

SOCIO-SPATIAL PRACTICES OF WELL-BEING: AUTHORS OF CIVIC ECOLOGIES

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INTRODUCTION

The ‘Office of National Statistics’(ONS)ⁱ, bases it’s qualitative assessment of well-being, on a fine-grained analysis of a local authorities physical, cultural, and economic health, weaving how well an individual lives, across a weft of their ability to direct these to a good end.

Well-being is also an acclaimed experience of those working and volunteering on city farms, but the evolution, economy and policies are different on farms to those of the civic authorities. Characteristically, city farms are situated on land which has little, or no commercial value and their ethical evolution and material development depends on generosity. Thus, as institutions, they can provide insights into ‘what it is to live well’ and ‘what is good’, different from ONS findings.

City farms as part of Social Farms and Gardensⁱⁱ (SF & G) are local not-for-profit, uncertain microcosms of the city; microcosms because they practically and ethically interweave simple and complex ‘activities’ to achieve stability. Uncertain, because their futures rely on the gifting of land and labour, where care is reciprocal with a community's formation.

Initiated at local level, they steward long-term community engagement, with a desire to ‘repair’ⁱⁱⁱ the physical, social, or cultural landscape and once ideals are established, they foster ‘care of’ the setting, forming a centre from which to initiate and engage ethical practices. In doing so, well-being is nurtured through tasks, establishing indigenous socio-spatial practices, forming identities, refining networks, creating industries, and securing policy.

Focussing on two case studies; Oxford City Farm and Kentish Town City Farm, this paper argues that the experience of well-being in city farm settings is formed through concerns of ‘care’ for the material and social environment; the farm’s practices initiate ‘activities’, and the character of these ‘activities’ is particular to the locality and people on the farm. According to Esposito, if “care-in-common”^{iv} is synonymous with ‘community’; held together by ‘task’ and ‘gift’, then it follows that the socio-spatial

practices delivered through care, are diagnostic of well-being and furthermore, hold potential to authorise these farms as civic ecologies within the city.

Forming a strategic framework to describe well-being as a practice-based activity, referred to in this paper as ‘Spheres of Action’^v (fig.1), it draws upon two theories. Maslow's widely adopted pyramid, the ‘Hierarchy of Needs’, which discusses the psychology of human motivation, as simple needs of comfort to complex processes of self-activation^{vi}. And Krasny and Tidball's ‘resilience systems’^{vii}, which operationally discuss the stewardship of communities, from physical and social ‘repair’ as ‘mending’, to their complex socio-spatial practices involved in ‘policy’ making. Together, these provide parallel psychological and practical frameworks to explore the farm's ethical engagement, at individual, community, and institution levels. How the farm facilitates these connections within the framework, indicates its ability to motivate “care-in-common”^{viii}; what it is to live well.

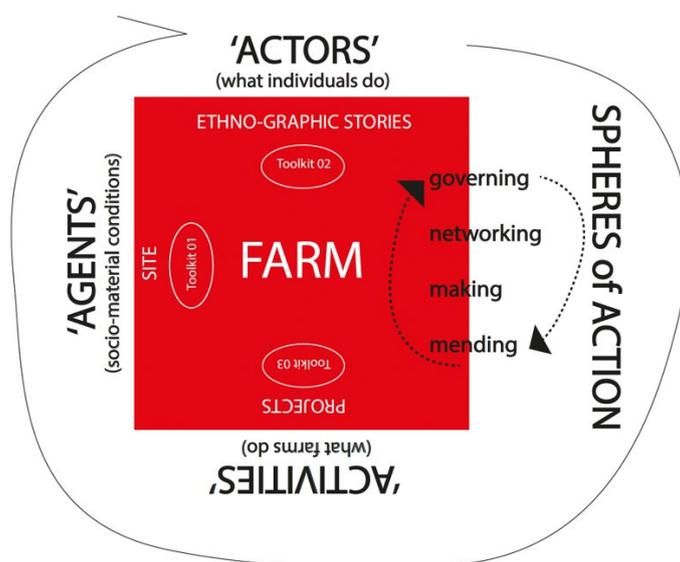


Fig.1 Diagram showing ‘Spheres of Action’ - diagram by author

Common to city farms, are four ‘Spheres of Action’. Operating within a currency of ‘care’ these act to repair the perceived socio-material absence or imperfection of a locality. The first sphere concerns the act of ‘mending’ the physical and social landscape, second, ‘making’ with the development of skills and practices, third, ‘networking’; how skills and knowledge connect people with practices and fourth, systems of ‘governance’ promoting policy beyond the periphery of the farm.

