

# Prototyping Utopias: exploring collaborative economy in place

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## Summary/Overview

Design thinking is anticipatory in nature, it is about imagining future possibilities and taking courses of action that could make them a reality. Design thinking is therefore intrinsically tied to Utopian thinking, the construction of ideal worlds, or ideal futures. Thomas More's book Utopia brought to the fore a fundamental duality between imagination and creation: the word utopia meaning 'no place' or 'nowhere' sounds identical to the word eu-topia meaning a good place, and so the very notion of utopia raises an important question about the relationship between dreaming and (making) better places. The concept of utopia naturally influenced (design) thinking about cities, places and architecture (e.g. Manuel & Manuel, 1979; Tafuri, 1976). Design has been approached as the act of prototyping futures that challenge existing realities, e.g. protesting against a consumption-led society, protecting the natural environment and provoking established norms. In the history of design and architecture we find many original versions of utopian cities or societies, but these tend to be 'expert' creations of visionary individuals (e.g. the work of Archigram). The aim of the Prototyping Utopias project was to explore *community* utopias, and how the connections people have in their own places frame their future aspirations and can lead to the emergence of new visions and actions. Underlying this exploration is the notion of collaborative economy, the sharing of skills, assets and ideas. More specifically, the project aimed to *realise a process of dreaming and prototyping diverse community-led utopias within a particular locality to explore a) whether shared or connected eutopias can be created and b) what their key elements are*. There were two further objectives related to the Empowering Design Practices (EDP) project principles:

- Developing and evaluating processes/methods to engage communities in design thinking
- Building capacity, skills and networks to benefit key partners and collaborators

## 1. Project activities

The project delivered two participatory day events in Bow, East London. **The Dreaming Utopias event** took place on Saturday 30th of April 2016 at Bow Church. It aimed to provide an open space for local people to dream about their ideal places and the future of Bow. The space was organised as a 'design studio' that allowed people to use different means to express themselves (through audio, text, drawing or modelling) and offered opportunities to reflect, to talk to one another, interact with artists and create visions of a utopian Bow. The **Prototyping Utopias event** took place on 21st May in Bow Arts, and aimed to review the ideas and dreams shared by people in the Dreaming event and to create more tangible expressions of those dreams. This included reviewing all the different materials generated and extracting key themes. Two prototypes were then constructed, building on the identified key themes: 'Smile Avenue' and 'Magic Boxes'. Outputs from the activities were shared at the **Utopia Fair** at Somerset House in central London, 24-26 June 2016. Visitors were invited to reflect on the visions created by people in Bow and dream about the future of their own places. Visitors created a collective, diverse and colourful Big Wide World of Utopias and used materials in a 'magic box' to draw and make prototypes of mini utopias. A film about the project was also shown (<https://vimeo.com/171563836>).

## 2. Participation

140 people took part in the dreaming event. They were mostly local residents, which represented a cross section of the community, from young people and families with small children, to older people. They engaged with the activities in a variety of ways (and at different levels). Many simply created labels for the outdoor display; some wrote their thoughts about aspects of utopias on a piece of card and attached it on a washing line inside the church; and others created their own images, collages, and models. Over 30 people audio recorded their dreams. Although the team sought to engage dreaming event participants in the prototyping event, the activity developed into a vehicle for the project team to analyse and synthesise the materials previously generated. The Utopia Fair was open to the public and the Somerset House estimated 10,000 visitors over the course of the weekend. At least 228 people engaged with the project stall: there were 228 flags placed on the world map of Utopias and about 50 mini utopias created (drawings or models).

## 3. Evaluation

At the dreaming event a visitor's book was used to record people's thoughts/evaluation. There were 17 comments, all of them expressing an appreciation for the event (providing inspiration,

opportunity to dream/think) and the building (beautiful space). The team held conversations with participants to assess the usefulness of the process for bringing people together. At the end of the day the team had a reflective group session to share experiences and observations about the process, participation and outcomes. This was followed by individual discussions, briefings and written feedback. The prototyping event was itself a vehicle for evaluation and reflection. At the end of the project, a de-briefing session was held, to share insights with Bow Church (core partner in EDP) and to plan further steps. The collaborating artists also shared their own reflections.

