BEYOND LENDING: A case study

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Hyperlink to short film, also called *Beyond Lending*, made for the Generosity Conference https://vimeo .com /285528440 .

Maindee Library in Newport, South Wales, was closed by the local authority in 2015. Following the global financial crisis of 2008, a Conservative-led coalition government was elected in 2010 on a promise to cut the nation's spending deficit. A period of austerity ensued with a range of cuts to public services in which library services, with 17% of branches closing, were particularly hard hit.[1]

The library was soon reopened by a determined volunteer collective called Maindee Unlimited, delivering more public services than ever before.[2] This was made possible through a process of Community Asset Transfer,[3] in which the council made a long lease on the building available to Maindee Unlimited without charge.
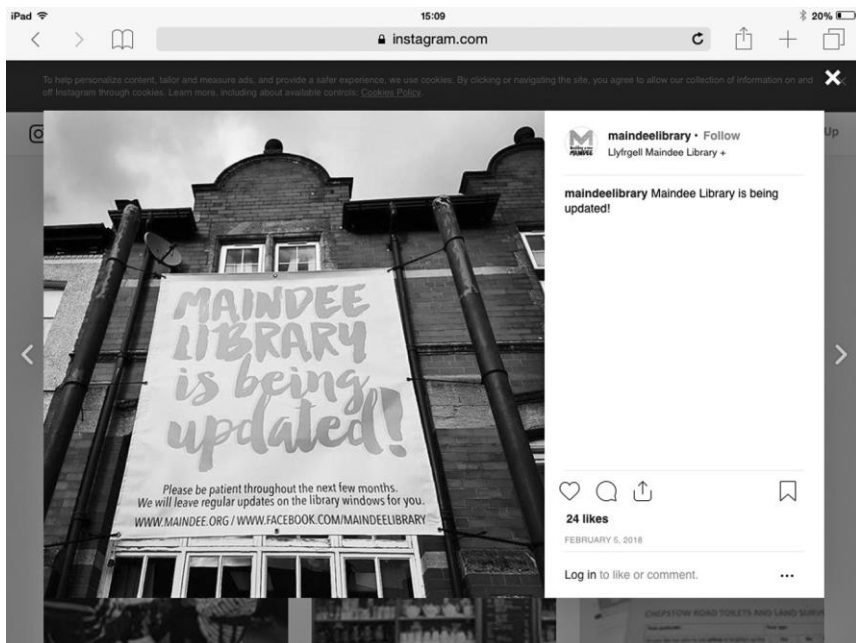
Remodelling the library took place within the broader context of a socially engaged art programme, *Finding Maindee*,[4] seeking to better recognize the (his)stories, culture(s), and community/ies of the place, though, as Maindee Unlimited's Project Manager has observed, we chose to use the word 'refresh' rather than remodel or refurbish which 'was about respecting the integrity of what was there already'. With funding from Arts Council Wales,[5] Maindee Unlimited appointed architects George Lovesmith & Sarah Hollingworth to help them reimagine the building in the spring of 2017.[6]

This photo essay comprises snapshots from the integral social media stream (blog, Facebook, Instagram, Vimeo) which accompanied the building design and construction, sharing the process and the progress, in order to expand the community reach and enable other similar groups to learn from these experiences. The predominant use of screen grabs, to represent the project here, is a reflection of the importance of social media to the entire process. The virtual community space paralleled physical participation and enabled both a transparency and a two-way dialogue, pushing the limits of who is invited to shape our shared civic spaces, with the media platforms themselves becoming new tools deployed to do this. Echoing themes of Convergence Culture, as observed by Henry Jenkins[7] following the dawn of 'new media'

in the early 2000s, new virtual inter-relationships emerged in the building of virtual community/ies that are not typically part of a design team diagram or building procurement process, and in turn, a community/ies built *their* agency to affect physical change.

Building works took place in phases between March 2018 and January 2019. However, it was certainly not a straightforward architecture project. Open invitations were extended far and wide to bring as many people as possible into the spaces of production. These include community leaders creating learning and economic opportunities in processes of procurement and change, to nurture the sense of local ownership and both maximize and multiply the impact the investment might have on the local economy.

