

Design Activism as a Tool for Creating New Urban Narratives

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Abstract

This paper reports on the activities of an alliance of artists, designers, architects and community activists in the development of a campaign to open up the imagination of how a large, complex city might act on its present and view its future. This is broadly dedicated to the development and diffusion of a counter-narrative of urban identity that provides new models for the everyday life of the city. It highlights the ordinary processes in the maintenance of collective endeavour. It also reviews the ways by which shared visions are fostered and the political challenges this poses. By focusing on processual measures across a community, the possibilities of design activism, both as practical action but also as political agency, are discussed.

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with design activism both as social action and political agency. It reports on a number of initiatives undertaken within a defined locality that bring together otherwise quite fragmented activities. These activities involve groups or individuals engaged in various forms of creative practice for social and environmental benefit. They are largely working in the third sector, that is in the voluntary or non-government sector, often funded by national, regional or local government grants or charitable support. In bringing them together, a sense of shared identity and purpose is defined as well as the opportunity for mutual support. At the same time, this networking takes place in a larger discursive field regarding the promotion of certain values as to what an urban agglomeration might be – in stark contrast to what it is. This new 'discursive field' itself is more self-consciously created by an alliance of interests.

Design activism itself broadly encompasses a wide range of real-life processes from greening neighbourhoods to transforming communities through participatory design action. Anne Thorpe takes activism to involve intentional action to bring about change, adding that her concern is with the actions that are visibly public in nature, rather than the 'day-to-day, behind the scenes administration of groups' (Thorpe 2008). The ground presented in this paper is indeed highly public. It concerns a city-wide debate on its future in terms of governance, planning and identity. While many of the activities that are reported on exist very much within the 'day-to-day', they therefore also connect to large questions. Necessarily, there is a degree of discussion of 'behind the scenes' activities that reveal some of the dilemmas and solutions in mobilizing design activism.

The Codification of Place

The context for this paper exists at two interrelated levels. One is in the wider practices of urban design and place-marketing in the UK over the last 10 years. The second exists more precisely in the particular conditions of economics, planning and governance of the city of Leeds that has produced an urban problematic. Leeds is a city of some 700,000 inhabitants in the north of England – 150,000 of them are in the bottom 10% of income levels. Some 140,000 of this population live in its inner suburbs (Unsworth and Nathan: 2006). This latter problematic to be found in Leeds is most probably transferable to other UK cities, although its generalizability to other countries may be debateable.

The post-industrialisation of modern cities and their slippage into knowledge economies has produced a seemingly unending requirement to compete with each other. Within this perceived imperative, new systems of governance are created, strategies are formulated and slogans are written.

For example, in 1990, the Leeds Initiative was founded. This strategic partnership brings together the public, private, community, voluntary and faith sectors to create policy and its implementation with regards to economic and social development. At one level this is typical of the 'agentification' has emerged in neo-liberal governance (Whitfield 2001). Through the Leeds Initiative and other local government strategic bodies, large amounts of policy have been turned over to so-called ALMOs (Arms' Length Management Organisations). Social and economic policy, previously formulated and carried through by the state, is formulated and played out by a partnership between national, regional or local government and a wide and sometimes fragmented range of NGOs and other interests.

At another level, such systems of governance are driven by target-setting and attainment that is promoted through rhetorical boosterism. For example, the first of the Leeds Initiative's aims is, 'Going up a League', 'making Leeds an internationally competitive city, the best place in the country to live, work and learn, with a high quality of life for everyone' (Leeds Initiative 2004).

This policy of boosterism has also given way to the emergent discipline of place-branding. In their efforts to distinguish themselves, many authorities of urban agglomerations have developed marketing strategies that identify and roll-out their unique selling propositions, encapsulated in a slogan and graphic applications. Thus, 'vibrant', 'cultural', 'diverse', 'cosmopolitan' and 'sophisticated' are frequently used descriptors that seem to almost come straight out of the Richard Florida (2002) textbook on how to lever a Floridean version of the creative city into a marketing campaign (see Julier 2005). In 2005, MarketingLeeds, a body set up to promote the city, launched its own city brand at a celebrity filled launch in the city's famous shopping quarter. Conceived by a local branding and communications group entitled An Agency Called England, it featured the slogan, 'Leeds. Live It. Love It.'. In developing this identity, the agency undertook a survey of Leeds residents to discern if the city was a person, what kind of person would that be. The research that came back was that Leeds would be, '...a young male, friendly, your best friend, a really nice person to know, an ambitious person, living in a trendy apartment, driving a Volkswagen Golf GTi' (Scott 2005). This would be used to articulate the new Leeds brand.

