

Re-Making Places: HCI, ‘Community Building’ and Change

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ABSTRACT

We present insights from an extended engagement and design intervention at an urban regeneration site in SE London. We describe the process of designing a walking trail and system for recording and playing back place-specific stories for those living and working on the housing estate, and show how this is set within a wider context of urban renewal, social/affordable housing and “community building”. Like prior work, the research reveals the frictions that arise in participatory engagements with heterogeneous actors. Here we illustrate how material interventions can rearrange existing spatial configurations, making productive the plurality of accounts intrinsic in community life. Through this, we provide an orientation to HCI and design interventions that are concerned with civic engagement and participation in processes of making places.

Author Keywords

Housing, Making Place, Everyday Politics, Multiplicity, Design.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we report on an ongoing engagement with an estate in South East London (UK), an estate where the reverberations and frictions of politically-led, regeneration policies are being witnessed in a strikingly visceral way. Our engagement centres on the regeneration of the *Pala Road Estate*—now *Oreth Park*—and efforts on behalf of the estate’s owners, the Ermit Group, to establish and build a cohesive and sustainable community where there was “none”. We show some of the complexities that arise in such housing regeneration projects. Like the anthropologist Glucksberg [16], we illustrate how an assumed absence (or degraded sense) of community can obscure ideas of place that are valued, and how well-intentioned initiatives to

promote diversity and build community can introduce peculiarly singular ideas of what constitutes community and place. Broadly, through our engagement, we aim to show the productive value of processes that resist urges to treat community cohesion as equivalent to normative uniformity or that pitch one idea of community against another.

More specifically, with our particular concern for HCI and the growing interest in digital civics, civic engagement and everyday politics [5, 8, 11, 24, 23, 32], we set out to extend these critical lines of research by experimenting with and reflecting on the capacities for new forms of participatory engagements and material interventions in urban regeneration and transformation projects.

In this light, the analytical perspective we adopt is grounded in an understanding of places as materially enacted through a multiplicity of practices and actors (residents, institutions, policies, etc.) [22, 28]. The ongoing material entanglements of socio-political and institutional processes and practices, and the heterogeneous actors and their relations are understood to be constitutive of the geographies of place [27]. Our engagements also incorporate this materialist frame. That is, we seek to bring together the multiple practices and voices that co-exist, side-by-side [28] (and that come to constitute place) through material means [26]. As we will describe, we use an intervention that has been purposefully designed to materially intervene in an Estate’s spaces and the relations between actors to help surface the ‘multivocality and polysemy’ inherent in notions of identity and place. Besides, this intervention provides a material means of configuring new spaces where diverse experiences can be related to one another and wider social and political life [19].

We offer an example of a process (and tool) for the re-configuration of participatory spaces, one that actively brings together differently positioned diverse actors and voices. Through a ‘materialist’ intervention [26], we show that when put into place, things can afford and authorise certain ways of being and thus offer vehicles for social change. What we demonstrate is how a process of collecting multiple accounts that enact place over time can open up a space for more genuine and plural accounts of community—something we argue has significant implications for the role of HCI in supporting sustainable communities and processes of making place.

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BACKGROUND

HCI has long been concerned with the role of computing and design in the development of place meaning [18, 2, 21], communities [14, 30], and civic participation/urban renewal [10, 20]. Here, HCI efforts can be traced to the design methods movement that has used computing to aid transparency and engage ‘non-experts’ in the processes of urban planning and where systems—such as Issue Based Information Systems—have been designed to engage multiple stakeholders in deliberative processes [34, 10].

While early works have been criticised for failing to support genuine dialogue and accommodate the particular values people come to associate with place [10, 34], this trajectory of research has turned to the active practices of meaning making, unpicking the ways places and communities come to be constituted, and in turn how HCI can play a part in designing for/in place [18]. Here works have explored the design and employment of methods [23] and locative media applications for civic engagement [21, 20], social action [2] and community building [14]. For instance, research has examined digital tools to ‘geotag’ community stories and found these can produce a sense of pride in the community [2] and a shared sense of belonging and identity, with potential to support urban planning processes [20].

While acknowledging the diversity of stakeholders and the dialogical co-production of place/community, what has been largely absent from this research has been a concerted proposal for harnessing the productive potential of plurality, and in particular how this might be achieved in some tangible or material way [26]. It’s a response to this omission that this paper aims to respond to. Like other relatively recent work in HCI, our aim is to explore how we might integrate social and material resources in multi-stakeholder engagements, support the shaping of relations between service providers and their clients [24, 30], and opening political spaces [5]. Responding to calls for design to enable spaces where divergent perspectives in communities can be worked out constructively [4], we explore the role material/technological interventions can have on processes of place construction [18] and how they might be constitutive of more productive participatory processes.

Next we provide some context to the regeneration project and our role in one of the community engagement activities. We then detail our engagement and work as we collaborated with a number of stakeholders. The analysis will highlight the role our intervention had in surfacing different ideas of living in the housing estate, through highly personalised configurations of people, time and space. In conclusion, we make a case for a genuine commitment to plurality, one where difference is something intentionally sort for and used as a productive force, and for the potential of material interventions to bring to the fore the always emerging qualities of place and the collective (though certainly not homogeneous) efforts to make a place feel like home.

