

Investigating strategies for delivering change through the practice of co-design with communities in the Northern Ireland context.

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1 Introduction

Little research has yet been undertaken on how co-design approaches might support Northern Irish communities to challenge power imbalances while identifying solutions to address the urgent and complex needs that exist within their areas. The PhD research proposes that awareness of and exposure to co-design processes will support communities in Northern Ireland to frame and develop long term strategic goals towards social transformation. In doing so the research focuses on three areas: how the local context might affect a co-design process, the components necessary to create a space that nurtures co-creation for social transformation, and the relational facets within a community-based co-design process between the actors engaged.

This research has emerged from the researcher's experience of working in community development in Northern Ireland and a desire to better understand how we might collaboratively design with communities to imagine alternative futures and create social transformation.

Northern Ireland has a complex history. 25 years on since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, that paved the way for peace following a horrific period of violence, the walls, both real and perceived, remain. While it is important to continue to address the legacy of the conflict and the trauma of the past it is also important to imagine alternative futures of possibility. This research seeks to create a space where, through collective imagination, those futures can be envisioned.



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Figure 1. Alexandra Park is believed to be the only park in western Europe to be divided by a wall. The ‘peace wall’, erected in 1994, was built in an attempt to prevent violence between Nationalist/Republican and Unionist/Loyalist communities. A gate linking the two communities was installed in 2011.

Co-design enables an ongoing, open-ended process (Mattelmäki et al, 2011; Manzini, 2015) to collectively imagine what is possible and create “landscapes of future experiences” (Salmi and Mattelmäki, 2021, p. 105). The research promotes a co-design process that is responsive and iterative; responding to the context, reflecting on learning and adapting to new insights. Underpinning the research is a phenomenological approach to co-design that emphasises experiential, lived aspects of the process, requiring the designer to “step into the ‘in-between’ space that is dynamic, emergent and relational” (Akama & Prendeville, 2013, p. 32).

2 Methodology

Fieldwork will be undertaken in three phases through a multi-methods approach. The first two exploratory phases will develop an understanding of co-design in practice through semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups with individuals from local government, voluntary and community sectors and local and international co-design practitioners. The third phase will capture the creative and generative process of co-design, embedded within a place-based community. The researcher intends to work with the community to explore how a series of workshops might support them to imagine the kind of future they want to live in and become empowered with enhanced capacity and skills to take steps towards creating that future.

Participatory Action Research (PAR), conducted through a single-case study, will guide the direction, content and output of the research. It will explore the “complex interweaving” of connections and “entangled interactions” (Salmi and Mattelmäki, 2021, p. 104, p. 101) of collaborators from different backgrounds, perspectives and areas of expertise engaged in a community-based collective participatory research process and how these can lead to social transformation.

3 Expected outcomes and knowledge contribution

Once complete the research will contribute to the field of design studies and, in particular, to co-creative design methodologies, holding a focus on the practice of community-based co-design in the

Northern Ireland context. The research will illuminate how co-design can acknowledge and address power imbalances, amplifying the voices and increasing agency of those with lived experience of complex problems while raising awareness and engagement about urgent issues within communities.

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