

Jun 25th, 9:00 AM

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Citation

Alexiou, K., Zamenopoulos, T., Hale, V., and de Sousa, S. (2022) Incubating civic leadership in design: The role of cross-pollination spaces, in Lockton, D., Lenzi, S., Hekkert, P., Oak, A., Sádaba, J., Lloyd, P. (eds.), *DRS2022: Bilbao*, 25 June - 3 July, Bilbao, Spain. <https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2022.575>

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Incubating civic leadership in design: The role of cross-pollination spaces

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doi.org/10.21606/drs.2022.575

Abstract: The paper explores the hypothesis that access to places that enhance capabilities for co-design work across sectors, is an important vehicle for incubating and supporting civic leadership. More specifically, the paper reports insights from a study which created ‘cross-pollination’ spaces to bring together academic and non-academic individuals from different backgrounds, disciplines, and sectors to explore the notion of incubating civic leadership and to develop pop-up interventions to test ideas for incubating civic leadership in two locations in the UK. Drawing on the reflections of participants collected through group reflection spaces and through individual interviews, the study identifies a number of common themes which help understand the value of cross-pollination spaces, but also the barriers and enablers of civic design leadership. As such, the study contributes to both the theory and practice of co-design within and with communities across sectors.

Keywords: co-design; civic leadership; cross-pollination; empowerment

1. Introduction

The value of creative civic leadership in developing innovations to deal with complex social issues and create sustainable local places is increasingly recognised (Hargreaves and Hartley, 2016; Timms and Heimans, 2018). The creative power of civic leadership stems from the connected capabilities of individuals, community groups and different types of organisations, such as social enterprises, voluntary sector organisations and public sector bodies, universities, local media, local businesses and local governments (Carayannis et al. 2019). Design is often an important part of creative civic leadership: ‘civic design leadership’ refers to the collective capability of people to carry out design work that is required to shape and develop civic action.

The meaning and scope of civic design leadership is particularly evident during the COVID19 pandemic: local communities and organisations quickly organised themselves to co-design and co-deliver a variety of initiatives. For instance, these include the co-design and co-creation of support networks to deliver food and medicine to the most vulnerable people; the



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creation of support lines to alleviate mental health issues; the co-design of activities for raising money for health care workers; and the co-creation of digital hubs for validating information about the coronavirus (Gov.UK, 2020; Alakeson and Brett 2020; McCarthy, 2020; Pelter, 2020; Wang and Hernández, 2020).

Recent research in the UK during the pandemic (Pye, et al, 2020) points to the fact that there are certain conditions that enable or hinder such initiatives to form and operate effectively and sustainably. Such conditions include social capital, time, and support from local and national government through funding, expertise and policy interventions. For example, a study by New Local, a think tank and network of local councils focussed on transforming public services and unlocking community power (Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020) found that Mutual Aid groups that emerged during the pandemic, were more heavily concentrated in areas where large numbers of working-age people could participate in them, or where people were wealthier and better-educated. In rural areas and places that were less wealthy, community activists, existing networks and institutions such as churches, banks and rotary clubs, played a prominent role on instigating civic design leadership. Mutual Aid groups flourished in places which possessed 'abundant community assets where people of different backgrounds were able to 'meet and mix', such as community centres, libraries and parks. This engagement in public spaces occurred, despite increased digital interaction generated during the pandemic.

Another key issue affecting the formation and operation of Mutual Aid groups was their relationship with local councils. Some local authorities were an invaluable partner and source of expertise, whilst other councils were criticised for being controlling due to their hyper-rigorous safeguarding processes and protective regulations. Many Mutual Aid groups viewed local government as an obstacle to their efforts, or as a parallel support system. Also, in some parts of the UK, the response of local authorities was one of indifference or dismissal, which in turn, drove many Mutual Aid groups to engage more independently with other institutions and organisations (ibid).

New Local's report suggests that more power should be given to communities and that councils should play a facilitating role in helping them to develop civic action initiatives.

