

**CIVIL SOCIETY RECLAIMS PUBLIC SPACE. CROSS PERSPECTIVES BASED ON
RESEARCH**

**HUMAN CITIES Symposium
15–16 March 2012, Brussels (BE)****DESIGNING SPEAKERS' CORNER****Shibboleth Shechter**

Associate Lecturer, University of the Arts London, s.shechter@chelsea.arts.ac.uk

Related highlight

Methodological highlight

Abstract/ How can design interventions foster the use of public space for public debate? What might a twenty-first century speakers' corner look like? How should the design process ensure that local people can contribute? The paper considers these questions through describing the collaboration between Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design (CSM), and Speakers' Corner Trust (SCT). Between October 2008 and June 2011, MA Creative Practice for Narrative Environments (MACPfNE) staff and students: developed their conceptual thinking on creating / reclaiming spaces for citizenship ; applied these ideas to the design of a generic speakers' corner, tested in Litchfield, and at the Global Forum for Freedom of Expression in Oslo; developed a co-design approach to speakers' corner whereby communities co-create their own version; tested this methodology in the process and implementation of a neighbourhood speakers' corner in North London, and a pilot project for a speakers' corner in every school. The case study projects suggest that the questions are inherently linked. Speakers' corners interventions can affect the way public space is used and understood as a space for debate, if the process of their design and definition is done collaboratively from the start with local people. Case study projects also indicate the wider potential of the co-design methodology developed in the design of public spaces.

Keywords. *Speakers' Corner, Public Space, Sphere and Realm, Co-Design*

1. Introduction

‘Designing Speakers’ Corners’ discusses a collaboration between SCT and staff and students on MACPfNE at CSM, on the design of speakers’ corners, and on the development of a co-design process with local stakeholders.

Speakers’ corner can simply be defined as a corner in public space where people can “*speak publicly about moral and political matters*” (Longman, 2011). Dictionary definitions refer to the most famous Speakers’ Corner in Hyde Park in London (Longman, 2011; Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2011). The Speakers’ Corner Trust is a registered charity founded in 2007 to bring back to public space face-to-face exchange of ideas between fellow citizens (Bradley, 2010). It does this through three core programmes: 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 assist and encourage people to express their views in public. MACPfNE was established as a response to industry demand for collaborative practitioners capable of developing user-centered environments. Project work is undertaken in multi-disciplinary teams of students from different design practices. Together they explore how to design spaces for people with people, and develop environments that enable users to tell their stories. The first year of the course is composed of a series of live projects in which students and staff work with real clients and real communities.

1.1 Speakers’ Corner

Hyde Park Speakers’ Corner is one of the most potent symbols of the role of public place in sustaining public life and discourse. It occupies an area where in the mid-nineteenth century the Chartists held protests for the rights of working people, including the right to assembly (Bradley, 2010). The government of the day eventually yielded to pressure and in 1872 the right to free assembly was granted by the ‘The Royal Parks and Gardens Regulation Act’. Since that day it has been a place for speeches, civic debate, and assembly. Originally every Sunday, but now everyday, people can set up a platform and speak about any topic as long as they are not obscene or break the law. On a typical day subjects can range from the political, to the religious, to obscure issues such as space invaders. Many famous people have spoken at Speakers’ Corner, including Karl Marx, Lenin, and George Orwell; however, speakers are mostly ordinary citizens, that come from every background and culture to speak, interact and exchange ideas with an ever-changing audience of regulars, hecklers and transient park population. Although it still remains “*the single best known place for free speech on the planet*” (White, 2009), in the last couple of decades Speaker’s Corner has lost its role as a serious centre for civic life, and is considered by many as just another stop on the London tourist route. This is due in part to the changing role of Hyde Park as a tourist attraction, yet arguably, predominantly due to the growth of mass media, the virtual public realm, which has replaced physical public space as the place where ideas and opinions are debated and formed.