The commission was conceived as a series of test pieces, a consequence of a desire to experiment with new ways in which the library could work, and the realities of budgetary constraints. For each strand of the project, what might normally have been user consultations or stakeholder meetings became creative workshops, social gatherings, or game-like events with learning outcomes, more akin to a lesson plan, as opposed to the bureaucratic agenda of a business meeting. The events were tailored to embed ideas of how it might *feel* to use the space in different ways within lived experience.

Maindee Library is being updated.

Becoming an Architect

Building a new
MAINDEE

Library Refresh about to get real!

29/11/2017 | Finding Maindee, Development & Building, Library

This week we will receive quotations from contractors to carry out the first phase of works to the building. With a written proposal we will then be in a situation to enter a contract for the work; gone will be the big questions about how long the work will take and how much it will cost.

REFRESHING

This blog is essentially a diary entry written before the big event. We explain some detail about the Arts Council of Wales' *socially-engaged* process which got us to this stage and some of the challenges which we have confronted - or maybe about to properly face...

Library refresh.

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Llyfrgell Maindee Library +

maindeelibrary We're making a film about the library makeover #architecture #space #buildings
Currently in edit with @creativefez and will be ready later this week

+WHATT
EXHIBIT

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AUGUST 30, 2017

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We're making a film.

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Cooking up the soup.

We ran two pilot projects in collaboration with students from the architecture schools of UWE Bristol and Cardiff University to prototype and experiment with how the building is used. In these projects, the tutors enabled not only the students but also participating volunteers to learn and to set the agenda within processes of creative change. This too can be regarded as an act of generosity on the part of the volunteers, as community leaders themselves open up to a broader set of objectives. The project becomes not only a process of capital procurement but also one of professional learning in the community, and there are risks associated with this as well as demands on time and resources.

This Maindee Library+ commission allowed for reflective creative practice and collaborative experimentation within communities who are keen to expand how their inter-relationships might vary from the norm. Expectations were challenged throughout, especially those of the architecture profession. Here, each person's potential and their own ability to find the answers was encouraged:

Now the funded works are complete and we reflect on what has been achieved, we can see within the library building that the project has recognised the people of Maindee, 'pulling' together ideas and aspirations, within a piece of spatial & social infrastructure that might best serve and value this particular place – something people would be comfortable with – not too flash.

… & we followed a process – 'pushing' on toward the future with newly-shaped spaces and extended capabilities. This is not a case of 'place-making' from afar, only

Benefit of trialling ideas.
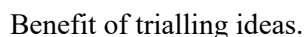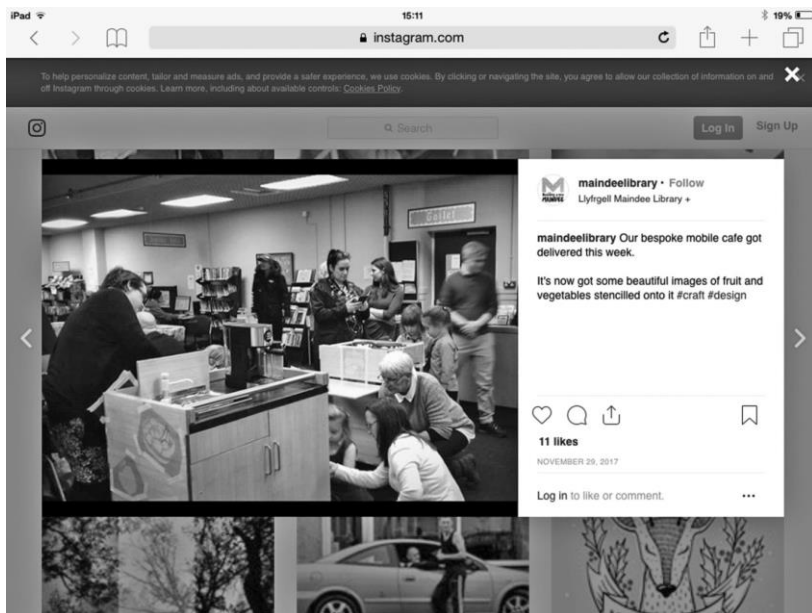
Bespoke mobile café.

