

The Construction of a Civic Neighbourhood as/through Cultural Production

A Discourse Analytical Approach to Participatory Art and Temporary Architecture

Paola Catenaccio and Torange Khonsari

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ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the construction of a neighborhood in East London, both in its discursive and its socio-cultural and material dimensions. The analysis combines methodologies from the fields of critical discourse analysis, participatory art, temporary architecture and urban commons to offer a “thick description” of professional, political and discursive practices involved in the definition and creation of a civic neighbourhood. The analysis focuses on civic neighbourhood project in East London called InterAct while the pivotal point of the project was the building of a piece of temporary architecture, the planning and ongoing construction of a civic neighbourhood involved a much more far-reaching production of material and symbolic artifacts which jointly represent a form of position taking within a site of social, cultural and symbolic struggle (Bourdieu 1993, 30). The study provides a critical description of the InterAct project, illustrating its purpose, goals and rationale and critically examines some of the publicly available discursive artifacts which revolve around it. The research approach programmatically seeks to combine insights from multiple methodological research traditions in order to investigate a complex socio-cultural phenomenon with considerable possible political ramifications.

Keywords: civic neighbourhood; discourse analysis; participatory art; temporary architecture; urban commons.

1. INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

This paper investigates the construction of a neighborhood in East London, both in its discursive and its socio-cultural and material dimensions. The object of the analysis is Project InterAct (recently renamed “The Common Room” by the local residents¹), a project which started in 2014 in the East End of London and which set out to explore the construction of a neighbourhood by local communities, focusing in particular on how such construction can generate civic action and civic engagement.

The study is the result of a collaboration between two researchers coming from very different backgrounds and with different modes of engagement with the object of inquiry. One of the authors is personally involved in Project InterAct, of which she has been an initiator and key contributor; the other is a linguist with an interest in the discursive construction of professional and social practices, with no prior knowledge of the project. The essay combines and integrates insights from both perspectives: it offers a “thick description” (Geertz 1973, 5-6, 9-10) of Project InterAct and its offshoots from the vantage point of the insider researcher, and integrates it with a critical analysis – carried out by the outsider researcher – of the network of discursive artifacts around which the project coalesced to explore the “site of engagement” (Scollon 1998) emerging therein, using data triangulation to enhance the validity of research findings. The analysis combines methodologies from the fields of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough and Wodak 1997), participatory art (Kelly 2008, *s.v.*), temporary architecture (Ferreri and Lang 2015) and urban commons (Dellenbaugh *et al.* 2015), to explore the professional, political and discursive practices involved in the definition and creation of a civic neighbourhood.

The research approach programmatically seeks to combine insights from multiple methodological research traditions in order to investigate a complex socio-cultural phenomenon with considerable possible political ramifications. In so doing, it seeks to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation *per se*, exploring at the same time the potential of multidisciplinary collaboration to both overcome the limits of insider researcher bias and to foster critical self-reflection. It further aims to promote a research paradigm capable of encouraging

¹ For the purposes of this paper, however, we shall continue to call it InterAct, and we shall refer to the physical location where most of the project activities take place as the InterAct hub.

closer exchanges between seemingly unrelated disciplines sharing common objects of inquiry, encouraging translationality of research findings from one field to another, with special regard for the role of applied discourse studies in research on social and professional practices (Sarangi 2015). This essay aims to contribute to the debate by examining the way in which local personal and community identities are fostered through the orchestration of discursively mediated initiatives that cut across different domains in the service of forms of empowerment which occupy the interstitial space between institutional constraints and forms of self-discovery and group/place identification, with a special focus on the role of art as a catalyst for change.

2. BACKGROUND AND OVERALL FRAMING: LOCALISM, NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING, AND THE (RE)NEGOTIATION OF POWER RELATIONS

Before moving on to the analysis proper, a few words are in place to describe the setting – both political and socio-cultural – in which the project under investigation takes place. Project InterAct is part of a neighbourhood planning initiative (the Roman Road Bow Neighbourhood project) set within the framework of the UK coalition government's Localism Act (2011), whose official aim is to “devolve more powers to councils and neighbourhoods and give local communities greater control over local decisions like housing and planning” (Localism Act 2011, “Summary”, 1), bestowing new freedoms, authority and responsibilities upon local councils (Plain English Guide to the Localism Act 2011, 4). The Localism Act has a markedly neo-liberal outlook, its declared aim being “to drive down costs” while delivering solutions which are mutually agreed upon by local residents and authorities. Repeatedly in the accompanying documents to the Act, conceptual links between cost reduction, creativity/innovation and empowerment are established, seemingly implying a functional framing of creativity and empowerment as means to an economic end (on this issue see, amongst others, Davoudi and Madanipur 2015, 553). This has led critics to question the motives and ideologies underlying the emphasis on empowerment and community participation which the Act insists upon. Some have argued that these principles have been hijacked in the service of the maintenance of an effectively disempowering status quo (see, for instance, MirafTAB 2004), thus representing an embodiment

