

**Meanwhile use as performance - rehearsing and performing community in temporary spaces**

HILL, Katie J, LIGHT, Ann and DEARDEN, Andy <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5706-5978>>

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# MEANWHILE USE AS PERFORMANCE – REHEARSING AND PERFORMING COMMUNITY IN TEMPORARY SPACES

KATIE J. HILL  
SHEFFIELD HALLAM  
UNIVERSITY  
K.HILL@SHU.AC.UK

ANN LIGHT  
NORTHUMBRIA  
UNIVERSITY  
ANN.LIGHT@GMAIL.COM

ANDY DEARDEN  
SHEFFIELD HALLAM  
UNIVERSITY  
A.M.DEARDEN@SHU.AC.UK

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of performance theory as a framework to conceptualise temporality and opportunity in a design research project examining community use of meanwhile spaces. *Meanwhile* has developed as a term to describe the use of temporarily available space, typically due to stalled building projects or business failure. Growth of the meanwhile sector led the researchers to question how more social and community value could be gained from these spatial opportunities.

Performance theory, with its emphasis on dynamic temporality was proposed as a framework that might provide for the conceptual shifts that would enable a sector that traditionally seeks permanent and long term development to make the most from these temporary opportunities. A design research study that included a practical intervention was undertaken. This paper reflects on the relationship between theory and practice in the project.

## INTRODUCTION

*Meanwhile* initiatives make creative use of temporarily vacant spaces, appropriating empty factories, warehouses or shops, as drop-in centres, arts spaces, pop-up shops, vegetable gardens and a vast array of other purposes. Arrangements of property taxation in the UK mean that temporary charitable and community

use of such spaces can reduce landlords' operating costs. The recent global economic recession, as well as changing patterns of land use (particularly in the retail sector) in the UK, has resulted in rapid growth of this sector in the past few years. Although the meanwhile uses are, by definition, temporary, the impact of such initiatives is potentially long lasting. Projects can enhance community cohesion, develop creativity and self-efficacy, and build human, social and cultural capital at a time of squeezed resources and changing social needs. We are seeing many examples of arts, retail and social enterprise initiatives using meanwhile and pop-up spaces, but we perceive that much of this increased adoption of meanwhile opportunities is being driven by commercial imperatives and the efforts of small groups of individuals (e.g. artists, small social enterprises) with far less use being made by community and social organisations. On the other hand, community based organisations often hold long-term ambitions to establish services such as youth clubs, crèches or facilities for the elderly, which demand physical spaces, where the community objectives are focused on long term and sustainable arrangements.

To explore the potential for neighbourhood-focused community groups to use meanwhile opportunities, we hypothesised that performance theory might provide a useful conceptual framework. In a short participatory, design research enquiry (9 months), our goals were to: understand how community groups can successfully secure social value from vacant space; develop performative approaches to support their activity; work with a community group to explore these ideas.

Performance theory helps us consider the shift from a model of enduring service, situated in long-term spaces and slowly building efficacy, to an 'event' model which values the benefits of short term opportunities and uses these to explore options. In our work we have drawn on three specific ideas from performance theory, namely:

- Schechner's (1988, pp. 157-8), conception of series of interrelated, but independent,

performances, each unfolding in three phases: gathering, playing out an action or actions, and dispersing;

- Turner's (2005) conception of site specific art as a response to physical, social and economic space that the meanwhile place itself provides; and
- a more specific view of *meanwhile as rehearsal* in a Boalian sense (1979), where the act of trying out options leads to devising new and more informed responses, which emerged during the project.

The purpose of this paper then is to reflect on how we used performance theory to guide and inform our practice within a design research project and to offer insights into the value of ideas of performativity, site-specific performance, and rehearsal in the context of collaboratively undertaking social innovation with communities. We first give more background to our understanding of performance and community; then detail the work of the project and the insights this led to.

## LITERATURE AND THEORY

The project examining innovation in social process took performance theory as an underlying framework to help understand what we posited as a shift from spatial understandings of community action to more temporally informed ones.