This discussion links to a fundamental discourse around what civic design leadership means (e.g. Couto, 2014) and how we can move to a more 'integrative' form of leadership which is predicated on cross-sector collaboration (Bryson and Crosby, 1992; Chrislip and Larson, 1994; Crosby and Bryson, 2010). It also relates to literature focussed on co-design, community design or participatory design as a form of empowerment – a practice that enables people to participate or engage in design processes that influence their own lives (Zamenopoulos and Alexiou, 2018; Toker 2007; Erther et al, 2010). Literature has remained less directly connected to debates around civic leadership and the focus is often placed on practices of engagement (particularly to design public services, e.g. Hambleton, 2019; Salinas et al, 2018) rather than the very question of how an 'integrative' mode of civic design leadership can be instigated in the first place.

In this study, the hypothesis is that access to places that enhance capabilities for co-design work across sectors, is an important vehicle for incubating and supporting civic design leadership. The paper focusses on a particular form of co-design places – ‘cross-pollination’ places – and explores its value in ‘incubating’ civic design leadership.

Cross-pollination was originally developed as part of a research project called Scaling up Co-design Research and Practice. The project created spaces where individuals from different backgrounds, disciplines, or sectors had the opportunity to work together to create a sharing economy of ideas, projects and resources, by framing and utilising their different, and sometimes conflicting, interests and agendas. The key principles behind the formation of these places were: openness, providing opportunities for safe experimentation, building on existing assets and projects and working to develop shared values (Zamenopoulos et al, 2021).

Cross-pollination was used in this study as part of a knowledge exchange project focussed on connecting the experiences, knowledge and networks of community and academic partners in order to explore and prototype new processes and infrastructures that incubate and enable civic leadership. The project partners were The Glass-House Community Led Design (GH) and Knowle West Media Centre (KWMC). The collaboration led to two ‘pop-up’ interventions in two locations, one in Redbridge, East London and one in Knowle West, Bristol in collaboration with local partners.

The study sought to answer the following questions:

- What is the value of cross-pollination places? This question focusses on understanding what participants gained individually and as a group and how (and in what sense) access to cross-pollination spaces contributed to the formation of integrative civic leadership in design.
- What are the conditions affecting integrative civic leadership in design? This question focusses on identifying the specific barriers and enablers of integrative civic leadership in these cases, based on the participants’ own understanding.

The paper discusses the study in detail and presents insights relating to the research questions above. The analysis is based on reflections of participants collected through online reflection spaces and individual interviews. The insights from this paper serve to raise awareness of the practical barriers different civic actors are facing in their efforts to formulate and run design initiatives in local places, and how these barriers may be overcome through an approach that focusses on empowerment. As such, the paper hopes to contribute to both the theory and practice of co-design within and with communities across sectors.

2. Methodology

The study used co-design as an approach to deriving knowledge ‘in and through action and reflection’ (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002) and through experimentation (Zamenopoulos and Alexiou, 2018). This type of research is inherently abductive (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012) in that it aims to explore the feasibility of a certain reality (i.e. that cross-pollination places

can contribute in the formation of integrative civic design leadership) by constructing that reality and exploring its value and meaning. In this particular case, the focus was on cross-pollination. The research involved academic and non-academic partners who connected their knowledge and capabilities in order to reflect on the notion of civic design leadership and the conditions that enable and to collaboratively develop initiatives and test their ideas in their local places. The project lasted under a year from October to July 2021.

2.1 The research team

The research team had a layered organisation. There was an 'enabling' team consisting of four people (the authors, representing academic and non-academic interests), who were responsible for project management and providing the infrastructures needed. This included designing the online spaces and prompts, facilitating the conversations, and collecting additional data through interviews. The 'core research team' had a broader membership of those involved in the funding application including the academics and the two project partners (GH and KWMC). Finally, there was a 'wider research team' which additionally included the local partners in Redbridge and Knowle West. Some members of the team participated in all activities and some members participated only in a few activities. There were twenty people in total in the wider research team who participated in one way or another.

2.2 Cross-pollination places

Cross-pollination places were realised as digital and physical spaces that facilitated *sharing, connecting, framing and cascading*. Online spaces were hosted on MIRO.

Sharing: an online workshop where participants shared their interests, and their aspirations for what the project could achieve. The focus was on the concept of civic leadership and the notion of 'incubator'. Participants also shared their values and principles of collaboration as a basis for establishing a collaborative way of working.

