

Weaving People and Places: Art and Design for Resilient Communities

Background: Cultures of Resilience—a Cultural Experiment

Contemporary societies are fragile.¹ This fragility has different causes, but a major contributor is the lack of social cohesion within them; or more precisely, their low degree of social resilience.²

The problem is particularly evident when a catastrophic event happens; but it can also be recognized in everyday life events, such as those associated with the economic crisis or the migrant flows across Europe and worldwide. In all these cases, a lack of social cohesion is apparent in breakdowns at every level from the micro scale of human encounters, to the macro level of society as a whole. On the other hand, both theory and empirical evidence indicate that “significant benefits can arise from collaborative forms of governance that foster self-organization and flexibility.”³ Robert Sampson’s account of the “enduring neighborhood effect”⁴ evidences that at the neighborhood scale, prosocial activity reduces antisocial activity and fosters greater community resilience. Sampson observes that those communities that have greater social and civic connectivity and activity respond better to catastrophic events. Tennis clubs become rescue centers and their members a connected network of support services. The barbecue equipment becomes a kitchen, the indoor courts a dormitory, the towels from the shower rooms bedding and bandages – the day to day is repurposed in response to the extreme. Adam Greenfield makes a similar observation about what he calls the “spontaneous infrastructure” that emerged during the Occupy networks’ relief response to Hurricane Sandy in 2012.⁵

What these authors observe is that, after a catastrophic event – when there are no longer normal ways of doing things, and when standard top-down communication collapses – people who know each other and know the place where they live are able to find a way of organizing themselves and making the best use of existing assets. Something similar can happen when facing acute economic and social crisis: networks of people living nearby and organized in open and flexible social networks can give each other not only fundamental practical and economic support, but also the psychological support needed to face difficult and unforeseen events with a sense of togetherness (this is exactly what is *not* happening today in Europe – the migrant issue is revealing a wider dimension of European social fragility).

We can summarize these observations by saying that social resilience requires the existence of groups of people who interact and collaborate in a physical context. Proximity and relationship with a place are what enable these people to self-organize and solve problems in a crisis.

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<http://www.journals.elsevier.com/she-ji-the-journal-of-design-economics-and-innovation>
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1 Rockefeller Foundation, “100 Resilient Cities,” accessed March 23, 2018, <https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/our-work/initiatives/100-resilient-cities/>; Stockholm Resilience Centre, “The Nine Planetary Boundaries,” accessed March 23, 2018, <http://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries/planetary-boundaries/about-the-research/the-nine-planetary-boundaries.html>; Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy, *Resilience: Why Things Bounce Back* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013); Nassim N. Taleb, *Antifragile: How to Live in a World We Don’t Understand* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

2 Markus Keck and Patrick Sakdapolrak define social resilience across three main dimensions: 1) *coping capacities*—the ability of social actors to cope with and overcome adversity; 2) *adaptive capacities*—their ability to learn from past experiences and adjust themselves to future challenges in their everyday lives; and 3) *transformative capacities*—their ability to craft sets of institutions that foster individual welfare and sustainable societal robustness towards future crises. Markus Keck and Patrick Sakdapolrak, “What is Social Resilience? Lessons Learned and Ways Forward,” *Erdkunde* 67, no. 1 (2013): 5–19, available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23595352>; Peter A. Hall and Michèle Lamont, eds., *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

3 Anglea Guerrero and her colleagues continue, “Our study provides empirical support for the ability of collaborative forms of governance to address the problem of fit, but also suggests that in some cases the establishment of bottom-up collaborative arrangements would likely benefit from specific guidance to facilitate the establishment of collaborations that better align with the ways ecological resources are interconnected across the landscape.” Angela M. Guerrero, Örjan Bodin, Ryan R. J. McAllister, and Kerri A. Wilson, “Achieving Social-Ecological Fit through Bottom-up Collaborative Governance: An Empirical Investigation,” *Ecology and Society* 20, no. 4 (2015): 41, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-08035-200441>; Daniel R. Curtis, *Coping with Crisis: The Resilience and Vulnerability of Pre-industrial Settlements* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

4 Robert J. Sampson, *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

5 Adam Greenfield, “Practices of the Minimum Viable Utopia,” *Architectural Design* 87, no. 1 (2017): 16–25, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ad.2127>.