of governmentality, i.e. voluntary alignment with state-directed means of control (Foucault 1997). Others have suggested more nuanced interpretations, pointing out the “flexible, ambiguous, and ill-defined” nature of the concept of empowerment, but noting at the same time how its open-endedness can enable “new forms of citizen involvement” capable of creating “new ‘spaces’ with ‘transformational potential’” (Bailey and Pill 2015, 300). Mutually exclusive as they may seem, these two interpretations coexist in the current uptakes of localism in Britain, which have “inadvertently opened up a number of ethical and political spaces in which various forms of interstitial politics of resistance and experimentation have sprung up” (Williams, Goodwin, and Cloke 2014, 2798).

Project InterAct and the ensuing neighbourhood planning process, both of which are explored in this essay, are embedded in this scenario, and are to be seen as an ongoing endeavour to understand what aspects of the policies set forth in the Localism Act, and which of their methods of implementation lead to neoliberal outcomes, and – by contrast – what can lead to instances of democratic involvement in the city, questioning whether it is really appropriate to always dwell on the duality of state vs market, and advocating forms of cultural production as a means to civic engagement leading to improved social conditions.

3. NEIGHBOURHOOD-AS-RESOURCE: PARTICIPATORY ART AS A CATALYST FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING

Project InterAct started in 2014, when the Roman Road Trust², previously Roman Road Residents and Business Organisation, asked London-based architect Torange Khonsari to support them towards a grassroots neighbourhood development. Khonsari, who is part of the collective *public works*³, has over the past 15 years through participatory art projects

² Roman Road Trust (RRT) describe themselves on their website as “a charitable organisation set up to help improve the high street, and its vision is for a thriving local economy that gives the opportunity and space for communities to flourish. Using the principle of co-production, Roman Road Trust activates, facilitates and supports a network of citizen-led community development initiatives to help revitalise the high street with maximum social impact” (<http://romanroadtrust.co.uk/>).

³ From the *public works* website: “*public works* is a critical design practice set up in 2004 that occupies the terrain in-between architecture, art, performance and activism. We re-work the city’s opportunities towards citizen driven development and nurturing their

developed methods of engagement and communication which she then expanded – together with her teaching partners Sandra Denicke Polcher and Andreas Lang – into a teaching pedagogy for architecture students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Through her involvement and that of her students, the Roman road project became a site for exploring such methods together with local residents. The initial idea, which was originally focused on reconstituting the town centre, grew into a civic hub – the InterAct hub – and then into a larger neighbourhood plan involving an area with 20,000 inhabitants, which is currently under development.

The InterAct hub is a piece of temporary architecture which was instituted with a view to establishing a privileged site for delivering and disseminating knowledge, hosting debate and meetings, and providing an open access location where the locals would have a say in how the neighbourhood should develop (Mouffe *et al.* 2001). While the hub was created by London Metropolitan University and its students, its maintenance was then taken on by *public works*. The involvement of the university and its students was the point of departure for the initiation of the neighbourhood planning initiative, which was suggested by Khonsari to Roman Road Trust. In the weeks and months following its inception, the InterAct hub became a privileged locus for the discursive creation of the neighbourhood through the production of multiple artifacts, both of an institutional nature and grassroot-driven. The artefacts created ranged from simple DIY objects such as origami sculptures and food, to elaborate posters by fine art students protesting high rents and debt and chairs made from discarded recycled materials. These objects are by no means what Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon (2014) describe as “disobedient objects”, i.e. objects created to protest and counter power relations; rather, their aim is to gently subvert power over the longer period of time. As these artefacts become the materials that produce social relations and – in time – civic engagement, the physical neighbourhood becomes a cultural, as well as spatial and economic, resource all residents share.