Connecting: an online workshop where participants further interrogated different perceptions of the core terms focussed more on objectives and mechanisms for incubating civic leadership. The aim was to draw connections and identify areas of common interest.

Framing: an online workshop where participants reflected on the key insights from the connecting workshop and formulated a provisional definition of what an incubator could be and do. This included creating a shared picture of the principles, aims, participants and mechanisms of incubation and a reflection on the unique contribution of such a construct (see Figure 1). The second part of the workshop was specifically dedicated to defining a plan of activities in order to cascade and experiment with these ideas through small actions/interventions.

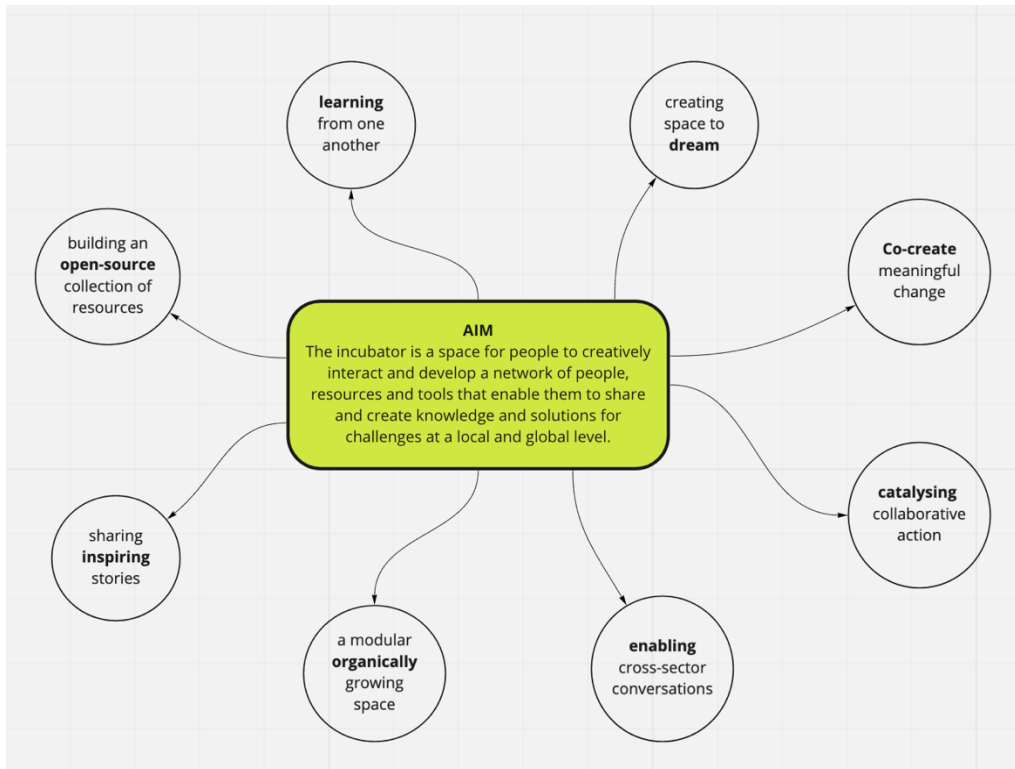


Figure 1. A graphic representation of the incubator

Cascading: a network of workshops and activities with the wider research team according to the plan that was collaboratively defined previously. It included:

- **Concept exploration**: this included individual conversations with local partners facilitated by a project partner and at least one academic. The aim was to understand the local context and objectives and what engaging in a small ‘pilot’ project to prototype a version of the incubator might be mean to them.
- **Co-design workshop**: this brought the wider research team together (with locally-based partners) in an online workshop to basically go through the first three phases of sharing, connecting and framing together and co-create some ideas for local pilot projects.
- **Prototyping**: this was the stage in which the local partners delivered their pilot projects (pop-up activities) individually in their locations with the support the project partners and members of the academic team. The prototyping stage lasted for 5 months and each pilot project received a small amount of funding (£2.5K) to complement existing resources. Each pilot had a choice on how to use the funds.
- **Final sharing and reflection**: this was an online workshop which brought together the wider research team again, as well as some external critical friends, to share their experiences with their interventions and reflect on what we have collectively learned.