Influencing these ‘Spheres of Action’ are the ‘agents’ - (site - socio-material conditions), ‘actors’ - (what individuals do) and ‘activities’ (what the farm does), in response to agents and actors. Spheres of Action’, are stimulated by the ‘actors’ engaging with the ‘activities’; projects^{ix} set by the farm, which

choreograph involvement across simple and complex socio-spatial practices. In this way, the projects aim to validate the farm as a civic ecology, fostering an environment whereby an individual is free to pursue and attain a ‘good life’ through local engagement within these uncertain microcosms.

Arguing that the farm's practices are diagnostic of well-being, being shaped by concerns for ‘care’, the practical methodology forms three ‘toolboxes’. The first takes the form of measured drawings, photographs and diagrams charting the physical and social context of the site as ‘agents’. The second, what individuals do, takes the form of ethnographic portraits capturing the ‘actors’ journeys, socio-cultural dispositions, skills and involvement on the farm. And last, ‘activities’, documenting projects initiated by the farm taking the form of educational films and building projects. The latter serve to motivate the ‘actors’ across the ‘Spheres of Action’, so, whether the projects ‘activities’, are small or large, the extent to which they engage the ‘actors’ in the ‘Spheres of Action’ become testament of the city farm's ability to engage and care for the setting, and by extension, form its community.

The following is a brief account of the three toolboxes, referring to two case studies, Oxford City Farm and Kentish Town City Farm. The accounts describe the context, the role of the toolboxes, the form they take, what they capture and how they become useful tools to the research. Whilst each toolbox addresses an aspect of the study; the setting - ‘agents’, stories of the users - ‘actors’ and projects - ‘activities’, the final thesis will be told through the stories of the ‘actors’.

I. Toolbox 1: Agents - site - socio-material conditions

Oxford City Farm, formed in 2015, is one of the newest farms and Kentish Town, formed in 1972, the oldest, both form case studies referred to in this paper. Yet there are common characteristics motivating these and others; the repair of a fragmented socio-material landscape, where ‘community assets’, have become the vehicle to provide coherence and continuity in the locality. The dynamics of these are provoked by the increasing commute to work and density of living conditions and access to green spaces and increasing support for mental health – concerns considerably exacerbated during the 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic.^x

The paucity of parkland and freedom to access public leisure spaces problematised by a culture of private ownership, contribute to a desire for care through community engagement. The areas of highest deprivation^{xi}, also show the greatest density of city farms and community gardens, which happen to be in commercially unattractive locations. Formed forty years ago, SF& G has enjoyed huge growth in recent years, enabled by trusts and funding bodies such as, ‘City Bridge Fund’, ‘London Food Link’ and ‘Capital Growth’. Currently, SF & G manages and funds its own Community Land Advisory

Service^{xii} (CLAS) which enables communities to look for land, transfer green spaces from local authority to community management, and gain planning permission for nature based or green space projects.

There are nineteen city farms in London and sixty-five across the UK, yet many more community gardens. In London these are found on sites affected by bomb damage, docklands waste, noise pollution and flooding. Kentish Town City Farm interweaves several railway tracks which serve north and west London. The land on which the farm is located is partly owned by Network Rail UK^{xiii} and Camden Council, the surrounding cultural demography of the area is mixed and the Indices of deprivation high. Oxford City Farm, forms part of an attenuation flood plain and again there is a similar pattern to cultural demography and deprivation mapping^{xiv} levels.

