

Beyond Lending – a case study

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Hyperlink to short film, also called *Beyond Lending*, made for the Generosity conference <https://vimeo.com/285528440>

Maindee Library in Newport, South Wales, was closed by the local authority in 2015. Following the global financial crisis of 2008, a Conservative led coalition government was elected in 2010 on a promise to cut the nation's spending deficit. A period of austerity ensued with a range of cuts to public services in which library services, with 17% of branches closing, were particularly hard hit¹.

The library was soon reopened by a determined volunteer collective called Maindee Unlimited, delivering more public services than ever before². This was made possible through a

¹Alison Flood, 'Britain has closed almost 800 libraries since 2010, figures show', *Guardian*, 6 December 2019;

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/dec/06/britain-has-closed-almost-800-libraries-since-2010-figures-show> [accessed 15 July 2021]

²More than once there was rumination on the dilemma of stepping in to fill the void left by retracted state services. No conclusion on the full civic implications was ever reached. For more on this see. David Barnett 'Do libraries run by volunteers check out?', *Guardian*, 25 June 2018;

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/25/do-libraries-run-by-volunteers-check-out> [accessed 15 July 2021]

process of Community Asset Transfer³, in which the council made a long lease on the building available to Maindee Unlimited without charge.

Remodelling the library took place within the broader context of a socially engaged art programme, *Finding Maindee*⁴, seeking to better recognise the (his)stories, culture(s) and community/ies of the place, though as Maindee Unlimited's Project Manager has observed we chose to use the word 'refresh' rather than remodel or refurbish which "was about respecting the integrity of what was there already". With funding from Arts Council Wales⁵, Maindee Unlimited appointed architects George Lovesmith & Sarah Hollingworth to help them reimagine the building in the spring of 2017⁶.

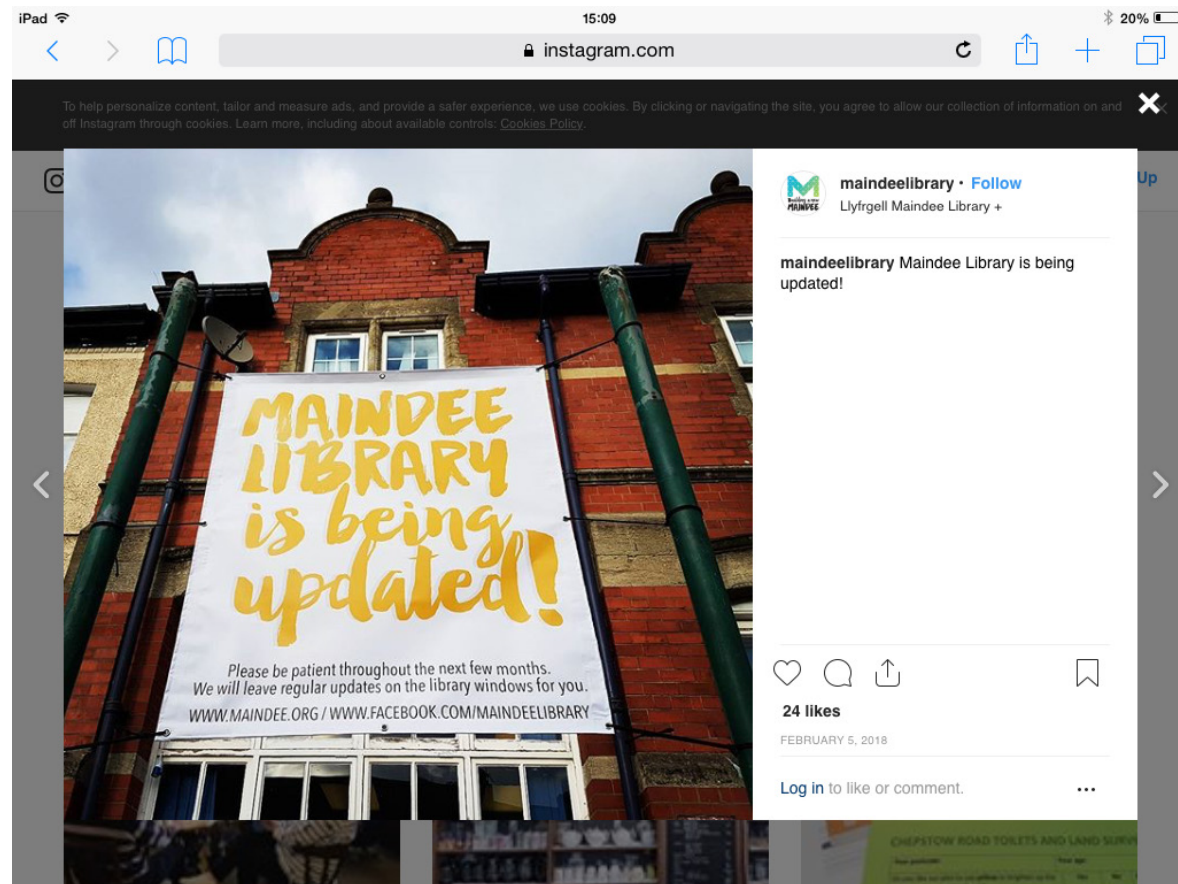
This photo essay comprises snapshots from the integral social media stream (blog, fb, insta, vimeo) which accompanied the building design and construction, sharing the process and the progress, in order to expand the community reach and enable other similar groups to learn from these experiences. The predominant use of screen grabs, to represent the project here, is a reflection of the importance of social media to the entire process. The virtual community space, that paralleled physical participation, enabled both a transparency; and a two-way dialogue; pushing the limits of who is invited to shape our