6 Cultures of Resilience (CoR) was a two-year project at the University of the Arts London (UAL). It gathered together staff and students from across the University. Its coordinators were Ezio Manzini, Chair Professor at UAL and President of DESIS Network; Nick Bell, Chair Professor of Communication Design at UAL; and Jeremy Till, Head of Central Saint Martins. CoR was also the leading project of a larger initiative on the same topic promoted by DESIS Network in several places worldwide.

7 Ezio Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 189.

8 Ezio Manzini and Jeremy Till, eds., *CoR Ideas* (London: Hato Press, 2015), 7.

9 CoR Project participants in the CoR Group: Hena Ali, Tricia Austin, Sandy Black, Marsha Bradfield, Carole Collet, David Cross, Neil Cummings, Melanie Dodd, Rebecca Earley, Anne Eggeburt, Kate Fletcher, Lorraine Gamman, Silvia Grimaldi, Lisa

Accepting the importance of these social forms we ask, “What is the nature of these place-related communities? What can be done to support them?” And, in particular, “What can art and design do for them?”

This theme issue of *She Ji* brings together a collection of papers that reflect on art and design action research that has been delivered in response to a common theme: *Cultures of Resilience*. Initially, the purpose of Cultures of Resilience (CoR)⁶ was to discuss the cultural dimension of resilience and produce a set of narratives, values, ideas, and projects on this topic. But as it evolved, CoR narrowed its focus to one of “place related communities,” identified as a pre-condition for every possible scenario of social resilience.⁷

The CoR project was made viable by the observation that there were already several initiatives underway at the University of the Arts London (UAL) that were dealing directly or indirectly with the issue of social resilience and community building. In view of this, the aim of CoR was to offer these ongoing projects a common platform from which to exchange experiences and discuss and build some original art and design knowledge. In doing so, CoR carried out a *de facto* action research project, where the action thread consisted of several art and design initiatives, and the research thread was the program of discussions and seminars exploring the social effects of the projects. Beyond this main goal, CoR also aimed at including normal didactic activities in the research process, challenging an art and design school to act *also* as an action research agent.

CoR had two phases. The first one, from February 2014 to October 2014, was dedicated to building a group of committed CoR members, and discussing the CoR theme. This first phase had a mainly divergent character, cultivating differences while raising the level of the conversation and, at the same time, deepening and enriching it.⁸

In the second phase, from November 2014 to July 2016, thirteen parallel CoR project teams⁹ agreed to enter a converging process. They were to present and discuss their activities, which per se had very different motivations and goals, from the same point of view: the projects’ impact on social forms. Each explored the same question: how to describe the social forms the projects’ were helping to generate. In other words, during the second phase, the on-going projects were used as references and practical experiences on which to base a discussion about the nature of contemporary communities, the encounters on which they are built, and the role of art and design in staging or supporting these encounters.

Social Desertification, New Tribalism, and Emerging Contra-Trends

To withstand and recover from present crises, and to prepare for foreseeable future ones, our societies should improve their cohesion through strengthening different kinds of social forms. Unfortunately, predominant cultural trajectories appear to be heading in the opposite direction. As Richard Sennet writes, “modern society is de-skilling people in practicing cooperation.”¹⁰ The result is that pre-modern communities – families, neighborhoods, villages – are progressively disappearing.¹¹ At the same time, the intentional communities of the twentieth century – communities driven by strong ideologies, shared interests, and sense of belonging, like political parties and trade unions – are becoming weaker.¹²

Loose, flexible, temporary social networks are increasingly replacing such communities. The effects of this transformation are contradictory, but, for sure, the main and most visible effect is a tendency toward an increasing individualization and displacement of people, which in turn weakens further the traditional and intentional communities described above and contributes to increasingly fragile social systems.

