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Design is a Social Process: A Survey on Inclusive Practice

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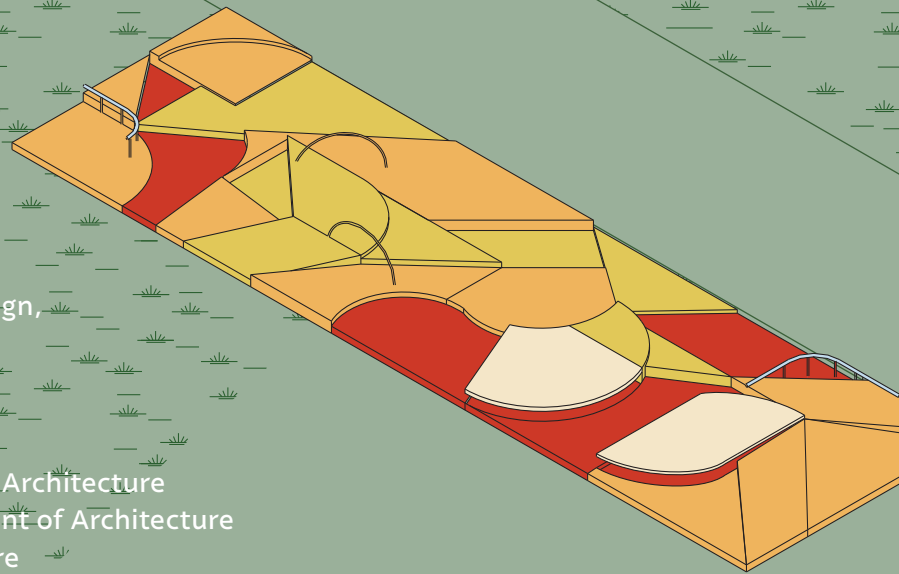
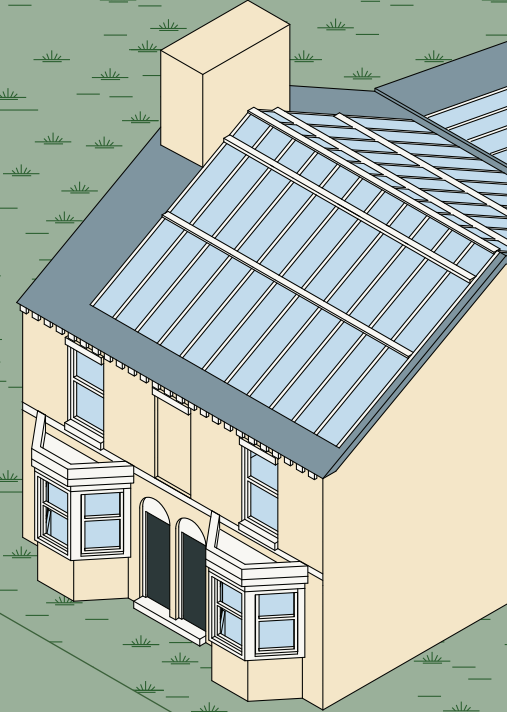
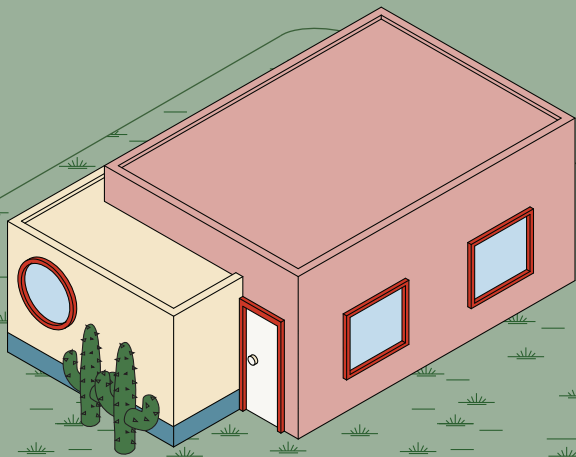
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Design is a Social Process: *A Survey on Inclusive Practice*



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Abstract

This inquiry pivots the discussion on design practice toward process, and seeks to elucidate how inclusivity is achieved in it, and by what means it is maintained.

The design process is interrogated through a series of case studies on contemporary practitioners that either describe themselves or are recognized by the wider design community as inclusive of gender, race, sexual orientation, ability level, and are sensitive to history of place.

The case studies are selected to demonstrate a diversity of project types, management structures, and design tools, and they comprise the practices of LA Más, Assemble, and Bryony Roberts.

The product of the case studies is a comparative analysis of process through three registers: freedom of use, situatedness, and citizenship participation, concepts gleaned from the work of Stephen Carr, Donna Haraway, and Sherry R. Arnstein, respectively.

The conclusion states a number of observations on the relationship between practitioner and user in the cases studied, as well as on certain aspects and individuals involved which should receive particular attention.

Introduction

Social and civic responsibility

During the 1968 AIA Annual Convention, hosted in Portland, Oregon, activist and then executive director of the Urban League, Whitney M. Young Jr., addressed a contingent of architects in a now-historical keynote speech on the social consciousness of the profession.

Young declared then that the architectural profession is not one “that has distinguished itself by (...) social and civic contributions to the cause of civil rights,” but rather by its “thunderous silence (...) and complete irrelevance.” Architects make use of a “escape hatch” in their own code of ethics, according to him, declaring they are “the designers and not the builders.”¹

To that point, Young went on to make a very reasonable case against the designers of public housing complexes of the large city centers of that era. Typical-

ly composed of series of 35 to 45-story buildings, home to hundreds of families – mostly lower-income families of color –, these complexes have come to epitomize the failure of twentieth century architects to enact change and “uplift” economically disadvantaged sectors of the population.²

Aesthetic decisions aside, there were design professionals willing to accept such commissions without questioning their racist and oppressive programming – “white-only” and “colored-only” restrooms, insufficient recreational space, just to name a few –, thinking it was not their “place” to provide feedback or influence decision-making coming from above. Architects and city planners have always been in the position of standing up against injustice and withholding their services if needed to make a stance – as the firms that will be studied in this inquiry demonstrate –, but a stubborn attitude

¹ Whitney M. Young Jr, “1968 AIA Annual Convention Keynote Speech,” The American Institute of Architects.

