PROJECT SUMMARY

Bumping Spaces

August 2021

CONTENTS

PART ONE

About The Project

"As a free local resource the library brings together characters from all walks of life and gives people what they need without trying to sell them things they don't."
— **Evening Standard article**

In 2015, Dr Roger Green et al. carried out research in the City of London, exploring the impact of social isolation for City residents. One of their recommendations was an increase in "**bumping spaces**" within the City. "Bumping Spaces" are informal spaces where people might naturally interact and form social connections.

A 2019 article in the Evening Standard highlighted the use of Barbican Library as such a space: 'As a free local resource it brings together characters from all walks of life and gives people what they need without trying to sell them things they don't.'

Lead by **Barbican & Community Library** in partnership with **MadeByPlay** (a venture within Shift that fuses creativity, play and research rigour), the intention of this project was to engage local residents and library users with Dr Green's findings while also using play to stimulate social interactions and connections. The project was kindly funded by the Engaging Libraries initiative from Carnegie UK.

A note on Covid-19 and the use of the library as a bumping space for this project.

This project was proposed as the Covid-19 pandemic took hold. From the outset of the project, our intention was to use the physical space of the Barbican Library to spark new connections within the local community. Due to the government restrictions the library was mostly closed to the public for the duration of the project. This meant we needed to adjust our approach and engage people either online or outside in accordance to Covid-19 guidelines.

Although we didn't engage people in the library, we feel our learnings are applicable to activities within the library post Covid-19. We also feel lockdown gave our work increased relevance with loneliness and social isolation being more acutely felt than ever.

The **intention** of this project was to engage local residents and library users with Dr Green's work while also using play to stimulate social interactions and connections within the library. Specifically these intentions were:

1

Engage the local community in conversation around the concept of "bumping spaces"

2

Create a set of guiding principles with the community that will help inform developing the library as a "bumping space"

3

Using our guiding principles, produce and test a number of playful prototypes that aim to foster informal social connections

PROJECT TEAM

MADEBYPLAY is an innovative venture within Shift that fuses creativity, play and research rigour to ignite people-led social change. Shift has been pioneering participatory research and design methods for over 10 years.

KARL TOOMEY, PROJECT LEAD Karl has worked in the creative industries for 15+ years. Working across a broad range of content, campaigns and experiences, his focus is on using design and creativity to spark positive change.

LIZZIE REID, PROJECT LEAD. Lizzie creates campaigns, films, products, interactive experiences and more. Her approach is informed by her political drive and interest in creativity's role in rallying people and bringing about real, transformative change in society.

LOUISE COOPER, PROJECT COORDINATOR. Louise is a designer with 10 years experience building human-centered products and services in both the for-profit and not for profit sector. She's obsessed with the complexities of people and passionate about participatory research methods and the power that play has to put people and communities in the lead.

BARBICAN & COMMUNITY LIBRARY is a vibrant public library located in the heart of the Barbican Centre. The library also contains a dedicated Music Library and Children's Library, along with places to sit, read and study.

HELEN TREMAINE, PROJECT COMMISSIONER. Helen has been in libraries for 20+ years and has worked on many community projects in her role as Assistant Librarian. She is passionate about libraries as community assets providing access to culture, self learning and individual and community empowerment.

RACHEL LEVY, PROJECT COMMISSIONER. Rachel has been working for Barbican & Community Libraries for the last 4 years as the Principal Librarian for Community Libraries. Her passion is for developing libraries as places where people in communities can connect and learn.

DEAN BROWN, DESIGNER. Dean designs and makes objects, installations and interiors with a dedication to materiality and narrative. In addition to working with clients such as Google, Uniqlo and V&A, he is also currently as Research Fellow within the Interaction Research Studio, Goldsmiths University of London.
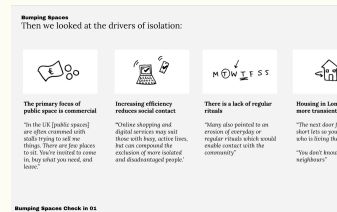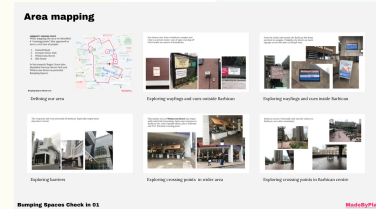
PART TWO

What we did

Focusing on **existing library users and people living and working around the Golden Lane and Barbican Estates** we used a mixed methodology research and engagement approach that included a recruitment campaign, online workshops, printed surveys and playful prototypes.
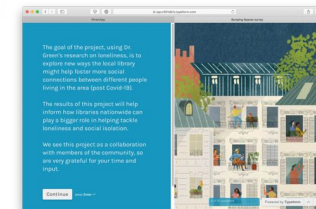
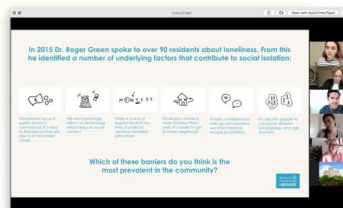These documents can be viewed in the Appendix.

