Designing Empathic Conversations for Inclusive Design Facilitation

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Abstract
For Heartlands, a large scale regeneration project in Cornwall, UK, we developed a series of activities that aimed to involve future users of the project in its design. In the role of inclusive design facilitators, the authors conducted social research to create insights into the imagined future uses of Heartlands, organised co-creative workshops to generate ideas, and user forums to discuss concepts and prototypes. All of these took the format of empathic conversations between the design teams, the local council and future users of Heartlands. Our approach differed in several ways from more traditional community involvement through public consultations. Firstly, we focused on actual current practices to explore future uses and tried to avoid long ‘wish lists’. Secondly, we involved local artists to do research and express their insights in art works that served as conversation pieces. Thirdly, our activities were small-scale and carefully designed, to allow for in-depth empathic conversations that informed and inspired design teams.

Keywords
Architecture, co-creation, inclusive design, empathic conversations, design research

Introduction: Inclusive Design Methods as Facilitating Tools
The philosophy of Inclusive Design proposes that users’ needs and abilities change throughout their life-course, and should be taken into account during design processes and design outputs. Such considerations can improve the design of products, environments and services for the majority of people and can be good for organisational development as well (Coleman, 1994). Inclusive design has gained influence over many years in a range of design disciplines. Architecture has been part of these for a long time. Nevertheless, no creative, inspirational methods for inclusive design have gained general acceptance among architects, master planners or landscape architects. Still many rely on general public consultations, which are considered best practice and minimum requirement by organisations such as regeneration companies, development agencies and statutory bodies. These normally take the form of exhibitions where local people walk in and express their opinion. This is how the Heartlands project in Cornwall (www.theheartlandsproject.org.uk) initially engaged with the public. Creative workshops with local school children were organised too, another widely used approach to raise awareness among a local population about plans that are being developed. Once the detailed design of the buildings and public environments needed to be made, deep insights into their future uses was needed. The public consultations and creative workshops did not allow for this focus and in-depth understanding. The team at the local
council recognised that this is where inclusive design can make a valuable contribution, with its design research toolkit of methods to explore, discuss, evaluate and speculate on how people use designed products, services and environments, with the design team. To make this contribution was our goal in the Heartlands project.

**Case Study: Heartlands in Cornwall, UK**

Heartlands is a regeneration project, built on a community-led vision to transform Cornwall’s most derelict urban area and the oldest UK tin mine into an inspirational cultural landscape. Heartlands will celebrate local Cornish traditions of innovation and creativity and help the area of Pool to be a great place to live, work and play. To achieve this community-led vision, Heartlands received £22.3 million in funding from the Big Lottery Fund’s Living Landmarks programme in November 2007. Characteristics of the design project are the aims of local citizens and organisations to realize a vital and dynamic set of environments and services for regional communities and visitors. The ultimate success of Heartlands depends on its popularity and its use, so it must really offer what local people as well as visitors appreciate, need and dream of.

**The Team and the Programme**

The inclusive design facilitation team included design researchers with mixed backgrounds in social research, user-centred design and architecture, and worked closely with the client and management team of the local council. STBY (‘Standby’), in collaboration with Yanki Lee of the Helen Hamlyn Centre, developed three different types of inclusive design activities for Heartlands:

- Social research to create insights and understanding
- Co-creation workshops to generate and explore ideas
- User forums to discuss concepts and prototypes

Over the course of six months in 2008 we organised 12 different activities, with different participants at different times during the design process. Some of the activities are discussed in detail below. All 12 were focused on the future use of services, buildings and environments of Heartlands and deliberately avoided a focus on the more formal aspects of the designs. Even though we organised co-creative workshops, we did not design buildings or parks with local citizens. Instead, we explored, designed and evaluated the use of these places with them and the design teams. The design of formal aspects was left to the experts: the design teams. Local citizens are experts in a different area: the use of their current environment and all types of local services. We explored these with them, to inform and inspire the design teams.

**Participants**

Creating a connection between designers and the people they design for is a key aspect of inclusive design. The UK Department of Trade and Industry (DTI, 2005) defines Inclusive Design as “a process whereby designers ensure that their products and services address the needs of the widest possible audience”. In large projects such as Heartlands, this becomes rather complex since so many different people are potential future users of what is designed. Even more so, the built environment is meant to last for a long time into the future. This makes ‘the widest possible audience’ a very large and
diverse group. Residents from local communities, representatives from organisations that may offer social and creative services, people who will work at Heartlands, visitors from all over the UK and abroad, school children, older people, people with disabilities are all expected to be future users. Obviously, one cannot set up small-scale in-depth conversations with all these stakeholders at the same time. In every activity we organised, a considered mix of participants and perspectives was brought together (see detailed examples below). The designers and people from the client team at Kerrier District Council were active participants in these conversations too.