² Ibid.

of “how things always have been done,” and of course, financial interest, have prevented that.

Young’s speech befittingly took place amidst a period of intense change and the flourishing of a number of counter cultural and civil rights movements in the 1960s and ’70s – but now, in the third decade of the millennium, the architectural profession has once again returned to a position of reflecting on its role in addressing (or neglecting) issues of inequity, injustice, and discrimination based on gender, race, sexuality, physical and mental ability.

Professor of landscape architecture Kyle D. Brown can provide us with a counterpoint to the hackneyed argument of “business as usual” when he states that landscape architecture—though this can be expanded to all design professions—are “involved with decision-making concerning the use, allocation, and preservation of resources, albeit in perhaps

indirect ways.”³ Architecture can and does indeed regulate and constrain behavior, on par with systems of law, as recognized by certain legal scholars today.⁴ This close involvement of the design professions with the social implications of designed environments call, therefore, for a better understanding of the process of creating them.

Inclusivity in practice

There are numerous architectural practices around the globe which have taken up the challenge to reform a profession that, in many ways, has remained passive, or negligent, to the demands of social equality and inclusivity. By means of different organizational structures and approaches, and perhaps most importantly, of a different set of design tools as commonly accepted or used, these practices are intent on moving the profession forward, toward an unconventional, though exciting re-scripting of the role of the architect. It is worth noting that no two practices

³ Kyle D. Brown and Todd Jennings, “Social Consciousness in Landscape Architecture Education: Toward a Conceptual Framework,” *Landscape Journal*, no. 2 (2003): 99.

⁴ Sarah Schindler, “Architectural Exclusion: Discrimination and Segregation Through Physical Design of the Built Environment,” *The Yale Law Journal* 124, no. 6 (2015): 1934–1944.

manage their design process in the same manner, and innovative practices are no different in that regard.

Motivation

This inquiry stems from my own reckoning with the pervasive injustices and inequalities of the contemporary world, particularly those brought to the fore by the events of summer of 2020.

By interrogating what the architectural profession can do to support efforts of social and economic progress, I have started to look at designed spaces under the lens of inclusion. As open-ended and multi-faceted the term "inclusive" is, there were exceptional instances of design projects who eschewed profit-driven goals, which I have come to discover in my research. These projects focused on accessibility and the opportunity for change, and tied back to active (and activist) design professionals.

How these innovative practices achieved inclusivity in their projects is a question that remained, and it warranted me to take a closer look at these practices and their process.

Background

This inquiry is built on a few premises based on particular theories in epistemology, as well as established literature on inclusivity in design, and related tools. These will be the lenses through which the selected case studies will be analyzed.

Situatedness

Donna Haraway, in her foundational text, “Situated Knowledges: the Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” spells out a call for a “successor science,” one “that offers a more adequate, richer, better account of a world,”⁵ away from the objectivity of the unified, reductionist narrative of human progress, or universalism. This successor science still grounds itself in the “real world,” but a real world that is made up of partially shared stories and experiences.

Situated knowledges are constructed out of the contact with multiple

subjects, their narratives being complementary to each other, or simultaneous. Each narrative is self-aware, and recognizes that it is a product of its own time and place, part of a larger social dynamic, and, of course, limited. Situated knowledges, though, still allow for contestation and deconstruction.⁶

The concept of situated knowledge versus universal knowledge is exceptionally useful in the field of architecture when considering the level of adaptability and responsiveness to context for a practitioner.

Freedom of use

Stephen Carr, Mark Francis, Leanne Rivlin, and Andrew Stone proposed a reworking of Kevin Lynch’s five dimensions of spatial rights⁷ in their publication “Public Space” of 1993. Despite their strict emphasis on public spaces, which this inquiry will deal

⁵ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 579.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 590.

⁷ Stephen Carr et al., “Rights in Public Space,” in *Public Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 137.

with to some extent, these dimensions can also be expanded to describe control over the use of private and semi-private spaces.

Spatial rights, as defined by their book, encompass the inclusion of individuals from a variety of backgrounds, walks of life, and ability levels. Therefore, these five dimensions of “freedom of use,” as I will call them, will be considered for the analysis within the scope of the user in the project. These five dimensions are:

- i. Freedom of access: including the rights to physical access (i.e. the space is accessible to anyone in general or to individuals with certain disabilities), visual access (i.e. users are able to see that they can access a space), and symbolic access (i.e. users do not feel threatened or excluded even though nothing impedes their physical access to a space).
- ii. Freedom of action: the right to use a space for the purpose desired by the user, without interference, in the desired

manner.

- iii. Claim: the right to appropriate a space for personal use, even if at the detriment of other users.
- iv. Freedom to change: right to alter the arrangement of a space.
- v. Ownership and disposition: the ultimate right of a user to claim a space as their own.⁸

Citizenship participation

Sherry R. Arnstein’s foundational notions of citizen participation can provide additional insight into the dynamic of the design practitioner and the user of a space or project, in terms of the strength of communication and engagement.

Citizenship participation, according to Arnstein, runs along a spectrum, or a ladder, from non-participation to the establishment of citizen power. Certain participatory practices which are merely superficial, such as putting citizens of a particularly affected or local group in an advisory panel without the benefit of

⁸ Ibid., 137-186.

having a voice, can be said to be a form of manipulation that only seeks to “educate” an individual, and not engage them.

Participatory practices that are a little more than superficial, such as surveys and opinion polls (consultation), or engagement in a committee that allows for having a voice without an actual degree of power in the decisions made (placation), are a form of tokenism – the citizen has some power, but not much. Finally, practices that allow citizens to have both a say and power over decisions can be said to establish citizen power.⁹

Organization and structure

There are additional pressures and struggles that certain groups and communities who were and still are the target of historical oppression – people of color, women and LGBTQ+ individuals – have to undergo on their way to employment and in acquiring a quality design education, among them discrimination, bias, verbal, physical and sexual harassment, and unjust over-

work.¹⁰ That, consequently, contributes to the lack of diversity in the field and to the lack of inclusivity in designed spaces: in many ways, certain differing points of view and ways of thinking are never considered or heard.