³CATs were made possible in Wales in 2003 to promote community development. See <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2021-03/community-asset-transfer-research-with-the-third-sector-local-authorities-and-community-and-town-councils.pdf> p.9 [accessed 15 July 2021]; Local Authorities elsewhere in the UK identified post-crisis austerity as a major catalyst for the disposal of assets in order to secure revenue savings. See https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COP33979_In-Community-Hands_2020.03.18.pdf p.15 [accessed 15 July 2021]

⁴<https://arts.wales/case-studies/project-finding-maindee> [accessed 15 July 2021]

⁵<https://arts.wales/our-impact/how-we-reach-wider-audiences/ideas-people-places> [accessed 15 July 2021]

⁶Ultimate capital spend was in the region of £80-100k inc. of tax & fees.



shared civic spaces; the media platforms themselves becoming new tools deployed to do this. Echoing themes of Convergence Culture, as observed by Henry Jenkins⁷ following the dawn of 'new media' in the early 2000s, new virtual inter-relationships emerged in the building of virtual community/ies that are not typically part of a design team diagram or building procurement process; and in turn, a community/ies built *their* agency to affect physical change.

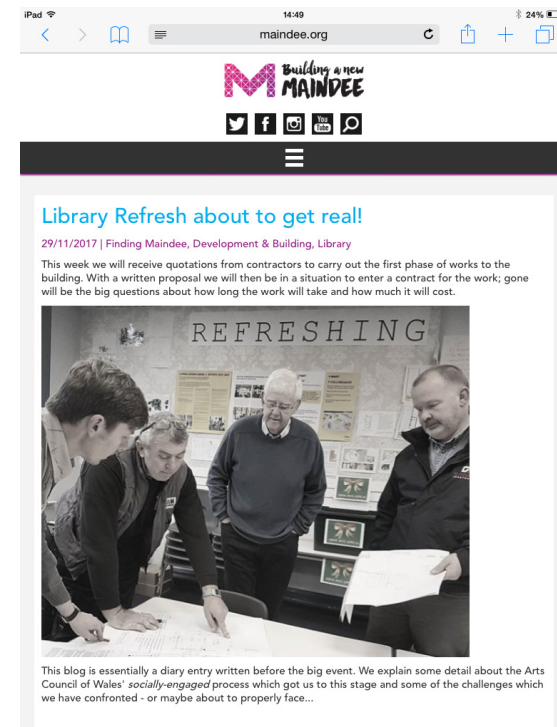
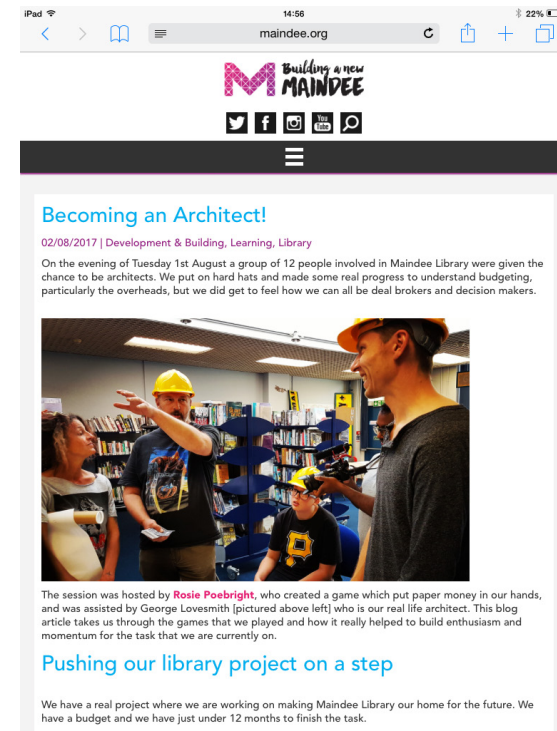
Building works took place in phases between March 2018 and January 2019. However, it was certainly not a straight forward architecture project. Open invitations were extended far and wide to bring as many people as possible into the spaces of production. These include community leaders creating learning and economic opportunities in processes of procurement and change: to nurture the sense of local ownership and both maximise and multiply the impact the investment might have on the local economy.