Student architects.

giving shape and form to external ideas. Rather the architecture of Maindee Library is a step forward in the practice of 'place recognition' – meaning to represent the attachment to place, but also sense to gently test where people are ready to go next.[8]

Borrowed initiatives

Contextualising this approach might begin on mainland Europe in the 1960s. Though their impact at the time was marginal, The Situationist International (cross-disciplinary artist radicals led by Guy Debord in the 1960s) have been credited with inherently political manifestoes proposing that creative production should be part of everyday life & that 'this transformation should not be in the hands of a small body of specialists but should be made by everyone.'[9] In parallel, the British group, Solidarity, sought to increase 'the confidence, the autonomy, the initiative, the participation, the solidarity, the equalitarian tendencies and the self-activity of the masses'.[10] For Lovesmith, lead architect on the project, this has become a personal, yet ever unattainable, yardstick by which to measure the successes and failures of each project. A decade on from the Situationists and Solidarity, Henri Lefebvre, in his seminal *Production of Space* implored us to "both enjoy and modify" social space.[11]

Direct and contemporary influences include the musings of Cedric Price. Indeed, elements of Maindee Library+ are viewed as test pieces, about which we, like he might, reserve the right to change our minds depending on what happens in the future.[12] Experimenting depends on an open-minded client attitude, but in doing so *lightly* the risk is mitigated.
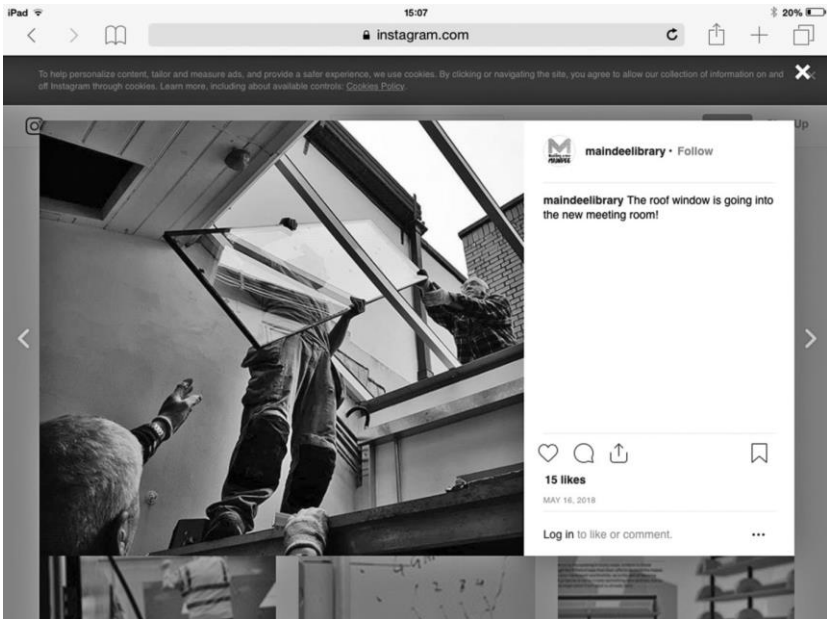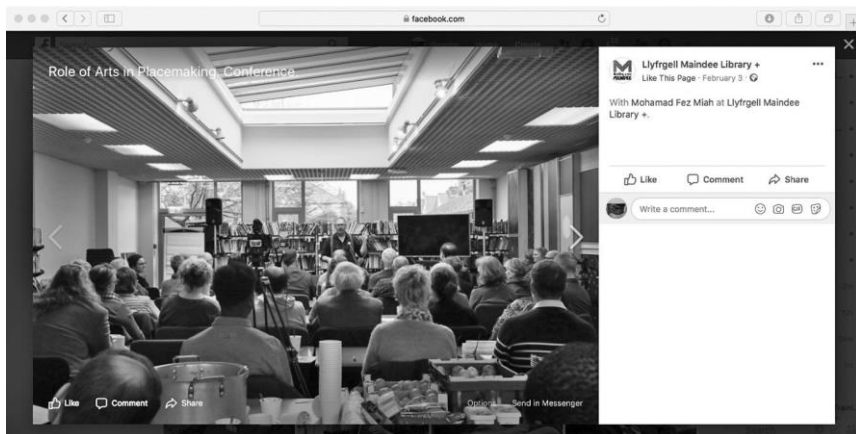
Roof window.