Community assets are socio-materially constructed and accumulated. Our history shows an ebb and flow of enclosures and commons, clearances, rambling rights, bequests, Allotment Acts and hard-won spaces such as centres, youth clubs and gardens. Concepts of ownership, access to spaces and the allocation of rights between individuals, states and communities have been debated by philosophers, explored by dramatists, and physically contested. In the present day, these struggles extend beyond issues of land and space as economic value and claims of particular 'ownership' rights are being attached to such diverse informational objects as genome sequences, algorithms, creative ideas and all manner of digital information. Resistance to these trends is apparent both within the formal legal system (e.g. open-source software development and sharing of materials as creative commons underpinned by so-called 'copyleft' licences), and on the street (e.g. in the international Occupy movement).

We are told we now live in the 'space of flows' (Castells 2004: p. 146-7) where 'the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through ... distant synchronous, real-time interaction' (ibid) suggest great fluidity. In this environment, possession of communal spaces feels temporary, not only in respect of the ever-changing political tide, but also because the very notion of sociality is being reconfigured and 'community' has become a term in search of definition.

How should the grass-roots maintain and foster the shared resources of their locale and promote a coming-together in these speedy, disintegrating times (Virilio 2000)? Can 'community' be found in the short-lived 'mob' that checks social media, descends to dance, dig or demonstrate and then disbands till next time?

Emerging between the old delineations of bounded, place-locked geographical community and the new forms of engagement that situate meaning in glancing physical meetings mixed with sustained online contact, are hybrid practices of production. These are more temporally-orientated than in the past, in that resources are increasingly seen as dynamic arenas to perform particular ways of being rather than as static spatial assets. There is a tendency to stage encounters using digital media; to enact and present society, as well as to own and occupy. And even where digital media are not used to augment events, the influence of the changing social norms that incorporate them extend to challenge spatial perspectives on community resourcing and highlight new temporal considerations. To this end, we explore a performative understanding of community.

## PERFORMANCE

We have adopted three distinct features of the body of work grouped as performance theory with which to frame our analysis.

The first is a general position on the temporality and performativity of events, more specific than the general performative turn in social science and the humanities. Schechner (1998, pp. 157-8), developing a poetics of performance, describes three phases through which events of a performative nature travel: gathering (in a 'special place'), playing out an action or actions, and dispersing. Schechner does not restrict himself to analysing theatrical contexts, but looks also at ritual and everyday events and explores the characteristics that evoke performance. This makes apparent the rhythmic nature of performance, with a coming together of disparate parties, a crescendo of shared activity and an aftermath, all of which can be repeated in series. In this, it shares characteristics with some interpretations of ritual (see Turner 1982). By looking at how communities manage their relations through these encounters, we can see that playing out an action in this context can be a moment of bonding and also the inspiration that feeds growth in participation and deepens engagement in community processes. Such an event might be the delivery of a particularly needed service, but, in an event-based understanding of these practices, it can also be an intervention that acts as a catalyst for community growth that has a less determined outcome.

When we bring in the particular considerations of site specific art, we see that performance does not transcend environment and place, but can use the context in which the performance takes place more or less to inform what ensues. Site specific art is made contingent on what exists already in the space and seeks to marry what is

'brought in' (goals, materials, people) with what is already there (utilities, spaces, décor, history). (e.g. Turner 2005) Community groups making use of meanwhile opportunities must reconcile the potential clash of what they bring with what they find, creating opportunity for interventions which are co-creative and enable community learning. Responding flexibly to what is offered by the contingencies of existing physical, financial and social frameworks links to work on design processes among social activists, which Light and Miskelly (2008) describe as: "examples of an opportunistic but productive kind of intervention [where] obstacles to the flow of designing, such as funding difficulties, local apathy and changing conditions, become part of the design challenge and ... ideas, funding sources, policy priorities, local skills and serendipitous opportunities are used as the materials for problem-solving". They argue that "essentially this process of 'making do' by reinterpreting and being inventive with the tools to hand ... characterises much social design activity" (ibid).