2.3 Data collection

Reflection was integral in the two workshops that brought the wider research team together, that is, in the 'co-design/cross-pollination' workshop and in the 'sharing and reflection' workshop. Participants were asked to reflect on what they've learned and also to give feedback on the process. Additionally, the core research team met at the end of the project to discuss and consolidate individual reflection. Furthermore, individual interviews with the non-academic project partners and locally-based partners were conducted to learn from their experiences, understand perceived barriers and opportunities and interrogate the benefits of the whole project for themselves and their communities, and for the objective of incubating civic leadership.

Data included audio and video recordings of the conversations and any notes or images posted on the whiteboards.

3. The pilot projects

Before we go into the insights derived from the research it is necessary to provide some background information about the pilot projects and the local partners involved.

In Redbridge, London, the partners included members of the local authority and a community leader running a sports-centred local service for young people called Muslimah Sports Association. The local authority had recently completed a Growth Commission focused on exploring ways to improve how growth happens in the borough, and were keen to start engaging with their communities to deliver place-based action. Through the project the group started exploring the idea of experimenting with the provision of a council space for 'meanwhile use' as a tool to instigate young people engagement and leadership. The pilot included an online creative workshop to explore the potential for young people to co-design, lead and manage an initiative for temporary uses for one or more public spaces in Redbridge. The final experiment was a pop-up 'urban activation' event in Ilford town centre to explore how a temporary activity to transform and use a space differently can get people interested in how we shape and use our shared public spaces.

In Bristol, the partners were affiliated with Knowle West Alliance and the Filwood Broadway working group, but a member of the local council was also involved in the activities. The pilot location is a place with historical significance for the local community in Knowle West, however has suffered from deprivation and lack of investment in the provision of services and infrastructures. The group was formed to ensure that the local community have a voice in the regeneration of the area, and wanted to see people using the space in positive ways. Through the project activities the group decided to experiment with setting up a stall at the local monthly market. They used the stall as a space to have conversations about the future of the place and get more local people actively involved with the activities of the group. While the stall was hired for a year, the study focusses on what happened in the first couple of months of its operation.



Figure 2. Photos from the two pilot projects

In addition to these local partners, other people were also involved to work with or support the pilot projects at different times, for example, a youth worker engaged in the creative workshop with young people in Redbridge, and the market organiser also attended meetings to help with the stall.

The two pilot projects can both be described as pop-up interventions, given their duration and temporary character, which introduces an interesting dimension in the exploration of the barriers and enablers of civic leadership in local places.

4. Incubating civic leadership through cross-pollination: Emerging insights

Below we present some themes that were identified by the participants in group reflection sessions and interviews as described above. Then we synthesise and summarise the results in relation to the research questions.

4.1 Theme 1: Spaces for mutual learning and development of skills

One of the most common themes identified in the discussions was that of mutual learning, or learning from one another.

This was an original motivation for many of the participants joining in the project in the first place. One of the local council officers in Redbridge discussed that their motivation was to learn from other organisations and ‘bring a non-council perspective into what is often council-led’. They found the cross-pollination method useful for community organising, and saw it as a ‘structured way to facilitate conversation’ and ‘draw local interests towards a sense of a shared outcome’. In their interview, the community leader in Knowle West also reported that they found that the sharing of experiences with the other group helped reflect on the

good and bad things, and provided a 'reality check'. The community leader involved in the Redbridge pilot also valued learning from the experiences of the other group who already had a foundation for this work. They reported that the project was an 'eye opener' as it showed them 'how much work is involved in getting projects off the ground' and that there are people who want to empower others but 'the community doesn't realise'.

There was a variety of things that participants also reported learning individually. One of the community leaders reported that they found it useful to 'learn about engagement techniques' and felt that they personally changed: while being used to often making decisions themselves they found they now 'try to make other people make decisions' and 'be more collaborative' in their outlook. Another found that the project 'opened doors' for them with people in the council and created new connections. A third community member reported that the project 'helped open up the wider picture'. A council officer reported gaining 'practical knowledge around organising event' and learning 'not to wait for others' to do something and bring new voices in.