Desk research

Mapping of local area

Recruitment campaign

Online surveys

Zoom workshops

Play prototypes

2,000
booklets delivered locally

51
local residents engaged

21
people took part in
Zoom workshops

20
people completed surveys

2
people took part in
one-on-one phone calls

500+
engaged with our prototypes

RECRUITMENT

We created a printed booklet that introduced the project's intentions and gave an overview of Dr. Green's work. The booklet also invited members of the community to get involved in engagement sessions.

Working with local volunteers and the library team, we delivered the booklet to the homes of approximately **2,000 residents** while a [digital version](#) of the booklet was also shared on Barbican and Golden Lane's online resident forums. The library also shared the digital document via its newsletter and social media channels. Our analytics tell us the document was opened 268 times.

To make it easy for a broad mix of people to get involved, we established an email address, a Whatsapp number and a telephone number to be contacted on.

From our initial recruitment drive, 51 people contacted us to be involved via the following channels:
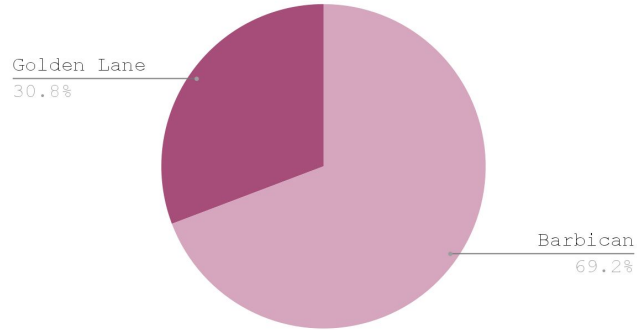**30** via Email   **16** via Whatsapp
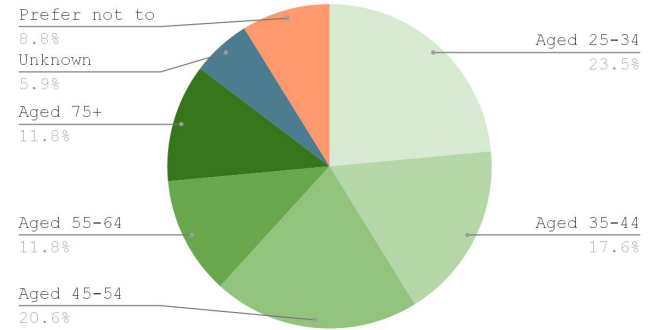**4** via Text Message   **1** via Phone Call