THE PALA ROAD/ORETH PARK REGENERATION

Since the 1980s, the UK—as with a number of other countries in the global North—has been subject to a series of urban renewal programmes prioritising mixed tenancy housing alongside ‘sustainable communities’. Government-led initiatives have promoted these programmes as a means of reversing socioeconomic decline, especially in inner-city areas where poverty and social deprivation have appeared to go hand-in-hand with an eroding built environment. Seen as key to the success of the regeneration efforts have been policies of “positive gentrification”, where the benefits of increased diversity and greater private ownership in city living have been put forward as stimulants for encouraging “less segregated, more liveable and sustainable communities” [25 p. 2449]. Legislation has thus precipitated a trend of investment in housing through public/local authorities and the increased ownership of ‘social housing’ by third sector and private organisations, as well as owner-occupiers. Here, a greater emphasis has been put on *affordable* housing, arguably prioritising a market-based model of housing over public *need* [36].

The political landscape and organisational investment

By the mid 1980s, Pala Road had become an estate famed, locally and nationally, for its deprivation and criminality. Built in the sixties—an era marked by brutalist architecture—the council estate in SE London had been envisioned as a symbol of modern, communal living materialised in Le Corbusier-styled tower blocks serviced by shopping plazas and public amenities. However, like many similar, high-rise council estates across the UK, Pala Road deteriorated, arguably never achieving its promise of communal living.

In 1998, set alongside the political appetite for mixed and affordable housing initiatives, Oreth Council transferred the estate to the Ermit Group one of the larger nationwide (private, non-profit) housing associations tasked with provisioning social housing and supported in large part by government subsidy. By late 2000, Ermit found the estate’s seven tower blocks and low-rise masonette complex (a total of 622 homes) to be both financially and socially untenable. The long-term structural and service failures were contributing to mounting costs, and the estate was seen to be failing its residents through severe and multiple forms of deprivation. Along with the local authorities Ermit issued an ordinance in 2010 to regenerate the area and in 2012 the local authorities granted planning permission.

“Building Community”

Since the inception of its flagship regeneration project, Ermit’s strap line, “*building community*”, has been core to its objectives. With a political backdrop prioritizing mixed tenure housing and the legacy of a troubled estate, the aim of community building has been especially prominent – expressed with the overarching vision to create a mixed, balanced sustainable community.

To this end, Ermit has significantly reduced the number of single occupancy and bedsit flats—seen as a contributing

factor to anti-social behaviour and a fragmented community—and increased the proportion of two-bedroom and family homes. Furthermore, provision targets for the overall estate have shifted towards increasing the proportion of market tenure and private owned housing. Reducing the availability of properties classed as ‘social housing’ and, with an emphasis on affordable housing, the estate has pursued an innovative rent-to-buy initiative as well as supporting shared ownership schemes.

The regeneration project also stands out for Ermit with its concerted efforts to prioritise community involvement. Part way through the four year buildings programme, and into its second phase, those from Ermit working on the estate have instigated a range of community-based schemes to help long-term residents with the transition and to encourage stronger community ties for those who are both old and new to the estate. Such schemes, echoing efforts in the history of planning [35], have involved the recruitment of residents from Pala Road and neighbouring areas to join a ‘Core Group’, tasked with influencing plans for the estate and co-organizing a range of community-based projects and events. Through regular forth-nightly meetings with the regeneration engagement officer, the group discuss initiatives for the new housing estate aimed at generating a sense of civic pride and community. It’s one of the latter community-led engagement initiatives that has been at the heart of the research we present.

ENGAGEMENTS

Historic walking trail

The initiative proposed by core group members began with the idea of a historic walking trail through the estate. Places of historic and geological importance had been identified in a preceding activity and the consensus was these landmarks might be somehow instrumented to allow people walking through the neighbourhood to listen to location-specific recordings. Already in conversations with Ermit and with

experience of similar walking tours [8], we saw the possibility of working with the community on designing a digital walking trail to be a way to examine the complexities of civic regeneration projects and develop a sense of the role HCI might play in this area.

Our engagement has for the last eleven months involved close collaboration with Ermit’s regeneration engagement officer, and both existing and previous residents of the Pala Road/Oreth Park. Over this time, we’ve explored different options for the walking trail and supported a small group of residents by offering methods and tools to gather and share digital narratives. Rather than doing it for them, from the start we were committed to developing the walking trail *with* Ermit and the residents. From a research perspective we asked *how would the process of making a digital walking trail support the residents and Ermit’s ambitions to create a more vibrant community.*

Walk the Talk

Our work began with four visits to the estate between October 2014 and February 2015. An initial workshop, run with Ermit staff, focused on getting to know the small working group of 7 residents and collaboratively generating ideas for the walking trail using photographic and archival material (e.g., historical records, photos, postcards, etc.). Three subsequent workshops incorporated a mix of different activities and people (including an invited history enthusiast who grew up and worked on Pala Road). For the most part, the activities involved experimenting with the City Walk method [8], and deciding how locations on the estate could be combined with personal stories. As with [8] and [3], walking was seen as a means of encouraging a genuine engagement with the environment and, with its enforced rhythm and pace, stimulating pause and reflection.

