Gathering-In-Action: the Activation of a Civic Space

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The Grange Pavilion project began in 2012 when residents of Grangetown, Cardiff began to consider what they might do to act as a catalyst for the redevelopment of a former Bowls Pavilion vacated following funding cuts under austerity budgets. In a context of then Prime Minister David Cameron's Big Society speech, the Localism Act 2011, and the launch of Cardiff Council's *Stepping Up Toolkit* encouraging community groups to form and take over council services and assets, residents understood the task of activating a civic space as something which might become an "all-consuming project." This paper reflects on eight years (to date) of gathering, valuing, and preparing for the intended and unintended consequences of taking on a small civic space, and critically considers the role of architectural education and practice within a community asset transfer.

Keywords: community development, architectural education, Localism, co-production, participatory design, live projects, Community Asset Transfers

That Simple Thing

"Underneath that simplicity there is a complexity but just getting that simple thing is important", a resident noted as a partnership of residents, local area organisations, and University staff and students prepared to select a professional architectural team in 2016. "It's a café, with a space, with some growing space."[1]

In 2012, a group of around twenty residents in Grangetown, Cardiff, began meeting around kitchen tables to talk about how they might instigate the development of a neighbouring vacant and deteriorating building through a Community Asset Transfer (CAT), a process whereby civic structures and services are transferred from central or local government to individuals or organisations. Their ambition sat within a broader context of austerity cuts to civic facilities and services in the UK.

In partnership with, and as members of the Grange Pavilion Project - as activists, participants, architects, educators, students and researchers - our collective research and live teaching has intertwined with this ambition since its inception, pursuing questions it raises along the way. What might a space for all mean? What are the logistical and ethical implications of taking on a CAT? How might the value of a civic space be defined? What role and responsibility does the architect hold long before and after design? How can care be constructed? How do ambitions for quality reconcile with fears of accelerating gentrification? How can a small building in a small park act as a catalyst for actions amongst fluid networks of residents and private, public and third sector partners?

As the Grange Pavilion Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) prepares to launch a civic space following eight years of partnership, we are in a position of reflection to frame our next collective steps. [2] Closely tracking what a community asset

transfer has demanded of all involved, this paper offers a micro-study of one

Community Asset Transfer as a reflection upon the valuing of a civic space. [3]

An all-consuming project (2012-2013)

"Could be very exciting, working with […] the council in a new sort of community

connection," a resident wrote in 2013 of the potential of redeveloping a 1962 Bowls

Pavilion and Green, recently vacated following withdrawal of funding under local

Council austerity measures. "But could equally become an all-consuming project that

would overpower those who were tempted to step into such matters."[4]

The proposal by residents to do *something* about a deteriorating civic building

sat within the political and economic shrinkage of the state in managing civic facilities

and services. Then Prime Minister David Cameron's 2011 Big Society speech had set

out an agenda of giving local communities what Cameron described as "more power

and control to improve their lives" through the chance to "come forward and help and

run" local facilities "that the state can't afford to keep open."[5] Alongside England's

Localism Act 2011, which devolved powers from central government to local

government and individuals, Big Society partnered the launch of austerity measures

outlined in the Chancellor's June 2010 budget speech.[6] Altruistic aspirations framed by

Big Society would play out as economic necessity in Wales as well as England. Not

long after Cameron's speech, Cardiff Council launched their *Stepping Up Toolkit* to

support the transfer of civic assets and services to local community groups. Writing that

national austerity demanded "new and efficient" ways of working, Cardiff Council

called for communities to take a "creative response." [7]

The Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) similarly identified creative

opportunity in the *Localism Act*. RIBA President Angela Brady's "Foreword" to Part

Two of RIBA's *Guide to Localism* identified the Act's formalisation of community

consultation as "a signal to architects that their skills are valuable."[8] Recommending

that architects engage their skills in new ways to capitalise on their services as "enablers

of successful community engagement,"[9] the *Guide* proposed:

> Localism needs design professionals to succeed, but the quality of the places
> created by this new process will be dependent on their ability to appropriately
> engage with local people and local issues, right from the beginning, designing
> 'with' rather than 'for' communities.[10]

Cardiff Council's *Toolkit* concurred with the need to employ professionals from the

start but forewarned of difficulties fledgling community groups "building their capacity

along the way the way"[11] could face in procuring funding professional services at early

stages. The *Toolkit* suggested that groups might be able to secure "pro-bono work

(provided by professionals at no charge)."[12]

Describing the "local" as consisting "of actors with differing access to power

and resources, differing needs, and varied commitments to fleeting or long-term

investment," Suzanne Hall observed in 2015 that the "current neo-liberal proposition"

consisted of "a decentralisation of power, without a decentralisation of resources."[13]

*Stepping Up'*s signposting to "pro-bono" work problematised RIBA's alignment of

quality to appropriate levels of engagement right from the beginning. In taking up the

offer and demand of Big Society and austerity, what, exactly, would be asked of

residents and professionals who stepped up to activate a civic space?