We also collaborated with local artists during several steps in the project. They were involved in the social research and the co-creative workshops, as participants and contributors to workshop programmes and materials. Being locals, they were quick to understand the considerations of their fellow participants, and being creative, they were able to translate these considerations into visual and engaging materials that triggered conversations between participants.

Activities, methods and moments
Some activities were triggered by specific stages in the design process. Sometimes designers requested input on the needs and concerns of particular groups on the future uses of Heartlands (e.g. the Cornish Diaspora or local youth) or explorations of particular parts of the designs (e.g. the market place, community centre or artists studios). Some topics for the in-depth conversations also emerged from the creative social research we did at the initial stages of our involvement. The methods used are all considered to be part of the design research toolkit: in-depth interviews, observations, video ethnography, cultural probe studies, co-creation workshops and user forums. The 12 activities we organised all took place at or close to the actual site, which was still derelict at that stage. Below are three examples.

1. Social research to create insights and understanding
Our main goal at the early stages of our involvement was to collect stories through interactions with local stakeholders and create insights based on these stories. We were keen to preserve the richness of the individual stories when we created the insights, and developed ways to communicate these. We found several highly visual ways of doing this, using different media from slideshows and video blogs to performances and artistic objects. For instance, when we started to look at the new community centre for Heartlands, we found that many different local organisations will be using this space for a large number of activities. All of them already organise activities in different places close to Heartlands, offering a broad mix of services, from child care and family services to social clubs and creative courses. From conversations with these service providers about their needs and wishes, four key themes emerged: Sharing spaces; Traces left by previous users; Meeting people engaged in other activities; Separating yourself from other people and activities. We involved visual artist Jeremiah Krage of Wild Works in the conversations and commissioned him to create four different objects in relation to these themes (see figure 1). The objects were then used as conversation pieces in the co-creation workshop on the future uses of the new community centre.
2. Co-creation workshops to generate ideas
The insight and understanding from the initial social research proved to be useful for the design teams in their work. To extend the exploration of some of the topics, we added another layer of design research: the generation of ideas and scenarios for the future uses of the architectural spaces. We generated these ideas and scenarios with potential users (both individuals and organisations) and design teams. We applied typical workshop dynamics such as a combination of plenary meetings and break-out groups. The materials we used (Krage’s objects for instance) and the situations we created were rather different though. A good example of this is the co-creative workshop we organised on the artists’ spaces. We asked the architects to stake out the spaces they had designed for artists on actual the brownfield site. We also invited four artists to bring some materials, tools and work, and take possession of an imagined studio for an afternoon (see figure 2). This allowed them to take ownership of these spaces before they were actually built, and to speculate about the fit with their usual work practices. Each artist was teamed up with an architect who brought drawings and sketches of the space. This was the starting point for the workshop. Then we asked four different groups of future visitors of Heartlands (students, art lovers, curators and people with disabilities) to visit the make-shift studios and have conversations with the artists about their work, and how they felt about working at Heartlands. This resulted in 16 scenarios of how artists and visitors would like to (not) meet and communicate with each other.

3. User forums to discuss concepts and prototypes
The third type of activity we organised was developed to give responses to ideas, drawings, models and prototypes of the design teams. These could be at very different levels, from a drawing to a model, but in each case the architect or designer was determining the agenda of the meeting, presenting their ideas to future users. The other two activities had given the lead to the future users themselves, focusing on their practices. Here the practices of the future users were important too, but mainly to explore the ideas put forward by the design teams. An important similarity with the first two types of activities though was the focus on in-depth conversations between future users and designers. Figure 3 shows an example of output from one of the user forums.

Results
We made it explicit to the design teams, who had no previous experience with our inclusive design approach, that we did not aim for generating lists of requirements their designs had to fulfil. Sometimes designers perceive inclusive design as a limiting factor. We wanted to steer away from this view from the start by taking a design approach in all our activities – by actually designing inclusive design activities. This approach was intuitively recognised by the design teams as a valuable part of their design process, and felt much closer to them than public consultations where people say something about design results. This gave community involvement a positive connotation. We aimed to provide solid ground for speculation by designers, partially together with the stakeholders. In the end future uses of services and environments are not entirely predictable, but current uses in related situations can give clear indications for the future if the motivations behind these uses are well understood. Professionals who will provide
some of the services at Heartlands in the future, for instance at the community centre, have this deep understanding, and so do local artists who could be future users of the artist spaces at Heartlands. Once such participants have helped to find the solid ground of understanding motivations that underpin possible future uses, a clear space for design speculations opens up. Designers feel at home in such an opportunity space because it stimulates creativity as opposed to requirements that are often felt to be limiting.