DEMOGRAPHICS

Estate

Golden Lane
30.8%

Barbican
69.2%

Age bracket

Prefer not to
8.8%

Unknown
5.9%

Aged 75+
11.8%

Aged 55-64
11.8%

Aged 45-54
20.6%

Aged 25-34
23.5%

Aged 35-44
17.6%

Gender

Male
41.0%

Female
59.0%

Ethnicity

Prefer not to say
6.5%

Other
3.2%

White British
41.9%

British Indian
6.5%

White Irish
6.5%

White French
6.5%

Chinese
3.2%

Black African
3.2%

Latino
3.2%

White Turkish
3.2%

White Brazilian
3.2%

Unknown
6.5%
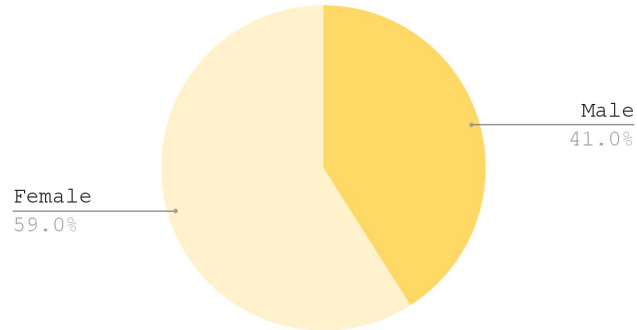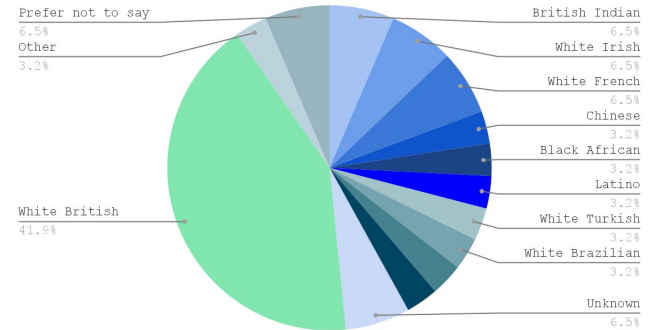
DEMOGRAPHICS

How often did you visit the library (pre-Covid)?

- Never — 15.2%
- Daily — 3.0%
- Weekly — 21.2%
- Very rarely — 12.1%
- A few times a year — 18.2%
- Monthly — 30.3%
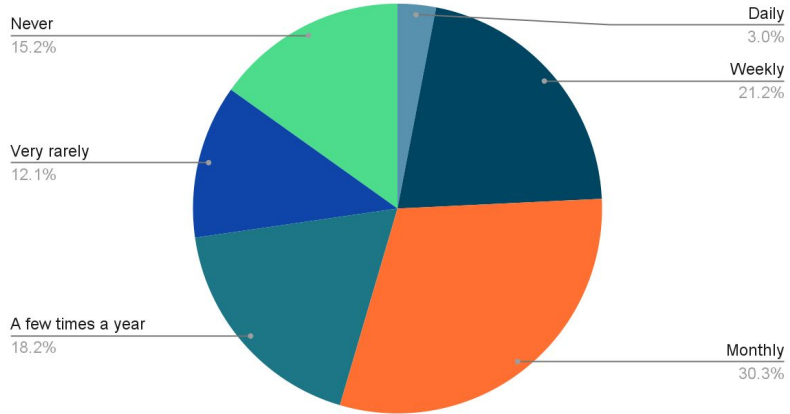
Were you aware that the library had wider services (e.g. desk space, etc)?

- No — 18.8%
- Yes — 81.3%
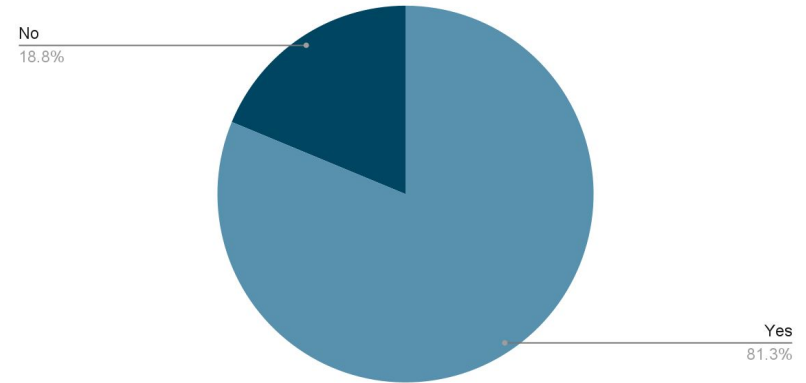
Guiding Principles

After completing our engagement activities we collated participants' responses from our various sessions. The following pages set each out.

1. **Provide casual invitations**
2. **Help people build familiarity**
3. **Push past shush**
4. **People over pixels**
5. **Help people help**
6. **Empower community champions**
7. **One size does not fit all**
8. **Awareness is action**

1

Provide casual Invitations!

People are craving an excuse to connect, but don't want it to feel too forced, formal or scripted.

"I would like to socialize more with people at the Barbican — it's trying to work out how, how do you connect with the others?"

"It's hard to have that confidence to start a chat, to know what the first line is that you're going to get to catch someone and be able to get a spark."

"How do you signal your your approachableness? I just smile at every stranger, you know"

"Interactions need to have a kind of real natural rhythm to them – nothing too scripted"

2

Help people build familiarity.
Building familiarity with others in the community is more important to people than making new friends (this can naturally come later).

"During the NHS clap seeing people on the balconies was brilliant. I was like, Oh, I have seen her before but now I know that she lives over there"

"I'd like to know people, even if it's just by name, like not needing to be best friends but that sense of knowing a neighbor's name, knowing someone would be great"

"Not everybody needs new friends, it's more just more interactions in your life more opportunities to just be familiar and say hello to people."