What could this be?

Figure 1. What could this be? The Grange Pavilion photographed in 2013, with a question posed by the first Vertical Studio led by the Grange Pavilion Project and the Welsh School of Architecture in 2013.

Image credit: Josh McDonough, Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University, 2013. BSc Vertical Studio 2013 led by Mhairi McVicar and Richard Powell, Grange Pavilion Project.

"[I]t's not about the visions but how they understand the us of us" (2013-16)

As well as a lack of funding and a self-declared lack of 'skills and inclination' to run a facility, the loose group of residents refused to declare themselves as representing "the" community. Having met through informal conversations at school bus stops, in the park, and at each other's doors, the loose and fluid group included long term residents and recent arrivals to the area, all of varied ethnicities, faiths and ages. "Ourselves is a subject of discussion," the residents noted as they discussed who might manage and use

a "community" space. [14] Their first step was that of broadening a definition of community as gathered by a common interest in a shared civic space.

As Localism and Big Society launched, Awan, Schneider and Till's *Spatial Agency* declared an expansion of architectural praxis with reference to Henri Lefebvre's definition of (Social) space as a (social) product. [15] Highlighting Lefebvre's definition of the production of space as dynamic, evolving and led by multiple actors, Awan et al proposed that the "skills and ways of thinking that go into the production of buildings" could be deployed towards ends other than a fixed notion of architecture as building alone. [16] Applying this interpretation to architectural pedagogy offered scope for supporting the earliest stages of a CAT.

As an architectural educator, my involvement with the Grange Pavilion began in 2012 when I partnered with residents in an exploratory three-week Vertical Studio with ten first and second year undergraduate architectural students. [17] My role become formalised in 2014 as a founding member of a Cardiff University partnership platform, Community Gateway. [18] Through a Cardiff Futures early career leadership program, [19] we - eight multi-disciplinary academics and professional services staff - secured Cardiff University funding and organizational commitment to develop mutually beneficial long-term partnerships with individuals and organisations focused within the geographically defined electoral ward of Grangetown, Cardiff. [20]

Constructed in the late nineteenth century on tidal mudflats between Cardiff Bay and Cardiff city centre, the historical development of Grangetown and the neighbouring wards of Riverside and Butetown was tied to global trading routes from Cardiff's docklands. Today, the wards are home to generations of Welsh and Welsh Somali, Bangladeshi, African/Caribbean, Pakistani, Indian, European, British and multi-ethnic Welsh-language communities, constituting Wales' most ethnically diverse electoral

ward. Containing super-output areas ranked within the 10% most deprived areas overall in the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, Grangetown addresses key challenges in areas of poverty and health through well-established Church, Mosque, Temple, public sector, third sector and voluntary networks. [21]

Committing to an asset-based ethos of valuing existing strengths within Community and University, Community Gateway launched in 2014 with an open call for any ideas for Community-University partnerships. Out of over two hundred ideas and over fifty projects, the Grange Pavilion project was the first expression of interest.

The residents coalescing as the Grange Pavilion Project had no desire to run a facility themselves, all being employed / self-employed in sectors including education, government, arts, and youth services. Identifying the potential of institutional support to build partnership capacity, the group approached Cardiff University as "an organisation with resources that could assist and practically help the process along," setting out their expectations. [22] We want, residents had challenged us in our first public open evening conversation in Grangetown in 2012, "a relationship and not an affair." [23]

