

DOES PARTICIPATING WITH ALL MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY  
IN PUBLIC SPACE PROJECTS OF VARYING SCALES HELP TO  
CREATE A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP OVER THE SPACE BY THOSE  
THAT USE IT?

**Abstract:**

An assignment looking into how at different scales of Public Space projects ranging from small-scale interventions, to a courtyard, to a public garden and to a large scale changing of the public spaces across a village can all create a sense of ownership when the community are involved in the planning or implementation process.

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As part of a live project Group looking at the Scarborough to Whitby Old Railway, we designed a Modular seating arrangement that had the flexibility to suit a variety of users regardless of age, ability or situation. Its use of a simple form and existing materials allows it to lend itself to be constructed through community projects as a way of engaging the local people into local projects. Does this community project create a sense of ownership of the structures and does this in turn reduce the act of vandalism to it? Do Skateboarders or those that perform Parkour have a sense of ownership over some areas of the city in which they meet/use? Or do homeowners who plant on public space outside their home in a Guerrilla Gardening Method, have some sense of ownership or take pride in this space they use? The focus of the essay will be questioning whether this idea of involving the community of all ages, abilities and situation, creates this sense of ownership in public space projects at a variety of urban scales, such as installations, courtyards, gardens and villages. The essay will follow on with several case study examples of community involved urban projects. The first of these projects is by Meike Schalk and Apolonija Sustersic; *"The Garden Service."*<sup>1</sup> A project in Edinburgh in which the community surrounding the courtyard, participated in the project which was a temporary garden built within the already existing public courtyard space. The second example is the Peace Gardens in Sheffield in which as part of a larger redevelopment of Sheffield's Squares and Streets known as the *"Gold Route."*<sup>2</sup> The community were consulted in the planning stages of the project in which they were asked to vote which of several designs they preferred. Even though the project was built ten years ago, the Peace Gardens are still a successful public space? The assignment throughout will question several other case study examples which are, an

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<sup>1</sup> *The Garden Service* was a 2007 project in Edinburgh involving the local Housing Association in creating a garden in a public courtyard, referring to Meike Schalk and Apolonija Sustersic's paper *Taking Care of Public Space* and Agency panel Praxis of Agency.

<sup>2</sup> *Gold Route* is the name of the regeneration project of Sheffield's public realm.

installation in Burnley called the "*Singing Ringing Tree*"<sup>3</sup> and Beighton Village Project<sup>4</sup> in Sheffield. To see whether the participation of all members of the community does in fact help create a sense of ownership over these changed public spaces.

The Brief set for the Scarborough Live Project Group was to design a Masterplan for the whole length of the Scarborough to Whitby Old Railway. Within this Brief we were asked to design a prototype for a specific site at the Scarborough end known as Woodlands Ravine/Manor Road. Whilst pursuing a design for the prototype and understanding its context, it became apparent that we needed to a design modular seating arrangement that could be changed and formulated together which would allow the flexibility to be implemented along the whole length of the line. Due to the vast length of the site it meant there would be a variety of users using the seating arrangement. Therefore it was vital that the design of the seating reflected these different requirements of a user as well as the changes in the environment along the line. The concept behind the seating was a mix of crate like structures built from reclaimed materials, to reflect the natural environment settings as well as being easy to acquire, sustainable and easy to work with. These components varied in height and sizes so that a variety of users could use and help to build them.

Similarly "*RECICLARQ*"<sup>5</sup> a Barcelona based non-profit organisation are seeking to investigate and recycle existing materials to create shelters/structures. Talking about one of their designs, the *Pallet Housing System* (PHS)<sup>6</sup>, they express the "*the possibilities for versatile*

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<sup>3</sup> The *Singing Ringing Tree* is an installation project in Burnley which won an RIBA award for its community involvement within the project.

<sup>4</sup> The Beighton Village project in Sheffield is a community-based project in which the whole community is involved in tidying and changing the villages' public spaces.

<sup>5</sup> *RECICLARQ* is a Barcelona non-profit organisation run partly by Christian Suau. Referring to Architectures for Emergency from the Agency panel Praxis of Agency.

<sup>6</sup> Pallet Housing System (PHS) is a house design made up of reusing existing pallets.