4.2 Theme 2: Safe spaces for experimentation

Another common theme was the notion of a safe space. A council officer, reflected on the notion of "creating comfortable spaces or safe spaces for things to happen". "I guess that's what we could call this space as well (...) and I think today has been a bit of a model for something that we could apply elsewhere. But I also think there's (...) some overlap between comfortable spaces and brave spaces as well, spaces where there's room for possibly quite difficult questions, where there's room for local politics to play out (...) and for disrupting our assumptions that we have come with". The risks associated with this change were also acknowledged (for example risk to the reputation of community leaders), but there was a shared sense that community and local authorities 'need to work together'. The council officer found that the 'sense of playfulness' that the urban activation event in Redbridge incorporated, was both 'important' and 'profound'. The pilot was for them an 'experiment' which gave 'more confidence over their remit' and more 'security in the key relationships' with residents and local community groups. The community leader in Redbridge also recognised the value of 'trial and error', and comments from academic and non-academic participants also pointed to the value of having access to 'research spaces' as somewhat neutral spaces that provide 'a safe space to have an experiment'.

4.3 Theme 3: Spaces for developing a shared language

An important theme that emerged in the conversations from a community perspective, and which related to communication, was the issue of language. As a community member noted: "The language bit is very important because us on the street, we have a different type of language". This participant talked about the difficulty of understanding the language of social workers, or those that are 'educated,' which 'puts off' people on the street, and so urged everyone to 'keep it simple, as we're all on the same page'.

The Knowle West partner reflected on their own role as a community anchor organisation facilitating communication between different parties: 'The challenges are around communication, between what the community want and what the council want... They are similar, but they're kind of communicated in a different way (...) It's enabling a space where the two can talk to each other, and there's people in the middle who can help facilitate that discussion and help weather the challenges'.

4.4 Theme 4: Inclusive spaces

The issue of language was also raised in relation to connecting different generations. The Redbridge group discussed the challenges of engaging young people in the online workshop and reflected on the importance of timing (how it fits around occasions such as school exams, time of the day etc) as well as channels of communication (for example social networking tools that different generations use). One part of the discussion focussed on notions of inclusion and exclusion challenging the idea that young people should be bracketed in a specific way, on the basis of their age, and debating the idea of cross-generational and intergenerational collaboration. In the final reflection, when asked where they see themselves in the future, a local authority officer responded: "So the things that we can perhaps think about for our next, you know, our next sort of intervention [is] just to try and make it a little bit more inclusive and spaces that people would like to come and join us and share more of their ideas".

Participants also reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of digital versus physical spaces, e.g. how digital spaces may increase participation but may also be excluding of certain communities, or how connections across spaces in a digital space interact with the more local locally grounded, social interactions in physical spaces. One older member of the group suggested that media can be a bit difficult for some and an emphasis on technical issues 'can alienate people'. All participants were in agreement that an incubator should embody physical and digital spaces and interactions.

Recognition of diverse languages, perspectives and agendas was also a key aspect discussed in relation to the incubator. As one participant put it: "... Incubator is a space where everyone's equal and everyone's view is valid, but how you manage that process (...) when you're bringing people together who come from very different backgrounds and perhaps come with different agendas, is that time to get to know each other, and understand how, what interests each other and good listening to each other and kind of seeing from different people's point of view. And that does take time".

4.5 Theme 5: Time and resources for reflection and action

As the quote above introduced, time and resources for reflection and action was also an important theme. The Knowle West group explicitly commented on the opportunity that the small fund of the project gave them to pay for a stall in the monthly market which in turn enabled them to start raising the profile of the group and letting people know that they are

there and that they could join. They were also able to pay for some staff time, and for materials such a banner for the group and arts and crafts materials. The creative activities available also allowed young people to engage, who are usually not drawn to traditional consultation exercises, and have a say about the changes they would like to see.