Over the course of these activities, we became increasingly aware of the mixed feelings residents had about the looming move to the newly built estate. Unsurprisingly in hind-

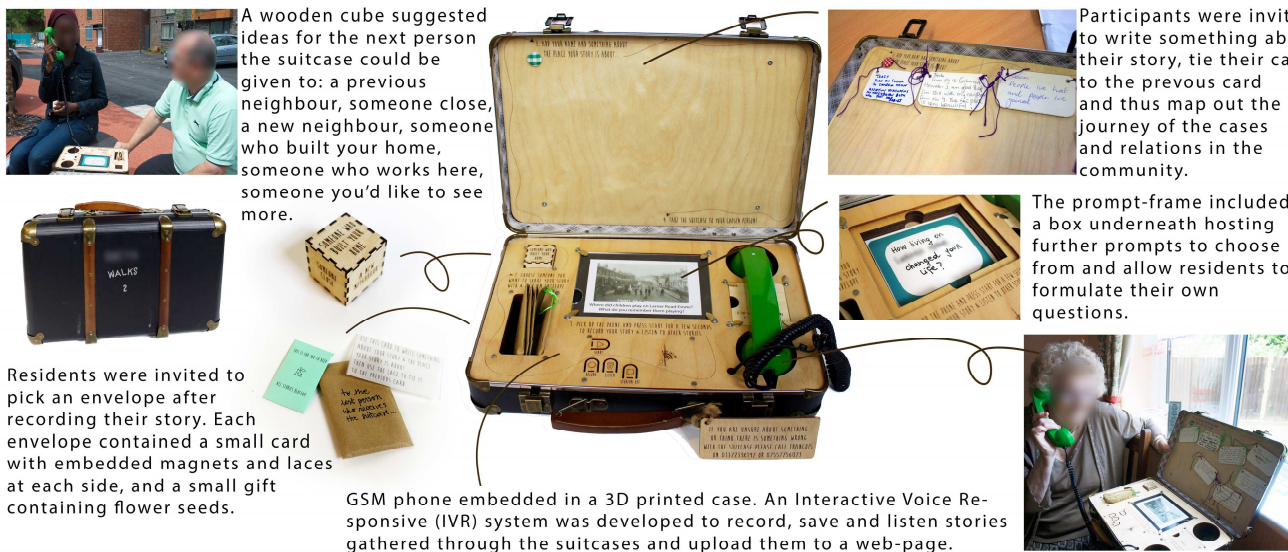


Figure 1 - Suitcase and elements, top-left and bottom right: residents using the suitcase

sight, the stories people started to share expressed a sense of sadness and in some cases conveyed a pride in Pala Road's past. While there was excitement about the move into the carefully thought out new environment, and the clean and functional new homes, most of the working group had spent significant and formative parts of their lives on the old estate and readily recounted evocative memories. There was also ambivalence towards the overall political and organisational context of the regeneration programme was giving rise to a very different housing arrangement (accommodating only some from the old estate).

With a clearer idea of these challenges, and as we began to think, collectively, more openly about the possibilities, it became clear residents were keen to incorporate a greater degree of agency into the stories and walks. As one of the group put it: *"whatever you say, you should also back up in action – so it's twisting in that you are walking where people normally wouldn't, but you are reclaiming it from a negative into a positive"*. With this in mind, we adopted the name *"Walk the Talk, Oreth Park"* to refer to the walking trail. With the residents, we also experimented with way to promote the walks and draw people in from the wider neighbourhood. Residents spoke of wanting to *"grow"* rather than *"build"* the community. This was interpreted as a wish to re-construct Pala Road/Oreth Park through stories from those who contributed to its past, present and future. Insightfully, one resident explained, *"sharing stories can help us plan the future"*.

In practice, given the stressful and emotionally loaded process the estate's residents were going through, the recruitment of others from across the neighbourhood proved difficult (especially with uncertainty about residents staying or leaving). Further, these early meetings highlighted tensions with Ermit's communication team who, although supportive of the initiative, initially opposed the materials promoting the walks because they deviated from Ermit branding. These issues and our preliminary insights, including the group's low digital and literacy skills and physical impairments, suggested a different approach was needed, one that provided a greater degree of independence in collecting stories but at the same time structured the activity to make it as accessible as possible.

Travelling Suitcases

A story telling process using custom built 'travelling suitcases' was designed in response to these initial insights (Fig. 1). Four suitcases were built to support four members of the working group collecting stories for the walking trail.

By enabling a technical and interpersonal system—a techno-social infrastructure, if you will—for prompting and recording stories; attributing them to places on the estate; sharing them in person and online; and passing the suitcases on to others on the estate, we sought to provide people the opportunity to collect and record stories in their own time and in their chosen spaces. Similarly, we aimed to encourage personal agency through individual responsibility of the

suitcases and greater control over who should be invited to contribute a story and how. The suitcases would travel person to person in the estate prompting them to listen to previous stories and messages, record their own and then nominate someone else in the community to hand over the suitcase to. The design of the digital suitcases was also partially inspired by the figure of the Community Buddy—one of Ermit's schemes described as *'a friendly neighbour who can give helpful advice when you move to a neighbourhood'*. The suitcases, built on the buddy idea, sought to offer opportunities for face-to-face and mediated encounters but placed emphasis on listening and sharing recollections. Overall, these qualities of the suitcase were designed to convey what people valued about the estate and show the diversity of these values.

Initially introduced into the community by four members of the working group (Tom, Kat, Sara and Mary), the suitcases have, to date, led to 35 recorded stories. A month after they began being used, we participated in a curatorial activity with the group, to listen to all stories collected, select five to feature as introductions to the bigger archive, and assign them to six locations on the estate.

Next, we draw on the data gathered throughout this series of engagements. Using field notes, audio-stories, audio recordings of walks, and transcripts taken from recordings of informal discussions, group meetings and one-on-one semi-structured interviews with residents and Ermit employees, we examine our extended engagement in the regeneration project. The data set were analysed following a thematic approach [6]. Places, organisations and participants have been anonymised. Below, we consider the role the suitcases and the process leading up to and surrounding them had in the understanding of place and community in Oreth Park, and reflect on how they may have had a meaningful impact.