Such initiatives imply a codification of urban experience. How a city is, how it is lived, what aspirations one might have within it are set out, almost literally, by the brand strategy handbook.

Another level of codification has also emerged within the practice of urban design and planning over the past 10 years. The UK government's Urban Task Force, founded soon after New Labour's election to power in 1997, published its highly influential policy statement *Towards An Urban Renaissance* (Urban Task Force 1999). This and the subsequent Urban White Paper (2000) came amongst a plethora of government policy that attempted to address urban living in the postindustrial era. For the first time, design was placed as a key component in the revitalisation of urban areas.

Its trickle-down effect to regional and local governments has led to the production of numerous design guides, compendia and statements. The Urban Task Force document made linkages between design, the sustainability of communities, demographic change and economic activities (UTF 1998: 27-34). None the less, its translation into government policy and thence into application at local level has tended to focus largely on a narrow interpretation of design as engaging its purely formal rather than processual features. Implicit in this is a behaviouristic model of urban design that is deeply embedded in its theoretical backgrounds (see Cuthbert 2006). In brief, this approach is firmly rooted in a purview of space as the assemblage of typologies that are based entirely on their material, contextual delineation rather than on practices of everyday life. Thus, for example, we hear of 'settlement pattern', 'urban form', 'urban space' and 'built form' (eg. DCLG 2006: 65) rather than the human infrastructure of, say, 'kinship', 'mobility', 'social networks' or 'labour'. Whether it be the guides on 'best practice' in developing design codes or the design codes themselves, the emphasis is on design that *produces* attitudes and behaviours in and toward places. Put the other way around, despite the recurrent reminders that public consultation is generally a good thing in the development of design guidelines, the end result is a particular, specifically cast narrative of what urban living should be. This narrative is, in turn, served up as something to be consumed, adhered to and adopted as a disposition or, as Bourdieu (1984) would have had it, an urban *habitus*.

As with any marketing strategy or masterplan, this is all well and fine when there is consensual buy-in on the part of the internal audience of an urban agglomeration – citizens, in other ways. This is most likely to happen in the context of economic success, social cohesion and environmental stability. However, even in the most ideal of circumstances, this doesn't go uncontested. The Urban Task Force vigorously championed Barcelona as a city that had achieved this. Resistances and debates concerning its 2004 Forum swiftly showed how easily this perception can be destabilised (see Degen 2003).

Trouble in Leeds

Where the traditional economic, social and environmental order is in crisis, or is, at least, challenged, so the dominant narrative of what that place is may also come to be contested. This seems to be the case in Leeds.

Over the past 20 years, Leeds and its city-centre in particular has undergone significant change. Key features include:

- re-imagining of the city as 24 Hour City with ‘European’ allusions to being the ‘Barcelona of the North’, 24 hour café society and city centre living from the early 1990s (Haughton and Williams 1996);
- employment in manufacturing dropped from 33 per cent to 17 per cent 1977-1993 (Leeds City Council 1998);
- growth of its city centre population from a few hundred to a projected 20,000 by 2015 (Knight Frank 2005) (NB. this will only account for 2% for the city’s population (Fox and Unsworth 2003));
- £1.4b. worth of office and apartment schemes under construction at the end of 2006 and a further £5.8b. proposed – a total of £10.4b since 1997 (Leeds City Council cited in Chatterton and Hodkinson 2007);
- reduction of social housing stock by 40,000 over the past 25 years with a further reduction of 10,000 by 2016 (Leeds City Council cited in Hodkinson and Chatterton 2007).

Leeds has been marked by a rapid growth of service industries in the city centre, particularly in the financial sector and a related growth of private city-centre dwellings, almost entirely directed at younger upper-income owners with little ambition to long-term settlement there. Hand-in-hand with this development has been a vigorous dedication to the hard landscaping of the city centre, in line with many other city centres.