The concept of neighbourhood-as-resource is especially relevant here. Project InterAct is deeply embedded in the discourse of urban Commons, one of its main purposes being to investigate implementation strategies to create a neighbourhood as a Common resource. This aim places the project’s coordinates firmly within the discourse of Commons, a discourse

rights over the city. *public works*’ projects are interested in what constitutes civic in the city and how to re-design structures that restrict it” (<http://www.publicworksgroup.net/about/>).

which is currently gaining momentum worldwide, with a strong global movement mobilising around it. While a definition of Commons is premature at this point, as there is a risk to simplify or narrow its meaning, most currently accepted usages of the term revolve around three key points: (a) common resources, (b) commoning practices (c) the community of commoners who are involved in the co-production of commons – in this paper, primarily the urban commons (Dellenbaugh *et al.* 2015).

Within the Roman Road Bow neighbourhood, common resources, practices and community coalesce around four territorial components which construct the neighbourhood as a Common. These components are (1) the neighbourhood boundary; (2) the InterAct hub in its role as a civic hub; (3) a Car park, which is set to become the town square; (4) a Community Orchard. This network of territories working at different scales has been created as part of a community engaged process, where collective decisions have produced the territories themselves, or collective rights and ownership over them are being negotiated and in some instances implemented.

The processes and practices revolving around these territorial components have exposed a number of nodes in the construction of the civic neighbourhood. The first one is the relationship between individual/collective property rights and community – and aspect which in many ways highlights the tension between market-driven forces and societal engagement. In the cases of InterAct hub and the Carpark, Khonsari and Roman Road Trust have been fighting to establish the land as Community land trusts, which in the UK are forms of legalised collective land ownership. In the case of the Orchard, land owners Clarion Housing association would like the community group involved to sign an SLA (Service Lease Agreement) to run and manage the green space of the orchard and perhaps future municipal lawns currently underused. Although embedded in a clearly neoliberal agenda, this opportunity gives huge control to the residents' group on decision making on use of its green spaces and their re-appropriation; again, this process needs careful orchestration to avoid falling into mainstream market trappings. Land ownership status of key civic sites within the neighbourhood is especially important also by reason of its political significance and of the impact it has on boundaries within the territory. Transfer of land from state ownership into community collective ownership is a reversal of power, and a struggle the project is currently fighting. The most important factor in this land transfer is that land is taken out of private ownership circulation and cannot be enclosed. The InterAct hub, the car park and the orchard are all spaces which, through

their ownership and governance, will lift boundaries and enclosures, thereby becoming open to the public.

This lifting of internal boundaries is matched, on the outer side, by the creation of a neighbourhood boundary, which is directly linked to the issue of identity. This is the second key node to have emerged from the project. The Roman Road Bow neighbourhood boundary was the result of a nine-month consultation both on social media platforms, at local events and at specifically organised fora with local community organisations and stakeholders. The Localism Act prescribes that boundaries are identified on the basis of consensus. If not sensitively understood and managed, this bureaucratic tool can result in much more serious social boundaries developing between who is in and who is out. The image of the boundary alludes – initially at least – to a collectivity bound together by a feeling of belonging; at a later stage, however, it is necessary to nurture its relation with the outside. Indeed, the neighbourhood boundary is, by definition, an enclosure. What role does a boundary have in a project which aims to liberate spatial resources for the benefit of the people? Theoretically, none; at the scale of the neighbourhood, however, a boundary – despite it being an institutional enclosure – is required to identify the limits of the resources and allow its inhabitants to feel a sense of finite belonging. At the same time, the boundary should not be constraining, nor impenetrable. Indeed, it should be thought of not as a line, but as a space, and not as fixed, but permeable and changing, in order to resist ghetto conditions. It should give constraints to enable an identity to develop, yet open access and empowering to let others in. As Kratzwald (2015, 34) puts it, “boundaries mean first and foremost knowing what resources is that they use together with others and who ‘the others’ are”. To this purpose, Stavrides (2010) talks about boundaries as “thresholds”: this is probably the best way for communities to think about them rather than as closed boundaries.

For this fluid boundary setting to be translated into viable identity building strategies, it is necessary that commoners engage in constant process of production and re-production of an open collective self – the “we” – and not reproduce social divisions (Dellenbaugh, Kip, and Bieniok 2015). Identity building based on multiple, flexible membership categories is key to developing a neighbourhood which has both internal cohesion and a potential for change, adaptation and – above all – accommodation of diversity.

Boundary setting and identity building were nodal points in the development of the project. Interestingly, it was not the limits of the boundary that were disputed, but the name of the neighbourhood plan. Roman

Road Trust, whose focus is Roman Road and most of whose directors live close to it, had called it Roman Road Neighbourhood Plan; however, others in the neighbourhood did not associate themselves with the Roman Road, but rather with the area called Bow. This led to a series of rather confrontational community meetings where different organisations felt threatened that they would lose power over their small neighbourhood. The name was eventually changed formally to Roman Road Bow Neighbourhood Plan and each community group has now a representative on the neighbourhood steering committee in form of ambassadors. This suggests that physical boundaries are less important than symbolic ones, and that the definition of boundaries entails identity claims which go well beyond spatial features.