*and creative uses offered by shipping boards.*"<sup>7</sup> The flexibility of the modular seating structure we had designed, meant that each crate could have several functions, such as a solid seat, turfed seat, planter, light box, and a bin, therefore creating different combinations which can be changed, adapted and picked to suit the needs of the clients and the community. The universally designed product varies in height and size to suit a variety of users. Figure one shows an example of a garden combination in which the components include a large planter for herbs and vegetables, a seating area suitable for picnics, several turf covered play components allowing children to climb up, as well as a platform which allows them to become involved in planting the garden. The two lower planters have enough space around them to allow wheelchairs access up to them so that the wheelchair bound can still be involved in the garden.



Figure 1: Sample of a Modular Garden Design  
Image: Live Project Team 01 2008

The garden design covers all seven principles of Universal Design; these are "*Equitable Use... Flexibility in Use...Simple and Intuitive Use...Perceptible Information...Tolerance for Error...Low Physical Effort...Size and Space for Approach and Use*"<sup>8</sup> This enables the garden to be used by people of all ages and disabilities allowing for a greater range of the community to be involved in the process. Evidence suggests that members of the public want to be involved in projects that affect their local surroundings particularly as they will be the ones to use it. "*Research by the Urban Design Group (1998, p.17) identified a high level of demand by local communities for involvement in the planning and management of their local environment*".<sup>9</sup> Getting all members of the community involved in designing public space can help to prevent

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<sup>7</sup> [www.reciclarq.org/pdf/cubichouse](http://www.reciclarq.org/pdf/cubichouse) 26.01.09, pg 6. Document for Plea 2004 - The 21<sup>st</sup> Conference on Passive and Low Energy Architecture. Eindhoven, The Netherlands, 19-22 September 2004

<sup>8</sup> Connell, B.R, Jones, M, Mace, R, Mueller, J, Mullick, A, Ostroff, E, Sanford, J, Steinfield, E, Story, M, Vanderheiden, G (1997) Chapter 3, *The Principles of Universal Design*, The principles of Universal Design and Their Application, The Principles of Universal Design, The Center for Universal Design, NC State University. Pg 34/35

<sup>9</sup> Carmona, M, Heath, T, Oc, T + Tiesdell, S (2003) *Public Spaces, Urban Spaces, The Dimensions of Urban Design*, Architectural press, Oxford, Pg 268

the feeling of fear in using a public space as they wish. Public *“places where children can rest without fear of being turned away”*<sup>10</sup> are aspects that need to be addressed for a successful shared space to occur. Getting the community including those with disabilities, youths and school children involved, will create this sense of ownership and pride and should in effect also reduce vandalism. On a similar scale project to the modular seating prototype, the installation ‘*Singing Ringing Tree*’ in Burnley, has been given a RIBA Award for its involvement of the community. During the participation processes of the project local school children were involved in workshops to find a location on site for the installation to be placed. In the end the community events were to *“encourage ownership of the site for the children involved”* <sup>11</sup>



Figure 2: The Singing Ringing Tree, Crown Point, Burnley by Tonkin Lin  
Image: Butterworth, C + Vardy, S, Site-seeing: Constructing the ‘Creative Survey’  
[www.field-journal.org](http://www.field-journal.org).

*“From evening tango classes in the square in Buenos Aires, to Mah-jong games in Hanoi, from skateboarding on the Left Bank in London to elaborate pavement drawings in New York City, the people of the world have transformed the streets, squares, buildings and alleyways of our cities into exciting spaces where different forms of PLAY take place every day”.*<sup>12</sup>

It is a known fact that Users of Public spaces such as Skateboarders, performers of Parkour and those mentioned above who use the city has a playground, have a sense of ownership over the areas of city they use. However this dominance in space, can sometimes unintentionally make other members of the public feel intimidated and uncomfortable. Exchange Square in Manchester in which skateboarders use the seats as ramps, affects those that want to sit on them. Tenants of houses (particularly those without an outdoor space attached) will make a public

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<sup>10</sup>Preiser, F, E, W + Elaine Ostroff, E (2001) Universal Design Handbook, Chapter 69 Creating a Universally Designed City, Prospects for the new Century ,Leslie Kaner Weisman, Mc Graw-Hill Companies INC, USA. Pg 69,13