"I feel really sad that my daughter hasn't got what I had growing up – knowing other families and having the freedom to just go around each other's houses and play out on the street"

3

Push past shush.

Trust is key for people to feel comfortable talking to strangers, and the library has lots of it. However, it is not seen as a place where people can naturally and freely chat.

"The Barbican Library I dont know - I'd never talk there because of the rules, you know that you have to be very quiet"

"There's something very special about being on my own in the library but with other people. It's quiet, it's a safe space and it's a free space and it's really special."

"I don't consider a public library to be a bumping space because when I go to library I think people want you to be quiet."

"I joined a club in the library, and it was a Tuesday evening. I used to feel such guilt that we were talking in there. And even though it was a group that had been arranged it felt completely wrong. I struggle to talk in the library."

4

People over pixels.

Although people are open to using technology to make connections, they are wary it can sometimes turn negative so would prefer to mainly interact with others in person. People are also mindful that technology can exclude some members of the community.

"On our residents forum things can often turn negative. Lots of complaints about all sorts of things"

"Things like Twitter encourage people to squabble, to seek differences instead of seeking a common good"

'Personally I'd be craving more in- person activity. I have enough time on phones and laptops already"

"I prefer things that are face to face. I find the phone difficult as I might not understand well and not see the facial expressions. I think the phone would be too awkward for me."

5

Help people help.

Covid gave people an opportunity to connect to and help others in the local community. This is something people are very keen to build on as. Also helping others over the last year has been a good excuse to connect without admitting loneliness.

"I'd love to know what things I can help with in the community"

"Maybe if there was a purpose of activity like a community mural or exchange of some sort it would help spark discussion and give some a reason to attend"

"What was interesting about the volunteers in mutual aid groups, is often the people who volunteered where people are actually needed a bit of support as well."

"When there's something structured, it's sort of cover for social interaction. Because there is actually a lot of shame and stigma associated with loneliness. "

6

Empower community champions.
For many, talking to strangers feels abnormal and awkward. However there are members of the community who love sparking up conversations.

> "I'm forever chatting to people in queues. Queues at the shop, queues at the bus stop, queues at the train"

> "I am the queen of forced interactions"

> "I don't think it has anything to do with confidence as such. You know, It's trust or things like that, or paranoia or who knows. I just think it's a social norm."

> "You have to be a certain kind of person to strike up conversations with strangers. Many people are too shy"

7

No one size fits all.

People live very varied lives within the community, and have different views on how, when and if they want to connect. Lots of smaller, flexible solutions will always be better than trying to find 'the' perfect one.

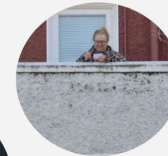> *"Sometimes you have to throw yourself in the freezer in **Waitrose** to avoid seeing people"*

VS

> *"Having **Waitrose** on the doorstep is not helpful for people. I have neighbours that cannot afford it."*

Chat bench
17 Yes
10 No
7 Maybe

Bingo
19 Yes
6 No
7 Maybe

Book Swap
20 Yes
12 No
1 Maybe

Jim's dinner
14 Yes
12 No
8 Maybe

Dial up
14 Yes
14 No
6 Maybe

"Would you engage with these activities?"
No clear consensus on each example activity.

8

Awareness is action

People felt moved to make more of an effort within their community when they learned about the extent of local loneliness and social isolation.

"This has motivated me to be bolder in my community and be more observant of spaces to connect"

"I'm going to notice places to talk with people and try starting conversations more"

"Thank you so much for organising. Have really made it a conscious effort to try and provide a "reason" for people to reach out or strike up a conversation if they seem to be up for it."

Prototypes

Using our guiding principles we identified a variety of opportunities to potentially prototype.

To give us flexibility, we explored ways to make each idea work 'out in the community' and also back in the library post-Covid-19. The longlist of ideas can be viewed in the appendix of this document.

Working with the library team we narrowed our focus down to one concept called **"Community Connections"** - an overarching idea that involved four different prototypes.

During our engagement sessions participants shared a variety of constructive thoughts on sparking new connections in their community. Our idea for "Community Connections" was to publicly share these thoughts as pop-up signs, each of which also featured a playful community related interaction.

Community Connections

Earlier this year Barbican & Community Library ran a research project asking local people for their thoughts on loneliness and making new connections in the community. As life begins to gradually reopen we are sharing some of the things people have said, along with some playful ways to interact. For more information on this project visit www.cutt.ly/Bumping, scan the QR code or drop into the library.