With reference to the institutional framing of the project highlighted in Section 2, it is to be observed that although all the initiatives undertaken are in line with the objectives of the Localism Act (and therefore do not question explicitly its underlying ideology, rather aligning themselves with it, at least at surface level), the focus of the project was in fact not simply to implement institutionally sanctioned opportunities, but rather to experimentally investigate the relationships between state power, market and civil society. On the one hand, the demise of the state implied in the Localism Act may be seen as a form of abdication, on the part of state authorities, of their key functions and values, which can be summed up as an interest in public good and in the government's accountability to public interest. A project which explicitly targets the concept of "common good", therefore, might be seen as mourning – to an extent at least – the loss of state power. This, however, is not the case. Rather, the project focuses on the negotiation of new relationships while resisting neoliberal agendas which – as shown above – are commonly recognised to be lurking in localism-oriented initiatives. In order to ensure the project does not follow a neoliberal agenda, it is therefore important to establish commoning governance models for key organisations such as the Roman Road Trust and other locally operating organisations to foster and empower self-organisation and inclusion (even while establishing boundaries) rather than operate as a corporation and a monopoly. Concentrated power in any form is detrimental to the success of the commons and predicates capitalist market driven models of development. In order to avoid this pitfall, care must be taken that the project does not lose sight of its main purpose, and that the latter be constantly inscribed in the discourses within which the project is embedded.

4. THE INTERACT HUB AND THE ROMAN ROAD BOW NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN AS DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

The description of Project InterAct of the initial stages of the Roman Road Bow Neighbourhood Plan provided in the previous section highlights a number of conceptual nuclei which appear to be particularly relevant in the discursive construction of the overall project. From a discursive point of view, three concepts appear to be especially relevant: (1) the concept of inclusion, and more specifically of the negotiation of diversity; (2) the joint concepts of participation and engagement; (3) the concept of identity as related to neighbourhood.

This part deals with selected aspects of the above mentioned issues. Due to space constraints, it will not be possible to treat each of them in detail. However, considerations will be offered on linguistic and discursive traits which contribute to conveying and/or reinforcing these concepts, in an alignment of linguistic structuring with discursive content capable of furthering the project promoters' aims by creating convergence of form and content.

In an effort to increase outreach, the research project has created a series of online platforms to aid communication and project presence. These were predominantly led by Tabitha Stapely (cofounder of the Roman Road Trust), whose expertise lies in digital platforms. To these, the InterAct blog and its Facebook page should be added; they were set up by students of London Metropolitan university to communicate their activities with local people. The blog is especially interesting, as it represents an evolving conceptualization of the principles upon which the project itself is based.

This section analyzes a sample of texts drawn from the various websites revolving around the project which, in various ways, play a role in shaping the neighbourhood coalescing around Roman Road. The collection is heterogeneous – indeed, deliberately so. The analysis does not aim to analyze all the discursive manifestations connected more or less directly to the project; rather, it attempts to reconstruct a multi-faceted picture of encouraged and/or emerging local identities, as well as of purposes and underlying ideologies, from multiple sources, some of which may not appear at first sight to have any obvious connection. The texts come from various sources, including the InterAct collective blog (<http://interactcollective.tumblr.com/>), the catalyst for the project, and the Roman Road website (<http://romanroadlondon.com/>), which is maintained by the Roman Road Trust. The Roman Road website features links to separate websites devoted, respectively, to the Roman Road Trust (<http://romanroadtrust.com/>).

co.uk/) and to the Roman Road Bow Neighbourhood Plan (<http://romanroadbowneighbourhoodplan.org/>), both of which contain multiple cross references to each other and to the InterAct project. Navigation across the various websites enables the construction of “traversals”, which can be described as mediational process that forge connections across spaces, and which can be used to account for movement from one digital or physical environment to another (Lemke 2002 and 2005). Traversals are user-generated meaning making structures which enable complex, multifaceted representations spanning across time and space. In Lemke’s words, they are temporal-experiential linkings, sequences, and catenations of meaningful elements that deliberately or accidentally, but radically, cross genre boundaries. A traversal is a traversal *across* standardized genres, themes, types, practices, or activities that nevertheless creates at least an ephemeral or idiosyncratic meaning for its human participants, and represents at least a temporarily functional connection or relationship among all its constituent processes and their (human or nonhuman) participants (i.e. *actants*) (<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/education/jlemke/papers/traversals/traversal-theory.htm>).

