

The Age Friendly City
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Manchester

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The Age Friendly City

Introduction

October 2011 saw the launch of a two-year partnership between the MA Design (Design LAB) programme, based at the Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University, and the Valuing Older People Team (VOP) at Public Health Manchester, Manchester City Council. The aim of the partnership is to develop design ideas and approaches which contribute to the Age Friendly Manchester programme. The project focuses on students working hands-on in the local community, whilst striving to achieve robust academic standards.

This booklet provides an overview of the initial phases of this partnership. It showcases several projects carried out in Chorlton, Manchester, and sets out what was done, how, and why. It documents design challenges and details responses that can be adapted or used by others working in this field. It is written from the perspective of the Design LAB students.

Collaborative, active, material-based design tools are starting to emerge. Direct contact with the community and its environment has been central throughout. Much of the work has taken place on location. Some instances have seen the street transformed into the design studio.

Project brief

Presented to MA Design LAB – October 2011

Background

In 2010 Manchester was successful in an application to become a member of the World Health Organisation (WHO) Global Network of Age Friendly Cities. The application was led by the Valuing Older People Team (VOP) at Manchester City Council. From October 2010, VOP has been developing a Manchester focused approach to the Age Friendly City through understanding the concept and planning activity.

Also in 2010, VOP worked with the South Manchester Regeneration Team on the consultation for the District Centre Plan for Chorlton. In 2011 the action plan for the future development of the Chorlton District Centre was published. A Manchester Age Friendly City work plan is presently being shaped around the themes of:

- People: giving older residents the opportunity to get involved in influencing the city's plans.
- Places: working in neighbourhoods, responding to the local need for the creation of new opportunities.
- Projects: practical pieces of work that improve services and help our learning.
- Partnerships: practical collaborations to achieve ambitious plans locally and to draw down resources and investment into the city.
- Policy: influencing policy and embedding age friendly principals in other city strategy.

VOP wants to work with partners in Manchester to develop local propositions of what the Age Friendly neighbourhood concept could be, based on the WHO's Age Friendly City principles, the Manchester Generations Together programme legacy, and the Manchester Ageing Strategy.

Requirements

Drawing on this context, Design LAB students have been asked to increase awareness of age friendly issues through one of the following options:

- Products retailing under £30.00 for sale in Chorlton.
- Objects or installations for placement or exhibition in Chorlton.
- An event or happening in Chorlton.
- A new policy for use in Chorlton or wider Manchester.