PROTOTYPES

The signs, designed and built with designer Dean Brown, were portable, sturdy and playful in their look and feel. Each sign featured two sides.

Side A contained a quote from a local community member, while side B featured a community focussed interaction. With Covid-19 in mind hand sanitizer was also supplied.

Each sign also featured information about the project (shown on previous page).
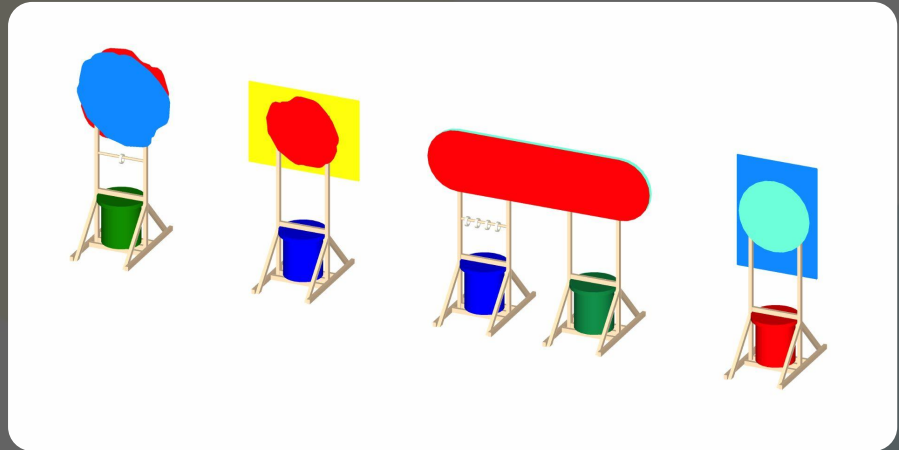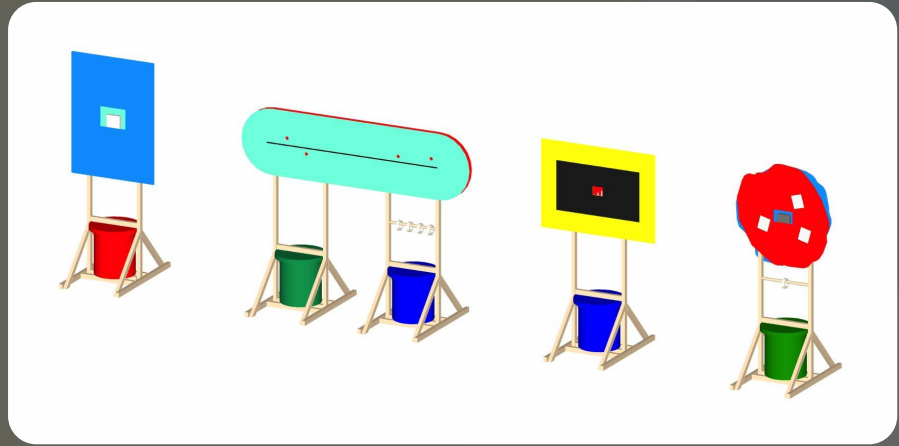
As the library was not fully open to the public we decided to set our signs up at other "bumping spaces" within the community: Fortune Street Park and the Barbican Highwalk, two locations highlighted by the community during our engagement activities.

To help with transport and management we placed all 4 prototypes at each location for a day each.

Overall we estimated 500+ people engaged with the prototypes over the two days. The following pages set out how each sign worked.
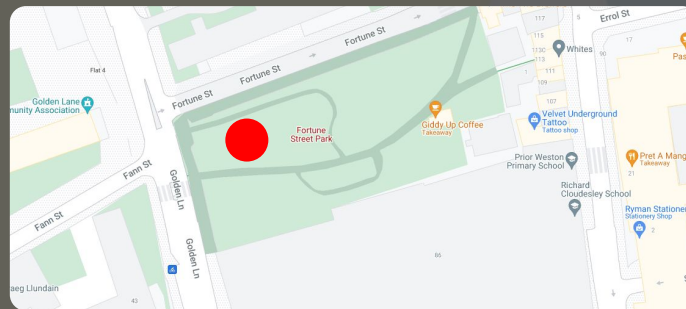
DAY 1: Tuesday June 01st, 10am—9pm
Fortune Street Park
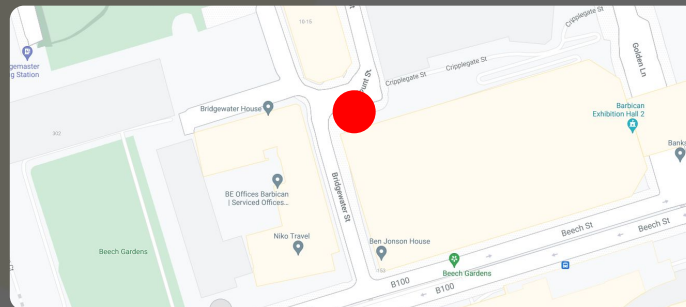
DAY 2: Wednesday June 02nd, 10am—7pm
Barbican Highwalk