Traversals make it possible to make leaps among thematic contents, attitudes, points of view and text organisation structures, building cohesive chains within multivariate structures. Cognitively, they build on the dialogism and intertextuality (Bakhtin 1986) which have become key notions in the age of textual hybridisation and cross-genre and medium meaning making. With reference to the discursive construction of the Roman Road Neighbourhood and attendant identities, hypertextual and hypermodal readings enable the construction of a complex cognitive environment which spans across different discursive domains whose points of intersections are (re)definitions of place and community.

4.1. *Conceptualizing complexity: the InterAct hub blog and manifesto*

As the current civic hub of the neighbourhood, the InterAct hub blog is especially important. The blog, which was set up to document the progress of the project, is self-contained, with no links to the quasi-institutional websites run by the Roman Road Trust. Intertextual references to the Roman Road resident association are featured (most notably in the opening post, which presents a picture of Tabitha Tabitha Stapely – local resident and member of the Roman Road Residents and Business Association), but no links are provided to other documents. The meaning making

potential of intertextual references is left implicit, presumably vested in the participants' personal experience, with institutional aspects being left in the background in favour of a prioritizing of an interactional involvement which is evoked but not fully documented.

In terms of textual and semiotic structuring, the blog features chronologically organized entries which are spatially arranged to encourage non-linear reading, with posts ordered along both vertical and horizontal trajectories. Posts are mainly pictures accompanied by captions of varying length. In some cases the linguistic component is fairly extensive, but more often it is confined to a few words of comment on predominantly figural material. The textual organization encourages non-linear reading, which contributes to conveying an idea of conceptual simultaneity which eschews purely chronological interpretations in favour of a purposeful convergence of multiple agencies. The blog does emphasize the beginning and the end of the project (it starts with the InterAct collective's "first walk on the Roman Road": <http://interactcollective.tumblr.com/post/103632253215/our-first-walk-on-the-roman-road-lead-by-tabitha>) and closes with a video clip which documents the material construction of the tea house on Roman Road. In between these two chronological boundaries (but note that the construction of the tea house is in fact a beginning) various activities are documented, each of them independent and self-standing, and at the same time all of them cumulatively contributing to place making. Side by side are initiatives engaging with past social history – such as the "Where's my boozie gone?" project, whereby older local residents were invited to talk about the pubs where they used to meet in their youth, with a view to recovering an important piece of social history and engaging them (as well as other members of the community) in critical reflection about the role of pubs in Roman Road – or questioning current modes of production and consumption in the social space of the high street, such as the swap-shop workshop organized in the run up to Christmas at Roman Road market, which prompted members of the public to rethink economic relations by inviting them to use personal possessions as currency in what was ultimately a relationship building experiment.

The blog eschews facile rationalizations of the activities therein reported. While the purpose of each workshop is generally explicitly stated, there is no indication that a masterplan exists within which the individual workshops fit. There is, on the contrary, an intimation of open-ended purposefulness whose ultimate outcome is not predicted nor, indeed, predictable. The guiding principle for the entire project is embedded in the InterAct manifesto, a snippet of which is visible on every post.

The manifesto, which was collectively created by undergraduate fine art students and architecture students, reads as follows:

INTERACT. AN OPEN MANIFESTO

INTER
be in between.

ACT
a right to act. to act right.

a platform. a museum. a
happening. a zine. a situation.
a gallery. a network. a
discussion. a construct. a
library. an experiment.

a digital distribution. a
physical place. a critical
thought. a forgotten memory. a
shared knowledge. a tea house. a
local exchange.

The linguistic articulation of the manifesto is worth examining in detail. The text opens with a (pseudo) definition of the lemma *interact*, which starts with an (imprecise) etymological definition of the prefix *inter* (the verb *be* is an arbitrary addition, from a strictly linguistic perspective). The etymological approach, however, is confined to the prefix: the stem *act*, which is here meant as a verb, is immediately embedded in a chiasmic construction which instantly evokes an ethical stance involving both participation (*a right to act*) and a morally engaged approach (*to act right*). The two stretches of text that follow are structured around two sets of nouns which are deliberately juxtaposed without an obvious order or progression. In the first set, nouns such as *platform*, *museum* and *library*, which indicate physical entities, but which can also be interpreted metaphorically as ideal spaces (which, however, convey an idea of permanence), alternate with nouns such as *situation*, *network*, *discussion* and *construct*, all of which are interactionally based and prevalently ephemeral. The list culminates in the word *experiment*, which suggests the novelty of the approach and indicates an intent to overcome conventional forms of interaction. In the light of the seemingly diverging nominal structures preceding it, the experiment comes across as one aimed at overcoming contradictions in the name of an inclusive approach.