One participant in Knowle West said that the limitation of time was an important challenge for their pilot project, but also pushed people to realise that any contribution they can make, however small, it can be useful for the community going forward. Another said that despite its limited time, the project helped the group 'get something really tangible out of it', it created a focus and they were able to reach out and get more volunteers. It also helped with communications, testing of ideas, and encouraged people to take up different roles.

4.6 Theme 6: Organic growth

Linking to the theme of time, but also experimentation, was a theme which we can call 'organic growth' or 'small steps'.

One participant from Knowle West remarked that their project 'had a legacy', it started with something that's already there, and in the process developed something which they can carry on doing. They thought that small steps were critical for building momentum and the funding also helped provide a 'structure' and a 'focus' for their project. Another participant talked about how 'once a little project starts, others start connecting' and 'become more interested' and this creates momentum. Thinking about how civic leadership can be instigated they recommended "starting by supporting something in the community, which the community wants to do. Start things off locally and the momentum grows locally and then suddenly starts to cascade over into other communities".

The participant from the community organisation in Redbridge had similar sentiments: "So it started out as a small thing. And it's now snowballed into where we can maybe start other projects and be involved in that. So hopefully, it turns into something much bigger, and we have a more established space or group of people to take this on".

4.7 Theme 7: Empowering spaces

Throughout the workshops and in individual interviews, participants referred to notion of ownership, leadership and power. A local authority officer in Redbridge talked about pitching the offer of leadership to young people "we can pitch this in a way that emphasises the responsibility of it, and there are ways that (...) emphasise other things that may be more attractive." This focussed on the notion of power, on inviting and giving permission to young people to change their public space, with a community member commenting that "(...)if you look at history, power has never been given, it's always had to be taken by, by some means or another (...) So that's, you know, as much as we'd like to think power is given, it's never really given. No, you have to be very clear about how you take. And then when you do take it, there is a responsibility that goes with it, which a lot of people don't seem to understand. They think power is power, and they can do what they like. It doesn't work that way..."

Participants talked at length about the effects of history and ingrained relations and perspectives. A community member talked about the community's perspective of their power to influence change: "But the biggest challenge I found at the moment is that when I speak to, you know, the residents and the community members (...) the answer is 'not allowed'. And I said 'not allowed, what's not allowed?' 'what you're asking us to do'. So I am trying to get to the bottom of why they think is not allowed. And I guess from some throwaway comments (...) is about how people have been disillusioned with the promises in the past. (...) I'm really battling to try and sort of turn this around, to give people the confidence to be able to say they have a voice, because they do have a voice. But they won't use it because it's not allowed. So I'm trying, I'm working on that sort of premise at the moment to try and get them to think why it's not allowed and why they think they couldn't, can't do it". A local council official reflected on the changing role of the council: 'For me it really is fundamentally about that relationship between the council and its residents (...) The relationship has been we ask the council to do something, we want the council to come and do stuff for us, and that actually shouldn't be that relationship. It is about empowering (...) It is about a different conversation'. The changing role of the local council has meant that they are not able to do things *for* people in the community, instead looking at how they can build 'a social network' that would enable people in the community 'to do things for themselves'. This would require a systemic change to shift existing expectations and to build trust. Participants discussed about local authorities being more open to giving some 'breathing space' and greatest ownership to the community at the face of a prevailing 'done to mentality'. Another participant added: "that may well be that in a year's time, we don't hear the not allowed, we hear the Yeah, we can do this. And I'm part of the x working group as well. And I helped to achieve that new development or (...) that new bench is there, because that was an idea I put down in an engagement thing. So I think for me is people feeling that they are part of the bigger picture, that's where I would like to see it in a year's time".