Pairing residents with 1st and 2nd year undergraduate Architecture students, we co-produced a brief for a three-week Vertical Studio in May 2013. Drawing on precedents of participation in architectural pedagogy and theory - Roberta Feldman and the City Design Center in Chicago,[24] Sharon Haar's *City as Campus*,[25] Doina Petrescu,[26] the University of Sheffield's Live Projects,[27] amongst others[28] – we optimistically proposed that, as well as carrying out social, economic and historical surveys, running a consultation event, and investigating precedents, students could "develop a brief for an architectural competition to regenerate Grange Gardens and adjacent derelict / underused buildings and public spaces" in three weeks.[29] Our attempts to create an architectural brief at this stage failed resolutely.
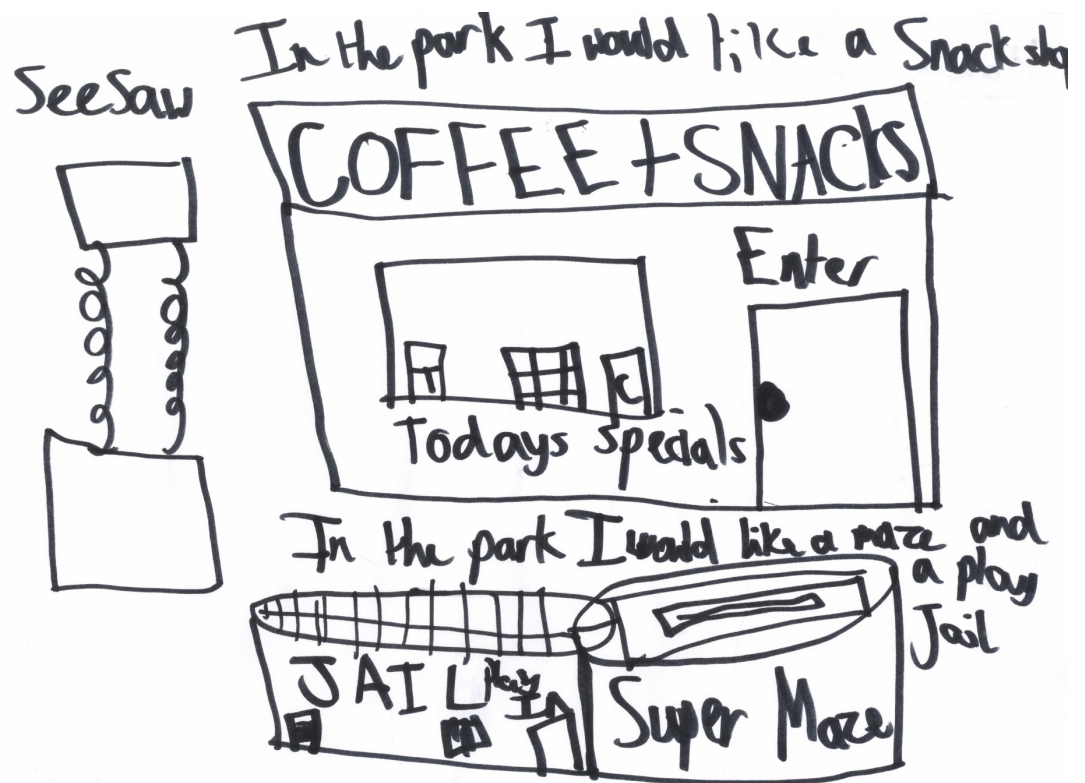
Figure 2. 'In the park I would like': the simplicity of a complex task. Image by a participant at the first public open session held by Community Gateway in December 2012.

Image credit: Photographed by Mhairi McVicar for Community Gateway, Cardiff University, 2012.

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre wrote of the "coming-into-being" of social space as embodying interrelationships and specific uses, irreducible to a form.[30] What the specific uses of this social space might be was not yet known. With no client, no agenda, no consensus, no evidence of what might constitute consensus, our first Vertical Studio found itself unable to begin what we thought of as our discipline-specific task of proposing Architecture. Instead, the studio instigated and documented three weeks of individual, group and public conversations, through which we - educators, students, residents - learned to listen, a skill sometimes overlooked by architects as RIBA's *Client & Architect* observed.[31] Expressing fears that architects might focus on identifying problems and idealising homogenised gentrification, residents advised us in

no uncertain terms to "[t]hink carefully about how you portray our community,"[32] as the task emerged not as that of designing a building, but of deploying architectural skills towards the slow, messy, coming-into-being of a social space.

"Our vision is to create a vibrant, friendly community facility at the heart of Grangetown, where people of all backgrounds can connect and are made welcome." This value statement written in 2016 by the expanding but still fluid group voiced the complex task of reaching across what one resident described as a "Russian doll" of multiple communities packed within multiple communities. Describing Grangetown's diversity as its strength, one resident observed:

> Grangetown doesn't feel like it has a centre where the whole community can meet. At the moment, the community is made up of pockets of different cultural populations who mix in either the mosque, the temple, the pub, church- but they do not mix in one place.[33]

In *City, Street and Citizen*, Suzanne Hall quotes Stuart Hall's clarification that "the capacity to live with difference is, in my view, the coming question of the twenty-first century."[34] Embarking on the complex task of creating a space where "all" could connect and feel welcome, manifesting the ability to "live with difference" by activating the vacant Pavilion was the basis of our second joint Vertical Studio.