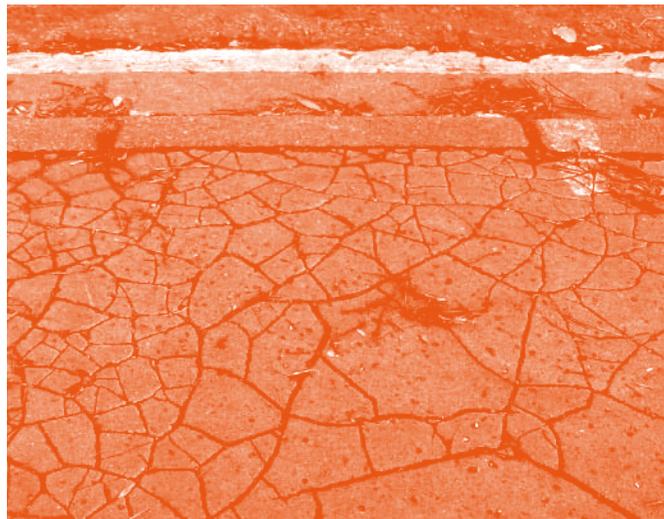
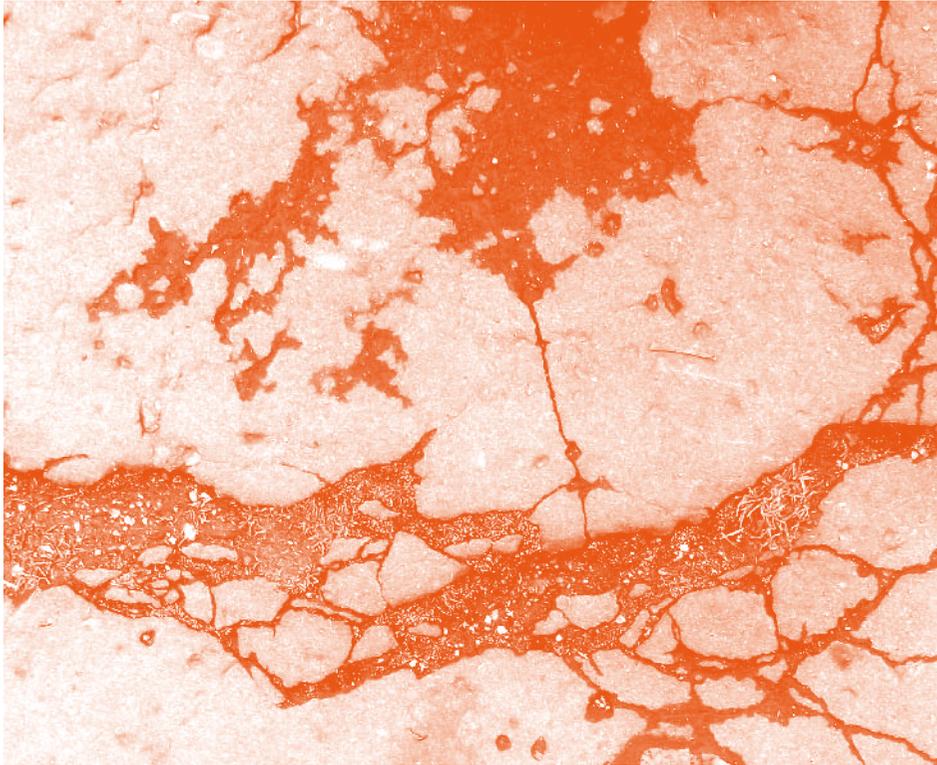
Each of these options should be researched and developed with communities based in Chorlton, working with individuals or groups, responding to their needs.

The work of the VOP Team focuses on older people living within the city of Manchester. Intergenerational work involves children and young people aged 8–25. It is therefore vital to engage with these age groups.

Time scales

Design LAB students are required to produce research and development outputs within the dates set out in the below schedule:

- Initial Project Phase: October to December 2011.
 - Collaborative event: December 2011.
 - Wider Project: September 2011 to 2013.
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Exploring Chorlton

October 2011

We began the project by exploring Chorlton. Our time was spent in a café at Chorlton precinct. We also met with a community group called Chorlton Good Neighbours.

An afternoon of walking, talking, listening, and photography, gave us our introduction to Chorlton life. We sought to observe the landscape through the eyes of older people. After the initial site visit, we had a week to gather our individual thoughts before coming together as a group.

We were told that pavements are often difficult for older people to negotiate due to gaps created by cracking and inconsistent levels. Social and environmental change was much commented on by the Chorlton Good Neighbours group. We collected powerful stories from various members and discovered that many didn't feel the area was their own anymore. They felt they were fading into the background.

Our initial research highlighted the importance and significance of resting points within communities. We realised that people and place are all components of our identity.

Starting words

November to December 2011

Through various seminars and discussion groups held in the Design LAB studio, we collated and structured our thoughts, forming a set of useful boundaries. We wrote a comprehensive list of key words, which we used to frame the themes, concepts, and issues that we wanted to explore.

From a very early stage the voice of the community was important. There was a natural progression that saw common interests coming together to result in the formation of separate research groups. These were later titled: Where Do You Sit?, Filling the Gaps, and The Facilitators.

Over the course of the next six weeks, each research group carried out a series of initial explorations and interventions.





Where Do You Sit?