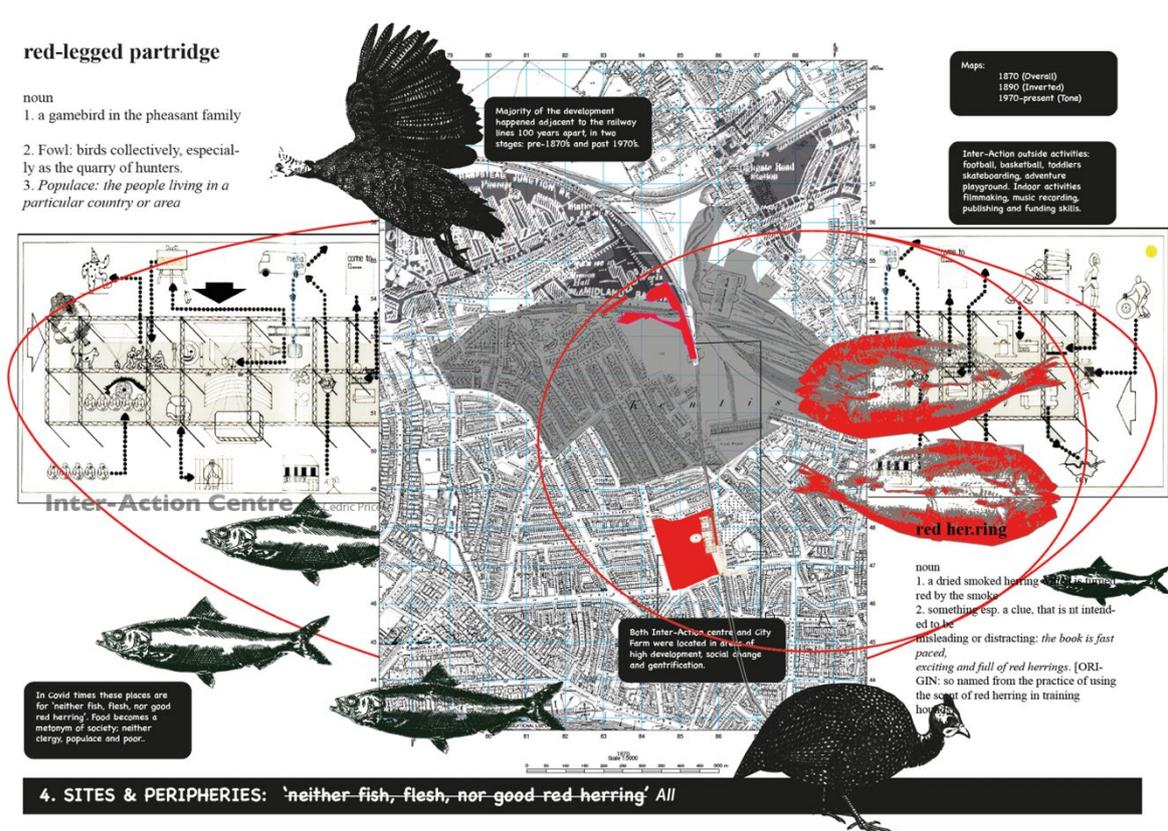
Typically, city farms are initiated by local groups in areas which are perceived as having little social cohesion. These are sites where there is a need for social care, skills, and stewardship, which build a cohesive approach towards the environment, health, cultural resources, and planning. Both materially and ethically these re-activate and re-imagine the settings to promote belonging and well-being. While the city farm's image may suggest a landscape of 'green produce', it is in fact a backdrop to a productive landscape of skills that encompass ethical, socio-political, creative and practices. Thus the 'activities' formed by these settings play a dynamic role in the procurement of 'community assets', and in doing so, also provide a context for the practices contributing to well-being. City farms can therefore be understood as socio-spatial initiatives, which become a reflection or expression of a community's aspirations or values in terms of care-of its setting. Documenting the physical and social landscape as measured drawings, diagrams, photographs, and interviews begin to establish the scene for the 'actors' and 'activities' to inhabit.

II. Toolbox 2: Actors - 'What individuals do':

'What individuals do', argues that the farm practices work in partnership with the 'agency' of the site to become diagnostic of the well-being in character with the setting. The study of 'actors', theoretically draws upon Bourdieu's 'Field theory'^{xv} and 'social, cultural and economic capital'^{xvi} bringing their background to 'what individuals do' on the farms to animate "care-in-common". Toolbox 2, documents the stories of workers as a series of ethnographic portraits, charting their personal journeys and involvement to discuss how this contributes to the community and a sense of well-being for the farm.