INSIGHTS

Institutional values and values on the ground

Visiting Oreth Park and speaking to Ermit's staff, on-site, reveals a regeneration project that is sensitive to the tight relationships between process, design and participation. Mel, the regeneration project manager, is able to articulate in compelling terms how Ermit's commitment to *"create a place with a different culture"*—driven, partly, by the needs to change perceptions of the estate and produce value-outcomes—has translated into innovative initiatives on the estate and a programme to involve the remaining residents in *"building community"*. Thus, while concrete demands have put limitations on what residents can influence, the regeneration team has shown considerable investment in designing and delivering activities aimed at creating social capital, 'good' neighbourliness and community building.

Our engagement and especially the suitcases have come to be seen very much as part of this in Mel's eyes. For her, the suitcases strongly resonate with her organisation's efforts to provide a quality environment that supports community life.

“I talked about having the build here of a quality that actually made people engage, feel ownership and want to be part of it and I think your stuff [suitcase] is kind of like the community equivalent [...] It felt special when I looked at it [suitcase] and a lot of people here don't have a lot of such special stuff in their lives.”

However, as we've alluded to, looking past the impressive new buildings and organisational shorthand - exemplified in terms like “building community” - complications surface over what actually constitutes community for those on the estate and what is thought to be valuable to the different actors who have a stake in the regeneration project. Here, the suitcases and walking trail process have done more than embody organisational objectives, they reveal the tensions and challenges a project like this runs into when it prioritises community engagement and participation. In one of our early visits to the site, Rob—the on-site engagement officer—appeared frustrated about Ermit's sometimes poor understanding of the work that goes into ‘place making’.

“I think Ermit believes you build people nice new homes you are putting a few things at the beginning and then hey presto it all works out. Well, reality check! It's not going to work like that...”

Rob, then, is speaking about the difficulties his organisation has in engaging, genuinely, with the residents. He voices the worries residents—long-time residents like Mary and Tom—speak of when they describe the necessarily “slow process” of “building community”. And it is from this standpoint that Rob has come to see the combination of the walking trail and suitcases as productive.

“[The intervention] has made people grow into believing in themselves and [that] actually [the] Oreth Park [estate] has something to give back to Oreth”

The configuration and slow pace of the process is seen as a crucial factor in facilitating, from Rob's perspective, its “organic growth” and the development of “ownership” of the walking trail. The importance of “giving something back” to the town of Oreth points to residents' desire to find value in their stories and actions and see their contributions as having a wider and lasting impact. For the working group, this attitude has been extended into the actual use of the suitcases. The group members have developed their own sensitivities to the times and spaces people should be given to participate and come up with their stories. As Tom puts it: *“It will be a slow process, same as with building the community... it doesn't happen overnight”*.

Yet for some in Ermit, the suitcases highlight the ease with which these perspectives and values can be overlooked. Jane is Ermit's housing officer in charge of the process of decanting people during the regeneration. Invited to contribute a story of her own using the suitcase, her first impressions of the intervention convey the difficulties of remembering how things are seen on the ground:

“ it really surprises you and from our side we obviously see it from that tenancy side and anti-social behaviour side [...] so you actually can forget that this is somebody's home [...] it's that outside thing we are all looking at it from our own little angle”

Jane, in her role of housing manager, speaks of herself being outside the endeavour of the regeneration. But, with a suitcase in hand and a need for narrative, she is invited to produce a different account of the estate. The suitcases thus act as a vehicle for occasioning new encounters, and in this case highlight agendas that could be in conflict.

So, unsurprisingly perhaps, we find the suitcases and trails surface some real struggles in recognising the different values in configuring participation. The complexities are far from straightforward, but to one side, we find an organisational and indeed political strategy that is invested in very particular ideas of value (ones bound up with ‘affordable housing’) and, on the other, Ermit grappling with how to genuinely engage with the estate's residents. The harsh realities of undertaking a regeneration project appear to dictate what and who should take priority, but even so the complications continue to arise.

It's Mel's details about the changes in housing provision that capture the organisational priorities of the project:

“We wanted to build more family sized houses because that is where the demand is and because if you want a sustainable community you need a mix [...] Whereas we do house vulnerable people as the old estate showed 84 vulnerable households in a tower block is a bit of a recipe for disaster [...] so the rules were if you left you left. No one argued because almost everyone wanted to get out [...] there were some people we had to say no to. We also said you couldn't stay if you had got rent arrears or antisocial behaviour [...] I think about 66 properties from the old estate moved to the new estate.”

This presents a pretty definitive view of who the community should be and the motivations for configuring community in this way. However, at the same time, the regeneration team must confront cases on the ground that can't be so easily characterised in these terms.

An example is found in Kat who has, until this year, lived on the Pala Road estate for 14 years. Kat's commitment to community work has grown significantly through the regeneration with her role in the core group and involvement in community activities like blogging and citizen's journalism. However, despite this, Kat found she wasn't able to take up a home in the new estate because of the unpredictability of her paid work and questions over her ability to pay rent, reliably. Kat still remains committed to the regeneration project and has been heavily involved in the walking trail and suitcase intervention, but she occupies a peculiar status, categorised as somehow not right for the new estate. A story Kat contemplates recording for the trail is of an early-morning fire in one of the tower blocks that led to the eventual closure of the top floor of the building. Among the working group, this generates further stories of a community rallying round, working to help the many people temporarily displaced. Kat then is stitched into community life on the estate, in both its past and present, but it is unclear how her status should be understood vis-à-vis the new builds and the new community. Similarly, for Kat, the suitcases have a

‘performative’ quality. In her words, they serve as “*a prop...showing what we are doing in the community [...] and its wow. Look at that!*” But again, we are left wondering how stories from past residents like her are to be viewed in Oreth’s new configurations of place and community.