But the weakening of traditional communities is not the only risk presented by this vicious circle of social erosion to which present societies are exposed. Returning to Richard Sennet, we can see that a second, equally dangerous consequence may be that of turning the human demand for community and collaboration toward what he calls *tribalism*, a form of “cooperative exchange [that] can produce results destructive to others.”¹³ A risk that today appears very high and we can recognize in several contexts. The most obvious is when cooperation is explicitly oriented toward furthering the interests of the group by damaging others (see criminal gangs, mafias, or terrorist groups). However, we can also recognize it clearly in all cases in which people cooperate against someone else in the name of their specific identity, as happens among some ethnic and religious groups. Finally, seeds of tribalism can be found every time cooperation produces *closed* organizations: groups of people who separate themselves from, and potentially set themselves against, those who are not members of the same group. Examples of this are evident in urban tribes, gangs of hooligans, and even residents of gated neighborhoods. No need to say how dangerous these closed communities are: they are carcinogenic social forms, the growth of which has lethal effects on the hosting societies, increasing the crisis in social resilience. Against this backdrop is silhouetted the picture of increasing numbers of people on the move across the planet, not as privileged actors in the marketized activities of globalization – those that might propagate, manipulate and maintain the networks of the information age that support a global free flow of capital – but rather those displaced by the twin perils of globalization and the tribalism described above.

Importantly, while apparently dominant, these are not the only social trends that can be observed. Looking attentively at the complexity and contradictions of contemporary societies, we can also see something else: against the mainstream trend towards both social desertification and carcinogenic tribalism, we see a growing number of people that are creating new salutary social forms, based on the rediscovery of collaboration and the quality of places.

Once we start to observe society in search of initiatives like these, a variety of interesting cases appear: groups of families who decide to share some services to reduce economic and environmental costs, but also to create new forms of neighborhoods (cohousing and a variety of forms of sharing and mutual help within a residential building or neighborhood); new forms of exchange (from simple barter initiatives to time banks and local currencies); services where the young and the elderly help each other, promoting a new idea of welfare (collaborative social services); neighborhood gardens set up and managed by citizens who, by doing so, improve the quality of the city and of the social fabric (guerrilla gardens, community gardens, green roofs); systems of mobility in alternative to individual cars (car sharing, car-pooling, the rediscovery of the possibilities offered by bicycles); new models of production based on local resources and engaging local communities (social enterprises and cooperatives); and fair and direct trade between producers and consumers (fair trade initiatives).¹⁴

These are radical social innovations. They appear as *creative communities*¹⁵ and, when successful, evolve into *collaborative organizations*: groups of people who choose to collaborate with the aim of achieving specific results and creating social and environmental benefits.

In recent decades, a growing number of collaborative organizations have merged with digital social networks creating unprecedented networks of people who are digitally *and* physically connected with each other and the place where they live, apparently straddling the “space of flows” and the “space of places.”¹⁶ In leveraging globally networked information and local face-to-face exchanges, these conditions and characteristics are producing a new generation of place-related communities.

The articles in this theme issue explore the question of how collaborative and

Hall, Anna Hart, Monica Hundal, Matt Malpass, Ezio Manzini, Jane Penty, Alison Prendiville, Nick Rhodes, Torsten Schroeder, Mark Simpkins, Ida Telalbasic, Sarah Temple, Jeremy Till, Adam Thorpe, Kim Trogal, Luise Vormittag, Marcus Willcocks, Dilys Williams, and Amanda Windle.

10 Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures, and Politics of Cooperation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 7.

11 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 70.

12 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000).

13 Sennett, *Together*, 5.

14 Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs*, 11.

15 Anna Meroni defines creative communities as groups of people who have been able to imagine, develop, and manage a new way of being and doing. Anna Meroni, *Creative Communities: People Inventing Sustainable Ways of Living* (Milan: Polidesign, 2007), 9.

16 Manuel Castells, “Space of Flows, Space of Places: Materials for a Theory of Urbanism in the Information Age,” *The CyberCities Reader*, ed. Stephen Graham (London: Routledge, 2004), 85.