<sup>11</sup> Butterworth, C + Vardy, S, Site-seeing: Constructing the ‘Creative Survey’ [www.field-journal.org](http://www.field-journal.org). Pg 130. Reference in the paper from Gayle Knight, Mid-Pennine Arts, Personal Interview, 25<sup>th</sup> Sept 2007

<sup>12</sup> [www.urbis.org.uk](http://www.urbis.org.uk) 16/01/09 Referring to the exhibition PLAY – Urban play within cities

space feel like it is their private space. This is sometimes achieved by Guerrilla gardening or using the street as a social space. An example of a community who have created a garden in a public courtyard can be seen in Edinburgh. Meike Schalk and Apolonija Sustersic in their paper '*Taking Care of Public Space*' (2008) refer to a project in which they undertook called '*Garden Service*'. The two of them alongside a group from a Local Housing Association built a temporary garden in a public courtyard. "*The garden is a public expression of private shared benefit - a public green space created and looked after by private garden lovers.*"

<sup>13</sup> The fact that the gardens are looked after by its '*lovers*' suggests the sense of ownership over courtyard. In this particular case study the community got involved first hand by physically planting elements within it. The project was so successful that the volunteers involved have applied to the council "*for the permission of making the garden...permanent.*"<sup>14</sup> There are several questionable problems to this approach of a small scale intervention of a public space. Have Schalk, Sustersic and the Housing Association in creating the public 'private' garden alienated other members of the public from using the space? Has the approach of using a select few, (albeit those that live around the courtyard) limited others from changing this space to suit their needs? Have the participant's changes to the garden to suit their needs, resulted in them believing that the space is theirs? (Lefebvre refers to these changes of space as appropriation of space, "*a natural space modified in order to serve the needs and possibilities of a group that it has been appropriated by that group.*"<sup>15</sup>) The answers to these questions are possibly all true in some respects, due to the small size of the courtyard and the involvement of only the circling community. This sense of ownership will in effect make the garden feel like it belongs to those involved. An approach that involved the wider community could have



Figure 3: The Garden Service, Edinburgh  
Image: Own

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<sup>13</sup> Schalk, M + Apolonija, S (June 2008) Abstract taken from the paper *Taking Care of Public Space*

<sup>14</sup> Schalk, M + Apolonija, S (June 2008) Abstract taken from the paper *Taking Care of Public Space*

<sup>15</sup> Lefebvre, H (1991) *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, Oxford. Pg 165

solved this possible alienation; however it is also possible that the only people who used the courtyard previously were the volunteers involved in which this possible separation would not exist.

In the Peace Gardens in Sheffield this alienation of other users using the area, has not been the case and this might be due to the different scales of the two projects; the difference in each of their sizes, the numbers of the public travelling through each of them and the amount of buildings enclosing the two diverse types of public spaces. The Peace Gardens were built as part of the on-going regeneration of the city as part of the 'Gold Route' project, where several squares and streets are being transformed. The urban space takes its form from lots of influences from in and around Sheffield. The use of locally based suppliers such as the gritstone for the walls from "*Stoke Hall Quarry in Derbyshire which also supplied stone for the Town Hall*"<sup>16</sup> and selecting locally based designers and sculptors to make aspects of the project such as the fountains. Initially the council involved an architecture practice to design the garden. Richard Watts, the Designer of the Peace Garden Scheme said that the public "*was very much against this element as most people said they wanted to retain the 'garden' approach*"<sup>17</sup> The council then decided to redesign, responding to the criticisms and thoughts of the public from the previous presentation. The new proposals were then represented to the public in a consultation meeting in which several new proposals by the council were met with greater enthusiasm and positive feedback than the previous. Creating this sense of ownership and pride by consulting with the public of Sheffield has led to there being no vandalism in the last ten years since the project was realised. However this could be due to the appointing of "*provision of day and night*



Figure 4: Peace Gardens, Sheffield In the day  
Image: Sheffield City Council, Planning Department



Figure 5: Peace Gardens, Sheffield, At night  
Image: Sheffield City Council, Planning Department

