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**for LONDON INDEPENDENT PHOTOGRAPHY**

# FLIP

# Using Photographic Research to facilitate Social Interaction

*By Anita Strasser*

'Community was once seen as a way of life with close networks, clear moral values and sentimental attachment to place, incompatible with modern life in the city which was perceived as fragmented, isolated and lacking cohesion.'

Within sociological writing, the notion of community has been fiercely debated since the late 19th century. Community was once seen as a traditional way of life with close networks, clear moral values and sentimental attachment to place, incompatible with modern life in the city which was perceived as fragmented, isolated and lacking cohesion. Urbanisation was said to be the result of the 'regretful' loss of tradition (although the reverse could also be argued), and the mourning of this loss resulted in nostalgia and romantic sentiments of a better past. This romantic myth has been largely dispelled, with the concept of community now understood as anything but a homogenous, stable and conflict-free totality with clear boundaries - however, in everyday discourse in rural as well as in urban settings, the term still conjures up feelings of warmth, belonging and loyalty to a clearly defined locality. Although people are often aware of the struggles within their communities, it gives them an even stronger reason to yearn for the idealised notion of 'the good old days', and to complain about urban neighbourhoods lacking community networks and social cohesion.

These sentiments were expressed strongly in the block of flats where I live in Deptford, south-east London. I decided to investigate the affective nature of community spirit, and look at how feelings such as solidarity, trust and a sense of collectivity might be created through participatory photographic research and repeated social engagements. When I asked neighbours how they would define community, they said: recognition in the staircase, a "Hello" and "How are you"; knowing who lives next door to feel safer in the block; knowing a little about each other to feel less afraid of knocking if need be; some collective action such as the odd coffee morning or looking after the flowerbeds. What struck me about these comments was this idea of community as communication; a shared dialogue between people who know one another.

With this in mind, the research project sought to create repeated social interaction among neighbours in order to build up this shared dialogue. The first step was to introduce them to each other, thus removing the first barrier. Using photography, observation and conversations, I put together images and texts to be used at a neighbours' tea and cake afternoon in my flat. This was to allow people time to read and meet each other through texts and images to make the first face-to-

'People in transit seem to be between two worlds, they've left one place and the persona they inhabit there - but they haven't reached their destination and the person they will be when they arrive.'



face contact easier. It was important to conduct this research *with* my neighbours and make them co-authors in the representations of their own lives, as I did not want to speak for them but, instead, give them more control over how they wanted to represent themselves. It was also important for this to be an informal event, so home-baked cakes and tea in my flat was ideal as this also enabled me to open my doors to the people whose flats I had been allowed to enter. As neighbours told me later, this gathering was crucial, as it not only achieved its purpose of getting people to meet but also helped their understanding of the intention behind the project.

Whilst carrying out the research, some of my neighbours and I created other social encounters in and around the block. Together we engaged in what is known as 'tactical urbanism' ie small-scale subversive activities to make space more liveable. On an ad-hoc basis, we decorated spaces such as the 2nd floor landing with discarded paraphernalia to liven up the dismal and neglected stairwell. Our audible laughter brought others out from their flats to join in and/or admire the curious displays, which have since become a topic of conversation around the block. Another important gathering was the transformation of the neglected courtyard. After obtaining plants, mulch and tools from the council, some of us transformed the space into our own community garden.

The effervescence of these activities has clearly worn off but what the project has achieved is to build the foundation for a shared dialogue, of community as communication. It introduced neighbours to each other and removed the fear factor of not knowing the person next door. It has provided people with connections that form the basis of small talk in the stairwell. The decorations and gardening activities are ongoing, as is collective action to have the block better maintained, and some neighbours engage in food exchanges and having cups of tea together. Although the complexity of social bonds in such everyday banalities is invisible, it is the art of coexisting with neighbours who are connected by proximity. Sharing experiences, territory and daily practices helps to form connections, resulting in mutuality and the visceral nature of community such as a sense of belonging, trust and solidarity.

*This work will be presented in an exhibition, A neighbours' event: building community through socially-engaged photography (and a talk) at Conway Hall throughout November and December 2017. www.conwayhall.org.uk/anitastrasser*