Along with the convention of concentrating the power of a firm in the hands of a few “heads” or “leads,” these issues of structuring and organization demand deep reflection and should influence the assessment of the design practices in this inquiry, even if not at the level of analysis.

⁹ Sherry R. Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 85 (1): 24–34.

¹⁰ Kathryn H. Anthony, “Designing for Diversity: Implications for Architectural Education in the Twenty-First Century,” *Journal of Architectural Education* (May 2002): 257-267.

Method

This inquiry will comprise of three (3) case studies on contemporary design practices that either describe themselves or are recognized by the (global) design community as inclusive of gender, race, sexual orientation, ability level, and are sensitive to history of place.

The case studies are selected to demonstrate a diversity of project types, process, and management structures across them. LA Más, a non-profit based in Los Angeles, for instance, engages in the affordable housing sector and in rehabilitating public street landscapes; Assemble, a UK-based collaborative, multi-disciplinary, non-profit design firm combo, is involved in all possible types of projects thinkable, and are devout to their public engagement tools. Lastly, Bryony Roberts, a design practice based in New York, experiments with tactile experiences and contextual research to come up with new and exciting public projects. Each case study encompasses a practice acting on a particular scale of urbanism, utilizing a

certain set of tools of design and production, and situated in a specific context – social or geographic.

Research for the case studies will be based on written scholarship, recorded public lectures, and published interviews on the three aforementioned design practices. Design process will be the focus of the research, and an attempt will be made to deconstruct it and clarify it in each case study. The research will result in a comparative analysis of their processes through three registers: freedom of use, situatedness, and citizenship participation – based, respectively, on the scholarship and conceptualizations established by Stephen Carr, Donna Haraway, and Sherry R. Arnstein. The conclusion, hopefully, will help to paint a picture of how to build and sustain an inclusive design practice.

Case Studies

LA Más

LA Más is a non-profit community organization based in Los Angeles, California. In 2021, LA Más underwent an organizational shift, which, among other things, reaffirmed the team's commitment to a place-based practice. As a consequence, the design-based practice and its team that was originally part of LA Más has moved to a new organization, Office of: Office. The two organizations, LA Más and Office of: Office, now coexist side-by-side, one acting in design, the other in public policy, and have the intention to continue collaborating in future projects.¹¹

Before 2021, LA Más was composed of a team of architects and policy specialists, working together under a non-profit status of a "skill-based" firm, of complementary interests and abilities. By combining expertise, the firm has developed a number of projects that seek

to address systematic inequalities of race and economics, focusing on communities of color in the neighborhood of Northeast Los Angeles (NELA). Their portfolio of work includes the development of an incentive program for the construction of accessory dwelling units (ADUs), the "Backyard Homes" project, as well as small-business support programs, and street revitalization projects. As a point of departure, the Backyard Homes Project will be used for analyzing the organization's design process as of 2021.

Mission

Though their mission has changed significantly in the past few years due to the organization's own reflections about accomplishments and failures, compounded with the splitting into two separate organizations, LA Más' mission as of 2022 remains committed to social justice:

¹¹ "Organizational Changes and Introducing Office of: Office," LA Más, <https://us10.campaign-archive.com/?id=1adf9f6e4d-31e873853b9ba3365057a86d3>.

*“LA Más designs and builds initiatives that promote neighborhood resilience and elevate the agency of working class communities of color. We envision a Northeast Los Angeles where communities of color have equitable access to the power and resources needed to shape their futures.”*¹²

Backyard Homes

Los Angeles County can be considered one of the epicenters of a national housing crisis. 50% of developable land in the city is zoned for single-family homes, and its rental market is the most unaffordable in the entire country.¹³ Meanwhile, families and communities of color are the ones that are impacted by the crisis the most, rooted in the systemic failings and discrimination in education, welfare, employment, and immigration policy, among others, which result in a limited outlook when it comes to the ability to pay for housing.

¹² “About,” Granby 4 Streets Community Land Trust, <https://www.granby4streetsclt.co.uk/>.

To address the problem, LA Más has developed a program that streamlines the process of permitting, financing, building, and renting out an ADU – a viable alternative for affordable housing that maximizes the footprint of a typical single-family home, a type plentiful in Los Angeles.

Process analysis

Pilot

The Backyard Homes’ program first started as a pilot in 2019, in partnership with Los Angeles Mayor Garcetti’s Innovation Team, and the city’s Council District 1. This model ADU home was designed affordably, and its concept was informed by the context of California’s Craftsman tradition.

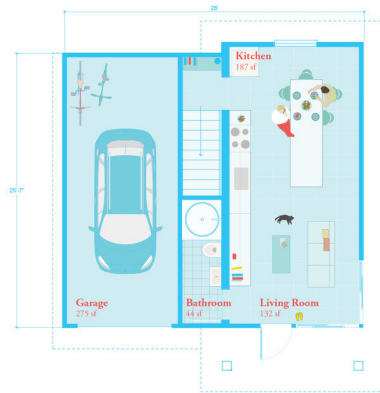
The finalized home boasted two bedrooms, one and a half baths, split between two floors and under a 1,025 sq. ft area. The pilot project, according to LA

¹³ Elijah Chiland, “Single-Family Homes Cover Almost Half of Los Angeles,” Curbed LA, January 15, 2020 <https://la.curbed.com/2018/9/10/17827982/single-family-houses-los-angeles-zoning-rules-explained>.



Figure 1 (top): Backyard Homes pilot. Los Angeles, CA.

Figure 2 (right): pilot floorplans.



Más' team, has helped inform LA's adoption of a new ADU ordinance, and launch the "LA ADU Accelerator" program in the same year.¹⁴

Research

Following the pilot project in 2019, LA Más underwent an entire year of research on an ADU program at a much larger scale for LA County. LA Más spoke to housing and financial experts, and over 100 homeowners, asking the question of how to get an average homeowner to sign-up to have an ADU built on their property and be rented out for additional income.¹⁵

LA Más also worked with LA County on developing "forgivable loans" that could support ADUs that house the formerly homeless.