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<sup>16</sup> Sheffield City Council + Sheffield One, Sheffield City Centre Public Realm, The Gold Route, The Journey from Sheffield Station to the Heart of the City, City Development Division, Sheffield. Pg 11

<sup>17</sup> Quote from Richard Watts, Designer of the Peace Garden Scheme, Landscape Architect/Regeneration Project Manager, Sheffield City Council

*attendance by City Centre Management Team Staff.”<sup>18</sup> Most probably it is down to the participation with the users in the design process and taking into account their needs and requirements from the project that has created this sense of ownership over the urban space. Andrew Skelton, Public Art Officer for Sheffield City Council talking of the fountains in the Peace Gardens (for the article *Sheffield: Work in Progress, 2008*), says that “People come to the city centre for a day out. On a nice day they bring their beach towels and whoop as they run through the fountains.”<sup>19</sup> This shows that the public are able to feel comfortable and have the confidence to play in the fountains therefore creating a sense of ownership over the garden.*

The process of participatory methods of involving the community in the planning/designing process has been an important topic since the 20<sup>th</sup> Century for pioneers who were and are all for community agency in the design process of public space. These pioneers include the architects Christopher Alexander and Jane Jacobs. Participation has also been at the forefront of Architectural Theory Education for many years as a way of creating a positive reason to change or build a piece of architecture or public space. In the wider picture many of councils also use the process as a way of creating support and a solid base to a project. On a larger scale than the Peace Gardens another Sheffield Public Realm project in Bighton Village are in an on-going regeneration programme to improve the village’s public spaces. The locals are actively involved in a range of projects looking into cleaning-up through to planting. As Matthew Carmona states *“An essential part of support coalition comes from the local community and those directly affected by proposals. Public involvement and consultation can be an important means of building support for urban design principles and proposals... Moreover by*

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<sup>18</sup> Sheffield City Council + Sheffield One, Sheffield City Centre Public Realm, The Gold Route, The Journey from Sheffield Station to the Heart of the City, City Development Division, Sheffield. Pg 12

<sup>19</sup> Hunt, J (Autumn 2008) Sheffield: Work in Progress, Art and Architecture Journal, No. 66/67, Pgs 29-31. Quote from Andrew Skelton, Public Art officer for Sheffield City Council Pg 30

*involving communities, a sense of ownership of the resulting decision may be engendered.”<sup>20</sup>*

Through varying scales of public space from small-scale interventions to large scale regeneration programmes. it can be seen that a sense of ownership can actually be achieved through participation in community projects. Through the small scale design of the modular seating system and the *'Singing Ringing Tree'* it shows that this idea of involving the community in a small scale project and a product that is universal so that a broad range of the community can use it, allows those that are going to use it a sense of pride and ownership. This also seems to work at a larger scale; the Edinburgh *'Garden Service'* seems to have created a strong ownership and pride within the courtyard after the involvement of Schalk, Sustersic and the Housing Association in regenerating the public space into a more appealing environment, The residents have stressed the idea of trying to get the garden made private. The positives of the project out way the negatives, that in producing this garden, they could have possibly alienated the rest of city users from using the space. The Peace Gardens on the other hand is a larger scale community-asked project in which this idea of isolating other users is not seen as the public space is larger and more open plan. The fact that the council involved the public in consultations was a positive aspect to the process, as the locals rejected the initial paved square, opting for a grassed area. The rejection of the initial design has allowed for a more successful outcome which is used daily by the public. This involvement has created a sense of ownership as there has been no vandalism in the ten years it has been around. It is a shame however that this could be partly due to the security on site. However the fact that it is still used after ten years shows the successfulness of the design. On a larger regeneration scheme of public spaces, Beighton Village is currently successful

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<sup>20</sup> Carmona, M, Heath, T, Oc, T + Tiesdell, S (2003) Public Spaces, Urban Spaces, The Dimensions of Urban Design, Architectural press, Oxford, Pg 268

because it has involved the community in transforming the village's public spaces by means of planting, cleaning up and other projects. Overall through looking at a variety of small to large scaled public spaces, it seems that involving the community in the planning process, positively suggests it can create a sense of ownership by the users of the space. Hopefully this will in response, result in little/or hopefully no vandalism to any public realm project as suggested in some of the examples.

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