

# CO-DESIGNING SPEAKERS' CORNER

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## **Abstract**

The paper describes a collaboration between MA Creative Practice for Narrative Environments (MACPfNE) and the Speakers' Corner Trust (SCT). In a series of 'live projects' students developed a methodology for the co-design of local speakers' corners and designed a prototype speakers' corner to be used as a mobile version and as a tool in the co-design process.

The methodology was applied towards implementation of a speakers' corner in Litchfield, in a community park in North London, and in a pilot project for a speakers' corner in schools.

Research considering the education of future 'built environment professionals' highlights the importance of communication skills and argues that these are best learned through live, situated practice [4]. In considering the speakers' corner projects the paper focuses on the teaching and learning of skills such as listening and facilitation, and on the importance to the pedagogy of these skills of 'real clients and real communities'.

## **1 Introduction**

### **1.1 Speakers' Corner**

Speakers' corner can simply be defined as a corner in public space

where people can speak about moral and political matters. Most definitions refer to the famous Speakers' Corner, in Hyde Park, London.

SCT is a registered charity founded to bring back to public space face-to-face exchange of ideas among citizens [5]. It does this through creating a network of local speakers' corners in the UK, undertaking initiatives for permanent and mobile speakers' corners around the world, and developing educational resources to encourage people to express their views in public. SCT starts new projects by establishing a founding committee with key local actors from public, private and voluntary sectors. The committee owns and steers the project from inception and continues to manage speakers' corner after the launch.

### **1.2 Communication Skills**

Communication skills are paramount to the setting up, the designing and the operation of speakers' corner's, of public spaces for public debate.

The 2004 Egan Review defined a set of generic skills and knowledge required for the delivery of sustainable communities. The 2007 Arup Review that followed focused on skills shortage [4]. Both reports, and subsequent studies such as 'Filling the Gaps' [4], in which the

author participated, identified a range of generic skills missing from the education of built environment professionals. Among these, are communication skills, such as, empathy, listening and developing effective dialogue and skills such as mediation and facilitation. The study proposed that these skills are best developed through practice or live, situated practice.

## **1.2 MACPfNE**

MACPfNE was established as a response to industry demand for collaborative practitioners, with high level communication skills, capable of developing user-centered environments. Project work is undertaken in multi-disciplinary teams of students from different design practices, who explore how to design spaces for people with people.

As such, the teaching and learning of how to communicate with stakeholders and fellow professionals are an important element of the programme. During the first year students are required to work on a live project in the spring term. Students can also choose to be involved in any number of other 'commissions' that come in throughout the year. A structure that allows flexibility to incorporate live projects at any time and overcome problems of academic schedule.

Student assessment is through a 'learning log'. They need to show evidence of research, analysis, subject knowledge and importantly, 'collaborative professional working skills'. They can choose which projects to use as 'evidence'.

## **2. Brief and methodology**

### **2.1 Client Brief**

Following the inauguration of their first project in Nottingham, (physically indicated by a plaque) SCT felt that more thinking was required on the physical appearance of speakers corner and it's 'place' in the public space. The trust approached MACPfNE: to consider how might a 21st century speakers' corner look? to design a generic mobile speakers' corner and to design a methodology to work with communities on local versions.

### **2.2 MACPfNE Response to Brief**

A key question when considering the design of speakers' corner, is whether public space is a place for public discussion, and whether, and how can design foster public debate. MACPfNE students undertook a historical analysis of the relationship between public space and the public sphere, and an analysis of contemporary design practices exploring the design of public space as a place for debate [1]. They found that the response to this challenge was a creative co-design process with the community, inviting public debate and engagement from the beginning of the project.

As such we established that the process of designing speakers' corner should be user-centered, involving communities in the co-design of their own versions to suit their needs, interests and environment. A process that ensures that stakeholder requirements, desires and value systems are incorporated into the space and the system, and that the community owns the outcomes and can

develop the scheme as their priorities change. Crucial to this was to ensure that the co-design process is linked to the social drive, the setting up the speakers' corners projects by the trust.