Prototype plans

LA Más' design team devised 7 different pre-designed ADU prototypes, inspired

partly by catalog house plans and pre-fabricated kits sold by the likes of Sears throughout the twentieth century.¹⁶ Each prototype features a different style and taste inspired, again, by the context of Southern California: "moderne" Craftsman, Spanish Colonial Revival style, Mid-century Modern, among others.

To further allow customization by potential homeowners, irrespective of unit type and size, a variety of interior and exterior finishes can be selected, including colors and hardware specifications.¹⁷

Permits and approval

With pre-approved prototype plans, LA Más sought to reduce the time and cost of permitting ADUs in Los Angeles – municipal bureaucracy being something that they already had an experience with in earlier street improvement and installation projects in the city. In partnership

¹⁴ "Portfolio," Office of: Office, <https://officeofoffice.com/>.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Timme and Chaz Kern, "I Heard You Build Benches," *Rice Architecture*, February 10, 2021, <https://arch.rice.edu/latest/events/elizabeth-timme-and-chaz-kern>

¹⁶ "Portfolio," Office of: Office.

¹⁷ Timme and Kern, "I Heard You Build Benches."



Figure 3 (top left): exterior rendering, "bedroom garage conversion + modern inspired +warm neutral." Backyard Homes.

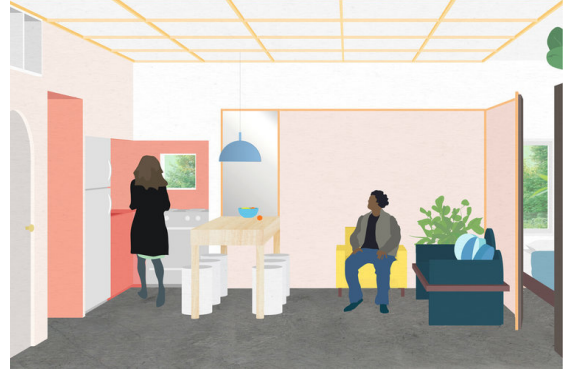


Figure 4 (top right): interior rendering.



Figure 5 (right): floor-plan options.

Figure 6 (bottom right): "Want a backyard home?." Pamphlet.

Want a backyard home?

We build you a backyard home, You rent it affordably for 5 years

About the Program:

- The Backyard Homes Project is a new affordable housing initiative for City of LA homeowners with single family lots and space to build another unit.
- A collective of established non-profit organizations will help you design, permit, finance, and build a new affordable rental unit in your backyard. These backyard homes are officially known as Accessory Dwelling Units or ADUs.
- In exchange, you must commit to renting your unit to a Section 8 tenant for a minimum of 5 years.

Program Partners:

- LA-Más - Program Management (PM), Design, Permitting
- Restore Neighborhoods LA (RNLA) - Construction
- Genesis LA Economic Growth Corporation - Financing
- Self-Help Federal Credit Union - Financing
- LA Family Housing - Tenant Matching and Support
- St. Joseph Center - Tenant Matching and Support
- Housing Rights Center - Landlord Training
- Housing Authority of the City of LA - Section 8 PM

Program Incentives:

- Free project management
- Affordable design and construction services
- Optional financing in the form of a permanent mortgage product
- Required landlord training and tenant support services
- Possible signing bonus for new Section 8 landlords

Apply:

- Please apply online at: goo.gl/YtqFjm

Learn More:

- For more information and program details:
 - Contact LA-Más at adu@mas.la
 - Visit www.mas.la/affordable-adus

with the Housing Authority of Los Angeles (HACLA), community development financial institutions, credit unions and local non-profits, LA Más was able to create a pre-packaged ADU mortgage product to prospective homeowners which further streamline their construction.¹⁸

Instead of the typical clustered site approach for affordable housing, the Backyard Homes uses a scattered site approach. Homeowners are bound to a five-year commitment to their ADUs to be registered as Section 8 housing – the ADUs are required to be rented out to eligible families, many of them lower-income, working class households who receive a federally-funded voucher for rent assistance.¹⁹

Impact

The program started accepting applications from interested homeowners in early 2019 and received 200 of them. From the applicants who were selected – those

with the “golden opportunity” of ideal finances, site, and commitment –, 5 went ahead with the program, and as of 2022 are at many stages of finalizing permits and construction.²⁰

LA Más and Office of: Office remain committed to affordable housing despite their re-organization into two distinct entities and teams. Office of: Office, for instance, is currently working on a design for prefabricated modular ADUs, the “United Dwelling Accessory.”²¹ Backyard Homes can be said to be part of a continuing line of work by both teams to formulate alternative, inclusive housing models, while pushing against bureaucratic systems of control and oppression in city and federal administration.

Assemble

Assemble is a multi-disciplinary collaborative group founded in 2010, in London, United Kingdom, by a group of recent graduates from the University of Cambridge. Among them there were 18 archi-

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ More information: https://www.hud.gov/topics/housing_choice_voucher_program_section_8.

²⁰ "Portfolio," Office of: Office.

²¹ Ibid.

ecture, sociology, philosophy, history, and literature majors, who all came together to organize a collective for self-initiated and hands-on creative projects.²²

The first project they undertook was called the “Cineroleum,” a temporary, public, movie theater space, constructed out of an abandoned gas station structure in Clerkenwell Road, London, using reclaimed and donated materials.²³ The success of the Cineroleum led to a great number of other collaborative enterprises, almost always based on a rethinking of the creative and the design processes – on how things get built, to put it simply.

The territory covered by their projects is astounding: from art installations to affordable housing, historical preservation to a houseware business, playground design to management of art studios. Their first base of operations, so to say, was a refurbished warehouse space in industrial Sugarhouse Yard, Stratford, on

a site waiting for redevelopment. Sugarhouse Studios, as it is called, was arranged as a series of workspaces to be shared among not only Assemble’s team, but also rented to other artists and carpenters in the area – one more source of income for their many enterprises. With the establishment of other workshop and studio spaces, such as the Blackhorse Workshop, Assemble has been relocated to different headquarters ever since. A long term project in Liverpool, the “Granby Four Streets” project, will be used for analyzing the organization’s design process as of 2021.