Familiar Faces

Side A:
A thought from a local resident:
"I'd be really happy just to know more of my neighbour's names and faces - seeing people on their balconies during the NHS clap was brilliant. It felt great to see who my neighbours were."

Side B:
On the opposite side of the sign there was an invitation to say hello to your community.
This could be done by taking a Polaroid photo of yourself with the attached camera, or by leaving a message using supplied stickers and markers.

"I'd be really happy just to know more of my neighbour's names and faces – seeing people on their balconies during the NHS clap was brilliant, it felt great to see who my neighbours were."

Say hello to your community

Community Roots

Side A:
A thought from a local resident:
"I'd love to know how long people have lived here and what some of their stories are"

Side B:
On the opposite side of the sign there was a timeline dated from 1985 to today, with an invitation to take a sticker, write your name on it and post it to the year you started living, or visiting, the area.

Checking in

Side A:
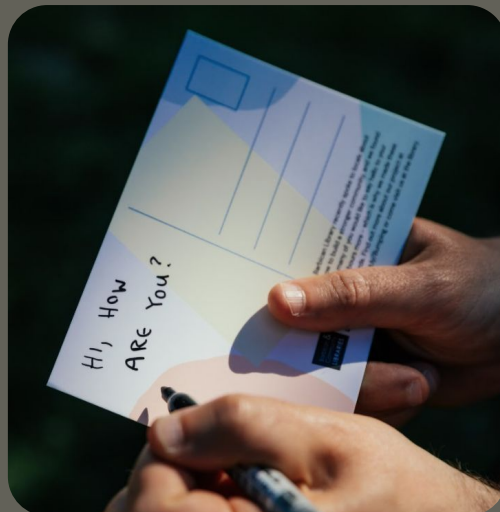A thought from a local resident:
"Seeing people check in on neighbours during lockdown was really special. I'd love to find ways to keep this going"

Side B:
On the opposite side of the sign there was a cubby hole with postcards. People were invited to take a postcard, write a message on it and drop it into a neighbour they didn't know or hadn't seen in a while.

Here & Now

Side A:
A thought from a local resident:
"I'm often staring at my phone when I'm outside, which means I'm not really open to noticing or saying hello to other people."

Side B:
On the opposite side of the sign there was a chalkboard with an invitation to take in your surroundings then sketch something you could see, hear or smell around you.

Celebrating the here and now

1. Sanitize your hands   2. Grab a piece of chalk   3. Take a deep breath and take in your surroundings
4. On the blackboard draw or describe a sound, smell or sight that pleasantly grabs your attention

"I'm often staring at my phone when I'm outside, which means I'm not really open to noticing or saying hello to other people."

What we learned

Celebrate your community roots

In addition to our guiding principles - which we feel can be applied to future library activities - we captured both quantitative and qualitative data based on the prototypes.

In terms of engagements, we have listed the numbers of interactions per sign over the following pages. As the weather was sunny, both locations were busy all day and evening so we have have also estimated the number of people who stopped and viewed the signs but did not interact. We think this is still a valuable metric as it raises awareness of the issues central to our project.

Familiar Faces (72)
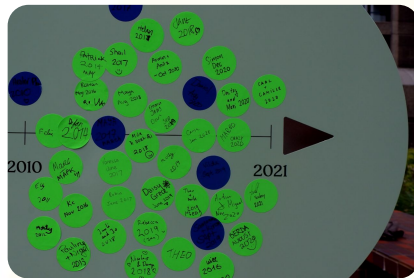
Day 1
Greetings added 27
Views 200+

Day 2
Greetings added 45
Views 100+

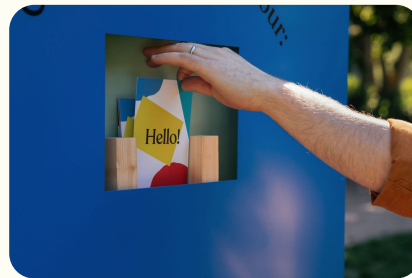**Community Roots (79)**

Day 1
Dates added 41
Views 200+

Day 2
Dates added 38
Views 100+

Neighbour check in (86)

