agency in embedding and entangling people's lived paths and experiences with others. Akama & Prendiville (2013:38) describe the act of transformation as it manifests between people and the specificities and materiality of the place in which designing is taking place. 'We are constantly "being" and

“becoming” through this transformative act’ resonating with and influenced by Light’s notion of design flexible enough to support mutation in the nature of being (2011). A designer in this context is also a facilitator and enabler, helping others to reflect and co-create new ways of being and becoming over time and space.

As we concern ourselves with design, there is always ‘making’ and a projection forward. Our studies point to ‘making’ relations and projection together over concerns – in these cases, related to social isolation, to disasters and to enabling innovation. But if there is ‘making’, there is also ‘cutting’ - detaching part of the assemblage with the possibility of making a relationship that can re-attach (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011). In our work, this can be seen as challenging existing power-dynamics, such as overcoming Australian residents’ dependency on the emergency management authorities with their top-down practices, or lessening boat-dwellers’ vulnerability to being displaced by their council, expressed in the three-week journey out of the city to take boats to dry-dock facilities. Such ‘cutting’ of power and dominance resonates with Beck’s suggestion that issues of power should be as much part of PD’s agenda as participation (2002).

The future is shaped in our projects by making the invisible cement of collaborative practice visible, to become material for exploration and play; by re-examining relationships and re-imagining familiar places and spaces in new ways. Social relations are not seen as static or as a given condition. Instead, as researchers, we respond to the challenge of seeing these relations as fluid, impacting and impacted upon, changed or created by the designing that we do, not to be pre-determined but to be fostered by making space for thought and evolution.

Ethics and ‘Becoming With’

The last section of this discussion returns to ethics and politics, which here are two sides of the same coin, not to be examined separately in this consideration of practice. We have touched on ethics as it relates to politics in designing throughout the paper, while questioning the practice of limiting recognition of accountability to participating in the design of new technologies, or effecting people’s well-being through their ‘use.’ Robertson and Wagner (2013) give considered discussion to ethics with practical questions on how to engage participants, how they are represented, what can be offered to participants and issues that concern current and future technologies. To this, we add another view of ethics as something created and manifesting in social relations. In other words, ethics is acting in the ‘between-ness’ among entities that are coming together to discover and reflect upon who ‘we’ are, and question, converse about and propose how ‘we become’ with one another (Akama, 2012). ‘Becoming with’ is a particularly rich term that Haraway (2008, adapted from Vinciane Despret) uses to indicate both ‘with-ness’ and fellow journeying. It recognises interdependence, while acknowledging the future orientation of the designer and particularly that of the participatory designer, who is concerned to take everyone along.

If we accept our role is to ‘become with’, care is no longer solely for researchers to grapple with or for the

organisations behind them to pursue as a way to mitigate litigation (about which much ethics approval concerns itself), but opens up a negotiation with which all may be concerned. Referring to Greenbaum’s earlier assertion, it is not just system developers who have an ethical obligation ‘to provide people with the opportunity to influence their own lives’ (1993:47) because of design’s power structures. An ‘obligation’ and opportunity exists with everyone as people who care, and, further, we can actively carve out a space for this to be enabled.

The projects we discuss, above, structure this agency in many ways, by opening up a convivial space to gather around tea and cakes; by enabling local connections to be visualised and re-evaluated; by traversing across the distances and boundaries of different practices to share ideas. We catalyse agency, all of us, and thus respond to how existing relations and future encounters are made possible. Our being and *becoming with* is always situated and embodied but also constituted in relating, located in-between, and co-shaping new entanglements. This is relational ontology where agency is mutually constituted through relations to other things and people. Seeing it this way, we are constantly designed by our own designing – a double-movement whereby the things we make (both objects and relations) act upon us as we are making and engaging in these things (Willis 2006). This process is not a linear trajectory of design’s production from start to finish. Instead, it is a hermeneutic circle: the world we design is in turn designing us, inscribing how we are being and becoming with others. We must be conscious of this inseparability and be careful not to flatten the circle into a causal relationship between ICT and people, emphasising the design of products and systems that mediate specific activities, or, equally, how methods of participation achieve better products and systems.

Of course, this has implications for where we have come from as designers and researchers as well as where we go from here. We *become* through others’ care as well as our own: the participants and partners of our research, our colleagues, peers, students, families and countless other beings and things. We became with them all. This is not just to acknowledge input, support or research funding in the instrumental sense, but to be thankful of the care that we, the authors, have received, that nourishes and keeps us caring. This is the nature of things.

CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF CARE

When ethical and political concern is narrowly focused on how people directly participate in designing products and systems, it can miss a significant dimension. We suggest that those skilled in and motivated by participatory design might also consider how ‘we’ are designed and designing relationally in the process of living in an environment alive with influences, many of them exerted by the products and services that have come into being in the years since PD helped computerise the workplace. The social as it manifests in structure and agency is always political. The act of bringing into being and equipping small agentic groups is political, challenging the scale at which change is made and ushering in new forms of organisation with their own dynamics. This collaborative future-making can be expected to have impact, possibly at many levels. What we

cannot say is how. But we see a role for participatory practitioners as custodians of care, creating spaces for others to reflect, make mistakes, learn and debate. We can support people in caring and changing their environment as they might wish. As the environment is increasingly rich with digital mediation, we can also bring our insights into these worlds to bear. The making of futures needs care. The case studies we share are sites in which we were able to explore, imagine and create these structures of care. Through our paper's discussion, we hope we have offered a variation on the politics of design to consider.

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