1.2 Public Space as Site for Debate and Discussion

This raises the question as to whether today, in the age of Twitter and Facebook, physical public space can still be or should be a site for exchange of views? Public space whether physical or virtual can be simply defined as a place where strangers meet (Sennett, 2009). Three key schools of thought have shaped the thinking on public space in modern times: Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas, who both view public space as political, and the social cultural public space in the work of Richard Sennett, Ervin Goffman and Clifford Geertz (Sennett, 2009). For Arendt and Habermas the meeting of strangers in public space is crucial for the creation of a public sphere, the informal discourse, debates and exchange of ideas on public affairs, through which people form public opinion to challenge or affirm government. For Arendt, who’s work has influenced many of today’s urban designers, the public realm is a physical space, in city centers. Her thinking originates in the Greek concepts of public and private. In the Greek city state private life was separated from public life, political debate and action, that took place in the agora. Greek cities were designed to facilitate meeting and exchange of ideas. Participation, however, was only available to free citizens, to masters of households (women and slaves were excluded); in contrast Arendt’s public space is an ideal place where people can meet and discuss ideas freely and equally, regardless of class, race or gender. Habermas believes that there should not be complete separation between the public and the private realms. His public realm is modelled on the seventeenth and eighteenth century London coffee houses, French salons, and German table societies where people from similar economic backgrounds met. It is composed of a series of public spheres that through the democratic process influence the core public sphere, the law

makers or parliament (Olson, 2011). Habermas's public space is not tied to place, he proposes that since the invention of the printing press it can be any form of communication structure which encourages the public to think about and deliberate about what they read or hear (Sennett, 2009). SCT argues that it is crucial to bring the public sphere back to the physical public space of towns and cities. It believes that although new media has brought us closer than ever before to an ideal public sphere as envisioned by Habermas - an unparalleled platform for freedom of expression; a greater accessibility to public information; a plural and independent media system; and a high degree and quality of participation (The World Bank Group, 2011) - it also detaches us from daily life and each other. SCT believes that face to face exchange of ideas in the urban realm is the best way to develop the mutual respect and cooperation which are the basis for active citizenship and successful and sustainable communities.

1.4. Design of public space for public debate

The decline of the public sphere in physical public space is explored, among others, in Sennett's 'The Fall of Public Man' (Sennett, 1977). He argues that public space as a place for civic engagement has eroded in the mid-twentieth century by the emergence of new broadcast media, as well as, the de-centralisation of the urban form. In the last few decades, a growing body of urban designers and planners have been working to restore livability, including face to face social exchange in public spaces, of the city. Public spaces designed on the basis of theorists and practitioners such as Jan Gehl in Europe, William Whyte in North America and many others, have proven successful, in that they are well used and have also increased value and business in and around them. These theorists and practitioners argue that successful public spaces are characterised by people remaining or lingering, people engaged in optional social activities, such as having a conversation, sitting or simply watching others. However, they seldom discuss reclaiming public space as a platform for engaged civic debate. The challenge of fostering and imbedding public debate in public space still needs to be addressed more widely (Austin et al., 2009). Which raises the question of what physical form should spaces to foster civic engagement take? Should they/could they be designed?

1.5 Designing Speakers' Corner

The third school of public realm thought, the social cultural view of public space, can perhaps help illuminate this question. The work of the performative school, as it has been termed, looks at how and where strangers in the public space express themselves to each other, it views public space as the interaction between people, others and a place; the sum of the details of people's behaviour (Sennett, 2009). As a public space, Hyde Park Speakers' Corner has always functioned without being 'designed' as such. The Corner has no clear demarcated boundaries, apart from the low-level fences that separate pavement, grass and road. To make themselves visible speakers stand on soap boxes, a term which originates from the nineteenth century when speakers stood on wooden crates, used to ship dry goods, such as soap. Today, platforms include plastic milk crates, step ladders, and various forms of chairs and stools. Sennett would put forward that it is this non-design that has enabled it to function successfully for so long. He proposes that designs for public space that are over determined, and do not leave space for evolution of the public sphere, for gradual change in people's behavior and rituals, are the enemy of the public realm. Yet, Hyde Park Speakers' Corner has existed for nearly 150 years, its rituals have been progressively learned and have evolved with time. This is not the case when designing new speakers' corner's. The challenge for their design is to both encourage new behaviors and forms of communication to be established, alongside allowing for flexibility of use, and the possibility of change over time to ensure long term sustainability. Research (Austin et al. 2009) identified a number of innovative artists and design practices exploring the design of public spaces as places for debate. Their response to this challenge is a creative co-design process with the community, inviting public debate and engagement from the very beginning of the project.