### **2.3 Co-design**

Co-design can be defined as the joint creativity of designers and users, working together on the design development process, from initial brief definition phase to product. The co-design process is having an impact on the traditional roles of designer/user in the design process. The user becomes the *'expert of his/her experience, and plays a large role in knowledge development, idea generation and concept development'*. As such a key role of the designer, alongside giving form to the ideas, is developing the tools for *'ideation and expression'* [3], tools *'... to engage non-designers by asking, listening, learning, communicating and creating solutions collaboratively'* [3].

### **2.4 Co-design methodology**

As a tool to capture the complex issues surrounding the insertion of a platform for engaged civic debate into an existing public space MACPfNE staff and students developed a four stage co-design process: Stage one - What is my speakers' corner, who will use it, and how? The purpose of this stage was to define with the users the brief for the project, to encourage questioning of the established view of speakers' corner, and discuss what form a platform for debate should take within the local context. Stage two - Where should speakers' corner be located? The purpose of

this stage was to understand the public space into which speakers' corner would be inserted, and consider how this intervention might affect it, and its current and future users. Stage three - What should be its physical form? The purpose of this stage was to consider, based on the previous two stages, the physical characteristics of the local speakers' corner. Stage four - Making and testing. Construction of 1:1 prototypes to 'interrogate' the design on site with local users.

### **2.5 Speakers Corner Prototype**

Alongside this the team developed a generic prototype, which could be used as a tool for the process, or as a mobile speakers' corner in itself. A modular design of seating or standing elements that could be combined into a variety of group sizes to enable a variety of forms of communication - one to one, one to many, many to many, oral and virtual.

## **3. Co-designing Speakers' Corner**

Speakers' Corner co-design methodology was applied in three projects. The prototype was tested in two of these as a design tool. The projects took place over three years (2008-2011), with three cohorts of students. They are presented here in chronological order to highlight the gradual refinement of the methodology. Case study descriptions - location, client, funding, background and process are followed by the authors reflection on communication skills learned.

### 3.1 Litchfield

**Location:** Litchfield, a small heritage cathedral city in Central England.

**Client:** SCT and Litchfield Speakers' Corner founding committee, with funding from the University of the Arts widening participation programme. **Collaborators:** students from Litchfield School of Art, Design and Media.

**Background:** We joined the project after the local founding committee had been in place for a couple of months. As such, we were not part of the speakers' corner brief defining stage, a critical co-design stage which serves to determine what should be designed and sometimes what should not [3]. Due to distance and budget restrictions, our communication with the founding committee, and thus with key local actors, such as the council, were through our co-designers and the SCT.

**Process:** MACPfNE students facilitated four workshops with our co-designers: a story-cube role play workshop exploring potential users; a questionnaire based workshop on location; a workshop using models exploring how the modular kit we designed could be adapted to the local context, and a 1:1 prototype testing on site, with Litchfield Youth Forum.



Figure 2: Litchfield Youth Forum testing the prototype on site (MACPfNE, 2009).

Following the prototype testing, we presented the process and ideas developed to the founding committee. Disappointingly, they commented that *“this is an exciting proposal, but perhaps, not for a heritage cathedral city”*. The possibility of the prototype being used as a mobile stage at the launch was then explored and abounded due to health and safety considerations. The prototype was finally exhibited in a local gallery as part of the events leading to the launch.

**What we learnt:** MACPfNE students learnt the difficulty of and constraints to communicating with the ‘right’ stakeholder’s at the ‘right’ time [4] and the detrimental effect that the lack of communication could have on a project. MACPfNE students also experienced the importance of asking the right questions at the right time and of a sensitivity to the ‘level of creativity’ [3] of co-designers. They reflected that in contrast to our aims the prototype was imposed on the process and that there was a gap in communication with our co-designers how it might work / be adapted to their local context; as one student commented: *“they began to view the modular kit*

*proposals as just more seating for the site“.*

### 3.2 Stoneydown Park

**Location:** Stoneydown Park, a small community park fronted by two primary schools in North London

**Client:** SCT and the Stoneydown Park founding committee. Funded by the University of the Arts widening participation programme and the Waltham Forest Council.

**Collaborators:** school children, teachers and parents from the local primary schools.

**Background:** The project originated from the headteacher’s, who felt a corner for speaking could provide a platform for communication between the two schools. They were supported by a voluntary ‘friends of the park’ group and the local council that were looking to invest in improvements.