Group one

We took a journey across Chorlton, mapping existing benches and resting points (including walls or steps) that we found on our route. We also noted places where benches were lacking. We were drawn to graffiti (or the lack of it) and intrigued by memorial benches. This was followed by research into methods of graffiti and mark making in public spaces with textile influences such as yarn bombing (a medium already explored within the local environment). It became apparent how benches can be used as a vehicle for messages and memories. They could (or perhaps should) fulfil a social need as well as a practical one.

We chose to focus our attention on the central courtyard of the precinct in Chorlton, as the space neither prompted social interaction or supported resting. The metal benches here were too low, cold, and without backing. On identifying this problem, we wanted to draw attention to it by modifying the existing benches in order to show how insufficient and impractical they currently are, especially for older people.

We wove material into existing holes in a bench, creating a warmer, softer seat. This resulted in a weatherproof striking yellow colour block that drew the eye. Feedback was generally very positive, with the majority of people seeming grateful when they realised we were working to create a comfortable seat. Our weaving work prompted passers-by to ask questions such as *'where do you sit?'* and *'do you ever sit here?'* We have since noticed that the bright yellow woven seat has stood the test of time, and is still chosen by people in Chorlton as a resting point many months later.

Filling the Gaps

Group two

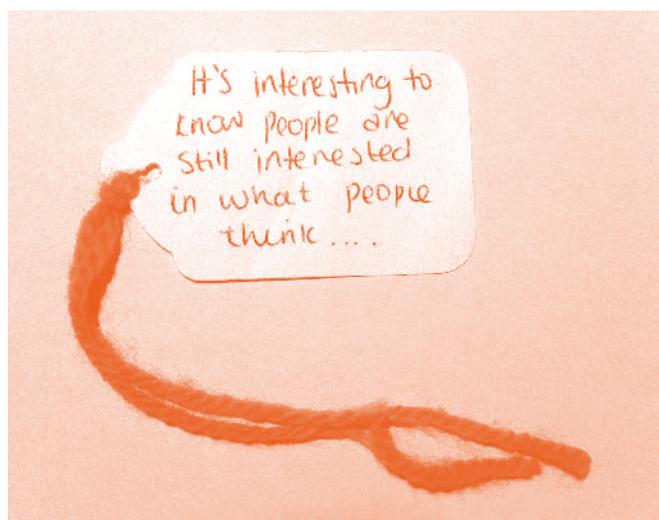
We were interested in highlighting an awareness of the safety and accessibility of the pavements. A series of site visits allowed us to identify some of the more problematic zones. We also observed that the issue was inter-generational. The difficulties experienced by older pedestrians were often problematic for younger pedestrians, pram users, and wheelchair users.

We set out to raise awareness of pavement issues. Initially we used paint, chalk, and gems in an attempt to fill the cracks. Our interventions attracted attention from passers by. We realised the potential of the act of doing and visibly making in the community. Photographic documentation of interventions and interactions were central throughout.

We also began to create work in the studio, working with ceramics, textiles, and paper, utilising images, and making use of material casts taken from the pavements. Three approaches were developed:

- Photography and the manipulation of the images. Paper cutworks were created to emphasise pavements in a state of disrepair, and the safety issues damage creates for older people.
 - Using alginate (a semi flexible moulding compound) we produced casts from the pavements in situ. These were then used to develop plaster moulds and ceramic forms highlighting depth and surface.
 - Using knitted textiles to explore the pavement surfaces and potential application of knitted samples in this context.
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The Facilitators

Group three

We wanted to address the following questions:

- What is it that better characterises people, and describes them as a community?
- What can we hold on to through change? For example when our bodies age and the built and social environment evolves.

We started by exploring ways of communicating the voice of older people to the rest of the community. We looked at work that was impermanent and often found in public places, for example graffiti and flyposting. The group thought anonymous storytelling that was collectively authored and displayed publicly would be most appropriate for our aims. We combined this research with our own work, carrying out several subtle interventions:

- Stitched textile maps to represent change in the built environment and to document personal responses.
- Parking notices encouraging drivers to consider pedestrians when parking on pavements.
- Luggage tags and poster labels displaying quotations written by the people of Chorlton.
- Pavement chalking to indicate the next stage of facilitation.
- Portable '*living room*' set consisting of armchairs, cushions, lamps, and coffee tables.