During the 1960s and 70s, obtaining vacant property from Camden Council for community use was less commercially contested than it is today. The area of north Kentish Town and Gospel Oak was impoverished and initiatives to develop land for leisure and engage youths were preferable to the alternatives of urban decay. American-born Ed Berman, social worker, activist, playwright, with Cedric Price, architect, and member of Archigram, initiated Inter-Action^{xvii}, on the site of the current 'Talacre Community Sports Centre'. Programmatically it was to echo Price's ambitions for the 'Fun Palace'^{xix} and within a few years, Inter-Action, then run by a co-operative of community workers and artists, flourished, spawning multiple projects around the area. Re-locating in 1972, along the periphery of railway intersections, the community project further developed as the present Kentish Town City Farm, taking advantage of the timber yard buildings in varying degrees of dereliction, sheds, stables, and Victorian warehouses. On Berman's initiative, the site provided an indoor riding school, still threading of learning through theatre practices.

Jean's story starts in the 1960s and 70s, as a volunteer at 'Gospel Oak Children's Workshop'^{xx} in the Kiln Place Tenants Hall (former site of the brickworks) just north of the present farm. With her partner, they involved children in the usual play activities, as well as more imaginative ventures with film making for older children. Their aim was to empower the children through experimentation, in the form of 'peripheral participation' and 'situated learning'^{xxi}, to establish alternative routes for problem solving and creativity beyond the school curriculum. (fig.2) Jean's ethno-graphic portrait



(fig.2) Jean's ethno-graphic portrait – Image by author

Diane's story describes intuitive nurture, awareness and mutual respect between human and animals across the species barrier. Her quiet understanding of people, ability to nurture their confidence and build communication skills between vulnerable children and young adults, even though verbal communication might be absent, tells of her experience and knowledge of with the horses and empathy with people with special needs. She says the horses sense the mood, they, “warm to calmness”, return calmness and lower stress levels, particularly in children with autistic or behavioural problems.

Simone's story (fig. 3) highlights the farm's role in forming a social tapestry through theatre. Being local to the area; she describes her role in the farm's social engagement with the community as “co-existing without much effort”, whether at work, school, or play. Coming from a performance background, she ‘conducts the scene’, compels her ‘actors’ to engage, whilst connecting and extending the farm as family

into the neighbourhood.