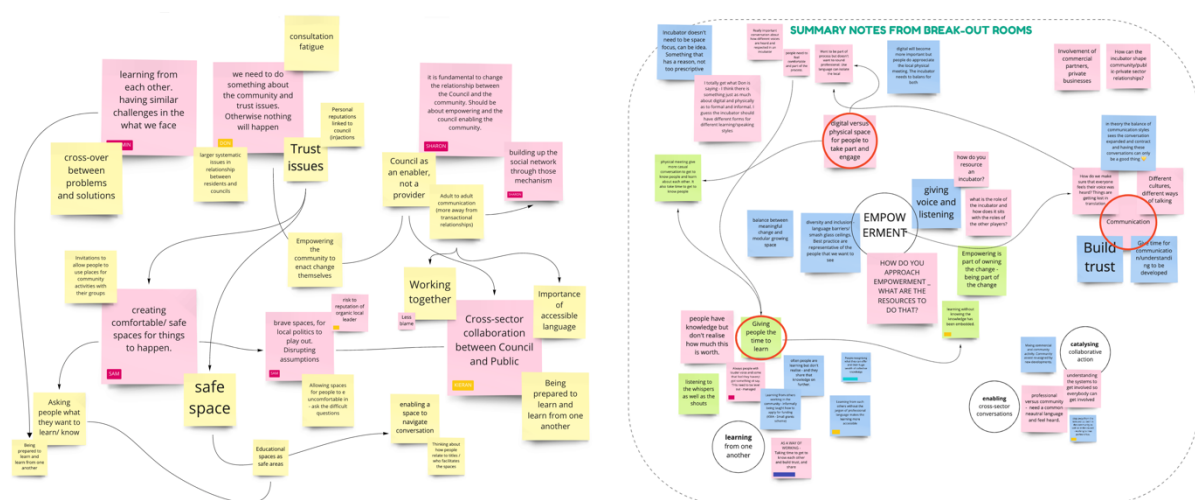


Figure 3. Images from the Miro boards summarising group reflections

4.8 Summary

In sum, the collective and individual reflections revealed important points about the barriers and enablers of civic leadership. Participants experienced difficulties in communication due to different terms or expressions used and discussed how these differences may inadvertently disengage or alienate certain groups of people. However, it also became apparent that the diversity of languages, histories, mindsets and agendas can also be a source of power: individuals reported that this diversity helped them understand and frame their own thinking, and their position and contribution to a collective initiative. It also helped them as a group to practically progress their local initiatives. Nevertheless, the positive effects of diversity were conditional to being able to safely express themselves, but also listen and learn from others. Participants commented time and again about the importance of giving the time for sharing and reflection, and for ideas to grow organically as two important conditions for incubating civic design leadership.

The value of cross-pollination hinges exactly on its focus on creating a safe space and (funded) time for people to experiment, to learn from another, to build connections and to incubate ideas. Participants reported that cross-pollination also has many personal benefits, like building skills and new understanding, and indeed empowering people to take initiative and lead change. In fact, the value of cross-pollination as a process, was found to be above all that of empowerment; cross-pollination and co-design more generally have a massive potential to help disturb and reorder existing power relations, creating new ways of working and new ways of being.

5. Discussion

The motivation behind this paper was to raise awareness of the practical barriers different civic actors face in their efforts to formulate and run design initiatives in local places, and how these barriers may be overcome. Some of the seven themes that emerged from the analysis are more expected and have become perhaps more accepted through the years (at least in principle), such as mutual learning, inclusivity, or experimentation. Other themes, such as that of organic growth, are less prevalent, despite a raising interest in approaches that recognise and build on existing local assets (resources, knowledge, skills, projects etc). Similarly, while the notion of reflection is very central in design and co-design research and practice, actual opportunities for reflection are scarce. Both organic growth and reflexivity are bounded by limitations in time and financial resources, and this is in our view an important point to raise, not only among designers, but also among funders and policy makers. The study participants talked in length about the importance of transcending existing mindsets, power relationships, norms and cultures (including language) to create real opportunities for people from different sectors to come together in an organic way and engage in civic action. We propose that the notion of empowering spaces is incredibly critical. By focussing on the notion of space, we shift attention from methods and mechanics of facilitation and community engagement (which are often the focus of co-design studies) to the conditions that enable people to develop and enhance their design capabilities, and their capabilities to

engender change. Although we relate space to the notion of infrastructure often used in participatory design, we see that the notion of space moves the emphasis from the act of (re-)constructing socio-technical assemblies, to the more essential act of (re-)constructing the boundaries (or degrees of freedom) of those assemblies.

Acknowledgements: The research reported here was funded through Research England's Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) allocation to the Open University. We thank all the participants for engaging with the project and sharing their learning.

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