Here, it appears our intervention has found itself somewhere between a range of differently experienced contingencies, each shaping configurations of community that although perhaps not at direct odds with one another, seem to complicate one of the overriding objectives of the regeneration project, that of building community. Via the suitcases and walking trail, community starts to look like something that resists being neatly orchestrated or treated in any singular way. Rather, it appears fragmented, and enacted, processually, through different and multiple threads. Deep questions are raised around how participation might be configured if we took seriously the commitment to engagement and community building.

Divergent accounts of life in the community

From the outset, the walking trail and traveling suitcases were intended to give the residents agency by providing a distinctively material form to their own memories of the estate. The individual choices and responsibilities for telling stories and nominating others to tell stories placed the residents as central in producing a historical account of place and shaping its future. Moreover, the reciprocity involved in ‘*asking*’ and ‘*giving*’ questions built into the system, aimed to give residents opportunities to shape narratives through collective experiences.

In practice, using the suitcases was a process of experimentation, where the working group used the series of workshops to consider what might work best. At first, residents questioned whether they ‘knew anything’ about the estate or whether their stories would be worth recording. Shifting the understanding of history—seen as objective, sanctioned *knowledge* and singular registers—into the everyday and tied to familiar locations, though, allowed the working group to see their personal experiences as meaningful.

As confidence built, ideas were exchanged, suggesting ways to engage and approach current or previous residents, including doing it together. In a workshop session, we saw Kat helping a fellow resident Jim by suggesting his story of friends “*lost and gained*” through the regeneration be cast in more positive terms (to avoid “*moaning*”). While there was plenty of support amongst residents, what was most striking was how, collectively, the stories (and the processes through which they were decided upon) presented variability in narrative. More than simply different stories, the wider narrative—drawn together through photos, handwritten questions and recordings, and the four suitcases—brought to light much more fluid and in some cases divergent accounts of the estate and its residents. This is best conveyed through a series of encounters we had with the residents preceding and involving the use of the suitcases.

Sara originally joined us for a coffee morning while she was helping her elderly mother prepare to move from her flat in Pala Road to one of the new flats in Oreth Park. She grew up and lived with her mother on the estate until she got married, in her late twenties. In our subsequent walks through the estate, she chose to tell stories from her childhood describing the towers as “*the best playground anyone could ever have*”. One of her stories recounts how she used to amuse herself as a child throwing glass bottles down the rubbish chute and how, just before the towers were closed from demolition, she re-enacted this, recording for posterity the sound on her phone.

In a later workshop, Kat encourages Sara to replay the sound for her suitcase recording, and Sara obliges:

“Just before the block itself was actually locked off to the public, I went back with a carrier bag full of glass bottles and did it one more time, just to hear it, and I videoed it, so here it is [sound]”

Sara’s story illustrates her affective and embodied relation to the towers. In fact, Sara consistently documented the regeneration, taking photos, collecting old signage and researching historical photographs. In this way, her ‘anticipatory archaeological work’, performed throughout the regeneration process, was amplified and further legitimised through the group’s walks and suitcase recordings.

For Rob, the alignment between Sara’s activities and the intervention chimed with her personal anxieties. The making of the walk trail supported Sara “*let go*” of the towers:

“because she has got a story out there and she told those fantastic things she did - what makes this place special [...] it has empowered her to let go.”

This letting go, however, seems in conflict with the efforts to digitally *save* aspects of the past—a desire that drives Sara’s actions and story telling. In this light, her efforts might also be understood as an attempt to safeguard a version of the past being expunged by the demolition and to preserve her affective attachment to the towers. Through *immortalising* her activities in the towers—in some sense converting the stark buildings into a deeply local vernacular—she has found a way not to let go, but rather repeatedly etch out a path from past to present, each time her story is replayed and listened to. It seems, confronted with the demolition, the suitcase recordings and walks with other members of the working group offer an opportunity to save, channel and share with others the things that made the towers meaningful for the community.

Ideas of the past come through differently in a story Mary (a core group member) recorded using the suitcase. Recollecting her move to the estate over 30 years ago, Mary talks of it being “*the best thing that ever happened*”, giving her the chance to “*do things she never dreamt of*”. Her story refers to long held ties between people on and around the estate, and their own investment in activities the community could take collective pride in:

“... some years ago, before Ermit came on the scene and we were Oreth Council tenants, we didn't get any help with doing anything and we decided we wanted to do things for ourselves, so we had a little fun day on Banks Field and we used to do morning coffees, ploughman's lunches and then afternoon teas. We did a lot of catering for all the people that came and we also used to invite different local groups to come ...”

Passing the suitcase onto a friend and another long time resident, Mary invites a similarly poignant story. She asks her friend, Sue, to talk *“about the way Pala Road changed your life”*. The story Sue tells responds to the invitation; she talks about the 21 years in her much loved old flat on the 14th floor of a now demolished tower block, and describes the view she often shared with Mary. She also talks of the core group and friends she has made through the coffee mornings Ermit has organised alongside the building work. Together, in their stories and suitcase exchange, Mary and Sue conjure up a community that has taken shape through its relations to the built environment. There is not a community that is absent, somehow, but one where people *“stuck it out”*, to use Mary's words, and in which you *“looked for good things”* and discovered *“there was always good things”*.

Yet unerringly positive accounts of life on the estate, like those of Sara's and Mary's, give long-time resident Tom pause for thought:

“Its interesting to find out that, well, they actually grew up here when it was rough and to hear their stories, it's not about how rough it was. Its about the fun times that they remember.”