The second stretch of text builds incrementally – syntactically speaking – upon the first one, featuring a set of pre-modified nouns culminating in the compound noun *tea house* – graphically analogous to, but structurally different from the other two-word units in the section. The adjective +

noun patterns returns in the last item (*a local exchange*), which closes the interactional circle opened at the beginning. The tea house – which, after all, is the key tangible outcome of the project itself – represents, prosodically and lexically, a glitch in the climatic construction of the text. Because of its structural oddity, it breaks the pattern of expectation and emerges as a focal point in the overall structure. The manifesto is built around conceptual nuclei of contrast and mediation, abstract and physical, personal and collective which represents the core of the project itself. While not *explicitly* mentioning the need to overcome contrast and even opposition, or to renegotiate a whole capable of preserving internal differences, it powerfully conveys these concepts through discursive constructions which create – obliquely, but effectively – the conditions for social action aimed at diversity negotiation and civic engagement.

Finally, the manifesto is not a definitive document. In line with the evolutionary nature of the project itself, which is open to multiple suggestions and contributions, it is set to change as the InterAct project moves on to a new stage – the Tea Room project – and new purposes and participation frameworks are established.

4.2. Engagement and participation: interactive resources

Engagement and participation are key elements in the InterAct and the ensuing Roman Road Bow Neighbourhood project. Outreach is key to the initiatives; this is reflected in the communication style adopted in the multiple modes of online presence established by the various components of the project. For instance, the InterAct project Facebook page uses the formula “join us” when publicizing events. This is, of course, a recurrent strategy in event communication, but its consistent use, highlighted by the use of capitalization in the formula, creates a thread of engagement which runs throughout the profile posts. Direct user engagement is also consistently used, typically in the form “dear friends”, and appeals are posted for contributions on the part of the public.

The insistence on engagement is even more marked on the Roman Road Bow Neighbourhood website. The homepage of the website features the following invitation:

Take part in shaping the future of your area.

If you live or work in or around Roman Road in Bow, we want to hear from you about your vision for Roman Road and the neighbourhood it serves in Bow, East London.

The opening address in the imperative mood (“take part”) is matched in the following sentence by the use of engagement markers in the form of personal pronouns – “if *you* live and work [...] *we* want to hear from *you* about *your* vision”.

In the “Join us” section on the website, the invitation to join is formulated as follows:

Join the Forum

A Forum is a group of local residents, businesses and community groups who share an interest in improving their local area. As a Forum member you can have as little or as much involvement as you like. This can range from joining the Steering Group to attending the occasional consultation events – it’s up to you. All Forum members receive newsletter updates and will have the opportunity to Vote on planning policies when these come to be written.

The text opens with a reader-engaging imperative form, and is followed by a paragraph which opens and closes with third-person sentences (*A Forum* is [...]. *All Forum members* receive [...]) bracketing an interactional passage (As a Forum member *you* can [...] it’s up to *you*). The alternating of engagement and third-person structuring effectively combines interpersonal engagement with neutral exposition, thereby encouraging forms of commitment grounded in rational thinking: the call for action is embedded in structures which encourage reasoned commitment to a cause. The structural combination of engagement and exposition moreover, contributes to the creation of a writer’s *ethos* which is both rational and committed to interpersonal engagement.

This combination is crucial for the success of such a project as the one described in this essay, which aims to foster civic participation grounded in rational adherence to reasoned principles.

4.3. *Boundaries and identities – the institutional websites*

This section comments briefly on some features of the websites maintained by the Roman Road Trust which are relevant to the topic of boundary and identity definition. No systematic analysis is advanced, but suggestions are put forth for further study and consideration. The two websites considered are the Roman Road website (<http://romanroadlondon.com/>) and the Roman Road Trust website (<http://romanroadtrust.co.uk/>). Both website homepages open with strong identity claims. The Roman Road website features this self-description:

Roman Road is one of the East London's oldest and most well known high streets, with its famous Roman Road Market operating on Tuesdays, Thursday and Saturday. This long straight road serves the neighbourhood of Bow and Globe Town, [sic] with Fish Island and the Olympic park at the western end and extending all the way to Bethnal Green at the other.

