

Summary/Overview

The Co-I was Professor Fiona Hackney/University of Wolverhampton. The principle partners were Soho House Museum and Fab Lab West Bromwich. Soho House, the home of Birmingham industrialist Matthew Boulton and meeting place of the Lunar Society, a leading Enlightenment group, provided an ideal historical context for engagement with new ways of thinking about community Utopias and alternative forms of entrepreneurship.

Maker-Centric took a material focused approach to engaging communities in speculative co-design activities in order to imagine and actively participate in shaping their futures. It used heritage, and particularly the notion of living heritage, as a catalyst for and means to imagine community futures in the context of local concerns, needs, debates and place-based identities. It explored how collaborative making might engage communities in confronting, visualising (and enacting) their futures through storytelling and material means.

We recruited an ethnically diverse group of community participants aged 50+ from the locality through open call. They were facilitated by visual artist/maker Melanie Tomlinson and story teller Gauri Raje. Artist Antonio Roberts assisted with using new technologies to visualise ideas. Researchers, artists and participants co-created a praxinoscope depicting/projecting their ideas on utopia and dystopia. The outputs from the project were displayed on a stand at Somerset House for the Utopia Fair in June 2016. Following the Utopia Fair we organised further outputs in Birmingham to deepen and widen the impact of the project.

The project aimed to:

- engage diverse minority community groups and cultures in Handsworth, an urban suburb of Birmingham in the exploration of what utopia in the 21st century might mean for them in the context of hyper local concerns, needs, problems, debates.
- utilise a local heritage site and its collection, as the lens to explore the past as a catalyst for future thinking.
- explore how a network comprising a museum, maker space, university and third sector agency might work together to support community resilience, asset-building and agency.
- explore ways of engaging people aged 50+ from diverse communities with new technologies and extending the potential user-base (age/gender/skills/ethnicities) for maker-spaces.
- test the value of a community partner leading such projects, and explore the shared interests and mutual benefits of this approach for a practice-based, action-research model.
- better understand how 'learning through doing' embeds community sharing, reflection, agency and work in distinctive ways creating a sense of connectivity, value and enterprise, particularly for those in second half of life.

Participation

- 2 day introductory workshops – tour of Soho House/story-telling/making.
- 11 participants; 1 Black British, 5 Asian, 4 White British
- x 8 day long creative workshops with 8 regular participants, mix of Black British, Asian and White British aged 50+ (location Soho House Museum and Fab Lab West Bromwich)
- x 3 days Utopia Fair at Somerset House – staffed by 7 project participants. 291 members of the public directly engaged in a making activity offered at our stall. More people viewed the stand. Our film was included in the screening room.
- Social media: The Maker Centric website page had 327 visitors during the Utopia Fair and for the lifetime of the project there were 1,334 views of different pages and media.
<https://cocreatingcare.wordpress.com/maker-centric-2016> includes film of the project.

Outcomes of evaluation

- Community participants were introduced to a Fab Lab, many for the first time. 3 went on to visit the Fab Lab regularly. 2 have become regular volunteers and now help to facilitate at the Fab Lab assisting others with problem solving. They have taught themselves programming and continue to experiment and collaborate.
- Participants said they learnt about each other's diverse cultures and social backgrounds which informed their perspectives on speculating about the future – 'whose utopia'.

- Participants (aged 50+) gained agency/learnt new practical skills and three have since been inspired to start new projects and entrepreneurial ideas in the locality. “The process of doing unlocks a myriad of ideas for other projects”.
- Using heritage/past – taking the long view was an effective catalyst for participants to imagine the future but it was still a challenge.
- Creating an interactive visual artwork was an effective tool/ story telling device to start a conversation about utopia/dystopia, it sparked the imagination and also gave participants confidence and means to engage with the wider public.
- A combination of heritage, making, fab lab technology and story-telling activity enabled different forms of ‘dreaming’ and ‘play’ which activated participants’.
- The opportunity to co-create led to self-realisation and making a collective response together in collaboration made an accommodation for divergent views to be included pictorially.
- Community participants had not considered the relevance of Utopia as a concept to be applied to current living until participating in this project. Afterwards they felt enlightened and inspired to do new things. They enjoyed the opportunity to stop and reflect through a co-creative process because thinking alone can be difficult.

Learning/reflections on the activity

- Creative, sensory participatory methods make research activity extremely accessible to diverse communities.
- Configurations of collaboration between community researchers and artists with academics leads to a deeper reflection which opens up to make esoteric concepts such as ‘utopia’ much more accessible.
- We gained a broader sense of what collaborating with academia can mean for artists, community organisations and community participants.
- We Identified the effectiveness of making and acting as vehicles for helping engage people from diverse communities in future thinking/engaging in research and moving from inner to outer agency.
- There is value in employing different methods of inserting ‘the body’ into the research process/activity in some way through story-telling, physically making or through play. Embodied methods which involve an investment of time enable participants to engage in filtering their thoughts more deeply.
- The importance of situated research – ‘place’ as a key component of unlocking community potential, meaning and legacy.
- The importance of devising safe spaces and safe ways to employ creative disruption as a technique for radical re-thinking.
- The fluid ways in which the partners worked together was a success factor in enabling research to succeed and have legacy.
- Affirmed the value of interdisciplinary exchange to share and widen knowledge and learning.

Details of follow up activity

- Weekend event at Soho House Museum Birmingham Heritage Week Open Day. Display and utopia drop-in workshop open to the public. 40 people various ages including family groups directly engaged.
- Community sharing and exchange event. 20 adult attendees from the local community including councillors and community development representatives.
- The Utopia stall was re-created for an event ‘the Meaning of Making: People, Processes and Places’ at the University of Birmingham in June 2017. 100 delegates mainly from the Midlands.
- A presentation about the project was given by the PI & Co-I at a workshop for chapter contributors to a forthcoming book ‘The Organization of Craft Work’ to be published in 2018. There were 15 people in the workshop including international researchers.
- Meeting other researchers at the Utopia Fair led to a successful application to AHRC Fellows’ Catalyst grant, enabling further reflection and collaboration on Utopia as method.
- One day Learning Lab involving an exchange between three Connected Communities programme funded Utopia research projects. Representatives included academics, artists, a community organisation and community participants/researchers from each project. 26 attendees; 20 from AHRC projects and 6 external individuals. We also commissioned an artist/illustrator to document the day through image. The day was conducted like a workshop with a mixture of presentations and interactive sessions.