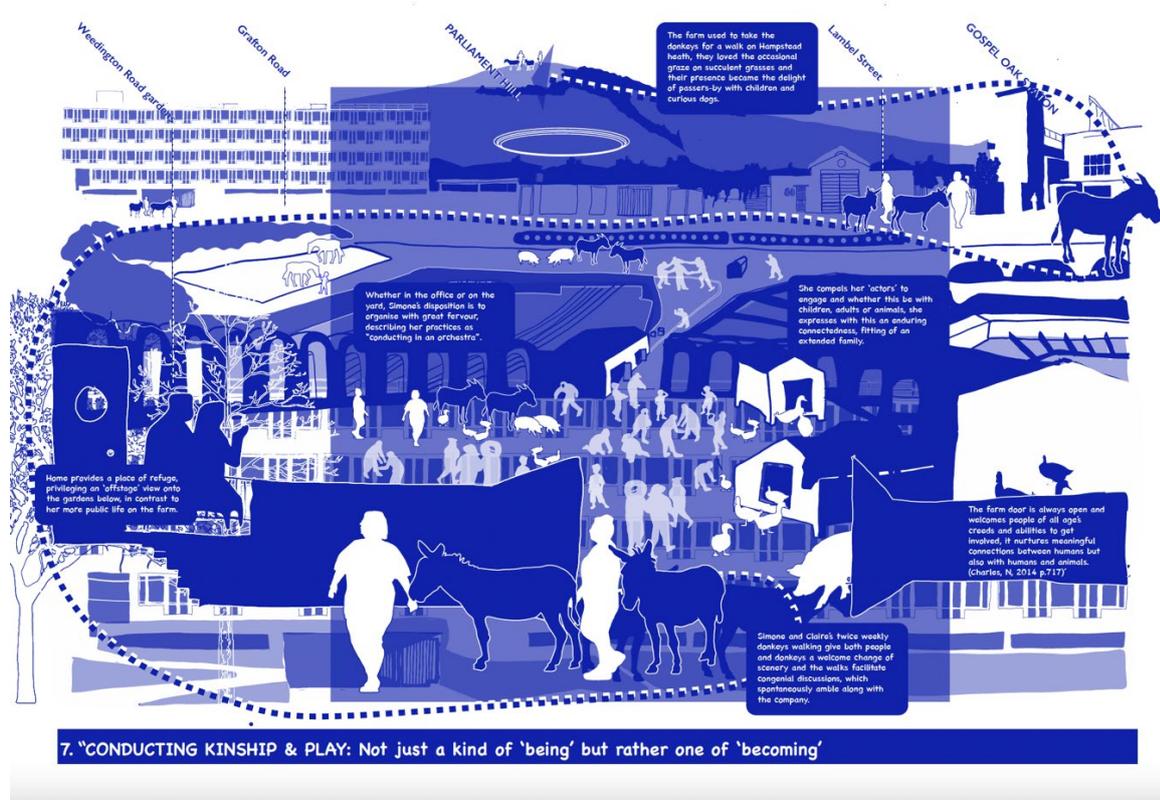


fig.3, Simone's ethno-graphic portrait – Image by author

Whereas the provision of music facilities at the 1970s Inter-Action were contrasted with horses and stables in later city farm in Kentish Town, the main ambition continued as engagement of the community through embedded learning, theatre practices and animal-human welfare. These have forged the direction of the farm, noticeably drawing upon the socio-spatial attributes of its setting. It is not unusual to witness Simone and Claire's twice weekly donkey walking around the neighbourhood which brings people and traffic alike to pause momentarily. Nor is it unusual to watch a child with special needs become befriended by Shirly the cow or Jester the horse who patiently wait with a young adult to regain their balance.

Each of the stories fit, and actively engage the setting. Each of the authors have brought their background and skills as 'cultural capital'^{xxii} to bear on the farm community. Each has been supported by the farm to develop their 'field', bring 'economic capital' to the 'activities' of the farm and speak of both personal and community well-being.

III. Toolbox 3: Activities - 'What city farms do'

'Activities', describe farm initiatives characterised by the 'agency' of the site and 'field', and 'capital' of 'actors'. Their remit is repair through 'task' and 'gift' of the socio-material setting through an ethic of "care-in-common". Puig de la Bellacasa, (2015), describes 'care'; as 'charged practice' which 'joins together an affective state, a material vital doing, and an ethico-political obligation...'^{xxiii}, care for the land through time^{xxiv}. Similarly, Edensor (2011) explores 'care' as the socio-material 'entangled agencies of buildings'^{xxv}, their material weathering and socio-economic changes over time. Gibson^{xxvi}, Chemero, and Stoffregen^{xxvii}, apply a similar approach of 'care', to working with materials, where 'affordance' is understood to be the agency^{xxviii}, engaging people and projects within the setting. Each description of 'care' identifies a different scale; large to small and from economic to social, and all assume a co-dependency in stabilising sustainability.

Toolbox 3, record interviews, educational podcasts, events, and live construction projects. However, whether these are individual pursuits or larger community engagements, they all contribute to the framework of well-being. Simple tasks such as mending fences or tending allotments, also engage the maker with networking and procurement of materials and the educational films on one level bring the cycle of life into schools on another reiterate the need to engage ethically with the setting. Lastly, the live projects invite a 'scaling-up' as complex activities, such as surveying, drawing, consulting with the community, and procurement of the building, addressing, and contributing to the framework of well-being. ...a material vital doing, and an ethico-political obligation...'^{xxix}

IV. Spheres of Actions - 'mending, making, networking and governance'

The motivational^{xxx} and operational^{xxxi} frameworks together suggest that stabilising and sustaining a community through a co-dependency of 'care' is a response to the 'repair' of our modern lifestyle. This, Cooper attests, ordinarily, partitions our lives between a 'public', 'civic', or 'professional' life and a more 'private' life, where conduct is a matter of individual 'choice' or 'preference' (2006:88).^{xxxii}

Discussion

On a site, designated by the Environmental Agency^{xxxiii} with a high risk of flooding, in 2015, Oxford City Farm proposed the design and construction of several new buildings, including offices, toilets, catering facilities, storage and barns for the animals. This provided a complex project to explore,

whether the farm could usefully steward the all four ‘Spheres of Action’, with the community and from there assess the value it brought the farm in terms of “care-in-common”.