The commission was conceived as a series of test pieces, a consequence of a desire to experiment with new ways in which the library could work, and the realities of budgetary constraints. For each strand of the project, what might normally have been user consultations or stakeholder meetings became creative workshops, social gatherings or game-like events with learning outcomes, more akin to a lesson plan, as opposed to the bureaucratic agenda of a business meeting. The events were tailored to embed ideas of how it might *feel* to use the space in different ways within lived experience.

We ran two pilot projects in collaboration with students from the architecture schools of UWE Bristol and Cardiff University to prototype and experiment with how the building is used. In

⁷Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006)

& Henry Jenkins, 'Rethinking 'Rethinking Convergence/Culture'', *Cultural Studies*, 28:2 (2014) 267-297





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Llyfrgell Maindee Library +

maindeelibrary We're making a film about the library makeover #architecture #space #buildings Currently in edit with @creativevez and will be ready later this week

11 likes
AUGUST 30, 2017

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maindeelibrary Cooking up the soup x

3 likes
OCTOBER 25, 2017

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these projects the tutors enabled not only the students but also participating volunteers, both to learn and to set the agenda within processes of creative change. This too can be regarded as an act of generosity on the part of the volunteers, as community leaders, themselves open to a broader set of objectives. The project becomes not only a process of capital procurement but also one of professional learning in the community; and there are risks associated with this as well as demands on time and resources.

This Maindee Library+ commission allowed for reflective creative practice and collaborative experimentation within communities who are keen to expand how their inter-relationships might vary from the norm. Expectations were challenged throughout: especially those of the architecture profession; Here each person's potential and their own ability to find the answers, was encouraged:

Now the funded works are complete and we reflect on what has been achieved, we can see within the library building that the project has recognised the people of Maindee, 'pulling' together ideas and aspirations, within a piece of spatial & social infrastructure that might best serve and value this particular place - something people would be comfortable with – not too flash.

...& we followed a process - 'pushing' on toward the future with newly-shaped spaces and extended capabilities. This is not a case of 'place-making' from afar, only giving shape and form to external ideas. Rather the architecture of Maindee Library is a step forward in the practice of 'place recognition' - meaning to represent the attachment to place, but also sense to gently test where people are ready to go next.

Aled Singleton, Project Manager, Maindee Unlimited, January 2016- July 2018

Progress 17 May - 17/05/2018

Nonsensus – A Journey Into Being Sung - 17/05/2018

Progress for Refresh at Maindee Library - 11/05/2018

Page 1 of 13 > >>

Blog Categories

- Street Media (14)
- Finding Maindee (79)
- New Paths (37)
- Arts (77)
- Maindee Voices (19)
- Development & Building (52)
- Community (57)
- Learning (40)
- Reviews (3)
- Opinions (9)
- Library (29)

Benefit of trialling ideas

By serving hot drinks and soup off the counter - and taking it all outside - we got some great feedback for making the real thing. Verity, from the group, said that:

"At the event we tested our 1:1 prototype of the mobile cafe to observe what would be needed at such a event which would influence the design of the real cafe that will be constructed shortly in the future. The event was a success with the prototype tested inside the library, whilst the soup was being prepared, and outside once it was being served."