Grappling with the different accounts, Tom's response is to suggest that the walking trail should feature all 'kinds' of personal stories, 'good' and 'bad'. His experiences of living in the towers were indeed not all positive. Tom moved to Pala Road as an adult and has lived on the estate for over twenty years. *“When I first moved in”* – he recounts – *“I kept myself to myself”*. Slowly, he begun getting to know some of his neighbours, but it was only with the regeneration that he got more involved. He sees the rebuild as an opportunity to influence decisions about improving the estate to *“create more of a community”*.

Reflecting back on his earlier life on the estate, Tom tells an unsettling story about what life was like for him:

“I remember coming out of my flat at 3am [...] Frank was in a state of overdose, we got the paramedics here and Ian said “oh I called the ambulance” and I [said] “what for? I would have just left him there to die.” [...] I said “He is a druggie, doesn't matter how much help you throw at him the next day he is back on it.”

Tom talks of a neglect for people's lives in the towers. Residents like him found themselves feeling powerless in the face of challenging conditions—frustrations festered to the point where the life of other residents seemed of little value.

To protect the identity of people in the story, Tom eventually chose to delete his recording. Yet, among the working

group, it sparked a heated discussion in which we began to hear different sides to the antisocial behaviour on the estate:

“I had friends: he was an alcoholic and she was a heroin taker [...] and somebody said to me what are you doing knowing these people and I said they are my friends [...] they'd do anything for you...you know such lovely people...” (Mary)

“This is just a demonstration of the bad side of Pala Road because there was people that were just put here and they didn't really get the help that they needed.” (Tom)

Tom, then, comes to see the *“bad side”* of the estate coming out of a lack of provision or the 'right' support for those who were most in need. However, the talk appears not to hinge on an agreed on and sanctioned narrative, or of any resolution *per se*, but a recognition of multiple narratives and possibilities.

More broadly, given the confidence and legitimacy to talk about the estate, what emerges from the residents are a collection of stories and encounters with shifting and sometimes diverging registers. The process of producing narratives and the orientation towards the suitcases/walks provide a space in which accounts continue to be worked over and grappled with. Here, we're led to ask how we might resist the urge to consolidate and stabilise the varied registers and normative alignments and, instead, hold on to such a multiplicity. The challenge is in seeing the differences and fluidity not as something to be solved, but rather resources for a community building that accommodates the lived (and lively) concerns held by the multiple actors involved.

Visions and ownership

The collection of stories gathered since the start of the process expose, as we have seen, a rich and diverse mix of values. The suitcases and the walking trail have come to be a means of 'telling' and sustaining the different versions of life on Pala Road. For example, Sara's vision of the recorded stories was driven by a desire to show how life on the estate has often been far more positive than the largely negative portrayals suggest. For Sara, images often conjured up in the mainstream media have done a disservice to the community and she's seen the stories and suitcases as a way to rectify this. She's thus invested in cultivating the positive stories amongst her friends and old neighbours. After making her own recording, she passed her suitcase onto a fellow old resident, Rose, presumably with the idea that Jane would follow in her example by talking positively about the estate's community. Rose recorded the following:

“Living in Pala Road we used to have a very close community of friends – years ago we used to have a twin set washing machine and people used to come on Friday [...] as some of the neighbor didn't have one [...] and because we had young children basically some of the mums used to look after the children in my flat while others used to go out and hang their washing on the lines [...]”

Amongst the working group, there is a great deal of resonance with Sara's ambitions for the suitcases. As Rob put it in the curatorial workshop where the recordings were reviewed: *“Rose's story [...] struck a cord with everybody*

about the whole notion that we used to work together in order to get by.” However, there is also a real recognition by all that the different perspectives emerging through the stories must also be given prominence. This variety is seen as offering opportunities to “look at the estate in a different light”. Paradoxically, perhaps, the shifting registers are seen as a way to provide historical “continuity” to and a sense of “being part of something” on an estate that has undergone constant transformation through the years:

“obviously it has changed over the years and there are so many diverse stories [...] that it all adds to everybody’s knowledge of everybody else...we are all sharing and learn more about the past and as I said we meet people and they talk about what they would like for the future...its all connected really...”

Room then is given not just to the positive but also the negative accounts of the estate. Tom and Kat come to strongly advocate for the necessity to include those stories that depict contentious events on the estate. Again in the curatorial activity, the group decides to combine two stories describing the time in which a murder took place on the estate. Recounting this particularly sad episode becomes an opportunity to ‘put the story right’ and contest mainstream media versions of the story, which omitted significant details.

“Everybody was so mad about all the bad things that had been saying about Pala Road regardless of the fact that there was a murder and that’s because the murder had anything to do with Pala Road. It could have happened somewhere in Corner Street or somewhere in Oreth and the press wouldn’t have been that bad [...] and then you realise that there is a community there or they wouldn’t have got angry, would they?” (Mary)

Mary’s words disclose a strong sense of injustice for the way mainstream media’s narratives have come to dominate public opinion. The mainstream media had a striking effect on life on the estate and contributed to its reputation – however the event and its complexity are here recounted to demonstrated the presence of community rather than a lack of it. Indeed, the inclusion of seemingly ‘negative’ stories alongside other experiences and diverse perspectives comes to be seen as engendering spaces for reflection, discussion or even transformations. Here Kat explains how she thinks even the less positive stories can be used constructively.

“We don’t want people to see that we are biased [...] if we say all good people are going to say that we are doing this to make Oreth Park look good but [...] we are doing this because we want people to know that everywhere you go there is going to be problems and sometimes you can make a negative into a positive thing. People know that everything is not perfect. I mean its like the stabbing – sometimes when you have a tragedy that brings the community together [...] can help improve something.”