Of course, the understanding of future uses we aimed for also required its own way of communicating research results. We used the idea of ‘personas’ (Cooper, 1999) – a technique to present interviews and observations of several individuals in one collated portrait of a fictional person – as a starting point for our visual documentation and communication of results. This allowed us to preserve the often highly personal and sometimes idiosyncratic nature of the stories we collected during the social research in our communication of results. At the same time this approach allowed us in the role of social researchers to use our design skills and create stories that inspire design teams.

Perhaps the most important result of the activities we organised were the new relationships that we built between the design teams and a wide range of future users of their designs. The activities were explicitly aimed at setting up conversations between the design teams and future users, about the future uses of specific aspects of Heartlands. As such they can serve as an example of co-creation (Aarts and Marzano, 2003), where design teams and participants co-create future uses, but not actual buildings or parks. We call these conversations empathic (Raijmakers, 2007) because the participants in the discussion all try to step into the shoes of the future users and create insights into future uses from that perspective. Results of these conversations were documented in highly visual reports, artistic objects and performances, and shared with designers and client teams. The designers had acquired their most important insights and understanding already themselves during the workshops. Our documentation was mostly aimed at helping them to share these insights with other people in the design or client team, and at creating shared, attractive references. We used these too to communicate contact details of all participants involved to allow design teams to contact them later personally.

Finally, another important but unexpected outcome has been the considered and integrated management of operational and business factors for potential future users of Heartlands. Since we had focused on future uses of Heartlands, the day to day use of buildings became an important topic in our conversations. Community organizations participating in these conversations saw this as a first step in discussing how the management of these places would be formalized. We involved people of the management team in our conversations, next to the designers, to allow this conversation to take place and build a bridge between creating the design and developing the management structures of Heartlands. The inclusive design work has fostered a positive, pro-active, partnership approach for tenants, of for instance the community centre and the artist studios, in particular.

**Discussion**

The 12 activities we organised for Heartlands aimed to find new roles for future users in design projects of the built environment. We wanted to move beyond public consultation and design workshops with school children. Instead, we aimed for setting up dialogues
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between design teams, future users and Kerrier District council. Heartlands as a whole has the goal to contribute to the innovation of Cornish society in a socially sustainable way. Our inclusive design facilitation started from the view that socially sustainable innovation is a process we can try to get better at all the time, not a result. This puts us in the company of projects such as DOTT07 (www.dott07.org) in the North East of England. John Thackara, programme director of DOTT07 says about designers:

*We need to foster new relationships outside our usual stomping grounds. We have to learn new ways to collaborate and do projects. We have to enhance the ability of all citizens to engage in a meaningful dialogue about their environment and context and foster new relationships between the people who make things and the people who use them.* (Thackara, 2005;8)

The activities we organised can be understood as explorations of what these ‘meaningful dialogues’ that Thackara mentions could be. Obviously they can be a simple, good conversation over a nice cup of tea, but they can also be much more and very different. People have many more means than words alone to express themselves. In particular for designers, but also for many citizens, different ways of visualising these conversations can be very successful as we have experienced with for instance the objects artist Jeremiah Krage made, the video blog design researcher Bas Raijmakers made and the performance Rogue Theatre did. These conversations can actually be designed, and that is what we did for Heartlands. Leadbetter (2008) recognises this opportunity too as he writes “Innovation does not come down a pipeline, but from the interaction of all players together. The context for that to happen needs to be designed appropriately.” Or, perhaps more philosophically “Design does not take place in a situation – it is the situation.” (Thackara, 2005). The conversations we set up for Heartlands are part of the design process and they were designed to foster a socially sustainable Heartlands and make a start with that process (rather than goal) at the same time. This role for design is relatively new, but has started to surface more and more recently, in projects such as DOTT07 (see www.dott07.com) and what is generally called service design. Inclusive design is positioned particularly well to contribute to this new role of design, with its emphasis on involving the people we design for in our design processes in many, creative ways.

References
Cooper, A. (1999) The Inmates Are Running the Asylum, Indianapolis, Ind., Sams
Figures

Figure 1: Conversation pieces by Jeremiah Krage based on interviews with future users

Figure 2: Furniture maker Tristan Harris (far left) talks to guests in his imagined studio at the Heartlands brownfield site

Figure 3: Fruit map of Heartlands, by one of the participants in a user forum