The short **Instagram film** below shows Matt wheeling the cafe out from the library and onto the space in front of the building.

maindeelibrary
Llyfrgell Maindee Library +

maindeelibrary Wheeling out the mobile cafe last week. Maybe it does need better wheels and some handles to get back up the ramp?!?

51 views
2 DAYS AGO

Initial conclusions from the event

After receiving lots of really useful ideas from Maindee community, Maindee Unlimited volunteers and George and Sarah - the architects working on the library 'refresh' scheme - and observing what worked

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maindeelibrary Our bespoke mobile cafe got delivered this week.
It's now got some beautiful images of fruit and vegetables stencilled onto it #craft #design

11 likes

NOVEMBER 29, 2017

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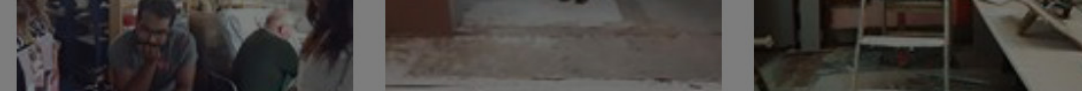
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The Pod

maindeelibrary Our student architect group meets again for a full day of activities. Thanks to @justsoexclusive for offering us the amazing Pod as the venue

10 likes

APRIL 23, 2018

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Contextualising this approach might begin on mainland Europe in the 1960s. Though their impact at the time was marginal, The Situationist International (cross-disciplinary artist radicals led by Guy Debord in the 1960s) have been credited with broad influence on cultural & philosophical thinking in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Their inherently political manifestoes rallied that creative production should be part of everyday life & that “this transformation should not be in the hands of a small body of specialists but should be made by everyone.”⁸ In parallel, the British group, Solidarity, sought to increase “the confidence, the autonomy, the initiative, the participation, the solidarity, the equalitarian tendencies and the self-activity of the masses”⁹. For Lovesmith, this has become a personal, yet ever unattainable, yardstick by which to measure the successes and failures of each project. A decade later, Henri Lefebvre, in his seminal *Production of Space* implored us to “both enjoy and modify” social space.¹⁰