Here having a balance to the positive and negative stories on the walking trail is both associated with a concern for how people might perceive it as genuine as well as a matter of fairness. Kat envisions the wider registers and values of the stories in the digital walking trail to resist homogeneous—and perhaps ‘deceptive’—notions of a ‘perfect harmonious community’ and show how instead communities

can be resilient in difficult situations. Moreover, Kat sees, in the past, things that matter for the present and also recognises their capacity for shaping the future.

In some respects, this sharing of and openness to diverse accounts of the estate stood in contrast to the ‘brighter future’ being set through the regeneration project. Talking about the renaming of the estate to Oreth Park, Mel explains it was emblematic of the change to the estate, disassociating the new site from Pala Road while emphasising pride in its presence within Oreth. Chosen was “a marketing name that was used to then establish the identity for the future”. In the same vein, Mel and the regeneration team involved members of the core group in the process of deciding the new names for the estate’s buildings and its streets. However, despite the presence of “opposing factions”, the underlying premise wasn’t questioned. Even though some saw it as a way to ‘liberate’ the place from the stigma attached to it and others wanted to keep names as they were when they grew up and raised their children, the register of change and a better future stayed the same.

Responding to this, Mel rhetorically reflects; “There is an issue I guess about how far you detach yourself from the past when that past is as contentious as Pala Road.” Here she hints of the many discussions she and the regeneration team entertained with the group. The question of degrees of attachment/detachment opens things up in a way Mel may not have thought possible in the past.

Again, the suitcases and their recorded stories appear to offer something distinct. They are seen by Mel as something “for the people” and not “a corporate promotional tool”. “Building communities” and the stories that members of the community might want to share need some distance from the economic and political demands to promote the estate, or at least the direction of influence comes to be understood as not only one way.

Toward the time of this writing, the suitcases and walking trail had received so much enthusiasm within the regeneration team that Mel had decided to present them at one of Ermit’s general management meetings. The implications of this are still unknown, but the achievement, we want to imagine, opens up the door, if only a bit, to new means of genuinely engaging their ‘customers’ (as Ermit chooses to call them), and maybe ways of encountering a plurality of community that can resist being tied to something singular.

Possibly, surprising, is that this development is being met with resistance on the ground. Concerns have been raised about ownership of the suitcases and the digital walking trail among members of the working group.

“It’s a residents thing [...] – yes Ermit runs the estate but it’s not their baby [suitcases/walk] it’s Oreth Park’s baby [...]. I think it’s us who should decide which stories go on there whether they are good or bad... because at the end of the day Ermit bought an estate with a bad reputation”

The suitcases and the Walk the Talk intervention come to be regarded by Tom as *belonging* to the residents. Ownership of the estate is here contrasted with the right to safeguard spaces in which to express the stories, experiences, and opinions that comprise the tapestry of life on the estate.

Whatever the case, it's precisely this that the suitcases have come to make room for. The power and value of sharing stories on the walking trail may reside in their potential to connect, and stem discussions about the different ways people can contribute to the making and re-making of the estate. In this etched out space, values or normativities aren't constricted, and possibilities for the future don't feel settled; rather conversations are left to unfold and be open to revision. Much like the intended trajectory of the suitcases, the emphasis is on how preceding stories shape the subsequent ones and how the encounters sew relations together that sometimes align but at times also diverge.

DISCUSSION

In our ongoing engagement, life on Pala Road/Oreth Park has emerged as a rich entanglement of heterogeneous entities, processes and practices. Working alongside residents and the regeneration team has exposed us to the complexities, struggles and inherent conflicts of transforming and improving communal and civic life in place. In closing, we draw on our experiences to offer some reflections and an orientation to HCI and design interventions.

Material interventions and spatial configurations

In our study, the processes and interventions aimed to open up and alter (if only slightly) the terms of participation and distributions of agency running through place-based narratives; in purposefully tangible ways, we sought to re-shape existing spatial configurations of participation. What we found in the regeneration of the old estate—in which the housing association was striving to establish a collective identity and better future *for* the community—was a (sometimes explicit) reliance on a narrative of degraded community. Through our meetings, workshops, walking tours, interviews, suitcases, and so on, residents strove to counter these dominant narratives by amassing a heterogeneous collection of stories tied to specific times and places on the estate. More than place being constructed or produced by differentiated positions and 'spatialities' [12] then, the residents exposed the extent to which 'spatialities' entangle with and continually bring into being social relations of multiple and diverse kinds [31]—in short, they surfaced the unceasing 'throwtogetherness' of different configurations of space and social life [27].

The interventions (and specifically the suitcases) appeared to play a role not just in the articulation of place and collective identity, but also the way *values* are bound to place. Through their material presence and the relations they enabled, the interventions provided opportunities to "cultivate" [28], to express what was valuable about the lived experiences on and around the old estate. The stories people recorded and passed on to one another through the walking

trails and suitcases gave the community a way to normatively organise space in a way that was emergent and heterogeneous. More than probes (eliciting participants' views for the purposes of design) [15], the interventions played a constructive role, locally, by allowing people to organise space differently, and in effect re-making place. Complimenting and extending work that has looked at the potential for digital devices to capture community matters [8, 11], and intervene in socio-material relations [24, 4, 11], we draw attention to how material interventions and digital artifacts have normative, meaning making capacities in social and civic affairs, and the constitutive role place can play in these [22, 28].