17 We must add that the CoR project teams are not alone in using the term community without a precise definition of what it really means today. In today's fast-changing times, it happens that practice can be ahead of the conceptual model we use to (try to) explain it. This is what has happened to the term community. Therefore, to take a step forward towards social resilience, we must make a consistent effort to fill the gap and build the body of knowledge needed to understand the nature, the potentiality, and the possible evolution over time of the social forms we want to continue to call communities. See also Ezio Manizni, "Communities (in a highly connected world)," *Cultures of Resilience*, accessed March 23, 2018, <http://culturesofresilience.org/setting/>.

18 In this discussion, we have observed a possible convergence between our working definition of "contemporary communities" and that of Dewey's "publics." However, we conclude that while these social forms share a temporary and heterogeneous nature, a meaningful difference exists. What we call contemporary communities differs from Dewey's publics in their relational and geographical dependency; as social forms they are better described as conjugations than assemblies, emphasizing the relational connection between people in a place and people and place more so than the motivating shared issue of concern.

participatory art and design practices can contribute to creating these place-related communities, the weaving of people and places, and reflect on the lessons learned about how to do so.

Lessons Learned/1: Characteristics of Contemporary Communities

All the Cultures of Resilience projects purported to be community-related initiatives, but if we look carefully at the social forms they contributed to generate, we realize that they were brand new, quite unlike communities of the past. They lacked a clear definition of what they really were – and therefore of what, in the new context, the term *community* really meant.¹⁷

Moving from here, the CoR project discussions are a modest but meaningful contribution to a better understanding of contemporary communities, particularly so because it is a contribution based on art and design experiences that seek to build specific art and design knowledge in this field.

Looking at them as a whole, we can recognize some emerging characteristics in the unprecedented social forms that the CoR projects refer to as communities.

The first and most evident is that unlike the pre-modern traditional communities, which were not chosen by their own members, these contemporary ones exist by choice; and unlike the twentieth century intentional communities, which were based on strong ideologies calling for firm affiliation and promising a strong identity, these contemporary ones are multiple, non-exclusive, and demand no special level of commitment.

A second characteristic, depending on the first one, is that those who participate in this kind of community are not looking for a ready-made solution or identity. On the contrary, they are looking to build their own solution and identity by making their own personal choices among the various options proposed.

A third characteristic concerns the nature of these contemporary communities: they are not to be seen as (relatively) stable, lasting, homogeneous groups of people, but as *spaces of possibilities* – spaces where a variety of social ties coexist and where different choices can be made and different strategies adopted in order to exchange ideas, solve problems, and open new perspectives.

Finally, a fourth characteristic, depending on the previous one, regards the community building processes. There are two ways to contribute to the process of building these contemporary communities: by creating opportunities for *collaborative encounters*, which in practice means proposing motivations and opportunities for these encounters; and by creating *enabling systems for them*, the favorable environments where these encounters can emerge, thrive, and evolve.

More precisely, regarding collaborative encounters, several CoR projects increased people's *choice* by offering new, different, and sometimes unforeseen options.

Discussing these characteristics and the projects that embody them gives us a better insight into the nature of these contemporary communities and their building processes. It clearly emerges that they cannot be designed and realized as single entities. What they require is to operate at two levels: the micro-scale of the specific collaborative encounter, and the macro-scale of the enabling system aimed at generating a more favorable environment in which specific encounters may occur.¹⁸

Lessons Learned/2: Meaningful Encounters and Communities-in-Place

Communities can be observed from different points of view, using different conceptual tools. CoR research focused on the micro-scale of the interactions that

constitute the communities' building blocks: *meaningful* encounters, when people meet and start conversations oriented towards doing something together. And, in doing so, establish different forms of relationships between them and between them and their surroundings.

Special attention has been given to the ways in which these encounters relate to the place where they happened. Meaningful encounters contribute to creating the place-related communities that, as we have seen, are so important in creating a resilient society. From here on, we will refer to them as *communities-in-place*: communities built on conversations that (also) deal with, and are influenced by, the place in which they are embedded.