Nine 1st and 2nd year undergraduate architecture students partnered with the Grange Pavilion project to host a one-day public Ideas Picnic in May 2014 as an open space for conversation and ideas, with no architectural design proposals in play. The Ideas Picnic gathered interest and built momentum, expanding the number of interested individuals and organisations. The first in a series, ongoing one-off public events began to explore and gather evidence of interest and viability, enabling the partnership to commit to a one-year License to occupy the space.[35]

"If space embodies social relationships,", Lefevbre wrote, "how and why does it do so? And what relationships are they?"[36] With Cardiff University acting as an asset guardian leaseholder, the Pavilion was opened for activation by and for residents, local organisations, and University staff and students, bringing partnership ideas raised in Ideas picnics to life: culture cafés piloted by a local business;[37] Grangetown Youth Forum initiated by resident youth leader Ali Abdi joining Community Gateway in 2015 as a Cardiff University partnership manager;[38] weekly Community Gateway funded tech cafés by resident arts organisation Art Shell; voluntary FAN friends and neighbours group and mental health networks partnering with Cardiff University.[39] Accommodating what Suzanne Hall describes as the "conviviality and conflict" of plural and unequal societies, the coming-into-being of a social space proceeded slowly towards the agreement of a common language[40]

Since 2012, annual cycles of live teaching have collaborated with over two hundred undergraduate and postgraduate architectural students, Community Gateway, the Grange Pavilion project, and architects Dan Benham and IBI to investigate questions raised by the project. Students and staff trained as appreciative inquiry researchers have gathered qualitative and quantitative evidence of interest and support, successes and failures.[41] Staff and students from twenty of the University's twenty-five academic schools partnered with individuals and organisations to develop research and teaching partnerships across business, philosophy, healthcare sciences, medicine, planning and geography. A gathering body of evidence for interest in and need for this civic space informed a business case and joint funding applications to bring in a professional design team and proceed to construction.

"It's not about the visions," the Grange Pavilion Project voiced in 2016 as their expectation of what a professional architect should bring. "[It's about] how they

understand the 'us' of us."[42] Core to this understanding was the group's demand for quality. The Architect, the group emphasized, "can engender a confidence to demand better of everything from the client, the architecture and the funders: they can raise the game and the quality of thinking to answer the question that has been posed."[43] With the selection of Cardiff-based Dan Benham Architect in partnership with IBI Group,[44] the demand for "better of everything" was the next question taken up as the project proceeded into construction.

Reasonable value for money (2016-2019)

A declared pursuit of *quality,* of demanding better of a civic space, had underpinned the project from the first conversation held between a resident and a local Councillor. "Show that Quality exists here,"[45] resident feedback stated, an ambition tested by advice following one unsuccessful funding application. Acknowledging that the project could offer significant social impact, the funding reviewer suggested that the project nevertheless did *not* demonstrate reasonable value for money, noting that a community space could be done for less.

How was the value of a civic space serving a community of 20,000 residents for 99 years to be measured? Indeed, the proposed project cost per square metre exceeded that of a contemporaneous *SPON's Architects' And Builders' Price Book* measure for the likely cost of a community facility, quantified by SPON's as between 55-62% less than the likely cost of luxury flats.[46] In a post-industrial urban area edged by vacant and Airbnb-occupied "luxury" waterside flats, the Grange Pavilion Project's demand for the quality of a civic space suggested a reframing of value for money, not only in terms of the short term physical infrastructure costs, but of the long term value this civic space might offer. [47]

Public land, Brett Christophers observes, is often defined as "surplus" and as "needing therefore to be put to productive (private sector, profit-oriented) use."[48] Economist Marianna Mazzucato's *The Value of Everything* challenges portrayals of the public sector as extracting value while the private sector creates it.[49] Advising moving "moving beyond Oscar Wilde's cynic, who knows the price of everything but the value of nothing," Mazzucato proposes a reconsideration of "the stories we are telling about who the value creators are, and what that says to us about how we define activities as economically productive and unproductive."[50]

In a shifting landscape of definitions of value, *The Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* requires public bodies to pursue the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales according to sustainable development principles by demonstrating "the importance of balancing short term needs with the need to safeguard the ability to meet long term needs."[51] The pursuit of a kind of civic quality extending beyond SPON costings demands not only the pursuit of long term value, but ongoing critical evaluation of the longer term consequences of the Grange Pavilion in the wider context of the neighbourhood and city.