Day 1
Postcards taken 45
Views 200+

Day 2
Postcards taken 41
Views 100+

Here & now (59)

Day 1
Drawings 22
Views 200+

Day 2
Drawings 37
Views 100+

WHAT PEOPLE SAID

"I come to this park everyday and would love to chat to people. This feels like a fun way to try"

"This is lovely – I've not seen anything out here like this before"

"I love this project! I've lived here for 35 years and don't know my neighbours at all. I really wish I did"

"I love that the library is doing this – it's really badly needed"

"Can I take 3 postcards? There's a few neighbours I haven't spoken to in a while"

"My block up there, it's practically empty because of everyone's second homes"

"I heard about this in my residents Whatsapp group so came down to see it. I've filled in each sign – it's great!"

"I didn't know there was a public library in there – I'll check it out once everything opens back up"

"I rarely go into the Barbican. Feels too snooty. The Peabody Estate is a lot more fun"

"This should be up for three weeks!"

Staffing the signs vs not staffing the signs

The prototypes were effective in different ways pending if we were on hand to facilitate conversations. When we left the signs alone and did not greet people, we had a high amount of engagement (people reading the signs and interacting with them). The instructions were clearly displayed and people knew what to do.

When we stood with the signs we also had a high level of engagement but in different ways. Staffing the signs gave us a great opportunity to have richer interactions with people and hear their thoughts on loneliness and community. It was also a great opportunity to connect people back to the library.

Children instigating

Our testing days fell during school holidays. This meant at certain times of the day there were lots of parents and children about. We noticed that it was often children leading parents towards our signs - something we assume was due to the colourful nature of our signs.

Reactions to this being from library

On numerous occasions people were a little hesitant to engage with the signs until they realised it was an activity from the library. An unsure Barbican resident even questioned us as to whether this was an advertising activity for a brand, but warmed immediately on hearing that the library was behind it. Overall there was an immense amount of goodwill and fondness towards the library.

There is a strong demand

The majority of people we spoke to easily connected to the project's central themes. Many people expressed a desire to have more connections within their community and were very happy the library was trying to instigate something. Many resident's hoped the signs would be left up more permanently.

WHAT WE NOTICED

As bumping spaces, both of our locations felt right. They were busy all day with a broad section of community members.

Fortune Street Park / Day 1

The park felt busy with older members of the community meeting and enjoying each others company between **10am—12.30pm.** We had some really lovely conversations during this time. People were curious and friendly.

The park was busiest between **12.30pm—14.00pm** when people were having their lunch. Interestingly people were less inclined to interact with our signs at this time - something we assume was due to time being tight for people before they head back to work.

Between **14.00—18.00** we had a steady flow of people. A lot of parents and children and people heading home from work. We had a lot of engagement at this time, particularly from families.

Between **18.00—21.30** was our highest engagement time - the park felt very different. People were a lot more relaxed and curious about the signs. There were families together and people out enjoying the warm evening. We know there is a lack of green space in the area so this is perhaps not a surprise. It was interesting to note we did not facilitate engagements during this time and the signs still got a high level of interaction.

Barbican Highwalk / Day 2

Our day on the Highwalk felt quite different to the park. Rather than timeslots feeling markedly different there was a **steady flow of residents and workers all day**.

This was most likely because our signs were placed at **a crossing point** where numerous paths connect, including the local Tube station.

Although we received a high level of engagement, people were less likely to sit and have lunch here, even though there are seats and benches available.

The Barbican is a wide open space. It felt like our signs offered **a focus for residents** to come down and chat to us which we feel was successful.

Recommendations for future bumping spaces

Overall when it comes to fostering more community connections, we feel 'bumping spaces' are a **worthwhile initiative** for libraries to build on. As we heard in both our engagement sessions and prototyping work there is a **strong demand** among locals to know more people living in their community. This is something we feel the library is uniquely position to do. The following pages set out a series of recommendations aimed at making 'bumping spaces' as impactful as possible for interested libraries.

1

Focus on the positive.

Although people resonated with the themes of loneliness and social isolation, we found people engaged more freely when we primarily kept the focus on 'making new community connections'.

Talking about topics like loneliness made people feel vulnerable and exposed, and so less likely to engage with us publically. To help engagement we think it's best to frame projects and engagements in positive, constructive ways.