The objectives of the projects explored through CoR, and reflected upon in these pages, were diverse, ranging from explicit attempts to leverage the capacity of “the design school, [as] a bastion of the diversity and redundancy of thinking and doing essential to experimentation, reflective learning and innovation” to support social and service innovation, working with local government and the communities they serve,¹⁹ to understanding how art and design can deal with interpersonal relations in its practices by providing guidelines to deal with interpersonal vulnerability to nurture and strengthen communities.²⁰ The first of these seeks to afford communities a redundancy of ways and means of addressing local needs and goals, while the latter understands that to connect people-in-place requires address to the fact that “an encounter with someone who appears to be very diverse requires taking a risk: the risk of opening yourself to an unknown person and, doing so, becoming more vulnerable.”²¹

On the basis of this diversity, CoR used the results of these projects to get a better insight into the nature of the encounters they created, their relationships with the contexts where they took place, and the social forms they contributed to building. In doing so, some common patterns have been recognized and emerging themes proposed. These results offer some insight into how to trigger and support meaningful encounters between different and transient interlocutors. That is, how to foster meaningful encounters in fluid society.

Lessons Learned/3: CoR Projects as Places Where Strangers Meet

Across their diversity, the results show that – in different ways and with different motivations – all of the CoR projects created opportunities for connecting people in places, by which we mean opportunities for encounters that might become the building blocks of communities-in-place.

All the project findings explicitly or implicitly refer to three key recognitions. The first and more basic one is that *the encounter* must be considered the unitary action from which society is built. This is the understanding that, to reweave people and place, we must consider encounters, and their quantity and quality – with the assumption that if their number is low, and if they do not produce enough social values, society is eroded, its democratic life weakened, and its resilience reduced.

The second recognition regards a possible role for arts and design in creating opportunities for meaningful encounters in a fluid world. Anne Eggebert sees the arts “as a tool for connecting with others through socially engaged and participatory practices,” adding that “momentary, fluid, short-lived connections in place can be as powerful as long term relationships.”²² Her statements suggest that the potential of *light and temporary encounters* and transient membership of communities-in-place are both significant and revelatory of a new kind of community-in-place, in the contemporary, highly fluid world, in which light and temporary encounters are becoming the norm. Working with the hypothesis that these kind of encounters

19 Adam Thorpe and Sarah Rhodes, “The Public Collaboration Lab—Infrastructuring Redundancy with Communities-in-Place,” *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economic, and Innovation* 4, no. 1 (2018): 60–74, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2018.02.008>.

20 Carla Cipolla, “Designing for Vulnerability: Interpersonal Relations and Design,” *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economic, and Innovation* 4, no. 1 (2018): 111–22, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2018.03.001>.

21 Ezio Manzini, “Afterword: Weaving People and Places Seminar,” *Cultures of Resilience*, accessed March 23, 2018, <http://culturesofresilience.org/afterword-2/>.

22 Anne Eggebert, “The Unlikelihood of Us,” abstract, *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economic, and Innovation* 4, no. 1 (2018): 20, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2018.02.006>.

23 Richard Sennet, "The Public Realm," accessed March 23, 2018, <http://www.richardsennett.com/site/SENN/Templates/General2.aspx?pageid=16>.

24 Christine Barwick, *Social Mobility and Neighbourhood Choice: Turkish-Germans in Berlin* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 86.

25 Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day* (Saint Paul: Paragon House Publishers, 1989), 15.

26 Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer, "Institutional Ecology, 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39," *Social Studies of Science* 19, no. 3 (1989): 387-420. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/030631289019003001>.

27 Ibid., abstract, 387.

28 Dilys Williams, "Fashion Design as a Means to Recognize and Build Communities-in-Place," *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economic, and Innovation* 4, no. 1 (2018): 83, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2018.02.009>.

29 Lorraine Gamman and Adam Thorpe, "Makeright—Bags of Connection: Teaching Design Thinking and Making in Prison to Help Build Empathic and Resilient Communities," *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economic, and Innovation* 4, no. 1 (2018): 91-110, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2018.02.010>.