2. Methodology

2.1 Guiding Principles

Considering the above discourse, MACPfNE staff and students established two guiding principles for the design of local speakers' corners. The first that the design process should be a user-centered one, whereby communities co-design their own versions to suit their needs, interests and environment. A process that ensures that the users' 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

independently as their priorities change (Austin et al., 2009). 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. SCT starts new projects by establishing a founding committee, composed of representatives of key local actors from the public, private and voluntary sectors. The committee owns and steers the project, from inception, through to decisions on location, use and management, and continues to manage speakers' corner after the project launch. The second principle was to develop with the users an open-ended design, a design of possibilities rather than fixed solutions.

2.2 Speakers' Corner Co-design

Co-design, or designing with the users is steadily gaining prominence as the way forward within design communities. 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 process involves shifts in power from client, by way of the designer to the end user, from the product to the process, and from product based design to research based design (Design Council, 2010). The process is having an impact on the traditional roles of researcher/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/researcher, alongside giving form to the ideas, is developing the tools for *"ideation and expression"* (Sanders & Stappers, 2008:12), tools *"... to engage non-designers by asking, listening, learning, communicating and creating solutions collaboratively"* (Design Council, 2010). 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 1 - 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 2 - 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 3 - 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 4 - Making and testing. Construction of 1:1 prototypes to 'interrogate' the design on site with local users.

2.3 Speakers' Corner as a Space for Assembly, Debate and Exchange

To facilitate the discussion on the speakers' corner as an adaptable design that could encourage the use of public space as a site for debate and discussion, MACPfNE students and staff, developed a modular kit of parts. A generic speakers's corner prototype that could be used for the co-design process described above, or as a mobile speakers' corner in itself. The team held brainstorming sessions on forms of communication and the props required for these. They formulated a brief for a structure that would allow planned and spontaneous public speaking to take place, could be permanent, mobile or a combination of the two, and enable a variety of forms of communication - one to one, one to many, two to many, many to many, oral and virtual. The brief was captured with a visual metaphor, a honeycomb structure, embodying notions of assembly, debate and exchange. Which in turn inspired a modular structure design of seating or standing elements that could be combined into a variety of group sizes, and into a 'honeycomb' to form larger platforms.

3. Case Studies

This section presents the four case studies to which the methodology was applied. Although they are separate cases, with different contexts and aims, through discussing them in chronological order, the learning curve, the gradual refinement of the conceptual thinking and methods used is presented.

3.1 Litchfield

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

Following the launch of their first project in Nottingham the SCT felt that further consideration should be given to the physical manifestation of speakers' corner in public space. The trust approached MACPfNE to work on a project in Litchfield in collaboration with Litchfield School of Art, Design and Media. Due to issues of academic timing and budget MACPfNE staff and students joined the project after the local founding committee, set up by the SCT, had been in place for a few months. As such, the design/research team was not part of the process to define the brief. Although never clearly

stated it became obvious as the project progressed that the co-design process was considered by the local community as a conceptual exercise alongside the main process of developing the speakers' corner. Never-less it was an opportunity to test the methodology and the modular kit of parts with the local partners. Four workshops were held: a story-cube role play workshop exploring potential users of speakers' corner from within the community that currently uses the public space; a workshop on how the chosen town centre site is used, and where within it could a speakers' corner be located; a workshop using models and maps, exploring how the modular kit of part configuration, usage, color and material can be adopted to the local context, and a workshop to construct and test a 1:1 prototype with Litchfield Youth Forum.

As regards the co-design methodology the dissociation from the actual design of speakers' corner was problematic. The first phase included a discussion on 'whom might use speakers' corner and how?', but not a more basic debate on 'what is speakers' corner?'. The questioning of the established form of speakers' corner didn't happen. There was also limited engagement, in the second workshop, with how this spatial intervention might affect the experience of the public space; as one student commented: *"they began to view the the modular kit proposals as just more seating for the site"*. Testing of the 1:1 prototype showed the potential of the design to provide a platform for a variety of forms of communication and rituals to emerge. During the short period of time it was on site, it was used for traditional one to many speeches, for debates, and for small group conversations. However, it was noted that the presence of the design team was crucial to guide users in the performative possibilities. A gap was observed between the understanding of the users and the design team of the modular kit as a platform to enable a variety of forms of communication.