Mission

Even though Assemble does not have an official mission statement, a few set of values have come to the forefront of their work with the passing of the years. According to Fran Edgerley, who has been part of the collective from the start, “everyone is in it for quite different reasons

²² Maria Lisogorskaya, "Assemble: 3 Places," *Rice Architecture*, October 17, 2019. <https://arch.rice.edu/latest/events/maria-lisogorskaya>

²³ Angelika Fitz and Katharina Ritter, *Assemble: How We Build = Wie Wir Bauen* (Zürich: Park Books, 2017): 8.

²⁴ “Assemble,” Inquiry into the Civic Role of Arts Organisations, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, <https://civicroleartsinquiry.gulbenkian.org.uk/resources/assemble>.

– different enough that people don't feel comfortable tying ourselves to one manifesto."²⁴

Meanwhile, their work is underpinned by a sense of "applications of arts and culture as an activity, and as a social practice"²⁵ – to do something, to create change, however that may look like. Certain principles of equality and ethics are also germane to their practice, on how they organize themselves non-hierarchically, and how they deal with "what's generous or what's cheap or what's not wasteful."²⁶

Granby Four Streets

Granby is a formerly bustling and lively main street, the meeting point for a diverse neighborhood, including many communities of immigrants, in the district of Toxteth, Liverpool.²⁷ Being a economically-depressed area of the city, as well as the site of civil rights protests by the local Black British community in the eighties²⁸, the blocks surrounding Granby Street,

previously ringed by a series of grand Victorian terraced houses, have undergone decades of urban renewal efforts and demolition – when Assemble became involved in Granby, in 2014, only four side streets of terraced homes remained.

Groups of residents, for years, had already organized themselves into action, trying to return the streets of their neighborhood to their former glory, and to re-claim it. One group that had been established in 2011 was Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust (CLT), with the purpose of refurbishing the Victorian terraced homes to create affordable housing in the area.

Assemble's involvement in Granby started with engaging with CLT, and that continues to this day – some of their accomplishments include 10 refurbished homes transformed into affordable and public housing, an indoor community space, and a houseware and ceramic business (now a local employer).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Lisogorskaya, "Assemble: 3 Places."

²⁸ Refer to the Toxteth riots and similar events taking place throughout England in 1981.



Figure 7 (top): Cairns Street, refurbished terraced homes. Liverpool, UK.

Figure 8 (right): Cairns Street homes, construction.

Figure 9 (bottom): Granby Four Streets, survey drawing.



Process analysis

Documentation

Granby Four Streets CLT first reached out to Assemble about their affordable housing project in 2014, with CLT already being acquainted with Assemble's socially-invested work. CLT commissioned Assemble a document surveying the area around Granby Street – what was already there, what could be possible in terms of a physical project with a limited budget, and where certain activities should be concentrated in the neighborhood.²⁹

Plan

Along with this documentation, Assemble, CLT, and a social investor group, Steinbeck Studios, developed an incremental plan for Granby, building on top of the work that had already been done by CLT and local residents in the past decades. The plan not only included the refurbishment of the housing stock in the area, but also the surrounding public spaces, while

creating employment and training opportunities. All would be done with a demonstrated respect for and celebration of the local cultural and architectural heritage.

Housing

The first installment of the plan came with the refurbishment of 10 of the derelict Victorian homes in one of Granby's side streets, Cairns. A number of models were built in the form of doll houses, which were displayed to local residents to inspire conversations among them, and for Assemble to receive feedback on their proposed designs.

Working with a small budget, Assemble worked around and adapted some of the elements in the terraced homes. If a ceiling had given in at certain portions, for instance, the space would become double-height. Distinctive Victorian features, such as mantelpieces, chimneys, and shelving – which were largely missing in some of the residences –, were to be

²⁹ Lisogorskaya, "Assemble: 3 Places."



Figure 10 (top): Granby Winter Garden.

Figure 11 (bottom): Granby Workshop, products.



re-made in-house, through an off-shoot of the enterprise, “Granby Workshop.”

Through an ownership model developed by CLT, half of the 10 homes on Cairns Street are for sale and have their prices kept below market value; the other half is rented out as public housing by the Steve Biko Housing Association – housing associations are not-for-profit organizations in England that receive public funding to support individuals in need to find an affordable home.³⁰

Workshop

Granby Workshop is an enterprise which started as a maker of products for the refurbished Cairns Street homes but have since expanded to a full-fledged business, providing training and employment opportunities for residents in the neighborhood. The products are made with recycled and under-used materials, such as building rubble and off-cuts of timber.³¹

³⁰ More information: <https://www.housing.org.uk/about-housing-associations/>.

Community space

In 2016, after uncovering two neighboring terraced homes in very poor condition for renovation as residences, Assemble and CLT decided to reuse their empty shells of brick walls to create a new resource for the community: an indoor courtyard with a garden tended by local horticulturalists, a meeting room, as well as an artist residency space. The Winter Garden is owned and operated by CLT.

Impact

Granby Four Streets is a long-term project that is still ongoing. As of 2019, all Cairns Street homes had either been sold or rented³², and Granby Workshop is still an operating business providing employment. In 2020, Granby Winter Garden was opened to the public, joining other activities organized by CLT, such as monthly street markets, to attract visitors from throughout the Liverpool region to the district.

³¹ Fitz and Ritter, 60.

³² “About,” Granby 4 Streets Community Land Trust, <https://www.granby4streetsclt.co.uk/>.

Assemble is currently working with CLT to come up with the next step in the revitalization of the Granby Four Streets neighborhood, the “Fourth Corner,” a two-story build on a vacant site at the corner of Cairns Street and Granby Street, with plans for a first floor café and a second floor apartment, with support from the organizations Power to Change, the Architectural Heritage Fund, and Homes England.³³

Bryony Roberts

Bryony Roberts is a design and research practice based in New York, with a distinct focus on public realm projects. Bryony Robert and its eponymous founder are also part of a women-led design group, Work In Progress (WIP) Collective, engaging in a number of collaborative efforts that also encompass the public realm, with their work being centered around feminist principles and the sharing of knowledge and skills.³⁴

³³ “Granby Four Streets,” Assemble, <https://assemblestudio.co.uk/projects/granby-four-streets-2>.