This tactical approach of innovating by 'making do' points to our third performance analogy. We began the project with the title of 'Meanwhile Use As Performance', but, through dialogue with stakeholders, we learnt of practices that stimulated thinking about a more specific view of *meanwhile as rehearsal*. In particular, we encountered the idea of 'rehearsal' in a Boalian sense, taken from the political use of performance in Theatre of the Oppressed (1979). Forum Theatre was designed to promote effective social change. Actors (professional or community) take an oppressive situation that they seek to change and present it on stage. At any point, the drama can be stopped and the 'spect-actors', who have been observing as audience, can try out behaviours to challenge the oppression, to see what will happen as a result and learn. The actors improvise to maintain the status quo but eventually the oppression can be overthrown. This performance 'as rehearsal' is distinct from rehearsals of formal texts carrying the intention of playing an expert scene to a static audience. Instead, the rehearsal is of real life. The act of trying out options leads to devising new and more informed responses which give confidence and flexibility to the 'spect-actors'. In our consideration, the act of trying out options leads to devising new and more informed responses and a set of conditions where openness in the specification of the space, the activity, and of the group means that social innovation is collaboratively created rather than formally designed. As designers, we were also struck by parallels with different approaches to prototyping.

Schechner also notes that some performances exist in spaces which 'exemplify a resistance and alternative to the conglomerates' of mainstream theatre. These take place in the 'creases', which are not marginal but liminal spaces that 'run through the actual and conceptual centers of society' signalling 'areas of instability, disturbances and potentially radical changes

in the social topography' (p. 183-4). This positioning too seems pertinent in considering how the acts of communities can inhabit social spaces.

## METHODS, PROCESS AND DATA

'Meanwhile Use as Performance' worked with communities using design research methods to innovate *meanwhile* processes. As a design research project, our focus was on innovation within the processes through which community groups made use of meanwhile opportunities so that they, in turn, could use these opportunities for social innovation. The methodology drew from a range of practice-based research approaches, including Action Research and reflective practice, as well as forms of design anthropology such as participant observation and storytelling workshops. As the aim of this paper is to reflect on the use of theory within this process we will focus our account around two activities within the project timeline – the first workshop and the neighbourhood project. These two events illustrate our conceptual work to draw on ideas from performance theory to direct shifts in practice.

It must be noted that the evidence presented here was derived in a small scale participatory design research project and whilst it is informed by literature, interviews and discussions with a broad range of stakeholders, the resulting case study is inevitably highly specific. Participatory design research shares many characteristics with Action Research, in that it is heavily embedded in context. The aim in such research cannot be reproducibility, but must be focussed on ideas of 'recoverability' (Checkland & Holwell, 1998) in the sense that the details of the work are carefully recorded and the context is properly articulated. The ultimate goal of action research, according to Hayes, is the development of solutions and knowledge that is 'workable' (for the research participants) in context (Hayes, 2011). In order to enable the use of this knowledge for other applications, we have attempted to give as full a picture as possible of the context within which the project happened so that others can relate it to the context within which they are working. Following the Action Research principles of planning, action, and reflection, and, through identification and involvement of stakeholders, there was an iterative process of seeking resonance with other practices, checking with authorities in the field and triangulation of learning from different perspectives.

## THE FIRST WORKSHOP

After an initial scoping study where literature and projects were reviewed and key actors interviewed in the context of their own work, we invited a mix of stakeholders from multiple meanwhile projects to share experiences through drawing, storytelling and discussion as a means for the research team (and the participants themselves) to develop an understanding of this space, practices within the space, and to identify priorities within the field in terms of a design research

brief for the next part of the project. There were eleven participants including project managers from meanwhile projects, landowner/developers, local authority officers, community organisers, and researchers.

We began the day by asking participants to share knowledge about how they had achieved their meanwhile projects. To build up shared understandings of their experiences, workshop participants broke up into small groups to exchange stories about their particular project experiences. Summarising those experiences, participants were then invited to draw a 'timeline' illustrating the story of their project and significant events in the story. These varied greatly since, deliberately, no format had been set for creating a timeline and different participants played up contrasting angles of the journey – some reflecting personal focus; some reflecting particular contingencies. Figure 1 gives two different examples of a timeline.