#### 4. Summary of feedback, learning and reflections

At the *Dreaming* event, while many people did not immediately engage with or understand the word utopia, when this was explained to them, they were overwhelmingly responsive. Participants valued the opportunity to walk into a space where they were free to wander around, explore other people's creations, and share their ideas. The focus on dreaming helped create a playful and relaxed environment. Many themes emerged from the discussions and the artefacts, voices and texts produced. People talked about community, and values such as understanding, listening, talking to one another. They talked about peace and conflict, about beating racism, about learning, about play. They talked about greener places. They talked about their love of Bow and about their fights to make places more inclusive for everyone. Some of the barriers to participation were related to the fact that the event was organised in a place of worship, and some of the residents were reluctant to engage either because of their faith, or simply because they lacked confidence or skills (particularly spoken English). The team reflected quite a lot on participation. Materials were produced for advertising and dissemination of the event, which were shared with project partners (website, posters (printed and digital versions), twitter etc). However, most of the participants were passers-by who did not have previous knowledge/clear understanding of the aims of the event or the roles of different partners. Arguably, the event would have benefited from more outreach, to residents in local estates and migrant or other excluded communities, although the timescale of activities did not allow sufficient time for that. However, a safe community space for crafting and conversation emerged as a self-evident need for many participants, and parents and children in particular, valued the availability of a family friendly, free space. The analysis of the materials at the *Prototyping* event, revealed that people dreamed about universal ideals, like peace, solidarity, equality, nature and community, but also reflected on the qualities of their own place and the value of local people (their culture(s) and sense of community). The key learning was the realisation that people share some universal values, but also that utopias do not need to be extravagant: there are simple things that can happen in a locality. The 'Smile avenue' prototype, synthesised elements of utopias shared by people focussed on the environment (green spaces, community gardens, clean energy) with an emphasis on sharing food as a vehicle not only for meeting a need but also as a vehicle for creating community. The 'Magic boxes' prototype brought to the fore the notion of empowerment through the creation of enabling infrastructures: places and mechanisms that allow people to communicate, to work together and to take ideas forward. These can vary in size and reach: ideas ranged from a 'talking bench' to a theatre on wheels. The *Utopia Fair* was an opportunity to continue the conversation on community utopias and test out one of the prototypes (the magic box). The box, a large suitcase with arts and crafts materials, proved particularly popular with young people, families, and children and enabled random gatherings and deep conversations. The mini utopias contained visions for a cleaner planet, a world run by children, a world of peace, with no borders, where people respect and care about each other and can be creative and make new things. *Overall*, the project showed that with a few resources, like arts and crafts materials and a lending ear, unexpected places like a church, can become catalysts for random encounters, potentially leading to the generation of community visions and actions. Some of the small intervention ideas generated (e.g. the audio recording of dreams, or the magic box) are already being adapted and used in other contexts. The project was a learning opportunity for the collaborating artists, who found the project useful for developing their own practice and building faith in the power of collaboration and community engagement. Perhaps the most important output of the project was that it provided a proof of concept for Bow Church who is currently planning a major project to open the building to wider community use. It provided important learning about local needs, barriers and opportunities and influenced the formation of their vision.



*'The theme of utopianism and how it applies to place has been a particular interest of mine for a while, and public engagement is also often part of my practice. This project allowed me to expand on these ideas in a new and exciting context; most rewardingly the application of artistic practices to a specific locality, combined with the focus on the creativity of residents. As an artist based in that area, but normally working outside it, this was especially pleasing! The project presented an opportunity I wouldn't normally have, and therefore a chance not only to be involved in socially beneficial work but also to develop my own artistic practice. It was also rewarding to meet and work with people from organisations that have a practical stake in the kinds of issues I've been exploring artistically. It will certainly inform my future work, specially in terms of techniques for public engagement and local focus' – Paul Burgess, artist*

*'As someone who was participating in the project almost from the sidelines, this was an interesting one to observe and document. It was refreshing to see that on the community open day, there was a large section of the diverse community that was engaged, with lots of passionate opinions expressed. I interviewed quite a few people who were engaged with the project, and all brought interesting points of view to the discussion. The environment and facilitation created by the organisers seemed to encourage nuanced discussions, and as a filmmaker, it was a good challenge to distill the events into something coherent for an outside audience. I came away with a renewed belief in the importance of dreaming big without limitations, and then realising the power of discussion and collaboration to come up with solutions that feed into those wider dreams. It was refreshing to work with people so passionate about engaging with communities, and really listening to what local people wanted to see in their areas' – Emma Crouch, filmmaker*

## References

Manuel, F.E and Manuel F.P (1979) *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, Harvard University Press  
Tafuri, M. (1976) *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, MIT Press

## Project website

<http://prototyping-utopias-uk>

## Project team

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Partners: Bow Church, Bromley-by-Bow Centre, Bow Arts and Poplar Harca

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PROTOTYPING  
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