For the ease of explanation, the tasks have been separated into the four ‘actions’. The first, ‘mending’, researched the landscape, its locality, geology, and topography in relation to flooding. The second, ‘making’, discussed materiality and social purpose, specifically exploring possibilities of species of tree on the site to fell for timber. The third ‘networking’ opened the project to local craft, expertise and manufactures. And the fourth ‘governing’ brought the project in contact with all aspects of procurement including local community and engineers, involving farmers and neighbours as well as statutory and legal bodies in policy action.

The final drawings were detailed to be delivered to site as a flat pack and instructions, so that the community labour needed little prior knowledge of carpentry and the assembly method and timescales times accommodated weekend fabrication. The style of communication was borrowed from the IKEA assembly manuals^{xxxiv} and designed to engage its makers in familiar working methods. Thus communication, involvement and ease of delivery became a primary concern and importantly an strategy to empower its members. (fig.4)

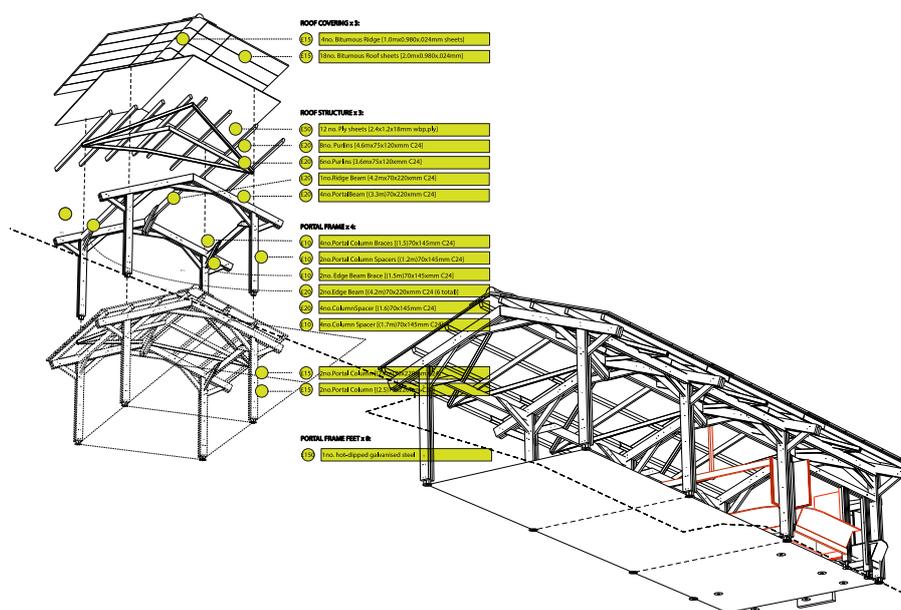


Fig. 4 assembly drawings - drawing by author

Many consultations were undertaken with the local community including neighbours and adjacent institutions. The promise and care of communication through drawings and models with the public eventually served to secure planning permission and months spent with the engineer finally achieved approval for building regulations, producing a scheme which could be fabricated on site with few skills.

However, the construction was deemed marginally over budget and compounded by the insurance commitments meant the efforts to involve the community in the process of fabrication were unfulfilled.

In place the trustees ordered a couple of gazebos from B&Q^{xxxv} and a local builder assembled on site.

CONCLUSION

Finances are always one of the most pressing issues for city farms and it is difficult to calculate the value a community build might bring, particularly, as the gazebos facilitated a new outdoor kitchen without much fuss. Fuss however also goes hand in hand with an attention to care. It would have included the sourcing of sustainable timber and choreographing the project through several weekends with the hands-on final stages of its erection. It would also have been a vehicle to consider the existing conifers on site for construction as these had been tested for suitability. And an opportunity to teach carpentry and skills, as well as introduce the community to methods of assembly which were designed to be up-scaled for other constructions on the farm.

This thesis frames ‘community’ in relation to the temporality of the setting, it points towards a holistic caring-for, which frames the ‘Spheres of Action’ in this context of well-being. Ethical ‘activities’, further ‘care’ through each of their ‘Spheres of Action’; mending, making, networking, and governing, which in turn allows scaling-up, through progressively complex ‘activities’ proposed by the farm.

