

Mapping Design Activism
Friday 14 September, 2007

The Leeds School of Architecture, Landscape and Design
Leeds Metropolitan University



Introduction

Some 45 participants gathered in Leeds to discuss past, present and future approaches to design activism. These were came from backgrounds in architecture, landscape architecture, urban, product and graphic design, public art, marketing, community consultation and permaculture. Two keynote speakers provided springboards to a largely discussion based event that was run, loosely, on an Open Space basis.

The wider brief for the day was worded as follows:

‘Design Activism’ encompasses a wide range of real-life processes from greening neighbourhoods to transforming communities through participatory design action.

This discussion-led symposium focuses on processes by which designers and creative communities innovate non-commercial, socially responsible design practices. Its emphasis is on exploring models that challenge existing conventions of design knowledge.

Participation will allow for the deep sharing of experiences and an opportunity to network with other specialists in this growing field. Activities will include a mapping of the geography and evolution of design activism and the exploration of its various processes, practices and outcomes. Delegates will include specially invited ‘design activists’ from the region and beyond.

Guy Julier, Professor of Design at Leeds Metropolitan University introduced the day, briefly outlining the historical tradition of design activism. He drew attention to related activities, such as the Design and Community Unit, within The Leeds School of Architecture, Landscape and Design. Definitions of design activism, however, are multivarious and by bringing a range of practitioners together, we can begin to understand its scope, processes and potential impacts.

Adrian Sinclair, Creative Director of Huddersfield-based group Heads Together followed with a fascinating keynote lecture entitled, ‘Just give me 8 years; 800 square metres of turf; and a change in government policy’. Drawing on 20 years involvement in the field of participative creative practice, he drew out two central themes: identity and communication. Of identity he discussed the way by which alliances and allegiances change through the duration of a project. Relatedly, communities can be inward looking, intergenerational and cross cultural and we need to find new ways of working with and developing communication with and within these. Within the process of a project, adhocracies are developed – alliances of individuals and groups that are not necessarily foreseen. Adrian made a case for less consultation and more participation, arguing



that consultation can often kill off good ideas. He then went on to talk about the Methleys project (see www.heads.demon.co.uk) and what had been learnt from it. A key point was that change takes time. Sometimes this can happen too soon and quickly and therefore this becomes neither deep nor sustainable – ‘timing is everything’. There is a need to be open to changes in strategy, for this to inform practice, and vice versa. He went on to talk about the ELFM (East Leeds FM) radio station noting that collaboration or activism turns great projects into strategies which work. There was, he concluded, the need for a new breed of professional who dealt in such challenges.

Eddie Walker, Leeds-based community architect, introduced a time-line of design activism he had conceived. This mapped key design activist projects



that he had engaged with, other paradigmatic projects, and theoretical and legislative developments from 1968 to the present day. Participants then added their examples of their own practices and experiences into this timeline.

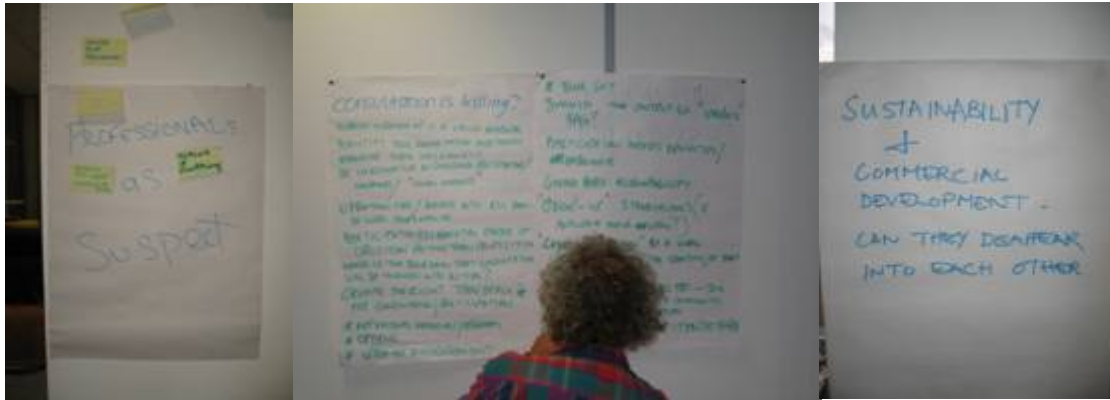
Eddie and others talked of the need to broaden the terms of social and cultural innovation, asking what there was to learn from business. Jenny Fisher of Leeds City Council Urban Design team talked of the EASEL project (an extensive regeneration scheme) and how she felt that much time was being spent trying to get it right without

engaging the right people or fostering substantive collaborations.



Break-out groups followed, with participants choosing the themes of evaluation, education, scale and size, making a living to centre their discussion in response to the question, ‘What are the key challenges facing design activism?’.





John Wood, Professor of Design at Goldsmiths, University of London began the afternoon's activities with a keynote lecture entitled, 'Monarchy, Anarchy, Hierarchy'. This talk followed on from Adrian's notion of 'adhocracies' in that it considered the social arrangements necessary for advancing an activist approach to design. Thus, drawing on the example of Bill Dunster's Zedbed project, the chief hurdle in its implementation was not its technical or material demands but social and individual engagement with it. New productive alliances can be created that sometimes necessarily leave others out. The challenge for designers is to develop synergistic approaches that view small-scale relationships and their relationship to a greater network of interests together.



The penultimate activity of the day involved break-out groups discussing the question, 'What future do we envisage for design activism?'. This was intended as a way of extrapolating the timeline discussed earlier in the day forwards by 10 years.



In summing up the day, Guy Julier drew attention to the need to shift the boundaries of what design is, reframing its processes and what its aspirations might be. The plenary discussion that followed made the following three recommendations:

1. A future event that focused on a particular theme within Design Activism.
2. A skills audit and publication of a Design Activism practitioner database and professional activity network.
3. An archiving of the Design Activism timeline toward the development of an historical awareness of this practice.

Discussion of the day continued at The Reliance into the evening.