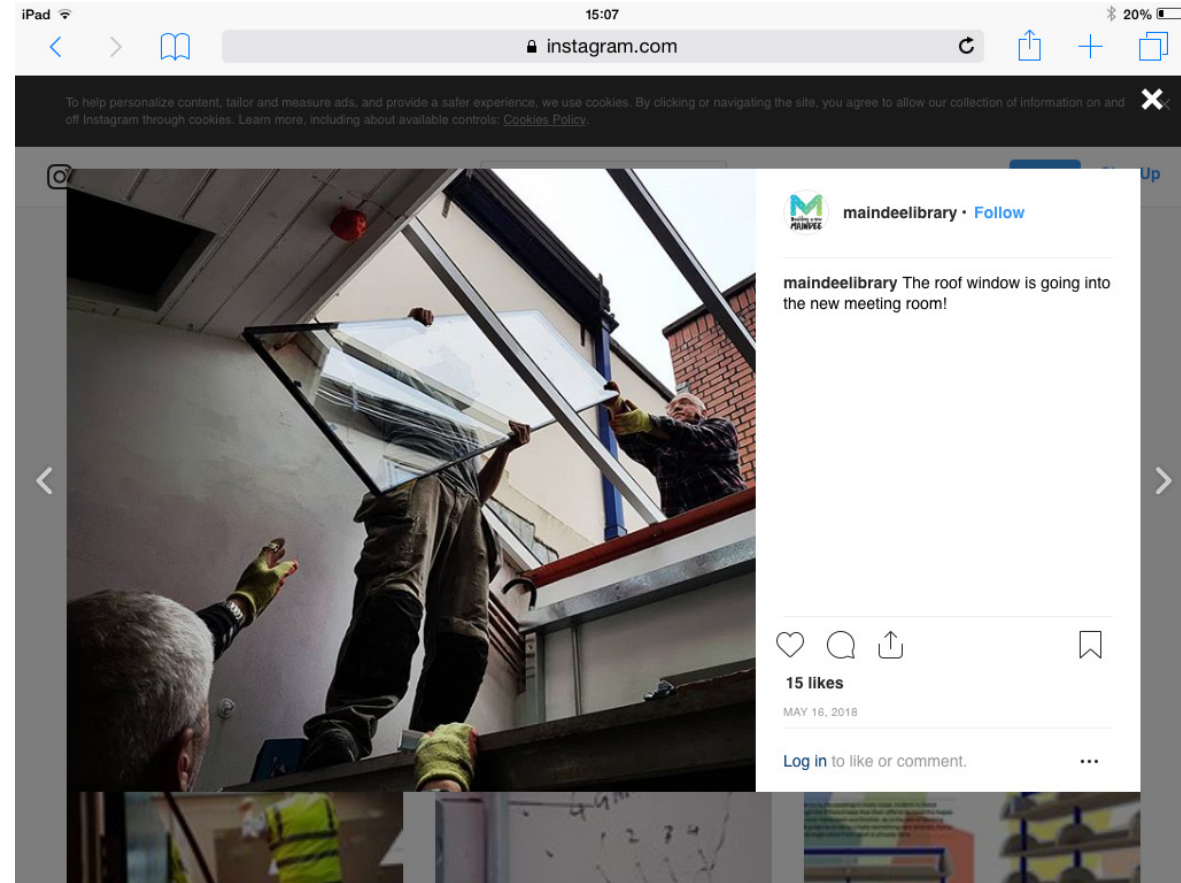
Direct and contemporary influences include the musings of Cedric Price. Indeed, elements of Maindee Library+ are viewed as test pieces, about which we, like he might, reserve the right to change our minds depending on what happens in the future¹¹. *Treading experimenting* lightly depends on an open-minded client attitude but in doing so *lightly* the risk is mitigated.

⁸Christopher Gray, 'Essays from Leaving the 20th Century', originally published in Christopher Gray (ed.), *Leaving the 20th Century* (London: Free Fall, 1974) also in Stewart Home (ed.), *What is Situationism? A Reader* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996) p4

⁹the Solidarity group, 'As We See It' pamphlet 1961, quoted in Stewart Home, (ed.) *What is Situationism? A Reader* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996) p115

¹⁰Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p35 (first published in French in 1974)

¹¹for more on this way of considering practice see. Cedric Price, *Re:CP* (Basel: Birkhauser, 2003)



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maindeelibrary New yellow doors

rosskenny11 🍷

maindeelibrary @rosskenny11 you not like it? The volunteers are loving the colour combo

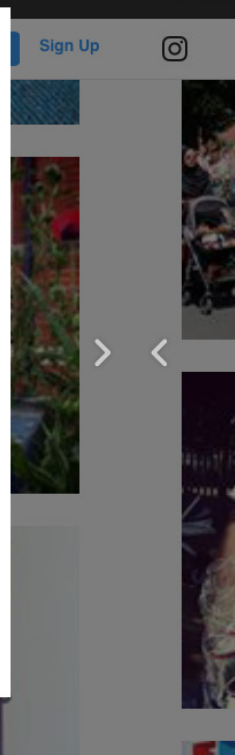
ohsusannahprint Love the colours..yellow is so uplifting. You're all doing an amazing job on the project.

maindeelibrary @ohsusannahprint they were picked after doing workshops with volunteers and the public at Maindee library :)

31 likes

JUNE 6, 2018

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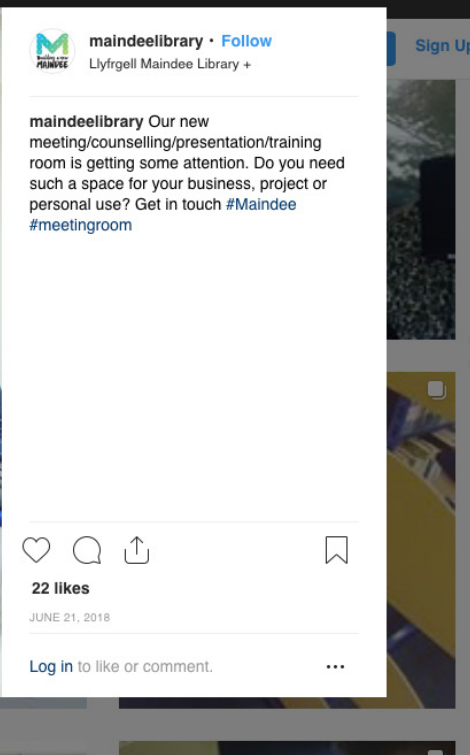
Llyfngell Maindee Library +