Figure 1: Litchfield Youth Forum testing the 1:1 speakers' corner prototype (MACPfNE, 2009).

4.2 The Global forum for Freedom of Expression / Mobile Speakers' Corner

Location: Global Forum for Freedom of Expression, Oslo

The Global Forum for Freedom of Expression was a week long event exploring and celebrating free expression. On the last day a 'Marketplace of Ideas' was set up at University Square on Oslo's main street, to engage the wider public. The marketplace included stalls by organisations fighting for free speech, and a programme of both planned speeches and spontaneous contributions from passers-by. SCT and MACPfNE were invited by the organisers (sponsored by the British Council) to construct the speakers' corner modular structure as the main programme stage. Here, the participatory co-design process was not on look, form or location but on use. The team together with the users, participated in the choreography of the kit of parts to enable a variety of performances and narratives to unfold. At the start of the day, the behavior of the public around the prototype was similar to the behavior of an audience around a stage, or a 'traditional' use of speakers' corner, one speaking to many. As the day progressed, the design team moved a few modules, and through example encouraged people to sit, creating an informal relationship between speaker and audience. The team then moved the modules closer to the speakers, creating a simultaneous use of speakers' corner for a speech and for informal conversations. Gradually, the speakers themselves moved the platforms to accommodate different forms of communication, from creating a larger stage for a dance or a rap, to creating two stages for a debate. The public gradually grew comfortable with the mobile speakers' corner modules, and used them for making speeches as well as informal conversations.

Figure 2: Speakers' corner mobile, modular structure at the Global Forum for Freedom of Expression, Oslo.

4.3 Stoneydown Park / Permanent Speakers' Corner

Location: A neighbourhood park, in Walthamstow, North London.

The next project was for a neighborhood speakers' corner in a small park, in Walthamstow, North London, fronted by two primary schools. The project originated from the headteachers at the schools, who felt a corner for speaking in the park could provide a platform for collaboration between the two communities. SCT worked to gain the support of a local stakeholders, which together with MACPfNE formed the founding committee. The committee worked towards establishing how speaker's corner would be used and managed. As a linked activity MACPfNE students facilitated a co-design process with school children, parents and teachers to consider use, location and form. Four workshops were held, a development of the Litchfield workshops. The first explored 'what is speakers' corner?' using 'forms of communication' prompt cards. The outcome was a brief for a flexible speakers' corner to

accommodate different activities, with a central platform, various configurations of seating, an open space for people to gather and observe, and interestingly a place to communicate through writing and drawing. The second explored where speakers' corner could be located using flags to indicate current and possible uses of the park. Interestingly, participants had very different views on location than the local council. The third explored the use and configuration of speakers' corner modules with paper maps, plaster models and plasticine people. Design ideas included soft or rounded edges for the seating modules, colour to make speakers' corner identifiable, and create zones for different uses, e.g. story-telling, singing or debating. The modular kit was then tested on site, and the public were invited to comment through speaking and drawing on 'how I would like to use speakers' corner in the park?'. The prototype testing on site coincided with local elections, the project gained the backing of councilors and media interest. This led to funding being secured to construct a permanent structure. To comply with the local council's tendering process it was agreed that the best way forward was to hold a design competition open to MACPfNE and local art college students. The local community, through an expanded founding committee, co-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 additional insight into how the wider community use the park and view the proposals. The winning design 'Stepping Stones to Great Communication', was located in the site favoured by users, and included a series of colourful plinths that could be used as stages, play elements, tables and chairs. They plinths were decorated with mosaics inspired by William Morris, a past resident, and designed and installed collaboratively with school children and local disability groups. MACPfNE staff and students alongside the users were involved in the project from the very start through to the final construction on site. This ensured that on the whole ideas co-developed were manifested in the final design, as captured by Jayne 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're looking forward not just to seeing it in the park but using it as well. In fact we've just had training in public speaking ... so we're hopeful that the next generation of great orators will be Walthamstow children"*. The close links between the co-design process and the social drive were also evident in the understanding of the 'open ended' possibilities of the design as captured by James O'Rourke, chair of the founding committee: *"This space is going to be for multiple use, not just a speakers' corner. We saw from rehearsals children used it for a place to play and a place to sit and eat lunch"*.