The thesis argued earlier that city farms are ‘unstable’ microcosms. The benevolent action of ‘mending’ therefore may only act to momentarily stabilise their future. If communities reflect their setting, in this context, it follows that firstly, communities are dynamic, and secondly, they must be ready to re-repair, as their setting changes overtime, their observations of this being attentive to engaging the ‘actors’ at all ‘Spheres of action’.

NOTES

ⁱ GOV.UK. n.d. ‘English Indices of Deprivation 2019’. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>.

- ii 'Federation of City Farms & Community Gardens Federation of City Farms & Community Gardens'. n.d. <https://www.farmgarden.org.uk>.
- iii Steven J. Jackson. 2014. 'Rethinking Repair'.
- iv Roberto Esposito, and Rhiannon Noel Welch. "The Law of Community." In *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*, 14–26. Fordham University Press, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x0bdm.4.p.26>
- v 'Spheres of Action' is the authors term used to describe four actions: mending, making, networking, and governing, requiring increasingly complex spheres of involvement.
- vi Kevin John McGuire, and Abraham H. Maslow. *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*, 2011.
- vii Marianne, Krasny, and Keith Tidball. 'Applying a Resilience Systems Framework to Urban Environmental Education'. *Environmental Education Research - ENVIRON EDUC RES* 15 (1 August 2009): 465–82.
- viii Roberto Esposito, and Rhiannon Noel Welch. "The Law of Community." In *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*, 14–26. Fordham University Press, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x0bdm.4.p.26>
- ix Projects include events and activities initiated by the farm to engage the local community. The research focusses on live construction projects and film making for the public.
- x James, Banks, Daisy Fancourt, and Xiaowei Xu. n.d. 'Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic'. Report. Institute of Fiscal Studies. <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15368>.
- xi GOV.UK. n.d. 'English Indices of Deprivation 2019'. GOV.UK.
- xii 'The Community Land Advisory Service'. n.d. Social Farms & Gardens. <https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/clas>.
- xiii <https://www.networkrail.co.uk>
- xiv 'English Indices of Deprivation 2019: Mapping Resources'. 2019. GOV.UK. 2019. http://dclgapps.communities.gov.uk/imd/ioid_index.html#.
- xv Bourdieu, Pierre, and Randal Johnson. 2016. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- xvi Bourdieu, Pierre, and Richard. Nice. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- xvii 'Inter-Action'. n.d. Unfinished Histories. <https://www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/inter-action/>.
- xix Stanley Mathews. 2006. 'The Fun Palace as Virtual Architecture: Cedric Price and the Practices of Indeterminacy'. *Journal of Architectural Education (1984-)* 59 (3): 39–48.
- xx A play scheme for the 3–5-year-olds in 'Kiln Place Tenants Hall'. The play scheme was to replace a youth club which has fallen into disrepute.
- xxi Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. 2018. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*.
- xxii Pierre Bourdieu and Richard. Nice. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- xxiii Maria Puig de la Bellacasa. 2011. 'Matters of Care in Technoscience: Assembling Neglected Things'. *Social Studies of Science* 41 (1): 85–106.
- xxiv Maria Puig de la Bellacasa. 'Making time for soil: Technoscientific futurity and the pace of care'. *Social Studies of Science* 45, no. 5 (2015): 691–716.
- xxv Tim Edensor. 'Entangled Agencies, Material Networks and Repair in a Building Assemblage: The Mutable Stone of St Ann's Church, Manchester'. *Transactions. New Series: Institute of British Geographers* 36 (2011): 238–52.
- xxvi James G. Gibson. 1986. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Hillsdale, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- xxvii A. Chemero. 2003. 'An Outline of a Theory of Affordances'. *ECOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY* 15 (2): 181–95.
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- xxx McGuire, Kevin John, and Abraham H. Maslow. 2011. *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*.
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- xxxiii Environmental Agency: Flooding and Coastal Change: <https://www.gov.uk/topic/environmental-management/flooding-coastal-change>
- xxxiv IKEA Assembly Instructions'. n.d. IKEA. <https://www.ikea.com/gb/en/customer-service/product-support/assembly-guides/>.

xxxv 'B&Q DIY Products at Everyday Low Prices'. 2022. B&Q. 20 January 2022.
https://www.diy.com/departments/outdoor-garden/arches-arbours-pergolas/gazebos/DIY594239.cat#icamp=SRD_Outdoor_Gazebos_L4.

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