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# STORYTELLING FOR DEVELOPMENT

## COMMUNITIES & CULTURE NETWORK+ INTERIM REPORT

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FARRELLS

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Storytelling for Development project is over halfway complete. Project partners have worked closely together to meet the project aims and objectives, although discrepancies between the priorities of each partner organisation have led to some unexpected shifts in procedures and methods. The project has generated fewer digital stories than we had originally hoped, although far more than the minimum for a viable analysis. We anticipate a rich set of findings to steer future projects seeking to use digital storytelling in the context of urban redesign.

## **PROJECT PARTICIPANTS**

Professor David Frohlich, University of Surrey

Dr Jocelyn Spence, University of Surrey

Marialena Nikolopoulou, University of Kent

Tom Barrett, Heather Jameson, and Trisha Boland, Lambeth Council

John Letherland, Farrells

Steve Broome, RSA

## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

The starting point for the project is a challenge and opportunity related to participatory design of the built environment. In a recent report on architecture and planning in the UK created by project partners Farrells architect planners, current design processes were criticised for not being participatory enough in representing the needs and aspirations of local residents, or respecting the history and cultural heritage of areas subject to re-development. This project aims to take a more holistic view of places and their identities and to draw on knowledge of the past in planning for the

future, using digital storytelling as an empowering and pro-active method of community engagement in the planning process for urban redesign.

Within the above context, we aim to help communities and architects to tell and exchange stories about the past, present and future of an urban neighbourhood. We address two research questions:

1. What is the role of digital storytelling in community engagement for urban development? □
2. What is the value of past, present and future stories in urban design? □

Our objectives for this project are distributed among four work packages.

1. With project partners at Lambeth Council, identify avenues for community engagement (WP1).
2. Invite short digital stories from members of the target wards to share on-line and supplement information gathering for the Co-operative Local Investment Plans (CLIPS) initiative (WP2).
3. Conduct training/facilitation sessions on a drop-in basis as well as sessions targeted to particularly underrepresented groups, such as the elderly (WP2).
4. Host community storytelling workshops, in which digital story creators can share their work with the wider community and collaboratively develop insights (WP2).
5. Host a seminar for Farrells employees in which digital stories are screened and employees are invited to submit their own digital stories in response (WP3).
6. Host a final project exhibition open to the public and featuring digital storytellers from the community and Farrells (WP1).
7. Run a reflective workshop to discuss the lessons of the project in relation to similar initiatives, and crystallise the findings in a presentation slideset (WP4).
8. Present findings to the Network event in autumn 2015 (WP1).
9. Analyse and write up a final report for the Network and Lambeth Council (WP1).

Key to Project Aim 2 above is the specification of five particular types of stories in a 'story arc' spanning past, present, and future, which we anticipate may be useful in framing and understanding the lived experience of people in the context of urban

redesign. 'Past' stories (called 'heritage' in the bid document) are those about an area's past. 'Present' stories (called 'use' in the bid document) are those describing present-day uses of the built environment. 'Future' stories (called 'aspirational' in the bid document) are those reflecting hopes and fears about the future, or visions of what a neighbourhood might become. 'Regeneration' stories (called 'development' in the bid document) are those describing personal experiences of changes to the neighbourhood. Design stories are development stories of the future, describing imagined changes to the environment and its use. □ Community participants will be invited to create digital stories in one or more of the first four categories. Farrells employees will be invited to create digital stories in the fifth category, design, in response to the community stories.

## **PROGRESS**

The project was launched immediately after the project start date, and in fact included a preparatory teleconference three weeks before the start date. All project participants keenly felt the time pressure for accomplishing our many objectives in the span of only six months. Our progress to date includes:

1. Kick-off meeting with partners at Lambeth Council, in Lambeth, 6 February.
2. Selection and preparation of digital storytelling technologies (Shadow Puppet for iOS, Com-Phone for Android, no viable option for Windows), February.
3. Development of memorandum of understanding between University of Surrey and Lambeth Council, February.
4. Commencement of application to University Ethics Committee regarding digital story collection, February (and ongoing).
5. Specifying and refining community engagement plan, February.
6. Train-the-trainers meeting with community activists, in Lambeth, 10 March.
7. Facilitation sessions in Lambeth 15 April, 21 April, 1 May, 5 May, 6 May, 13 May, 19 May.
8. Composing and creating the architecture for the project web page ([www.surrey.ac.uk/dwrc/projects/storytelling-development/index.htm](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/dwrc/projects/storytelling-development/index.htm)), the microsite for online digital story creation (to have been hosted by Stockwell

- Partnership with a mirror site on the Vassall and Coldharbour Forum site), and the mechanism for acquiring participant demographics and consent (distributed via a SurveyMonkey questionnaire), February.
9. Internal project meetings with Steve Broome and Marialena Nikolopoulou to guide decision-making, online, 3 March, 5 May, 2 June.
  10. Dissemination of early findings at the DS9 (Digital Storytelling) Festival on Storytelling and Activism, 24-25 April 2015 at the University of South Wales, Cardiff. Jocelyn Spence delivered a paper titled 'Storytelling for Development: Shaping Localism in London' that was met with great interest among many conference attendees.
  11. Creation of an online digital story corpus, divided by story type, available to project partners (hosted on [www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com)). At the time of writing, the corpus contains 21 digital stories: 14 'present', 3 'past', 3 'future', and 1 'regeneration', May.
  12. Collection and organisation of demographic data for participants, May.

## KEY FINDINGS

To date, our key findings involve the benefits and drawbacks of working with a local council to achieve our objectives. We want to stress that everyone at Lambeth Council involved with this project has been positive and accommodating; our observations relate to organisational concerns that would most likely be encountered with other local councils.