**Process:** MACPfNE staff and students were involved from the brief definition stage and worked with the founding committee to establish how speaker’s corner would be managed, and on the use/form/location co-design process with selected school children, parents and teachers.

Learning from Litchfield, emphasis was put on the first workshop, where we explored ‘what is speakers’ corner?’ using ‘forms of communication’ prompt cards and acting out of the space required by these. In the final workshop, due yet again to budget constraints, the original and not a modified modular prototype was brought to the site. The public were invited to comment through speaking and drawing (on

the prototype) on ‘how I would like to use speakers’ corner in the park?’.

The outcome of the workshops was a brief for a flexible corner to accommodate different activities, with a central platform, various configurations of seating, an open space for people to gather, and a place to communicate through writing and drawing. Design ideas for adapting the prototype to local context included soft edges for the seating, colour to make speakers’ corner identifiable, and create zones for different uses, e.g. story-telling, singing or debating.



Figure 4: Stoneydown Park prototype testing

The prototype testing coincided with local elections, the project gained media attention, council backing, and funding to construct a permanent structure. To comply with the tendering process we held a design competition open to CSM students and local arts college students. The founding committee with MACPfNE staff wrote the brief, which stressed the importance of incorporating the co-design process to date, and the inclusion of an open-day event to gain insight into how the wider community use the park and view the proposals.



Figure 5: 'Stepping Stones to Great Communication' (H. Clack, S. Roming, Y. Hong, 2010).

The winning design was chosen in an open exhibition by the community. 'Stepping Stones to Great Communication' was located on the site favoured by users, and included a series of colourful plinths that could be used as stages, play elements, tables and chairs. They were decorated with mosaics designed and installed collaboratively with school children and local voluntary groups.

#### **What we learnt:**

MACPfNE students were disappointed that we could not construct a 1:1 prototype that more closely reflected the outcomes of the co-design process. However, through experience, they were able to respond to this in a creative way and develop tools to communicate, to very young children, that the prototype was a principle and not a final design. Evident in the design ideas developed.

The winning design was selected by the community as they thought that it most successfully responded to the brief and incorporated the ideas developed through the process. Highlighting the importance of 'intelligent listening' skills. As observed by Mrs. Cominetti,

headteacher: *"The design ... has been a great experience for the children. They not only had their say when the students started work but also about the finished products. Now we are looking forward not just to seeing it in the park but using it as well"*.

### **3.4 Speakers' Corner in Every Playground Pilot Project**

**Location:** Lilian Baylis Technology School and Heston Community School in London **Client:** SCT and Pupil Voice and Participation England. Funded by the University of the Arts widening participation programme **Collaborators:** school children.

**Background:** The success of Stoneydown Park speakers' corner as an educational project, integrated into the school curriculum, led to the Speakers' Corner in Every Playground initiative. The initiative stems from growing concern about the decline of key communication skills among youth in the UK. We were asked to develop the co-design methodology into a format that could be rolled out nationwide, and to test it in two secondary schools.

The four workshops proposed and tested were a refinement of those used in preceding projects. The main difference, that the modular kit could not be used as a tool, due to the need for a format that could be replicated easily. Thus, during the fourth workshop pupils created drawings of their speakers' corner, MACPfNE students translated these into a master drawing, and together, using recycled materials collected



by the pupils, we built and tested 1:1 prototypes.



Figure 3: Pilot Project 1:1 prototype construction (MACPfNE, 2011).

We are currently waiting to hear whether our funding application to develop the project further has been successful.

#### **What we learnt:**

Arguably, the prototypes developed present a much narrower view of a what a 21st century speakers' corner might look like. As such reflective discussion amongst MACPfNE students was focused on facilitation techniques, the role of the designer within the co-design process and on the critical importance of an appropriate communication methodology - tools and techniques - at the appropriate stage of the process [3].

#### **Concluding Reflections:**

We did not undertake a structured quantitative survey of students learning. However, informal feedback received from students has predominantly been on the positive impact the learning of communication, participation and facilitation skills, has had on their practice.

The discussion of the projects has highlighted that the key learning points of these skills were when 'problems occurred' and creative solutions were required. These

instances would be very difficult to recreate in a studio based project.

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