Without, ‘a Masterplan for the city, nor tall buildings policy, nor energy strategy, nor integrated transport strategy nor public realm strategy’, this has led to a situation where city planning has ignored, ‘the notion of unlimited demand for deep plan air-conditioned commercial space and constantly refused to acknowledge that sustainable design may have a commercial value’ (Bauman 2008). Equally, on a recent visit, Wayne Hemingway branded the city as, ‘the most unsustainable’ (Waite 2008).

In recent months, this strategy, or lack of strategy, has led to something of a planning crisis. As the city’s river Aire burst its banks – the second major flooding of the city centre inside a year – so this gave visible evidence to the need to build a more sustainable approach to urban planning and design. In the background, the development boom has passed its zenith. The credit crunch of early 2008 and loss in demand, has led to many schemes being put on hold, including the £160m. Spiracle tower, a building for which the city’s only city centre public swimming pool was closed to make way for.

This concentration on the city-centre as a capital intense, transaction rich and design and development dense hub contrasts with Leeds’s inner suburbs. This city ‘rim’ is characterised by high levels of deprivation, a run-down housing stock and low levels of ‘official’ economic activity. Added to this is are topographical and planning issues which have caused these areas to be relatively cut-off from the city centre. Thus the benefits enjoyed by high investment in the city centre urban realm are not transferred to the rim, in terms of regeneration, by a ‘ripple effect’. If there has been a strong narrative of ‘going up a league’, of Leeds as the international, 24-hour city to do business in, of retail-fuelled loving-it-while-you-live-it, then 2008 may be the year in which this version of the city gets re-coded.

Design Activism Re-Awakens

Set against this context of city-centre growth 'at all costs', 2007-8 has seen the emergence, or I should say, re-emergence, of design activism as a practice where a constructive counter-narrative is taking place.

Leeds has a strong history of counter-political action connected to creative practice. For example, it is home to the Leeds Animation Workshop. This was founded in 1976 as a group of women who came together to make a film about the need for pre-school childcare. Since then they have produced numerous titles on social issues. Leeds is the home of Leeds Postcards. Founded in 1979, this group set the standard for activist stationery in the 1980s. Leeds is also where, via a slow process of community participation, steps were made in the 1990s to the establishment of Britain's first Home Zone, turning residential streets into mixed use civic spaces (see Julier 2007: 204-8). This history certainly acts as inspiration. But many of the people who have been actors in this history have brought their experience to bear in the current situation. This isn't student protest. It is action carried by many people with considerable experience of carrying forward complex projects and in different contexts of urban governance. In addition to this, recent years has seen the rise of a number of 'design activist' social enterprises. Examples of these include:

- Hyde Park Source, who create gardens and play areas out of derelict areas;
- Ketchup Clothes who create new fashionware by recycling existing garments;
- East Leeds FM, a radio station that incorporates community discussion fora on sustainability and the neighbourhood design issues.

From 2005, there has been a considerable re-birth of activism in Leeds that is centred on sustainability, urban form and governance. Thus environmental, design and political (with a lower-case 'p') questions are linked (summarised in Fig.1).

This impulse toward activism is held within particular special interest groups within civil society, university academic departments and some professional creative practices. While several fora and groups constitute a broad alliance of activists, movement between them is fluid in terms of ideas, action and people. Such porosity maintains an open sense of participation and inclusion while each group is coordinated or driven by key activists. Also notable is the close relationship between public lecture events, workshops and symposia, and their leading to the foundation of action groups. Indeed, the call for papers for the Changing the Change itself acted as a catalyst toward the concretization of further design activist initiatives.

Within this micro-history, a key moment were protests regarding the city's Corn Exchange. At the end of 2007, the Leeds City Council allowed its leaseholders, Zurich, to evict all of the building's independent stallholders in order to usher in greater turnover and higher rent-paying businesses that belonged to multiples. As this building was a favourite haunt of teenagers on Saturday afternoons, this drew a vociferous and concerted protest. This may seem like a banal affair. However, it was an important watershed in citizen participation in protest as to the governance of Leeds. The notion that there would be consensual buy-in to a vision of city development as embodied in relentless retail development and gentrification is presumptuous.