maindeelibrary Our new meeting/counselling/presentation/training room is getting some attention. Do you need such a space for your business, project or personal use? Get in touch #Maindee #meetingroom

22 likes

JUNE 21, 2018

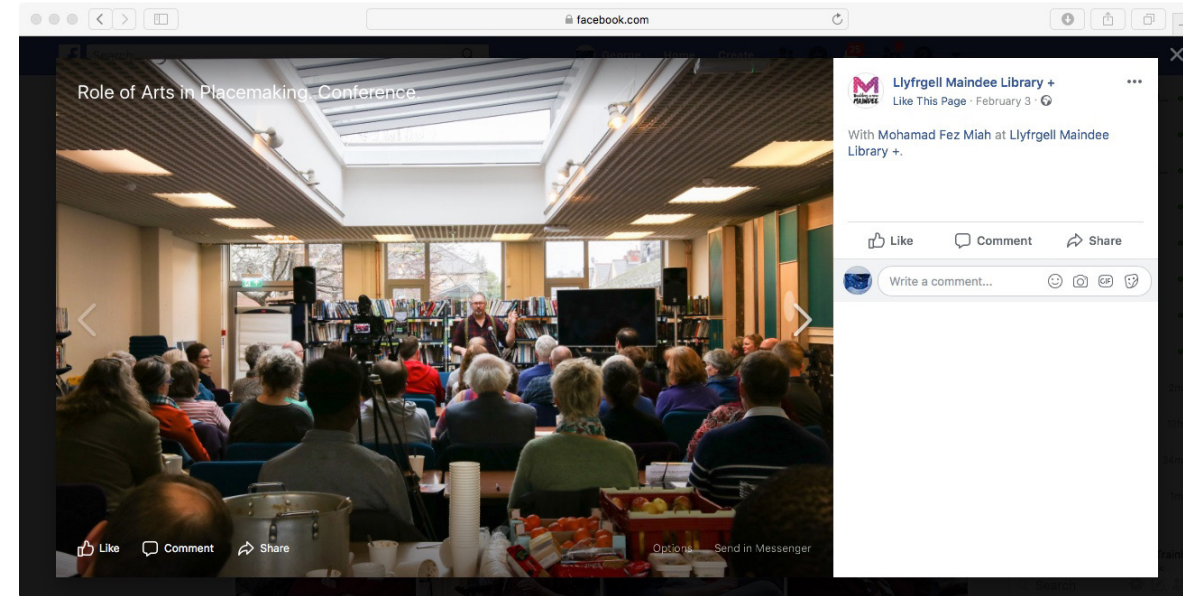
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In the consideration of public facilities as integral to broader notions of civic space this work is indebted to Kath Schonfield. In her call to develop the public realm, she critically described it as our lived experience of democracy¹², saying it is “as fundamental to the experience of humanity as the loving touch of the parent”¹³

Lastly, drawing again on art practice, the notion of the *Relational Aesthetic*, as classified by Nicolas Bourriaud, has spurred an impetus to ‘model alternative realities’ in the face of a ‘commodification of human relations’¹⁴

An ambition of enabling is embedded within these approaches, and though risk factors are multiplied, opportunities to maximise on the potential far outweigh anxieties of needing to be in control. Liberated from a sense that one might lose the upper hand or the fee income, the process becomes richer and the process has meaning because of a culture of community support, within which each one of us has a sense of belonging.



¹²Katherine Schonfield, in muf, *This is what we do: a muf manual* (London: Ellipsis, 2001) p28

¹³Katherine Schonfield, *The Richness of Cities* (London: Comedia & Demos, 1998) p9

¹⁴Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2002) p13 (first published in French in 1998)