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# Participatory Citizens & Hybrid Cities: Imagining Green Spaces in Manchester's Northern Quarter

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**Abstract**

This paper presents an innovative community project through the notion of research through design. With Manchester as our hybrid city backdrop, we look specifically at community greening groups in the Northern Quarter (NQ). Thirty-four participants attended 12 conversations that asked: how do you respond to a greening challenge with the digital communication and technology you carry with you? Through the use of IDEO and D:School's Empathy Map we reveal conversational themes that will inform a design challenge.

**Author Keywords**

Hybrid cities; Participatory citizens; Urban green spaces; Values-led participatory design; Digital communication; Sustainable futures

**ACM Classification Keywords**

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

**General Terms**

Design; Sociology; Sustainability

**Background**

In March 2014, it was announced that Manchester (UK) had been chosen as the third city to join the

*SmartCitizen* environmental monitoring initiative alongside Amsterdam and Barcelona. Commercial partners *Intel* and cultural partners *FutureEverything* share in positioning the city as a pioneer of the smart/hybrid city movement [1]. The investment into hybrid cities is funding Manchester in implementing its Digital Strategy [2], a response to the government and publically-funded reports that are investigating the nation's digital literacy skills [3]. They suggest that challenges are inherent in the application or use of technology by users, including the temptation to look to 'technology as the best solution to life's problems' [4].

With Manchester being in the international spotlight of the smart/hybrid city movement we were curious to see if a "research through design" project [5] could facilitate a bottom-up participatory design [6] process and reveal how people use existing digital technology to actively respond to a community challenge. This challenge has been influenced by the efforts of the local community greening collective. They have been actively campaigning against the increase in car parks in the NQ of Manchester's city centre. Manchester City Council has recently been showing signs of supporting their campaign, which could see citizens' efforts rewarded. Our research project joins these community greening groups at a stage where they feel support is needed to realise their ideas.

### **Our Approach**

With a shared interest in designing with values in mind, and an understanding of the needs of our stakeholders we focused our research on a bottom-up social inquiry that would ask; can you green Manchester's NQ with the digital tools you have on you?

We worked with a collective of greening groups consisting of: *Parkstarter*, *A New Leaf* and *Northern Quarter Greening*, whose shared vision is actively campaigning for green space in the NQ, Manchester.

We have tentatively defined the residents and business owners in the NQ who contributed to each facilitated conversation as *participatory citizens*. We arrived at this term as a result of our research methods applying participatory design [6] and considering the literature surrounding smart citizens [1].

These conversations, explained in the next section, have been content analysed around themes and informed by two indicators – 1) how frequently the conversational themes were mentioned and 2) the duration of each conversational theme. The conversational themes have since been assigned to five key clusters informed by the research objectives: 1) People, 2) Creativity, 3) Processes, 4) Environment and 5) Technology, and act as the criteria to gauge success of the design challenge – a critical response in the form of an event to engage participants and stakeholders in the outcomes of the research.

Our approach has been supported by literature in values-led participatory design [6], Schwartz's Values Framework [7], design and the digital humanities [8] and the notion of curating sociology [9]. We believe this cross-disciplinary approach to the research can reveal valuable insights into the tensions between *participatory citizens* and their relationship with physical and digital spaces and places [10].

## Research Method

We launched a Wordpress blog called: [‘Have Conversations With’](#). This acted as a place online to communicate the research project and, in particular, the *in situ* conversations that we would have with participants. Twelve conversations were hosted with the intent that each conversation would effectively be a ‘pop-up’ experience. As a result the backdrop would vary as we chose social settings in and around the NQ that were familiar and in some way connected to the network of the stakeholders. By remaining open to serendipity and the unknown this ethos was not without its challenges (e.g. not knowing who was, and how many were, going to attend). However, it also provided rich insight into the local area, and the differences of group dynamics between people who know one another and people who have never met before. The maximum number of participants in a conversation reached six (occurring two times) and two of the 12 conversations were unattended; there were 34 participants in total.

Each conversation was structured into four parts: 1. Personal Values Exercise (15mins), 2. Digital Technology Audit (15mins), 3. Speculative Challenge (15-20mins), 4. Societal Values Exercise (10mins). The conversations lasted 60-90minutes. Schwartz’s Values Framework [7] was applied to bookend the conversation as a means for us to later map the personal and societal values of each participant and explore the trends revealed across conversations.

The Digital Technology Audit gave participants an opportunity to see the technology and hear of the digital communication platforms that people use on a regular basis. This point in the conversation provided

space to share stories and revealed factual and emotional responses amongst the participants.

In March 2014 an active campaign led by *Parkstarter* resulted in Manchester City Council refusing a car park developer’s application for a site on Oldham Street. The refusal was based on the failure to meet two grounds of The National Planning Policy Framework: Sustainability and Environmental policies. This became the foundation for part four of the conversation - the Speculative Challenge. Whilst remaining true to who they are as individuals, the challenge invited participants to respond as a collective, role-playing a community group. The challenge asked the group to respond to the following: Using the digital technology tools you have identified as being in your possession right now, can the community group gather a response or propose a solution for the upkeep, maintenance and future ownership of the site on Oldham Street?

To end the conversation we asked each participant to identify four societal values that they believed the community had to embody and/or express for the response to the challenge to be a future success.

## Outcomes

The first conversation resulted in participatory citizens responding to the speculative challenge using an online digital communication platform Trello (an open-platform and digital notice board). We provided every other conversation with the opportunity to build on and into this platform, start another or neglect it altogether. It soon became evident that participants became divided between reacting to the challenge through digital versus physical means. In addition, we observed that confidence in this particular digital platform was

divided as some were not aware or were unfamiliar with the tool and openly debated its pros and cons. This often resulted in time being spent in the conversation on debating or becoming familiar with Trello rather than responding directly to the speculative challenge.

The more tech-savvy participants began to engage with the [Trello site](#) outside of the conversational settings, with two from different conversations actively engaging in reorganizing, designing and making the platform more user-friendly. Aesthetic design decisions included turning their online place green and vocalizing the need for the online place to be 'tended to' in the same way a physical green space/place would be. These comparisons and similarities made of the physical and digital green spaces or places provoke further questions, for example: does turning to a digital platform in an attempt to support an active community project come with the same challenges of the physical?

### Next Steps

The research is informing a design challenge which will provide us further opportunity to explore the concept of *Participatory Citizens*. Having applied IDEO and D:School's Empathy Map [11] we see our methodology and methods as a unique way to engage and motivate *citizens* in the *participatory* design and action of societal challenges, such as greening the hybrid city.

In summary, when tasked with imagining green spaces in a hybrid city we would posit, that the digital technology, or digital tools that are available to participatory citizens, are both an enabler *and* disabler for people to move from responding to challenges with ideas to actively seeing through the tasks in hand.

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