The description insists on *tradition* ("one of London's *oldest and most well known high streets*"), combined with *commercial activity* ("its famous Roman Road Market") and *spatial boundary setting* ("serves the *neighbourhood* of Bow and Globe Town, with Fish Island and the Olympic park at the *western end* and *extending all the way to* Bethnal Green at the other"). Identity is therefore primarily presented as endowed with history and tradition, geographically located, and revolving around the commercial and social meeting point represented by the concept of market, which is not only a place where goods are bought and sold, but also – and above all – a locus for social engagement.

The self-presentation of the Roman Road Trust is articulated around similar nuclei, though, of course, action is prioritized over geographical location – the Trust being conceptualized as an actor, not a place:

Roman Road Trust is a small but ambitious community and economic development company operating in the Roman Road area in Bow and Bethnal Green in Tower Hamlets, East London. It is a charitable organisation set up to help improve the high street, and its vision is for a thriving local economy that gives the opportunity and space for communities to flourish.

Roman Road Trust is pioneering the Community Improvement District (CID) model for high street regeneration, a model designed for high streets whose businesses are unable to support a Business Improvement District (BID). At the heart of the CID is the understanding that a high street is much more than the shops on the main road, and that sustainable revitalisation of the high street can only succeed if it shaped and delivered in partnership with the wider community.

Using the principle of co-production, Roman Road Trust activates, facilitates and supports a network of citizen-led community development initiatives to help revitalise the high street with maximum social impact.

The presentation is carefully orchestrated around the joint concepts of *community* and *economy*, which are consistently portrayed as convergent and interdependent. The Trust is self-defined as a "community and economic development" company, and its vision as one which sees a "thriving local economy" as a necessary pre-requisite for "communities to flourish". Economic viability is therefore portrayed as a condition for community development; but community development is, at the same time, presented

as a catalyst for economic growth (“community development initiatives [...] help revitalize the high street”). The two are mutually interdependent and neither has priority over the other. The discursive articulation of the text reinforces this concept by using mirroring structures to open and close the text: in the first paragraph, the idea is put across that a thriving economy leads to a flourishing community; in the closing one, it is community development which can help revitalize the high street. Far from being tautological, the circular structuring of the argument highlights the close linkage between the two concepts.

For what concerns identity construction, the Roman Road website features two interesting sections devoted respectively to “Heritage” and “Local Heroes”. The Heritage section features the following caption:

From the Suffragettes to Wiley to Cockney Rhyming Slang, Roman Road has a uniquely East End heritage full of pioneers and radicals.

This statement instantly characterises Roman Road as popular, politically engaged, and a laboratory for social innovation. Immediately below the caption is a piece devoted to the Suffragettes, which are featured extensively on the website. Such an emphasis – which is of course perfectly justified from a historical point of view – sets the stage for the definition of a local identity grounded in political action and aimed at creating the enabling conditions for revolutionising the *status quo* in both gender and social relations. Any mention of the Suffragettes is bound to be, inevitably, a political statement of sort, and the celebratory tone of the website testifies to the pride of local residents for this shared, geographically inscribed, past.

The section on local heroes is equally interesting. At the time of writing this article, the section featured an article on Harry da Costa, a retired Roman market trader known for his active role in pursuing the rights of market workers. The headline which introduces the piece about him reads as follows:

Harry da Costa: fighting for street trader rights on Roman Road Market

Again, at the core of his description lies the concept of a fight for rights – a metaphor which is extended in the lead to the article:

Harry da Costa is probably one of Roman Road Market’s most well known characters. He first started trading at the age of seven back in the Thirties then became best known as the chairman of Roman Road Market’s Trader’s Association, a post he held for 25 years until the early 1990s. He took the London authorities to court about street trading conditions and succeeded in brokering an insurance deal for all London street traders over public liability.

Harry da Costa's claim to fame lies in his successful bid to win rights for an often undervalued profession which, in the article, is celebrated without being romanticized.

Both the Suffragette movement and the local heroes featured on the website owe their claims to fame to fights for rights, community involvement, and local embedding (albeit with a universal value). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the website should feature a section called "Community" and devoted to residents' involvement in local initiatives. At the time of writing this essay, the first post was a traineeship opportunity offered by the Roman Trust; and the second a feature on the Roman Road Neighbourhood Plan. The latter is especially interesting also from a semi-otic point of view. It is introduced by black-and-white picture of a local shop with its blind down in a desert street, shop sign erased, graffiti on the brick walls of the building, a gloomy sky looming. This image of pure despondency is used to drive home the idea that a plan for regeneration is urgent lest a general decay take hold.