30 Dilys Williams and Renee Cuoco, "Co-creating a City Spectacle: Fashion as Facilitator of Social Ties and Forms: An Opportunity to Explore Fashion as Participatory Design in a City Locale," *Cultures of Resilience*, accessed March 7, 2018, <http://culturesofresilience.org/category/wip/projects/page/4/>.

31 Eggebert, "The Unlikelihood of Us," 13.

may be in their own way powerful, and deeply relational, all the proposed projects – with all their differences – can be seen as experiments on how to make these light and temporary encounters happen, and how to improve their quality.

From this perspective, the fact that several of the projects shared here generated encounters between people living in a place and students, often only present in a place for the duration of their study, or even their project, becomes particularly meaningful; these projects present extreme examples of what in the contemporary fluid society is becoming normal: the need to weave together highly different, transient people with resident populations.

In this way, the CoR projects themselves can be understood as "a place where strangers meet."²³ As Christine Barwick²⁴ points out, while Jane Jacobs predominantly focused on sidewalks, Ray Oldenburg addressed the importance of "third spaces" in a city, described as "the core settings of public life."²⁵ The crucial characteristic of third spaces is their harboring of the chance encounter. Oldenburg, Jacobs, and Sennett all share concern for the loss of such spaces within our cities as our public sphere is ever eroded by private interest. As the bounteous sociability of Sennett's public sphere is depleted, so the social resilience afforded by access to the diversity of opportunities that strangers present, the connectivity of chance encounters, and the redundancy of myriad relational configurations is also curtailed.

Given all that, we arrive at the third main recognition: encounters are relational and cannot be directly designed. Therefore what can and must be designed are the conditions that make encounters more probable and their quality higher.

Looking at the ways that CoR projects created these conditions, we can recognize that most of them provided some *enabling artifacts, events, and activities* – in other words, dedicated product-service systems, or communication initiatives, or dedicated frameworks for practices, thanks to which a well defined kind of encounter is favored and fostered. These kinds of actions are totally in line with what we have learned in several years of experience in design for social innovation. But in this framework of coherence with previous experiences, these projects give an original contribution, focused on the importance of two particular devices: *relational things*, capable of triggering relational/empathic encounters; and *safe places*, where meaningful and relational encounters can happen in a *de-risked* environment.

Lessons Learned/4: Special Artifacts Capable of Triggering Relational/ Empathic Encounters

All of these projects draw upon some kind of special artifacts and interactions that can be understood as *boundary objects and processes*.²⁶ Described as being "both adaptable to different viewpoints and robust enough to maintain identity across them,"²⁷ these socio-material interactions accommodate the exchange, dialogue, and even contestation of diverse actors' perspectives necessary for relational understandings to be built. Such devices are as diverse as the contexts of their application, ranging from the t-shirt that invites exchange within the *I Stood Up at Chrisp Street* project, described as a "familiar, relatable object," that acts to "offer participants the opportunity to be heard,"²⁸ to the learning games deployed within the *MakeRight* project, aimed at developing trust, cooperation, communication skills, and mutual respect and empathy between inmates and facilitators.²⁹ These artifacts and their engagement are observed to afford "elastic connection between assertion of individuality, connectivity within community, and wider contribution to societal infrastructures."³⁰ Eggebert³¹ observes that "dialogue is often both the process and outcome of socially engaged art practice" and foregrounds the shared experience of making and the role of material in prompting processes of engagement and the

provocation towards dialogue, an understanding that resonates with the description of processes within the *Early Lab*.³²

Empathy is crucial to fostering meaningful encounters between people. It is built between participants in the participatory and collaborative creative processes described here explicitly, through development and application of empathic design research methods and tools, including the design probes, journeys, personas, and stories that surface people's experiences, needs, and values. Empathy is also built implicitly, through proximity and process, whereby the tenets of participatory design – as democratic and emancipatory, and committed to ensuring everyone's voice is heard in the decision-making processes that will affect them – prevail, allowing the perspectives and values of the other to become more known to each involved participant. Fine arts practice applies different and diverse approaches toward similar goals. For example, in addition to the act of making together, participatory and collaborative activities within the *Superannuates and Tenderfeet* project included “going for walks, visiting exhibitions, exchanging techniques, writing each other letters, and drinking tea.”³³