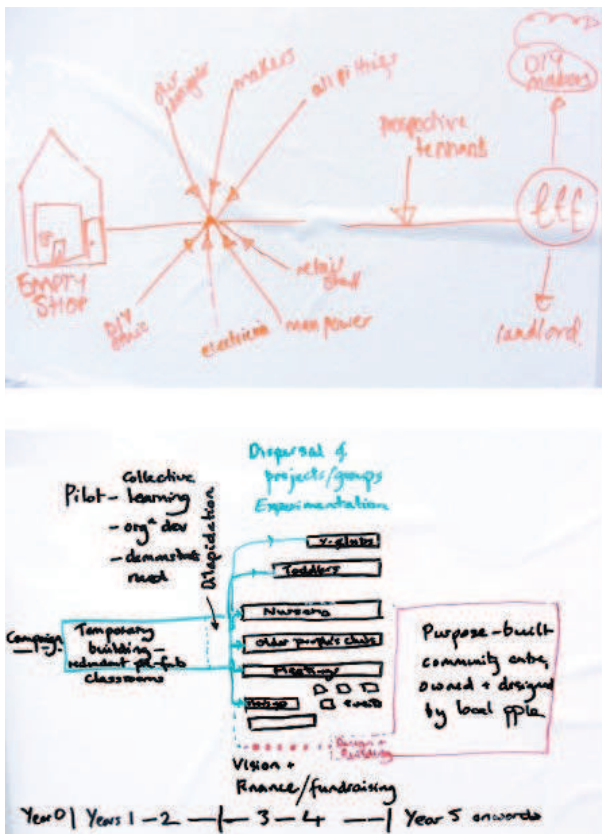


Figure 1: Examples of timeline drawings from the first workshop.

Using these images as a prompt, the journeys were then presented back to the full group in plenary for discussion. We collectively analysed the stories as examples of meanwhile use and mapped themes through post-it note exercises. In all, seven stories were told. As examples, we give three here in brief.

Story 1: Gaining a community centre. The participant that told this story had been a community worker and resident that participated in this project. After years of campaigning for a new community centre, and 2 years running pilot projects such as a youth group, a nursery

and other community groups in disused temporary classrooms, the classrooms became uninhabitable and the different groups found that to continue activities they had to disperse into multiple and various temporary spaces. This produced a meanwhile phase within a broader project which eventually led to establishing a permanent community centre. The workshop participant reported that the phase of the project that made use of temporary spaces enabled learning, identifying need and building community: organisers had the opportunity to learn about running groups and activities; there was the opportunity to try out different ideas; during this time, they were able to discover what was or was not needed in the locality. Further, links were made with the spaces and with the organisations that temporarily hosted the groups. This brought more people who were interested in setting up the new building into the network. When the building was ready, there was already an established community of people who needed, and had viable plans to make use of it.

Story 4: Pop Up Shop. The workshop participant that told this story is a designer who has run pop-up shops to sell her own and other peoples work. As a new designer with no track record and few resources, the designer negotiated a deal with a landlord who had a new empty shop unit. Low rent and a very short lease meant that they could run a shop for three weeks to try out products on the market and build a brand. The landlord showed prospective longer-term tenants around whilst the shop was in use and subsequently let the space. The participant said insight was gained into the high levels of risk involved (although now with template leases available that can be reduced). She suggested it had helped new people with ideas to get started and try something without committing more than they could afford. It also helped the landlord to let his empty property. However, there was a high investment of sweat equity in getting the space ready to host a shop, the cost of which fell on the designers running the shop. They also had to manage without amenities, so an additional overhead was that arrangements had to be made with neighbouring premises to use bathrooms and get access to water.

Story 7: Paddling pools at City Festival. The workshop participant telling this story is a director of the organisation that set up this event. The project was a one-day event using pop-up paddling pools in the city centre of Newcastle to trigger strategic thinking about play space and water in the city. The event was part of a bigger festival aimed at bringing families and children into a space normally dominated by offices or night time economy. Drawing on the experience, the participant suggested that quick temporary events can have impact on long-term thinking. Collaboration with organisations can make it quick, cheap and easy. Although the paddling pools were not a prototype (they were not a stage to a specific design outcome), their quick and temporary nature can be seen to occupy the

same space of physically manifesting ideas to try out the practicalities.

#### ANALYSIS

As a result of analysis in the first workshop, we identified several themes that ran across some or all of the *meanwhile* experiences. The accuracy and value of these ideas was tested in situ by asking our participants whether they recognised the theme as significant. We present below only those that resonated with the group.

Success attracts further opportunities. It is widely recognised that small successes should be achieved early on in a project to build motivation, but it was also apparent from the case studies that the visibility of these successes – a performative presentation – was important in gathering the energy that propelled these projects, won (further) funding, etc.

There are risks involved. The politics of *meanwhile* spaces need to be negotiated, and vulnerable communities need protecting, for example by anticipating gentrification and protecting key strategic elements that should be looked after if the site develops beyond *meanwhile* use. Dilemmas were raised around engaging excluded and disaffected members of communities, managing expectations and dealing with tensions and conflicts, as *meanwhile* spaces bring together multiple stakeholders who all have their own motivations and agendas.