³⁴ WIP Collective, “WIP,” <https://wip-designcollective.com/About>.

Bryony’s portfolio of projects, according to her, involve three continuing themes: intangible subjects, cultural histories, and lived experiences. Intangible subjects describe how people use a space, and conditions of inclusion and exclusion. Cultural histories are drawn from the social dynamics, the history, and the memory of place. Lived experiences, meanwhile, are about embodied, sensorial experiences of individuals.³⁵

Bryony’s public installation “Soft Civic” at Exhibit Columbus (2019), for instance, responds (and defies) the strict geometry of the city hall building’s plaza, creating a landscape of colors and textures that can be experienced by anyone – a form of democratization of a space not usually inhabited by most of Columbus’ residents. Another installation that addresses the intangible and the sensorial even more acutely is “Restorative Ground,” designed in partnership with WIP Collective, which will be used to

³⁵ Bryony Roberts, “Bryony Roberts,” *Weitzman School of Design*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOGk1dZvVPY>.

analyze the practice's design process as of 2021.

Mission

Bryony Robert's mission statement is consistent with the themes set out by her work and are very telling of the practice's design process:

*"We expand modes of design practice to address the lived experiences of communities and the current inequities of the public realm, integrating methods from architecture, art, urban design, and historic preservation. Moving between contextual research, stakeholder interviews, community workshops, and material testing, we create projects rooted in specific communities and places. Through innovative material techniques, we produce sensory environments that activate the public realm and celebrate layered cultural narratives."*³⁶

³⁶ "About," Bryony Roberts, <https://www.bryony-roberts.com/about-1-1>

³⁷ Ibid.

Restorative Ground

Restorative Ground is the winner of the "Care for Hudson Square" competition in New York City, organized by Urban Design Forum, Hudson Square Properties, and the Hudson Square BID, opening in the summer of 2021.³⁷ The competition was a recovery initiative that sought to "reactivate the public realm with a site-specific installation," accepting submissions for any of three proposed locations in the neighborhood of Hudson Square in Lower Manhattan.³⁸

Bryony Roberts worked on the installation, again, as part of the larger WIP Collective, with a team of six other independent designers, among architects, fashion and graphic designers: Abby Cover from Overlay Office, Elsa Ponce, Lindsay Harkema, Ryan Brooke Thomas of Kalos Eidos, Sera Ghadaki, and Sonya Gimon.³⁹

³⁸ "Care for Hudson Square: Winner Announcement," Urban Design Forum, March 29, 2022, <https://urbandesignforum.org/care-for-hudson-square-winner-announcement/>.

³⁹ Ibid.



Figure 12: Outside the Lines, Bryony Roberts, 2021. Atlanta, Georgia.

Process analysis

Preliminary research

“Outside the Lines” is yet another installation by Bryony which engages a range of sensorial experiences – the preliminary research for this project consisted of consulting physical and mental disability institutions, such as the Center for the Visually Impaired in Atlanta, on the needs of disabled individuals when it comes to public space. The self-initiated research on this project was carried over to discussions with the rest of the WIP Collective and was involved in the inception of Restorative Ground. Some of the conclusions drawn from these conversations with specialists include the need for a variety of moments of sensory stimuli – reducing stimulation in certain spots while increasing it in others –, and the opportunity to captivate the tactile and kinesthetic senses through the application of different textures, densities of material, and playful, but gentle, forms.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Further research

As the Care for Hudson competition was considered a project that could not be undertaken on one’s own, WIP Collective have come together to initiate it, then combining the expertise of its members, among them not only architects, but fashion and graphic designers. The group continued Bryony’s research on the needs of the physically and mentally impaired in public space settings, this time conducting interviews with advocates and self-advocates of the cause, as well as parents, inquiring what was missing in spaces such as playgrounds. Again, much of their conclusions came down to creating a greater range of experiences, and perhaps visual prompts that transform into conversation starters.

The proposal

In response to the two early phases of research and consultation, Restorative Ground finally came to fruition. The

proposal is a dynamic landscape sited on King Street, straddling a section of the sidewalk and the street itself, containing a variety of “sensory zones,” or spaces that are designated for either “active,” “calm,” or “focused” activities, and their accompanying sensory experiences. The active zone, for instance, encompasses a territory of interesting faces and shapes made for children’s play; the calm zone boasts a “lounge hammock” for resting; lastly, the focused zone comprises of two large tables that can be used as work surfaces.⁴¹

Care for Hudson

Care for Hudson was a design competition conducted in two rounds. WIP Collective was among the finalists of the second portion of the competition, along with two other minority and women-owned New York City-based firms, Taller KEN and Dash Marshall with Public Policy Lab. Bryony and WIP Collective were selected the winners of the competition by an “inter-

disciplinary jury of fellows (...) based on physical presence, evolving public health guidance [with the competition taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic], and inclusive design.”⁴²

Future work

According to Bryony, WIP Collective intends to continue the line of work of public spaces geared and made accessible to individuals with physical and mental disabilities. As a multi-year process, Bryony and WIP Collective hope to conduct audits of existing spaces with self-advocates on what is still missing and how design can improve their qualities of experiences not only in playgrounds and pocket parks, but in the general streetscape of New York City.

⁴¹ Roberts, "Bryony Roberts."

⁴² "Care for Hudson Square: Winner Announcement," Urban Design Forum.



Figure 13: Restorative
Ground, Bryony Roberts.
2021. New York, NY.
"Active" zone.



Figure 14 (top): Restorative Ground. "Active" and "focused" zones.

Figure 15 (bottom): initial rendering of Restorative Ground.



Comparative Analysis

All practices depend on the interaction between two entities to maintain their position as inclusive: the practitioner and the user. For the user, the issue of freedom of use in a specific space or project is to be regarded as the most important factor in this interaction. For the practitioner, on the other hand, the measure of adaptability of their work to context and situation, or “situatedness,” plays the main role. From this interaction between user and practitioner, another aspect should be noted, and it comes down to the communication between them: participation, or rather, citizenship participation. Citizenship participation denotes how effectively a practitioner attends to the needs and desires of the user of a space or project.