This event led to a discussion event in early 2008, attended by 250 citizens, as to the direction of the Leeds city centre – its management, governance, form and planning. It was entitled 'Leeds: Are We Going In The Right Direction?' and was hosted by the School of Geography at Leeds University. While overtly critical of local authority approaches, it also fostered a sense of positive contribution to planning processes and a willingness to engage local government. Many of the broader wishes of these citizens coincided with stated local authority policy – the development of more green space, better public transport, more affordable housing, better cultural resource. But the development of such fora shows a will on the part of many citizens to see such developments realised. It plays an alternative form of political pressure to the four yearly and underused ballot box.

Lovelt.Sharelt.

The new landscape of peak oil, climate change and of the crisis of many financialisation and property initiatives, and with it of the naïve belief in continuous growth model, requires new understandings and an ability to think laterally and holistically (Bauman 2008). The scale of participation in events such as ‘Leeds: are we going in the right direction?’, reported above, is evidence of a lack of confidence in the leadership of the city to deliver the requisite new thinking for these challenges. This condition has given rise to the emergence of a strong radical movement in the city under the slogan of ‘Lovelt. Sharelt’, a play on the Leeds brand, ‘Livelt.Lovelt.

This initiative is made up of individuals and groups, networking creative practitioners, academics and activists. Its steering group currently comprises Irena Bauman (Bauman Lyons Architects), Sue Ball (Media And Arts Partnerships), Rachael Unsworth and Paul Chatterton (School of Geography, Leeds University), Andy Edwards (independent graphic designer), Andy Goldring (Permaculture Association) and myself. As such it comprises an alliance of creative practitioners and members of the academic community.

So far it has identified two aims for the coming months. The first is to undertake a mapping of the inner suburbs of Leeds, paying attention to three aspects:

- social institutions – eg. sporting or leisure clubs, faith groups, support groups;
- green space use – eg. gardens, allotments, left-over spaces, derelict space;
- grey economy – eg. informal childcare networks, vehicle repair activities.

By doing this it is hoped that attention is drawn to the resources that are available but invariably overlooked in these areas and that provide important infrastructures for the sustainability of these communities. It brings this, largely shadow, rim back into the wider picture of the city. It also begins to counter the notion that urban regeneration can take place from the centre outwards by helping to develop resilience of localities. It is intended that this action is both scaled up and down. It has started with a pilot project in the city’s Richmond Hill area to test mapping processes and its forms of representation. This prototyping will then contribute to a toolbox which can then be rolled out into other areas of the inner suburbs. At the same time, it is expected that this toolbox can be used and adapted by communities themselves, thus scaling the process down and allowing for greater participation and less concentration in the hands of ‘experts’.

The second mid-term aim of Lovelt.Sharelt is the development of an alternative vision for Leeds, counter to the already mentioned Leeds Initiative’s official one. This will be guided by three aspirations for the city that are stated in the group’s manifesto. These are:

- conviviality: supporting a diversity of forms of living;
- resilience: consolidating economic and social patterns that are tolerant of external change;
- beauty: nurturing a cityscape that exhibits a compelling material and human infrastructure.

The group is planning toward a document that will identify promising scenarios, existing and future tools as well as impact assessments that recognize the interlocking potential of design and/or communitarian activism and urban regeneration. Ultimately, it is envisioned that within 5 years, neither LoveltSharelt nor the ‘Leeds. Livelt. Lovelt’ slogan need exist. It is hoped that the city may by then have adopted a new urban disposition.

Leading on from this, and also a number of other initiatives in the city, efforts are underway to create a wider, more inclusive and representative network of creative practitioners who are engaged in environmentally and socially committed activities. Around LiveltSharelt is also the Design Activism Group that has sprung from Leeds Metropolitan University’s School of Architecture, Landscape and Design. The latter hosted the first national symposium ‘Mapping

Design Activism' in 2007. This event instigated a discussion as to the history, topography and identity of design activism. In 2008 it also hosted a 'Gala Awards Evening' that mixed carnival (eg. cabaret acts, live bands) with an opportunity for various practitioners to meet and form closer contacts. Citywide design activism initiatives were mapped and future collaborations discussed. This was facilitated by a 'do-it-yourself' awards process, where participants made awards to each other in recognition of their respective achievements.