Broadly, our work points to the ways we might intervene in prevailing, normative practices and existing spatial configurations in order to support the articulation of values, issues and open up the conditions of possibility [26]. Building on [12], the work shows how the social and political organisation of space is manifest in material ways and how these can offer both oppressive and emancipatory possibilities [26, 31]. Here, then, we may work with a heightened awareness of the performative capacities of our material interventions and the spaces they create to expressly (re)distribute participation [26] and reflect on if not disrupt existing distributions of power and agency [29, 22].

Multiplicity, plurality and place

The value of collecting and sharing stories in communities—aimed at the creation and articulation of shared place-identities—has been at the center of many studies in HCI [14, 21, 2, 20]. Grounded in an understanding of places as enacted through a multiplicity of practices [22], our process and the suitcases aimed specifically to support actors bringing together the different practices, places, and voices that have, over time, been significant to Pala Road/Oreth Park. The assembling of diverse stories through the suitcases framed life on the estate as something to inquire into and re-discover [13], unsettling stable categories of identification, and simplistic polarizations of the 'good' or 'bad'.

From our insights, these stories find their value not in their claims to legitimate truths about community and place. Instead, it's in their uncertain and open-ended nature, and in how they emerge through varied, situated encounters and contingent situations [17], that they posit an "equality of intelligence" (rather than 'sanctioned' knowledge) [34]. That they are plural, situated, partial and contingent doesn't discount them, rather it's this that allows them to contain the possibilities for the future. Residents' concerns over the 'ownership' of the suitcases stressed the importance of this; they were keen to safeguard spaces for critical reflection where different voices (and practices) might come *together*, and personal experiences connected to one another and to larger socio-political processes and structures [19] in order to 'work out' what place and community might *become*—rather than what *it is*.

Prior work [5] explored the role of HCI in creating spaces where multiple voices can co-exist, and recommended ‘autonomy’ in order to ensure all divergent perspectives are heard [30]. The above shows that besides the visibility of practices and different voices, what matters is how they actually relate to one another [22]. It’s not that multiple and diverse voices, identities and practices should simply be allowed to co-exist; rather these should be seen as “mutually imbricated” [9] and constitutive of one another. A critical and productive participation calls for an understanding of the ways different practices and subjects are constitutively tied to one another through what we have in common—our surroundings [9]. Thus, while community is often regarded as a collective of largely identical citizens [9], in designing for the civic sphere, our challenge should be to look for ways to keep the disparate stories going, to enable spaces where heterogeneous actors and collectives can be related to one another, not to cement oppositional grounds (us and them, etc.), but where partial accounts and differences can be recognised, understood as assets, and worked with.

HCI and (re)making places

Indisputably, regeneration projects are a complex entanglement of social, political and economic practices with their own agendas and priorities. At Oreth Park, we have seen first hand how for example these projects can become a struggle between the tensions of democratic participation and marketing strategies. An assumption of a single place/community struggles to align with the lived experiences and interests of citizens and runs the risk of overriding their voices and values. Similarly, political tensions arise. ‘Social mixing’ policies have been criticised by academics and policy-makers because they are often based on an imagined normative integration [7, 25] and mask strategies with a social cleansing agenda [1]. On the ground, Oreth Park’s efforts to involve residents with aspects of the design of the estate and activities to support shaping the new community further complicate these top-down perspectives. They show how a lot of ‘work’ and care is applied in enacting these organisational and political policies [22]. In this sense then, we need to attend to the relational forms and particularities through which rebuilding projects are done in practice.

Our insights point towards ways to understand and engage with places and communities as *always-becoming* configurations of communal life [27], and the pitfalls of treating these collective endeavours as singular, stable objects. Indeed, the case we present indicates there is no such thing as a ‘completed’ and single place and community [9], but that there is an *ongoing* processual quality to places and communities that can’t be avoided. Thus, while the devices and processes we may design and use should be seen as part of the evolving and lively processes that constitute place making, we also need to find productive ways of putting the heterogeneous practices (social, institutional, political, economic) in dialogue with one another [37].

What we’ve offered is an illustration of how materially bound processes and interventions have the capacity to enable such dialogues. Rather than assuming place or communities as an ‘object’ to intervene in or a problem to solve [33], our examples hopefully invite new models of participation, ones where through material engagements in place making, socio-political issues, lived experiences and practices are brought to the fore and given form. Here, form giving is an endeavor of connecting the different ways people contribute to making places—bringing together and (re)distributing the practices and actors (institutions, policies, lived experiences, etc.) that come to enact the places and communities to be reckoned with and made sense of [34, 26]. HCI design can then be an activity that is about opening, envisioning and realising new relations among the practices and actors at work in (re)making places.

CONCLUSION

We presented a process working with multiple, heterogeneous actors—a housing organisation and a group of residents—in the context of a housing estate undergoing urban regeneration. The process entailed the construction of a walking trail that included a material intervention to support the recording and playback of people’s stories. Our engagements and material intervention showed the possibilities for changing social and spatial configurations by opening up spaces in which different voices, with distinctive registers, could be understood in relation to one another.

The process of working in this context forced us to confront some of the ‘harsh realities’ hoisted on people being subject to urban regeneration—the ‘cleaning’ and ‘clearing’ of multiple identities and histories. Through the process, we found solace as the struggles and frictions embodied and performed through the intervention and suitcases made the tensions visible, and that value was found in this visibility.

Overall, our time with the people of Pala Road/Oreth Park showed us the extent to which existing configurations of space have significant implications for the way places are understood, and then made and re-made. We think HCI can play a significant role in designing spaces through material means in which people can talk about their lives and values, connect these to socio-political practices and enact their communities and places. The provision of these spaces is essentially about safeguarding the rights to affect one another and shape each others common surroundings—that is making and re-making the places that matter to *us*.

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