New yellow doors.

Meeting counselling presentation training.

Role of arts in place-making.

In the consideration of public facilities as integral to broader notions of civic space this work is indebted to Katherine Shonfield. In her call to develop the public realm, she critically described it as our lived experience of

democracy,[13] saying it is 'as fundamental to the experience of humanity as the loving touch of the parent.'[14]

Lastly, drawing again on art practice, the notion of the *Relational Aesthetic*, as classified by Nicolas Bourriaud, has spurred an impetus to 'model alternative realities' in the face of a 'commodification of human relations'.[15]

An ambition of enabling is embedded within these approaches, and though risk factors are multiplied, opportunities to maximize on the potential far outweigh anxieties of needing to be in control. Liberated from a sense that one might lose the upper hand or the fee income, the process becomes richer, and the process has meaning because of a culture of community support, within which each one of us has a sense of belonging.

Notes

1   Alison Flood, 'Britain has closed almost 800 libraries since 2010, figures show', *The Guardian*, 6 December 2019, www .theguardian .com /books /2019 /dec /06 / britain -has -closed -almost -800 -libraries -since - 2010 -figures -show [accessed 15 July 2021].

2   More than once there was rumination on the dilemma of stepping in to fill the void left by retracted state services. No conclusion on the full civic implications was ever reached. For more on this, see: David Barnett 'Do libraries run by volunteers check out?', *The Guardian*, 25 June 2018, www .theguardian .com /books /2018 /jun /25 /do -libraries -run -by -volunteers - check -out [accessed 15 July 2021].

3   Community Asset Transfers (CATs) were made possible in Wales in 2003 to promote community development. See https://gov .wales /sites /default /files /statistics -and -research /2021 -03 /community -asset -transfer -research -with -the -third -sector -local -authorities -and -community -and - town -councils .pdf, p. 9 [accessed 15 July 2021]. Local Authorities elsewhere in the UK identified post-crisis austerity as a major catalyst for the disposal of assets in order to secure revenue savings. See https://locality .org .uk /wp -content /uploads /2020 /03 /COP33979 _In -Community -Hands _2020 .03 .18 .pdf, p. 15 [accessed 15 July 2021].

4   https://arts .wales /case -studies /project -finding -maindee [accessed 15 July 2021].

5   https://arts .wales /our -impact /how -we -reach -wider -audiences /ideas -people -places [accessed 15 July 2021].

6   Ultimate capital spend was in the region of £80–100,000 inclusive of tax and fees.

7   Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006); Henry Jenkins, 'Rethinking Convergence/Culture', *Cultural Studies*, 28:2 (2014) pp. 267–297.

8   Aled Singleton, Project Manager, Maindee Unlimited, January 2016–July 2018.

9   Christopher Gray, 'Essays from Leaving the 20th Century', originally published in Christopher Gray, ed. *Leaving the 20th Century* (London: Free Fall, 1974) also in Stewart Home, ed. *What is Situationism? A Reader* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996), p. 4.

10   The Solidarity group, 'As We See It' pamphlet 1961, quoted in Stewart Home, ed. *What is Situationism? A Reader* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996), p. 115.

11   Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 35 (first published in French in 1974).

12   For more on this way of considering practice, see: Cedric Price, *Re:CP* (Basel: Birkhauser, 2003).

13   Katherine Shonfield, in Muf, *This is What We Do: A Muf Manual* (London: Ellipsis, 2001), p. 28.

14   Katherine Shonfield, *The Richness of Cities* (London: Comedia & Demos, 1998), p. 9.

15   Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2002), p. 13 (first published in French in 1998