The project got off to a strong and early start, and we negotiated a refinement of the objectives to incorporate Lambeth Council's advice on how best to engage with a diverse range of demographics within the three target wards of Stockwell, Larkhall, and Vassall. Our partners on the council brought in leaders of local community groups to act as project advocates and arrange facilitation sessions (Objective 3 above). The council are far more interested in the category of 'use' stories (renamed 'present' stories at their suggestion) than any of the others, due to their requirement to identify specific recommendations for disbursing funds relating to the CLIPS initiative. However, this posed no problem for the University research team, who intended all along to give participants free rein in terms of the types of stories they contributed: a preponderance of 'present' stories would not adversely affect the

project's research goals. The priorities of the university researchers and Lambeth Council were not perfectly in line, but they did not contradict each other. We looked forward to two or three months of intensive story creation, followed by large-scale community events.

Many community leaders have expressed great enthusiasm for the digital storytelling approach, and our participants have for the most part approved of the idea of offering a rich, humane sense of context to their interactions with the council. Out of those who completed a digital story, informal feedback ranges from the straightforward to the triumphant: those more comfortable with the technology and with giving voice to their opinions found the process to be positive or mildly interesting, while those who came to a facilitation session unsure of their ability to complete a story responded very positively to our encouragement and to seeing the result of their efforts played back to them.

Despite the best intentions and efforts of the community activists brought in at such an early stage of the process, we have found it difficult to solicit participants in great numbers. We attribute this difficulty to a number of factors:

1. **Recruitment.** We have relied upon community leaders to recruit potential participants. They rely on their established networks for recruitment, which in effect limits them to the small segment of the community that is already actively engaged in local issues. We are still working on other methods of recruitment to broaden participation.
2. **Motivation.** In the absence of a particular or pressing community need, community leaders have encountered some difficulty in motivating potential participants to contribute. This might be addressed by clarity regarding what happens to stories once made.
3. **Restrictions.** An early email from a vocal critic of past council policies prompted our partners at Lambeth Council to restrict engagement to face-to-face facilitation sessions. Online-only recruitment and participation, originally intended to be the project's mainstay, was ruled out to avoid what they feared might become an avalanche of negative comments. This illustrates the political sensitivities involved in community engagement work.
4. **Suspicion.** One notoriously controversial redevelopment project, Myatt's Field, is situated in the CLIPS area that we were asked to target. Relations between the council and the community there have been strained in past years, and this has affected the perception of our project. We are currently ambivalent about being independent from but allied with the local council.
5. **Photography.** The digital storytelling methodology depends upon participants being able to take their own photos for use in their digital stories. This poses no problems for people making their own digital stories through the online-only mechanism envisaged at the outset. However in a facilitated workshop process, participants may not already have suitable photos to hand, and are reliant on sourcing them from elsewhere. It has proved difficult to locate publically available contemporary photos from the web, and our request to draw on historical photos from the Lambeth Archives was turned down. Community leaders kindly donated several photos that they themselves had taken, and sessions were restructured on the fly wherever possible to make photography possible.

6. **Crafting.** The traditional digital storytelling methodology typically involves several days of instruction and guidance, resulting in a carefully crafted and often technically complex output. We aimed for a far more lightweight process that would take much of the pressure off of participants and lower the barrier to engagement. However, we have found that several participants require significant support, both with the technology (selected specifically for its ease of use) and with the development of their ideas. This has proved difficult, though not insurmountable, in the timeframes and locations provided by community leaders. Several potential participants have expressed keen desire to take part and even filled out consent forms before deciding to do the actual story creation on their own at home; very few of these people have followed through.
7. **Privacy.** Our approach included two privacy options. One restricted viewing of digital stories to the immediate project team, and one which made the digital stories available to the public. Although 16 of the 21 stories created so far are set to 'public', Lambeth Council has requested that we restrict these to the project team for the time being. We are therefore unable to entice potential participants with promises of public engagement, or to share the publicly available stories with the local community or network members.

These issues prove the value of this project as a pilot for larger-scale attempts at engagement around urban redesign. We anticipate that our findings at the conclusion of the project will point towards potentially more effective mechanisms for identifying, motivating, and working effectively with community members outside of the structures offered by the local council. Again, we want to point out that our partners at Lambeth Council have been very positive towards this project, and their decisions regarding access seem reasonable given their priorities and their position within the community.

We have also identified a significant internal obstacle to implementing a project using the digital storytelling methodology, which is the internal ethics procedure at the University of Surrey. Despite initiating the ethical approval process within the first two weeks of the project, we are still awaiting full approval for all target participant groups in early June. The university raises a number of valid concerns regarding

participant consent and the privacy of digital media, but some of these concerns are either irrelevant or counterproductive in light of the public-facing nature of this project. We will seek clarification and further advice from the committee before embarking on a future project using digital storytelling.

## **NEXT STEPS**

Our plans for completion include the following:

1. Two or three further facilitation sessions during the week of 15 June.
2. Finalising plans for the Farrells workshop, tentatively
3. Finalising plans for the final project exhibition, tentatively
4. Finalising plans for the reflective workshop to be led by Steve Broome, tentatively
5. Analysis of community-generated digital story content for contribution to Lambeth Council CLIPS project.
6. Analysis of Farrells-generated digital story content in relation to Project Aim 2 above.
7. Analysis of project outcomes in relation to Project Aim 1 above.
8. Preparation of report for CCN+ meeting in September.
9. Development of guidelines for revising AHRC bid for which this is the pilot.