Figure 3: Stoneydown Park speakers' corner prototype testing

Figure 4: 'Stepping Stones to Great Communication' (H. Clack, S. Roming, Y. Hong, 2010).

Figure 5: Year 6 pupils speaking at the launch of the first neighborhood speakers' corner, and the first new London one in nearly 150 years.

4.4 Speakers' Corner in Every Playground Pilot Project

Location: Lilian Baylis Technology School and Heston Community School in London

The success of Stoneydown Park project as an educational project that has been successfully integrated into the curriculum directly led to the next project, Speakers' Corner in Every Playground. A joint initiative between MACPfNE, SCT and Pupil Voice and Participation England. The initiative stems from growing concern about the decline of key communication skills among young people in the UK. Skills that form the basis of consensus building, cooperation and community life and are also valuable for engagement in the democratic process. MACPfNE were asked to develop a series of co-design workshops for school speakers' corner's that could then be rolled out nationwide, and to test the methodology in two pilot secondary schools. The four workshops proposed and tested were a development of those used in preceding projects. In the first workshop the concept of a speakers' corner was debated, topics of importance to pupils were discussed, and they practiced 'speaking'. The second workshop focused on the physical, spatial form of a speakers' corner. Pupils considered methods of communication and the space they require. In the third session pupils explored their campus using props to consider the relationship between audience and speakers, acoustics, technology, people flow and weather. 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, they built and tested 1:1 prototypes.

Figure 6: Construction of 1:1 prototype, adaptable platform, seating, weather protection and a notice board of topics (MACPfNE, 2011).

The emphasis on process in this project served to highlight the co-design process as a ‘design intervention’ in itself, fostering the use of public space, here the school campus, for public debate. The value of the workshops, whether a final speakers corner will be constructed or not, as a tool to explore issues of public space and the public sphere, and transform the understanding of participants of their own public space, was recognised by both school pupils and MACPfNE students. Interestingly, in this final case study the team did not use the prototype as a design tool, as this would not be easily replicated if the workshops were rolled out across all schools in the UK. The 1:1 prototypes, reflect directly the ideas of the pupils, with very limited design guidance/interpretation. Arguably the 1:1 prototypes developed present a less open ended, design solution and a much narrower view of a twenty-first century speakers’ corner. Highlighting the importance of design as such, and raising new questions on the role of the designers within the co-design process.

5. Discussion / Conclusions

The extent to which design interventions influence the use of public space for civic engagement, in comparison to spaces that are not designed as such, remains largely unanswered. Observing the use of the generic speakers’ corner in Litchfield, Walthamstow and Oslo, indicates the potential of the modular design to encourage users to experience and explore a variety of forms of communication. Particularly in Oslo, the structure orchestrated different forms of engagement, and altered the behaviors of both participants and passers by, and thus of the public space. The design process transformed the understanding of space of its users, and as such the space itself. In all those cases the designers were present. How would the users understand and use the modular structure as a platform for public debate in the absence of the design team? Stoneydown Park speakers’ corner, the only permanent speakers’ corner in whose realisation MACPfNE were involved, captures the ideas of the prototype in a permanent form, offering open ended possibilities for the use of the park as a space for civic engagement. The school children, who were involved in the process from the start, instinctively understood this and responded to the design by using it as a site for performance, conversation as well as for making speeches. This was observed on the day of the launch and shortly after. Through the founding committee’s the SCT continues to monitor the official programme that takes place at the various speakers’ corner sites. The gradual change in rituals and behaviors in response to the design, as relates to the creation of a public sphere, is of course more difficult to monitor, but necessary in order to answer questions on design interventions and the use of public space as an arena for public debate. Within the question on the extent that design interventions can foster the public sphere in public space, lies the question of the extent of role of the designer in co-designing these spaces. The final case study suggested the importance of the designers role to facilitate the questioning of established ideas and the interoperation of this into an ‘open ended’ design solution that leaves space for evolution of the public sphere. Arguably, the most interesting observation to emerge from the case studies, is the potential of speakers’ corner co-design methodology and prototype, as tools for the wider practice of reclaiming public space, and as an educational model for exploring issues of public space and the public sphere. Inherent to the case study processes were conversations on issues surrounding civic engagement, issues whose consideration is crucial for the design of successful and sustainable public spaces.

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