Both the traineeship offer and the Roman Road Neighborhood Plan posts provide links respectively to the Roman Road Trust and to the Roman Road (Bow) Neighbourhood Plan websites, thereby enabling the construction of traversals (see above) linking the various institutional actors and initiatives into a cohesive (albeit loosely and hardly constrained) whole. While all websites are independent, they all have deliberately porous boundaries, with links encouraging modes of hypertextual and hypermodal reading spanning across different but related domains. The Roman Road Trust website, for example, features extensively the events promoted by the InterAct hub (which are presented as moments of social and creative engagement), and links back to both the Roman Road and the Roman Road Bow Neighbourhood Plan websites. Multiple interconnections across networked materials enable the construction of personalised reading paths which converge to create a unified whole centered on local (radical) identity tempered with socially (but not openly politically) engaged current initiatives, all of them geared towards encouraging greater civic participation within a spatially anchored yet conceptually open 'local' community.

The open, albeit partially constrained and certainly guided, networked structured of the websites considered indicates an orchestrated communication strategy involving different actors at multiple points of engagement and with different roles, responsibilities, authorities and powers. While maintaining their individual peculiarities, these actors (institutional and otherwise) deploy converging strategies geared at encouraging civic participation, for which multiple, scalarly organised levels of engage-

ment are envisaged. The overall impression conveyed by the architecture of networked sites is one of structure with limited navigation constraints, high differentiation with a unified purpose, open-ended, flexible planning open to grassroot contributions – all of this subsumed under an umbrella identity firmly grounded in local (radical) history but open to discourses of regeneration which aim to promote economic development while distancing themselves from purely economic aims.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This essay has endeavoured to apply a multidisciplinary approach to the analysis of an urban experiment current underway in London. A practitioner's perspective, tempered with a critical academic approach in the fields of urbanism, architecture and art, has been combined with a discourse analyst's perspective focused on linguistic and rhetorical features of selected aspects of project-related communication. The overall aim was to integrate the practitioner's perspective with applied linguistic analysis conducted on the multiple discourses and documents generated by and around the project with a view to identifying the impact of linguistic and rhetorical, as well as discursive, features of communication on the project under investigation.

The linguistic analysis has shown that the InterAct hub project and the ensuing Roman Road Bow Neighbouring Plan can be interpreted as examples of cultural production within a changing social and economic landscape. Located at the intersection of multiple communication efforts, through engagement with actions which eschew neo-liberal framings, they construct a dense network of interrelations across a variety of institutional actors and actions, ranging from the original InterAct hub group, to the Roman Road Trust, to groups of local residents. The interconnected web of materials used to communicate about the project provides multiple access points to the project itself, enabling the construction of traversals by means of hypertextual – and often hypermodal – navigation. The multiple sites of communication convey – each of them independently, but much more effectively when taken jointly – a multi-faceted and multi-layered representation of the various components of the project. Pragmatic uptake is invited, but not demanded. Although the texts are convergent, they are not homogeneously so. Interpretive directions and ideological suggestions are indicated, sometimes even forcefully (as is the case with the reference

to the Suffragettes), yet never *per se*; local heritage, identities, and history provide framing devices which invite alignment with a given ideological and cultural position, but shun facile indoctrination. Difference – even contradiction – is accepted and welcome, and paths are indicated, but no pre-conceived goal stated in definite terms. In fact, participation in social events organized by the project promoters does not need to lead to further engagement – it can be an end in itself, its civic engagement goals remaining unrealized, and yet retaining their validity. If grassroot involvement is to be genuine, flexibility and forfeiture of control over the outcomes must be discursively inscribed in all forms of communication, so as to offset temptations of pre-emptive closure.

This last point is especially important. Mainstream practice in both architecture and urbanism is still about maximum control over its product, be it a building, a room, or the city; regardless of the product, architects and urbanists seek to align with optimised efficiency in line with neoliberal ideologies (Spencer 2017). Project InterAct, however, is inefficient and transversal, offering choice and elements of control “from below” through negotiation of interests and values. It is an example of flexible, adaptable, open-ended cultural production along undefined trajectories. The digital platforms here analysed have enabled access to a wide civil society required in the construction of community led neighbourhood planning. This access – previously restricted institutionally and financially – now enables a different form of mass engagement required for different forms of organisation and governance, and calls for different forms of communication of which the networked websites around the InterAct hub and the Roman Road Bow Neighbourhood Plan are groundbreaking examples.

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