After evaluation and public feedback, phase one was refined since some aspects were perceived as too close to graffiti. For example, our chalking was promptly erased from the Precinct. We recreated a familiar space by staging a '*living room*' set using charity shop furniture. Our intention was to use this set on pavements in Chorlton as a catalyst for conversation. We wanted passers-by to sit down and engage with us over tea and cake.

Meet Me in the Precinct

January 2012

We secured the use of the Chorlton Arts Festival Hub for one week where we held an event called Meet Me at the Precinct, an insight into the needs of the community. As we spent our time in the space, it brought to light the call for conversation.

We wanted people to sit with us, so we designed and built a table that recalled the images of cracked pavements. The chairs and stools displayed comments and questions gathered from the community. A variety of hand-made objects, including stitched maps and ceramics castings, worked to highlight design issues, record concerns, and highlight the changes felt by the residents of Chorlton.

We encouraged visitors to write comments on paper tags and invited them to view the objects and visuals on display. The degree of involvement was left in their control. We made use of images, quotes, and design themes from our research activities to highlight connections between what visitors may have already encountered around the area.

A memorial bench was created by weaving together individual reclaimed wooden chairs, where people could sit and reflect upon their connections to Chorlton and their memories of it.

It was the combination of a place to sit and something to respond to that prompted our conversations with visitors. People would pop in a number of times throughout the week, allowing us into their daily routines and offering snippets of their lives.





Reflections

Project review

Over the course of four months, we have created and delivered a series of activities exploring community engagement, which were borne out of conversations and encounters with Chorlton and its residents. This work could develop in terms of its transferability (for example, to other areas of Manchester) and longevity. There were several core aspects that strengthened our experience, whilst others proved to be less successful.

Relationships can be built through community engagement. The process involves emotional energy and investment on both sides. Communication is developed throughout the project as alternative to the passive communicator to receiver dynamic. The process creates a sense of responsibility.

Collaboration challenges the roles typically undertaken by designers and artists. Throughout the project our personal roles evolved, and we found that they didn't always sit naturally within our individual practices.

However, collaboration is an exciting tool. It allowed us to move beyond the limitations of our own perspectives, and embedded our creative ideas in the real world, making new potential of ways of working more apparent.

We received a greater amount of feedback in relation to the public bench located in the precinct than we did regarding the seating created for the shop. People shared a better connection to the outdoor bench because they felt that they were able to interact with it freely.

The pavement '*living room*' set was conceived in an attempt to provide a space that was accessible and inclusive. This was in response to the feelings of territory and ownership that became apparent to us after collecting stories from the Chorlton Good Neighbours group.

The hub acted as a neutral space that meet people halfway. Because shop space is typically very versatile, people were already accustomed to internal changes taking place regularly. It became a community drop in centre.

Recommendations

Project review

For people in Chorlton to work in a more Age Friendly way with older people and the wider community, we recommend:

- Approaching older people and others as individuals, allowing for different levels of engagement.
- Giving careful consideration of timing of events. The shop was appropriate to winter since it offered warmth, tea, and cake.
- Using a range of communication methods including oral and written. Visual prompts such as postcards depicting Chorlton's past, tags, and chalkboards, encouraged people to share their memories and current thoughts.
- Collaborating with older people to determine project outcomes. Chorlton Good Neighbours guided our approach, which we adapted after meeting and talking with them.
- Working physically and visibly. We created several small interventions directed at a range of age groups, provoking questions and thoughts related to issues such as cracked pavements. The act of making is a strong facilitator for interaction with people. Even in the shop it was important to keep busy rather than just sitting and waiting for people to join us.
- Working in teams. This involved collaboration and collective working. It kept energy high as constant interaction can be draining.