Following Stephen Carr’s dimensions of spatial rights, freedom of use for a user can be broken down, again, into freedom of access, freedom of action, freedom to claim, freedom to change, and ultimate ownership or disposition. With Donna Haraway’s conceptualization of situated

knowledge – rooted in place –, against universal knowledge, situatedness can be measured.

Citizenship participation, meanwhile, is a stepped process, ranging from relationships between the user and the practitioner that are manipulative and palliative (non-participation), through ones based on the superficial provision of information or consultation (tokenism), to effective relationships of partnership and delegated power (citizen power).

Through the three registers of freedom of use, situatedness, and citizenship participation, certain images can be formed about each practice reviewed in this inquiry, surveying the effectiveness of the design process in terms of inclusivity in each level.

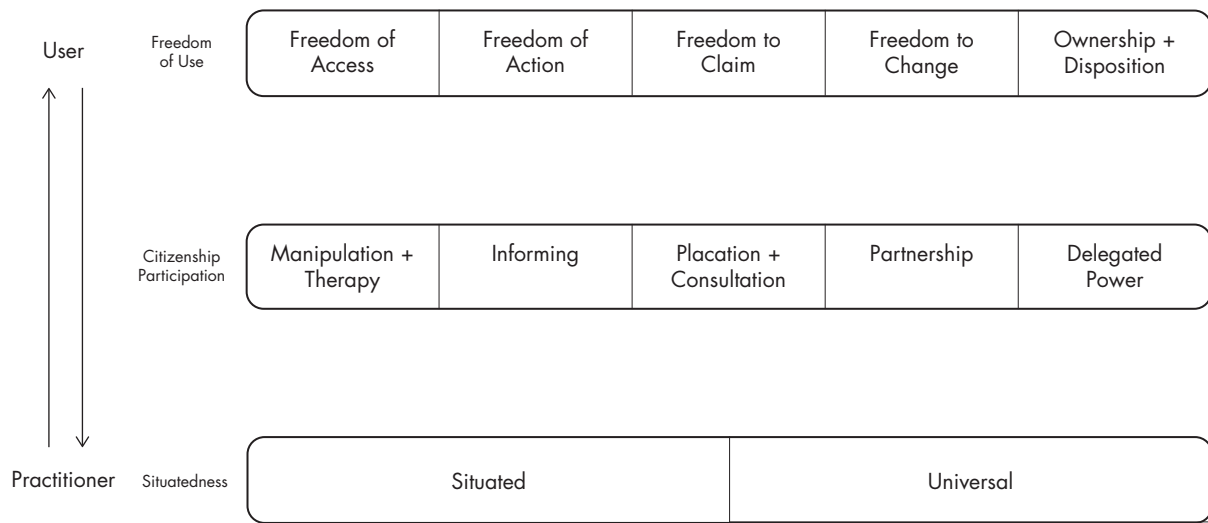


Figure 16: user and practitioner interaction is crucial to evaluate inclusivity, and it yields multiple issues at each level.

LA Más

Freedom of use

For the Backyard Homes project, two users can be identified: the owner of the property where the ADU is to be built (the homeowner), and the person who is going to rent the ADU (the renter). The homeowner has the ultimate ownership of the ADU and has significant freedom to change its appearance or functioning, but their freedom to access or use is impeded by the presence of the renter. The renter has the freedom to access the ADU, to use it to their desire, but does not, technically, own the ADU or has a right to perform changes to it.

Situatedness

LA Más responded to the context of homeownership in Los Angeles and its challenges. Many aspects of the project dealt directly with local policy and history of urbanism – suburban, single-family home lots. The aesthetic choices for the ADUs were made in response to the cultural and architectural history of the place, and were, therefore, situated. Nonethe-

less, their concept of the ADU was also regarded as transferrable to other major metropolitan regions in North America, therefore it is somewhat universal.

Citizenship participation

In the pilot project for the Backyard Homes, LA Más did not engage with a significant amount of input from city officials and homeowners, the ADU was simply finalized, and the County of LA was made aware of the possibilities and the challenges of the ADU typology.

The final project engaged with much greater input from homeowners interested in having an ADU added to their property, as well as financial and housing experts. A partnership was set between LA Más, the County of LA, and the homeowner. The homeowner was also empowered to select their own preferences for the appearance of the ADU.

Freedom of Use

| Freedom of Access | Freedom of Action | Freedom to Claim | Freedom to Change | Ownership + Disposition |
|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| | | Homeowner | | |
| Renter | | | | |

Citizenship Participation

| Manipulation + Therapy | Informing | Placation + Consultation | Partnership | Delegated Power |
|------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| | Pilot Project | | Final Backyard Homes | |

Situatedness

| Situated | Universal |
|----------|-----------|
| LA Más | |

Figure 17: LA Más evaluated through the Backyard Homes project.

Assemble

Freedom of use

In Granby Four Streets, three users can be identified: the neighborhood community group, or Granby Community Land Trust (CLT), the new residents in the refurbished housing stock on Cairns Street, and the visitors to Granby from other districts in the city of Liverpool, who are attracted by activities such as the monthly street markets, the Winter Garden, and Granby Workshop (the general public).

Through a collective ownership model, CLT is the effective owner of spaces such as the Winter Garden and any other Granby development (before being sold), its members have the freedom to access those spaces, make use, claim, and rearrange them. The new residents at Cairns – who acquired a property, at least – have similar freedoms as CLT, including ultimate ownership of their apartments. Visitors to Granby have freedom of access to its streets, and the Winter Garden, but the number of limited activities might preclude freedoms of action and claim.

Situatedness

Assemble's involvement with the Granby Four Streets project was initiated after CLT's request, and the firm worked closely with them and older local residents to develop it. From the housing refurbishment at Cairns Street, to the establishment of Granby Workshop, and the later development of Granby Winter Garden, projects developed organically, adapting and responding to changing needs and availability of resources – distinctive Victorian features that were missing in the terraced homes at Cairns, for instance, were recreated using construction rubble and left-over material. The search for new housing led to a need for home products and hardware; the presence of new residents led to a need for a shared community space. This direct relationship to the context and the people in the neighborhood evinces Assemble's situated practice.