Lesson Learnt/5: Safe Places, Where Encounters Can Happen

As Carla Cipolla³⁴ observes, the formation of relationships across diversities implies vulnerability. “An encounter with someone who appears to be very diverse requires taking a risk: the risk of opening yourself to an unknown person and, in doing so, becoming more vulnerable.”³⁵

Thus, the meaningful encounters that give rise to the possibility of relationships, even fleeting ones, require consideration and mediation of the risk of vulnerability for the people involved. This is something that is common to these projects, which all – in their different ways and contexts – create a safe space for meaningful encounters to happen. Strategies for creating such de-risked spaces include consideration of the nature of the place in which they are situated. From the conscious choice of *I Stood Up* to host their engagement in a disused shop rather than a gallery or museum so as to avoid the “rules and regulations, risk and liability” that create “social boundaries through which encounters must operate;”³⁶ to the choice to stage the *MakeRight* design academy in the prison workshop, rather than the educational areas of the prison, to avoid the negative associations with traditional educational environments that many inmates experience. The latter choice also created an alibi of “paid work” for the deeply relational and transformative activities that the inmates were engaging in. In both scenarios, the site of encounter between participants was consciously and carefully curated or created to deconstruct hegemonies, instill openness, and invite engagement. Additionally, strategies for de-risking the “space” of encounter go beyond the situational to address behavioral considerations. Perhaps the most extreme example shared here is again that of the *MakeRight* design academy, which deployed the principles and approaches of restorative justice combined with those of participatory design to remove the prison mask³⁷ from participating inmates. This metaphorical mask describes a demeanor that at once protects the wearer, “hid[ing] their feelings in order to avoid upset or conflict”³⁸ and isolates them from meaningful connections with others. Another strategy is that of favoring conditions for playful and loose encounters that make the very high level of collaborative intensity easier to handle for all participants, reducing risk.³⁹ Cippola explores the diverse strategies applied across the CoR projects in greater detail, framing them as “enablers of vulnerability.”⁴⁰

Fundamentally, the de-risked nature of these encounters comes from the fact that they appear to some extent superfluous – offering a positive redundancy – and hence capable of enabling participants to prototype and practice, to rehearse new

32 Nick Bell, “Early-Stage Innovation Centered on Making for Youth Mental Health: A Design-Led Approach,” *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economic, and Innovation* 4, no. 1 (2018): 31–46, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2018.03.002>.

33 Eggebert, “The Unlikelihood of Us,” 16.

34 Cipolla, “Designing for Vulnerability.”

35 Manzini, “Afterword.”

36 Dilys Williams, “Fashion as a Means to Recognize and Build Communities in Place (draft)” (unpublished manuscript), MS Word file, 8.

37 Gamman and Thorpe, “Make-right—Bags of Connection,” 92–94.

38 Ibid, 92.

39 Bell, “Early-Stage Innovation Centered on Making for Youth Mental Health,” 43.

40 Cipolla, “Designing for Vulnerability,” 117–19.

41 Manzini, *Design, When Everybody Designs*, 167.

42 Ibid., 90.

43 Pelle Ehn, "Participation in Design Things," in *PDC '08: Proceedings of the Tenth Anniversary Conference on Participatory Design* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 95.

44 Erling Björgvinsson, Pelle Ehn, and Per-Anders Hillgren, "Participatory Design and Democratizing Innovation," in *PDC '10: Proceedings of the 11th Biennial Participatory Design Conference* (New York: ACM, 2010), 43. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/1900441.1900448>.

45 Thorpe and Rhodes, "The Public Collaboration Lab."

ways of being together that may be drawn upon in future, more crucial contexts.