There is potential to use spaces or the experience of managing spaces to consolidate organisations or to establish needs and grow new organisations. Experiences in short-term *meanwhile* activities provide opportunities for both training and organisational development around key procedures – managing finances, writing bids, managing people, establishing expectations, business development [giving the vision legs]. These activities can be used to set the foundations of new projects and groups. This learning and prototyping (rehearsal) concept can also be seen in cases such as the pop-up shop, which did act as a prototype, not only for the social enterprise that ran the pop-up shop, but also for the landlord and future tenant who were able to use the pop-up event to present an understanding of how the space could work.

There is also a motivation for landlords to encourage *meanwhile* use and organisational development. Landlords and developers are seeking ‘intelligent clients’ – people who might lease space on a more permanent basis and who have a good understanding of how to make spaces successful – and *meanwhile* spaces can be a way to develop this capacity. So, in performing the role of tenant on a temporary basis, organisations can develop skills that will enable them to successfully run buildings and make them more appealing to support. *Meanwhile* uses allow the piloting and testing of ideas and approaches, or even businesses, at low cost. They allow experimentation. They also allow people to establish credibility by proving themselves in a real

situation rather than, for example, through a business plan. It is a space within which entrepreneurial potential can flourish.

Finally, *meanwhile* allows conceptual shifts, such as ‘shopping beyond consumerism’, and the subversion or appropriation of familiar environments. For example, it is possible to use the familiar ‘shop’ environment, and the social practices that surround it, to draw people in and introduce them to the idea of adopting new practices by engaging in other community-based activities (<http://www.meanwhile.org.uk/showcase/the-daughters-project>).

These ideas were analysed further by researchers over the following weeks while a case study that exemplified the key issues was agreed for the next stage. It was at this point we noted that much of the *meanwhile* use we had learnt about was neither one-off nor serial, but used as a rehearsal for achieving a bigger ambition.

#### NEIGHBOURHOOD PROJECT

One of the key findings from the first workshop was the use of temporary spaces as a way for community groups to learn, develop skills, identify needs, gather participants and build capacity for other space-related ambitions such as setting up community centres, parks or facilities. We developed this idea in relation to performance theory as ‘rehearsal’, where groups that had ambitions in relation to space could use *meanwhile* opportunities as a rehearsal space for larger or more permanent spaces.

We wanted to test this notion and to see how we might model the process so that community groups could use it. Looking for a group that had space-related ambitions and might be interested in trying out their ideas in a temporary space, we approached a residents group that we knew had ambitions to open a youth centre in their neighbourhood in Leeds, northern England. It transpired that the groups ideas had moved on from a youth centre, and that their current interest was in making a community orchard on a piece of land that had been cleared for rebuilding and then left empty. We introduced our theory of rehearsal in *meanwhile* spaces to group representatives who agreed that this might be an appropriate vehicle for helping them move towards their community orchard idea. The principal researcher then worked with them to run a three day garden building event (in October 2012) and followed the progress of the group in terms of learning skills that would help them with the larger orchard project. Fig. 2 shows the small garden site before work started and during the event.

The initiators of the community work were already established as a residents group that ran local events such as playschemes during school holidays and a summer festival. Five members of the group met regularly at planning meetings in the weeks before the event, joined by researchers and a community arts worker who had previous experience of community

gardening. Although the input from the research project did affect the process that the group adopted for launching their gardening ambitions, the main role of the researcher was to study the interactions of the group and intervene only as a member of the gardening team, not try to steer outcomes or impose solutions. The question being tackled was: does the idea of rehearsal in this smaller space help the group deal with scaling up? This could only be studied by a light touch process which allowed the effects of the small-scale gardening project to play out.



Figure 2: The community garden site before and during the event.

During the three days of the event, the planning team brought in members of the residents group to help with the work and activity in the space also attracted the attention of passing local residents who then became involved. The space provided a highly visible stage-like space, as it was located directly behind a busy parade of shops and a doctors surgery, and was surrounded by roads on three sides.

Through the event, the site was transformed from a derelict site covered in weeds and debris to a site that had been completely dug over, all debris and contaminated soil removed and fresh topsoil dug in as beds for growing vegetables and herbs as Fig. 2 shows. A few days after the event a fence was built.