2
Bring the library to the community.

Having a temporary unstaffed library presence at a variety of local bumping spaces is a very effective way to make new connections between the library and local people.

However having staff on hand to also chat to people yields a richer mix of interactions, while also building bridges back to the library. We think this could be a great opportunity for more library staff to explore in the future.

Also we tested our prototypes for two days but feel a longer time frame would have more impact. This could be a number of weekly slots or consecutive days.

3
Lean into the libraries voice.

When bringing the library out to the public make sure the library's voice or brand is dialled up. As shown in our engagement sessions and prototypes this instantly creates trust and permission.

We feel the warmth and goodwill the project received (once people heard it was from their local library) gives the library license to do powerful and surprising things that no one else can.

4
Build a long-term library 'bumping space'.

As shown we know there's demand for more community connections. A question we were asked repeatedly while prototyping was 'what's next?'. It would have been great to be able to point to a long term 'bumping space' or programme of related activities back at the library post Covid-19.

However small, we think it would be worthwhile to create a long-term 'bumping space' at the library. The pop-up signs were impactful in raising awareness and building links to the library but for more long-lasting change we think something permanent is required.

5

Find ways to challenge people's perceptions of the library being a place for quiet.

People do not readily associate the library as being a place to meet and chat freely. To help offset this we think any 'bumping space' created should feel different from the rest of the library.

This could include supplying items such as tea/coffee facilities, seating in 'breakout' areas and/or visual cues as to the intentions of the space. Exploring ways to shift the silent atmosphere will help people feel relaxed and open to connection.

With regard to the Barbican Library specifically, as shown in our mapping work, we feel there's work to be done to make it more accessible for non-Barbican members through internal and external wayfinding signage.

6

Give people casual invitations to share.

People told us they did not like interactions or spaces that felt too forced (e.g. a 'designated chatting bench' example). Our prototypes focussed on providing people with casual ways to share and discover common community connections. In the library setting, we feel prompts like these — focussing on non-sensitive, commonly shared responses — would also be successful.

Furthermore by providing facilities such as the ones mentioned on the previous page, we think these prompts would spark sustained conversation between visitors.

7
Partner with community champions

Building and maintaining these community connections is a lot of work. During our engagement and prototyping work we met many enthusiastic residents who are keen to help lead and shape projects like 'bumping spaces' in their area.
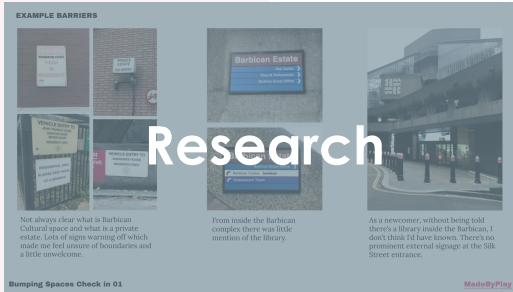
To make activities in the library as sustainable as possible we feel it's important to partner with community members to make them a reality.
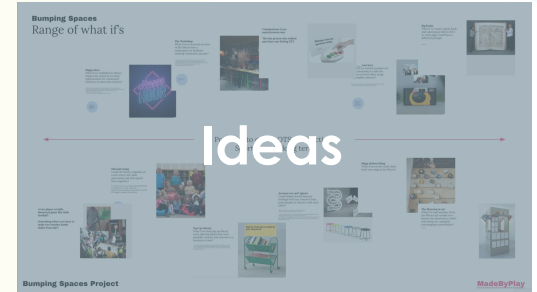
Appendix

Access original research document here.

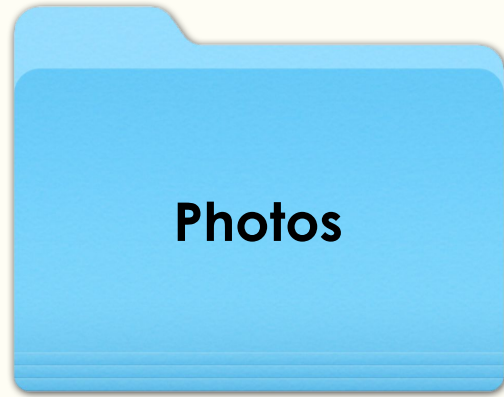Access original insights and design challenges here.

Access ideas and opportunities here.

Photos

We have created a folder of imagery that can be viewed here. For privacy and permissions reasons we have only included images that do not feature people's faces.