Lessons Learned/6: Enabling Systems and Infrastructuring Activities

The scenarios in these papers combine to portray communities-in-place as spaces of possibilities where a rich, complex, fluid constellation of actors, assets, encounters, and conversations enable several different place-related projects. In turn, the plurality of these projects affords resilience through redundancy – multiple configurations of relationships and resources affording alternative ways and means of achieving present and future goals.

Looking at the ways that Communities of Resilience projects contribute to these conditions, two approaches are visible. The first one, that we can define as a project-based approach, consists in conceiving, assembling, and enhancing dedicated sets of actors, assets, and artifacts as *enabling systems*,⁴¹ thanks to which specific projects may be delivered, and through which more desired encounters and conversations become possible and probable.

The second approach aims at enriching and improving the existing sociotechnical ecosystem⁴² to create the conditions for different encounters and conversations – unforeseeable at the outset – to exist and thrive. This approach can be effectively described as *infrastructuring*:⁴³ connecting actors and resources such that multiple alternative projects may emerge more readily in future.

According to Erling Björgvinsson, Pelle Ehn, and Per-Anders Hillgren,⁴⁴ this strategy requires "long-term commitment, but it also provides an open-ended design structure without predefined goals or fixed timelines." It is "characterized by a continuous process of building relations with diverse actors and by a flexible allotment of time and resources. This more organic approach facilitates the emergence of possibilities along the way and new design opportunities can evolve through a continuous matchmaking process."

At a first glance, all the CoR projects – except one, the *Public Collaboration Lab*⁴⁵ – are examples of the first strategy. The *Public Collaboration Lab* clearly exemplifies the second. But, looking more attentively, we can recognize that, beyond the diverse specific goals, all of them *also* contribute to improving the entire sociotechnical ecosystem. That is, they can be seen as initiatives supporting the infrastructuring approach.

In fact, it happens that their enabling systems – or some of their components, at least – have lasted in time beyond the end of the projects for which they were assembled, and become part of local infrastructures. Additionally, it is foreseeable that the trust, shared values, and empathy the relational encounters may produce endure within the existing sociotechnical ecosystem, become part of it, and reinforce relational infrastructures.

It follows that, between the two approaches, a virtuous cycle can be established: improving the local infrastructures makes more projects possible and probable; and, in turn, the multiplicity of projects, the resources they locate and connect, and the relational goods they produce, improve the infrastructures of communities-in-place.

Conclusion

The CoR projects presented in this *She Ji* theme issue give us a better insight into the nature of contemporary communities-in-place and their building processes. In particular, they demonstrate the importance of light but highly relational encounters, and the role played by the relational interactions and artifacts in triggering and supporting them. The projects also highlight the significance of the de-risked

spaces where these encounters become acceptable to participants, through a balance of vulnerability and a sense of being supported and protected. Finally, they help to understand the two main approaches for making these encounters possible and probable: the enabling system approach and the open-ended infrastructuring approach. In doing so, this research contributes to our understanding of how collaborative and participatory art and design practice might configure a virtuous cycle by which to create and re-create communities-in-place in a fluid society; resisting and reversing the effects of the vicious cycle of social erosion to which contemporary communities are exposed.

But doing all that, these projects also tell us something else concerning the role of art and design in everyday life politics.

The CoR projects can be seen as political acts – peculiar kinds of political acts – that are not made apparent by putting art and design at the service of politics, but rather by producing events, services, and products capable of generating meaningful encounters and resilient, sustainable ways of being and doing. In other words, they do not *do* politics, they *are* politics. They do not promote a resilient and sustainable society, and more generally, a new civilization, by making propaganda (much less by supporting political parties or movements that wave the banner of this new civilization). On the contrary, they are themselves aspects of this new civilization. They are previews – rehearsals of possible, desirable futures.

These activities could all be seen as a kind of activism. However, maybe it is rather reductive to refer to them in this way: it makes one think that there are other, non-activist, ways of being an artist or designer, whereas it may be that this is simply the way that art and design should want and be able to operate to be truly worthy of their names.

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Guest Editors