Discussion

The aims of LoveltShareIt and design activism in Leeds are unashamedly ambitious. They demand:

- the creation of new scenarios and visions for Leeds;
- a radical reappraisal of city-wide planning that embraces space use, social arrangements, local economies, mobility and connectivity;
- a reinvigoration of citizen participations in urban governance;
- new roles for creative practitioners within these aims.

These probably also seem rather utopian, touched by the enthusiasms that accompany the early imagineering of a project before the reality principle of delivery sets in.

In terms of the initial mapping project, it is difficult at this stage to predict what the outcome of this initiative might be. At one level, it is about creating information systems through which localised social enterprise and everyday practices may be supported or support themselves. At another level it also carries a potential to broker new relationships between local government policy (and its partner organisations) and citizens. For example, within Leeds City Council, its Local Enterprise Generation Initiative (LEGI) is dedicated to developing entrepreneurial activity in deprived areas. So far this has gone mostly toward supporting enterprise centres that provide advice and training for new businesses. The LoveltShareIt mapping may help as a catalyst to recognising the social connections required to stimulate local and sustainable enterprise. Implicit in this is an orientation away from a traditional, economically-led growth model of enterprise that is currently embedded in LEGI thinking.

In such ways LoveltShareIt may work to match up local government policy that is delivered through a fragmented range of agents and the disparate landscape of social enterprise and design activism (see Fig 2). At the same time, with its emphasis on socially and environmentally committed practices, LoveltShareIt demands a different story to be told in terms of city aspirations.

The classic and implicit dilemma here is the extent to which design activism practitioners are prepared to adjust to local government policy or, conversely, the extent to which local government is prepared to adopt new frameworks of practice. In terms of the latter, the demands for more sustainable forms of urban living combined with the challenges to current orthodoxies in city centre property development might orientate local government toward a new attitude. That said, a counter argument put forward by Buck (2007) is that ultimately, capital and neo-liberalism (which, ideologically is at the heart of city council policy) will always prevail through constantly propelling itself into new technological frameworks. Corporations, it is argued, will always find a way to install themselves at the head of whatever pile.

In the meantime, design activism in Leeds draws sustenance in two ways. One is in developing an internal sense of identity, a shared language and knowledge as to how to overcome everyday challenges. This is partly achieved through the use of events to bring such activists together. The other is by looking outwards to other sources of inspiration. Thus, for example, Demos's 'City Dreaming' project that sought to engage citizens in defining future visions for Glasgow is one touchpoint. Another is David Barrie's production of the Middlesbrough's urban agriculture project.

Meanwhile, urban agglomerations consider their next step as to what experiencing urban

life is. The stories that have been offered in place-branding and in design-led regeneration have so far been limited. Design activism, such as that offered by this paper, may open up new texts and textures for urban existence.

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2005	2006	2007	2008
Green Drinks			
Leeds Sustainable Futures	Schumacher North Lectures and Workshops: Sue Roaf, Herbert Girardet, Ezio Manzini, Peter Harper		
	Stop Climate Chaos Leeds	Lectures: Ben Brangwyn	
	Leeds Eco-Village Project		
			Transition Town Leeds
		Corn Exchange Protests	
'Who Runs Leeds', School of Geography, Leeds University			'Leeds: Are We Going In The Right Direction?'
DesignLeeds, Leeds Metropolitan University		Mapping Design Activism Symposium	Urban Mapping Workshop
		Leeds Rim Study, Bauman Lyons Architects Radical Leeds, (BLA/MAAP)	LoveltShareIt
			Leeds Design Activism Gala Event
The Common Place			
2005	2006	2007 changingthechange announced	2008

Fig. 1: Developing activist groups and resources in Leeds, 2005-8

Examples of Local Authority agents



the Leeds Initiative
Local partnerships making things happen



Examples of 'design activist' groups



I Love Armley



Fig. 2: A 'map' of the 'fit' of some of the local authority agents, the Leeds City Council, LiveItShareIt and 'design activist' groupings.