After the event, there was a review meeting and the impact of the process was discussed with many of the

participants. Materially, there was now a cleared patch with plants in place for the following spring, achieved by the collaboration of people in the area. However, the impact was also felt on less visible community assets. Most dramatically, the group reached the conclusion that the orchard idea was completely beyond the capacity of the group to implement!

We now go on to consider the key points that arose from the collaborative evaluation.

#### ANALYSIS

In analysing the experience gained, we can take a short-term view of the rehearsal and what it achieved, and a longer term view of how this contributed to the group's understanding of itself.

One of the main points that the group raised in their reflective discussion was that they were surprised at the level of involvement from people that lived on the streets around the site. Many of these were people that the residents group had struggled to engage in community activities in the past. By being present and active within the site and by having something there that people could do and join in with, the activity supported conversations and the building of relationships. Many people were reluctant to get involved on initial contact with the project, but took little persuasion to join in, and some started on small entry-level activities such as making tea, which then led to further involvement and digging the ground and building beds. It was pointed out as important that people could just join in without needing asked or seek permission, and people could join on their own terms. For example, one person did not want to do any gardening but was a keen photographer so was encouraged to bring his camera and document the project, adding an element of spectacle. Easily negotiable boundaries to different levels of involvement enabled people to act at levels at which they felt comfortable without having to verbally negotiate or seek permission. We saw several permeable boundaries over the three days, between involvement in the performance (e.g. digging), an engaged audience stance (e.g. talking to people who are digging), a connected, but distanced audience stance (e.g. shouting at people digging) and a passive audience stance (e.g. looking and walking past).

The event provided great opportunities for practical learning, such as what types of equipment were needed, how much equipment, what types of construction materials and how to build with them, and, importantly, how to facilitate engagement. For example, volunteers said that the spades were too heavy and the gloves were too big for some people so, to make it easier for everyone to take part, they needed a variety of equipment available. Much of this was done through discussion, skill sharing and sourcing local knowledge and expertise. Finding ways to make things happen became part of the relationship and community building and an opportunity for people to get involved and

publicly enact their participation in the project - and therefore their community.

One activity that was a source of a great deal of discussion and learning was the construction of a fence around the site. In planning meetings before the event much time was spent talking about how high and what type of fence was needed and the effect it might have on the sense of ownership and access to the space. Due to last minute 'disasters', the planned fence was not in place, but this led to discussions on site and the mobilisation of local networks to make sure that a fence was erected soon after the event to protect the work that had been done. The benefit of this was that a local builder built the fence, thus strengthening the links to local businesses and residents (the builder was a friend of one of the residents on the street).

Interesting discussions were had around the duration of the event. There was undoubtedly value in having a three day event to achieve goals; further it also allowed people to observe it, consider it and still join in before it ended. In the reflective discussion, it was noted that there was a visible transition from people passing by and saying hello to coming and taking part. It was also noted that the project started too early in the morning: activity in the street seemed to happen more after lunchtime and then into the late afternoon, rather than in the morning. Group leaders who had committed to taking part for the full three days found it too tiring and, by the third day, said that they were not able 'to give it their best'. This insight into the physical demands of the activity was useful in terms of planning future activities, but it also gave a sense of achievement and allowed for an ebb and flow of different participants at different times. Having the event within a discrete envelope of time did enable an 'eventness' to be set up through planning and distribution of flyers and spreading the word. When the time came, there was a rallying point for people to join in and perform a very visible and active engagement in the project. Food and drink also became part of the team effort as a rota was agreed for group members to make soup for lunch, and then people took turns to make hot drinks for the volunteers.

Some of the group members that organised the project were experienced in organising community activities. They commented that normally they would have done more detailed planning of what would happen on the site, but that there had been benefits to having a very open plan. For example, the layout of the beds was determined through the efforts of one resident who started to dig a certain layout that he thought would protect the site from water damage. Another resident disagreed with his approach but, through negotiation, the group was (amicably) able to agree on a compromise design that incorporated both residents' points of view while reflecting the ideas of multiple residents. This ad-hoc development gave more space for incorporating perspectives on the fly, making the resolution of design choices a publicly accessible event. The particular benefits of this serendipitous decision-

making were evidenced when the residents were invited to the follow-up meeting in a local pub (about 10 minutes' walk away from the site). None came. At this point, the organising group decided that it would no longer have any separate planning meetings and that all decisions about the garden would be made on site with the residents. It was decided that the combination of visibility and activity was important for engaging people in the site and in supporting ownership. Although this may have slowed down production, it enabled a more equitable outcome.