To make physical spaces in Chorlton more Age Friendly, we recommend a long term approach to:

- Installing public benches that meet the requirements of the user (older people for example). Outside resting spaces for people are invaluable in the community.
- Run an awareness campaign to reduce parking on pavements that blocks that space for people with limited mobility.
- Target problematic paving areas in need of repair using mapping exercises, identifying future opportunities for improvement.

Conclusion

Age Friendly work should fit into a wider neighbourhood context and not be an add on. When working with older people there will be benefits that relate to other age brackets too. We found a strong link existed between older people and parents with young children. They seem to share similar issues such as loneliness, isolation, uneven pavements, resting points, and toilet breaks. 'Age' is a hard bracket to use when defining people because there are always expectations, preconceptions and assumptions. This was brought up again and again by the people we spoke to. Take time to plan an approach and genuinely collaborate with local older people and others as early as possible.

Design LAB 2012

Project roles

Lucy Broadbent

I trained as an interior designer. I'm interested in how people interact with spaces. I would describe myself as a researcher and a communicator as we collaborated. The role of listener came with a sense of responsibility and the maker within me wants to give something back. I am looking into emotional mapping and keeping hold of the significance of a place to sit.

Beata Domanski

As a ceramist driven by an interest in texture and form, I approached the project hands on. Working collaboratively to tackle the issue of uneven pavements, my focus was on awareness raising, making conversation, and provoking thoughts. I am becoming an explorer and I want to develop my work on the contradictions between pavements and trees.

Ruth Hadwin

I approached this project openly, as a maker used to working independently in embroidery and textiles, but also with an interest in collaboration. As the project progressed, I became more of a listener and maker, using the environment around me to fuel my work, whilst exploring methods of creating provoking images in the hope of raising awareness.

Gemma Latham

I approached the project openly. When initially trying to engage with the public I felt like an intruder. I was pleased that as the project progressed, my favoured textile medium proved to be invaluable for connecting with the community. I hope to explore this further.

Emma McKenzie

My background is in contemporary craft specialising in ceramics. Before this project I would have described myself as an independent maker, most often at ease in the studio with materials at hand. This project has reinvigorated my creative practice, and I now perceive my role to be inclusive of visual communication and collaboration.

Rachel Murray

As a textiles practitioner used to working individually, I approached this as a listener. As a team member it was a new experience to incorporate the community's comments into our project. Working collaboratively has been an enriching experience.

Chi Opara

Before participating in this project I had worked as a fashion designer for five years. During the project I felt my role as part of the group was to create opportunities for people to engage directly with us. However, running alongside this was my personal role, which was more behind the scenes and observational. Now I describe myself as a product designer.

Annabel Perrin

Embarking on the VOP project I saw myself as a surface pattern designer. As the project developed my role evolved into listener and facilitator. Now that I have completed the first stages, I would like to combine the two roles producing prints that communicate meaningful messages.

MA Design LAB

Manchester School of Art

The MA Design programme at the Manchester School of Art is part of the Manchester Design LAB, which is in turn is directly connected to the city of Manchester.

'We are interested in collaborative practice and support projects that contribute towards positive social change. We respect fluency of material and the practice of making. We are motivated by people and things, remaining grounded by the reality of experience.'

Design LAB Manifesto 2011

With strong links to the city, MA Design allows you to specialise in either design or contemporary craft practice. Responding to live briefs, students learn how to understand the needs of clients and communities, and how to balance these needs with an experimental, visionary approach to their own creative practice.

Students work alongside researchers and professionals on a variety of live projects that connect with the region's major public organisations, companies, small design studios, agencies and individual practitioners.

There are two pathways through MA Design; Design and Contemporary Craft Practice. Students work collaboratively throughout the programme whilst also developing individual projects. Students who undertake this programme come from a range of disciplines, including, but not limited to graphics, furniture, product, interiors, jewellery, ceramics, architecture, textiles, glass, and computer science.

Further information

artdes.mmu.ac.uk/designlab

manchester.gov.uk/vop

manchester.gov.uk/generationstogether

who.int/ageing/age_friendly_cities_network

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