Figure 3. Grange Pavilion described by those who will use it. In 2019, our seventh annual Vertical Studio partnering with the Grange Pavilion documented a series of conversations over a three-week period with individuals and groups who will lead activities in the Grange Pavilion when it reopens following redevelopment. The students created precise drawings capturing every described activity and the people involved.

"We want our city back" (2020)

> If this was just a big glass shiny box would people be afraid to walk through the doors all of a sudden? It is a really really valid question, we want to keep what has happened today in that people of all different ages, backgrounds, faiths, genders, have, you know, walked through the door, have been happy to fill out a card, have been happy to what's going on, we have had loads of requests to rent the space, and people just absolutely love it.[52]

After eight years (to date) of partnership, our partnership has secured a 99-year lease and over £1.9 million to redevelop a community-activated and managed civic space, with construction completion in 2020. Despite successes, alertness to the unintended consequences of redevelopment is expressed through fears that the Pavilion might not feel welcoming for all, that it might accelerate gentrification and inadvertently do more harm than good. "Who would we trust to come and sort out the mess the day afterwards because it is a year down the line and it's not working?" residents questioned in discussing the responsibility of the architect in proposing a civic space. "Who is going to correct the correction that needs to be made?"[53]

The desire that an architect should "stick around and genuinely create a relationship" faces funding challenges for long term post-occupancy relationships between architect and client. As with the project's long and uncertain evolution, the University can be placed to offer long-term institutional capacity through ongoing live teaching and research partnerships as the Grange Pavilion Project now takes on the task of caring for an activated civic space.

Caring for this physical space continues with construction itself. An undergraduate research intern spent summer 2019 on site, documenting care taken by those constructing the Pavilion alongside resident artist and CIO member Deborah Aguirre Jones.[54] In our seventh annual joint Vertical Studio, architecture students paired with Grange Pavilion CIO members to translate precise descriptions of intended uses of the space into written specifications and drawings, reminding students that the accuracy of architectural visualisations matters to those who use it. "Think carefully about how you portray our community," residents had stipulated in 2012.[55] Critical questioning of the longer-term consequences of the Pavilion as it opens sits within national and local contexts of gentrification, as local area residents voice all-too familiar protests to proposed developments in the area. "Developments are killing off our city," a local community garden group protested. "We want our city back."[56]

The "move away from a profit-oriented city," Anna Minton writes, is likely to encourage fluid, open and loose space, arguing that public life could be supported by "the civic-minded Victorian approach that saw land and buildings left to local communities in perpetuity."[57] The 99-year community asset transfer of a civic space offers looseness and fluidity which extends long beyond meanwhile use. Juggling the irony of fulfilling Big Society and austerity agendas with the threat of inadvertently contributing to the rise of adjacent house prices while profit-oriented housing practices define UK cities, ongoing planned conversations will take up questions residents have raised of gentrification, community land trusts, and community development trusts as other vacant or underused sites in the area come into play.

At the Grange Pavilion, the residents' activation of a civic space continues, for now, to pursue the simplicity of a space, with a café, with some growing space, as a social space gathering a community. Our long-term collaborative teaching and research

continues to question the role and value of architectural education and practice beyond
that of designing a building.

Grange Pavilion, Exterior view of Outdoor Classroom, 17:00, 18th May

Figure 4. A day in the life of the Grange Pavilion. A 2019 Vertical Studio with 1st and 2nd year Undergraduate
students, led by Dan Benham Architect, Grange Pavilion project and Community Gateway, captured specific
moments in a day at the Grange Pavilion, drawn while the project was under construction.

Image credit|: Drawn by BSc Vertical Studio student Caitlin Elliot, Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff
University, 2019. Architectural design by Den Benham Architect and IBI Group.

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Grangetown as a multicultural area of Cardiff: 38% of the population in Grangetown identify as being of 'Mixed Ethnicity', 'Asian', 'Black' or 'other ethnicities' as opposed to 15.3% in the whole of Cardiff. https://www.cardiff.gov.uk/ENG/Your-Council/Have-your-say/Ask%20Cardiff%20Library/Cyfrifiad%20Grangetown%20-%20Grangetown%20Census.pdf (accessed September 4, 2019).

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