Citizenship participation

In both the housing refurbishment at Cairns Street and Granby Winter Garden, CLT and local residents provided feedback

and input on the design and development of the spaces. CLT and local residents had the final word when it came to approving these two portions of the project, an evidence of the power of end users over the process.

Despite the situated nature of Granby Workshop, and the employment and partnership of local residents in it, the houseware and ceramic business is still ultimately run by Assemble.

Freedom of Use

| Freedom of Access | Freedom of Action | Freedom to Claim | Freedom to Change | Ownership + Disposition |
|-------------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| Community Land Trust | | | | |
| Cairns St. Residents | | | | |
| Citizens/General Public | | | | |

Citizenship Participation

| Manipulation + Therapy | Informing | Placation + Consultation | Partnership | Delegated Power |
|------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| | | Cairns St. Homes | | |
| | Granby Workshop | | | |
| | | Granby Winter Garden | | |

Situatedness

| Situated | Universal |
|----------|-----------|
| Assemble | |

Figure 18: Assemble evaluated through the Granby Four Streets project.

Bryony Roberts

Freedom of use

In Restorative Ground, two users can be identified: officials from the Hudson Square Business Improvement District (BID) and New York city administration, and the general public that makes use of the installation. New York city administration officials, through the city itself, have ownership and the freedom to claim and modify the space where the installation is placed, as it sits on a public street and sidewalk. The visitors to the installation have easy access to it, as it is open to the public, and the landscape of the installation does not impose any obstacles to individuals with physical disabilities. Visitors are also allowed to make use of the various zones of the installation – adults at the large working desks, children in the playscape of varied textures and forms. Changes to the installation by visitors, though, are limited.

Situatedness

On the one hand, WIP Collective's consultation on the needs of individuals with

disabilities can be regarded as situated around a specific community. On the other, the knowledge gained from that can be applied anywhere, and therefore is relatively universal. Restorative Ground is also a project that responds to a particularly dense environment and a fashion for post-pandemic sidewalk activity in New York City, but, again, it can easily be reproduced in other urban centers.

Citizenship participation:

WIP Collective performed consultations with mental and physical disability institutions, as well as advocates and self-advocates in the cause. The output from these consultations led to a design for an installation that responded to the needs of individuals with disabilities – one that is not only physically accessible, but also is appealing sensorily, regardless of the user's abilities. The consultations and the research, however, did not develop into further engagement activities or partnerships.

Freedom of Use

| Freedom of Access | Freedom of Action | Freedom to Claim | Freedom to Change | Ownership + Disposition |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|
| | | Hudson Sq. BID and City Officials | | |
| Citizens/General Public | | | | |

Citizenship Participation

| Manipulation + Therapy | Informing | Placation + Consultation | Partnership | Delegated Power |
|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| | Restorative Ground | | | |

Situatedness

| Situated | Universal |
|----------------|-----------|
| Bryony Roberts | |

Figure 19: Bryony Roberts evaluated through the Restorative Ground project.

Conclusions

Some practices were slightly more effective in certain registers used in the comparative analysis – they were either more situated, closer to achieving citizen power, or allowed for more freedoms in their projects –, but that should not be regarded as a judgment of their effectiveness as a whole practice. In fact, greater success in one of the registers did not imply the same for the others. Regardless of that, the comparative analysis of the case studies have produced a number of important observations on the relationship between practitioner and user in an inclusive practice. These observations reveal, to a large extent, that indeed is our "place," as designers, to stand up against injustice, and things need not be the way they "always have been done."

Situated solutions for situated problems

Adaptability and responsiveness to context in the design process should be paramount. Universal solutions are consistently poor at responding to the needs of a specific community, as it is grounded on

generalizations. All practices analyzed in this inquiry have engaged with situated knowledges of place and people – in different intensities, but they have engaged with them, nonetheless. Of special note, LA Más and Assemble have demonstrated long-term investment in a single community, engendering favorable symbiotic relationships between users and practitioners.

Iteration is key

Research and experiences in one project should be carried over to the next. The first time a practitioner works in a place or with a group of people in a project, it might be difficult to effectively satisfy needs and desires. That is more reason to soldier on, to take part in constant learning, and to go through trial and error. Bryony Roberts' inquiry into the needs of individuals with disabilities and LA Más' on ADUs as affordable housing alternatives are great examples of the iterative aspect of an inclusive practice.

There is no ideal design tool

The gamut of (alternative) design tools

that each of the three practices studied make use of is a clear indication that there is no hierarchy for the best, most effective tools, and there is not much use in comparing them – different tools exist for different ends. From historical research to community engagement, from consultations with specialists to panels with advocates of a cause, provided that there is an attempt to share information and power, and to center the narrative of a project around its users, a tool – whichever tool – has the potential to be effective.

Multi-disciplinary work yields (some) structural change

Another salient similarity between the practices studied in this inquiry is that they all involve other disciplines in their design process. Bryony Roberts harnessed the expertise of medical specialists, Assemble and LA Más the advice of financial and housing organizations, as well as the funding of civic institutions. LA Más, furthermore, has devised a pre-packaged mortgage product, Assemble has started ceramic and art studio rental businesses. There is a degree of subversion of the typical role and praxis of

the architect that comes with the engagement with other disciplines beyond design – that, in and of itself, increases the radius of people impacted by a practitioner's work. Multi-disciplinary engagement also implicates localized knowledge about a group of people or place – it is situated.

Moving forward

It is increasingly clear that there is no ideal path or special formula to achieve an inclusive design practice. Rather, there are general praxes, shared by many socially-oriented practitioners, which should be taken into consideration. There are also certain aspects about the design process and the individuals involved in it which should receive particular attention. This inquiry sought to establish an approximation of the praxes and priorities shared by the case studies surveyed, and should in no way be construed as exhaustive or prescriptive. The effort of evaluating the inclusivity of the design process and, likewise, its social impact, is a continuous and never complete project in itself, as long as the belief in our agency and a collective desire for self-improvement persist.

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Figure 11: Assemble.

Figure 12: Jonathan Hillyer for the High Museum of Art.

Figures 13 - 14: WIP and Hudson Square Properties.

Figure 15: WIP.

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