And while all these features of the event had a theatricality that was useful to exploit for scaling up and considering further activity, the most powerful element of the 'rehearsal' was the insight it gave that the 'main production' would call for more resources than the group can muster at present. Not only would the undertaking require a lot of work in the setting up, but the maintenance and aftercare would be beyond their scope in their current formation.

This insight opened up the chance to consider how to progress. Further 'rehearsals' could be used to increase participation and look for an organisational structure that could sustain an orchard, or the group could take its learning in another direction and produce a more modest set of long-term ambitions to improve the neighbourhood. This was powerful learning about capacity and will take some time to consider – next steps were still under review at time of writing.

## DISCUSSION

We share this analysis of community practice and the interventions of the Meanwhile Use As Performance project to help understand how innovation can be supported at a grass-roots level, and to reflect on our use of theory within that. Blending theory and design research into practice, we show how a theoretical framing can be turned into a useful intervention to help small groups consider their resources actively and gain powerful experience without committing themselves beyond their capacity. Our model was drawn from collaborative analysis with many practitioners, based on a research question that took insights from one domain (performance theory) and applied them to another (community innovation). It was tested by intervention with a further group to see if this analysis had practical benefit. Early evidence suggests that it does.

There are several features worth reflecting upon as part of discussing the outcomes of this work.

In terms of learning about social innovation, the experience resulted in a gradual unfolding of openness in the design of the gardening project, of the space, and the groups' own ways of working. Their new approach to community action has taken on strongly performative dimensions, by emphasising more visible activities in open spaces which allow community residents more freedom to perform their engagement with the group. Through taking this performative perspective, new



pathways for incorporating newcomers have been opened up and enabled community organisers to engage with people that in the past have not participated in community activities.

Reflecting on the relationship between research and practice we used a co-research methodology of bringing together practitioners to consider practice at workshops. Indeed, our approach raises questions around the nature of design anthropology – using Koskinen et al.'s (2011) distinctions between laboratory, field and showroom in design research, can we create laboratory moments that are still ethnographic? Once we had worked together to articulate the process of innovation, we applied it in the field. Research became intervention, and, in turn, ways of innovation become more designerly: we embedded a more iterative process into the approach of the group and we saw them become more calculating. In this respect, we were bringing design skills into community action and our interventions softened the line between observation and participation.

On the role of theory within the practice-based research approach we can note that the ideas of performativity and temporality drawn from performance theory provided common ground for the multi-disciplinary research team. It allowed us articulate concepts and explore diverse perspectives on what was happening within the project. The theory was present and useful throughout. It enabled a deepening of understanding as the ideas grew from performance to rehearsal to devising. It acted as both a conceptual framework that provided structure from the beginning of the project and a sounding board to shape new thinking as the project developed. In conclusion, we feel that this project illustrates a relationship between theory and practice that is unusual but valuable.

As a research team, we hope that there will be more research in this area, both in our own practice and in that of others who may now identify similar tendencies, and that we have helped to make explicit a useful practice. But there are many questions left begging:

People who will broker meanwhile use relationships are needed. There is a role for a 'managing agent' – identifying space; generating potential usage/ideas, finding tenant-users, drawing in finance and being the project enabler. But who will be the intermediaries? How might we create partnerships and coalitions of stakeholders to make things happen and provide expertise and resources, including funding? What is the potential use of technology and the internet for brokering?

There are also questions around the timing and sequencing of events – whether a space becomes a catalyst for something to happen or if groups are already forming and looking for space. Different models no doubt apply depending on multiple factors.

In the meantime, we have some evidence that framing community action with performance can lead to more

articulated innovation processes, greater confidence to innovate and more manageable assets.

"[In] its most archaic sense, theatre is the capacity possessed by human beings... to observe themselves in action. Humans are capable of seeing themselves in the act of seeing, of thinking their emotions, of being moved by their thoughts. They can see themselves here and imagine themselves there; they can see themselves today and imagine themselves tomorrow." (Boal 1992: xxvi)

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