

We
Made
That

Feelings in Place: Emotional Honesty Within Community Engagement Processes



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Humanities
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Are you OK here? Lessons from our year-long research partnership

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It's not often that an architecture and design practice has the opportunity to collaborate so closely with an academic. While we frequently engage with academic researchers through projects, opportunities for deeper, longer-term hands-on experimentation are rare.

Thanks to an Innovation Scholar research grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK, we had the chance to work with Professor Clare Rishbeth on a year-long exploration of participatory methods in urban design practice.

Both We Made That and Professor Rishbeth have extensive experience with participatory and ethnographic methods. However, in the fast-paced world of practice which is often constrained by time scales or budgets, there's often little time to step back, experiment, test new approaches, and refine them to fit real-world constraints. This collaboration created that much-needed space—allowing us to explore participatory methods from both academic and practical perspectives, learn from each other, and critically assess what works best in different contexts.

The methods developed through this process may seem deceptively simple at first glance. Yet, through iterative testing and discussion across multiple projects, they have been fine-tuned to integrate

into the realities of practice while enriching the engagement process as a whole.

From a design perspective, the real question is always: so what?

While this document doesn't focus on the specific findings from these methods, it highlights how a deeper understanding of place can lead to more inclusive and equitable design solutions. Our hope is that by sharing this journey, others can also benefit from this experimentation—applying, adapting, and evolving these approaches within their own work. In doing so, we can collectively target more just spatial outcomes for our design processes.



A guide of principles and methods for architects and landscape architects working towards spatial justice

Professor Clare Rishbeth

Spatial justice is not just what gets done but also how it gets done. The 'who' and the 'how' of engagement is important. The right to representation and collective advocacy in processes of urban change will never be achieved by superficial or tokenistic forms of 'consultation'.

This is a guide is written for architects, landscape architects and urban researchers who use participatory approaches. Many decisions about how engagement is meaningfully carried out are important: who is included, when it happens and the scope of the possible impact. The guide focuses on creative but achievable approaches to how local knowledge and priorities are surfaced, how less-often-heard voices are amplified, and the need for talking about feelings *in* places, as well as *about* places.



Part 1: Principles

How we see others, how we are seen, and indeed, how we think we are seen, are all complex issues bound up in aspects of identity and reflect some of prejudices and stereotypes that surface in daily life. These are big issues, but ones which play out in practical ways that are related to the design and management of urban spaces.

People's experiences of places are complicated. They can depend on time of day or week, who you're with and who else is there. Whether you're shopping with your Nana or coming home from a night out with friends. Maybe you have happy memories but think the place has taken a turn for the worse. Feelings of familiarity and confidence jostle with worries about unwanted approaches or a too quiet street. None of this is easily communicated in the tick boxes of a questionnaire.

Discussions about change which is happening locally need to be accessible to people who don't usually chat about urban development. Everyone involved in shaping the architecture of everyday life needs engagement methods which encourage open conversations and can capture both complexity and nuance.

These principles set out to describe what 'good' can look like, with an emphasis on honest storytelling. It's not possible to force story-holders to be tellers, or story-tellers to be honest. But as design professionals we have found that the Feelings in Place principles can guide us to hear and validate the emotional dimensions

of local experiences which shape an everyday quality of life.

Acknowledging mixed emotions about different places can counter stereotypes and stigmatisation

- Reflect that people are more than one thing, and different aspects of peoples' identities and life history shape their relationship with local places.
- Capture something of the way that experiences of place can change.

People's 'feelings in place' need to be heard and shared in ways that are honest and respectful

- Find languages and forms of communication that are meaningful within the setting and can reflect ambiguity and mixed emotions.
- Be open to engaging with tricky experiences but do not

require a rehearsal of trauma. Look out for telling details which can point to the stories behind the stories, and ensure that participants can decide what personal history to share.

- Give space for non-judgemental discussion of the specifics of social dynamics, the 'me' or 'us' in relation to 'you' or 'them', and how this is connected to a sense of belonging or lack of belonging.

Who is included and what happens next are both important

- Enable relaxed conversations in relatively short periods of time, so that an appropriate range of people can be included in an engagement programme.
- What comes next is part of being accountable. Include time and give expertise for synthesis of findings, and the input of these into wider stakeholder decision making.

“The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” Adichie (2009)

Part 2: Methods

The methods are designed for use in engagement processes by architectural and landscape practices, local authorities or urban researchers. Adapted from methods used in ethnographic research within academic contexts, we have tested these for use in practice settings, where it is important to hear from a wide range of people usually over a short period of time.

Methods to surface complexity and nuance exist. In academic research they are often termed ethnographic methods. These methods often use creative techniques, working with small groups of people over a long period.

However, this is a problem for professional practice and for neighbourhood scale design and planning projects, where it is often necessary to learn from many people over a short period of time. Architects need to be able to connect with a wide range of people who live and work in an area, especially those whose perspective is often unheard. As commercial projects in a competitive industry, they also need to cost their work by the hour and deliver to tight deadlines. So, while ethnographic methods can offer imaginative ways into honest and careful approaches to engagement, the expectations and delivery of these need to be adapted to be viable within a commercial practice setting.

What is needed? A project-specific engagement strategy needs to choose exercises that are achievable within the skill set and time resource of the project

team, and an approach which supports good communication relevant within a particular context. Both these need to be guided by an overarching process by which knowledge is shared and then acted on.

In drawing on ethnographic research, but with intentional adaptation for use in architectural practice, the following three sections outline examples of methods we have developed reflecting the 'Feelings in Place' principles and which work at these three scales of engagement: an exercise, an approach and a process.

Multisensory scanning

This is an exercise to use in an outdoor location with a small group of participants. It uses the power of multi-sensory responses to place to simulate thoughtful discussions of how we 'feel' in a place, also touching on how places change, the impact of other people, and design details which are problematic or positive.

Emoji storytelling

This is an approach to engaging with participants which focuses on finding a language that is

meaningful in expressing nuance and contradictions, and can encourage storytelling and memory sharing.

Working with community researchers

This is a process that requires a higher level of experience, time and budget, but is extremely powerful in supporting diverse and honest voices within an engagement process. We give a short overview of how we used this process in combination with the multisensory scanning exercise. It may or may not be used as a means of conducting the other two methods.

Multisensory Scanning

Why choose this exercise?

Our experience of outdoor places is not something held intellectually but experienced in our bodies and responded to emotionally. Some of our precise reactions – a hunching up, a smile, a sidestep – are unconsidered in the moment but often very telling in terms of a social understanding of a place. In public places being at ease is not always easy, but a sense of unease may be both difficult to describe and somehow shameful. Developing a method that allowed participants to notice their bodily responses to a particular place in a supportive group gives validity these nuances. We wanted to create a way of paying deep attention to a place, and a way of communicating that enabled honest discussions without judgement.

The exercise 'multisensory scanning' is an on-site method in which participants discuss their sensory responses and is highly effective as a research tool for the following reasons:

- In a short space of time participants gain a high level of focus and attention on the realities of the place.
- It integrates discussion of the built environment with the experience of its social dynamics.
- It provides ways into talking about ease and unease, pleasure and worry, sense of community and detachment from this.
- The structure does not prompt participants to recount traumatic events. However, individual memories of the place can be brought into the conversation and often enrich understandings.
- Leading this exercise does not require a high level of skill, but the researcher must be confident in asking participants to carry out a range of actions in a public area.

The multisensory scanning exercise was designed to contribute to a 'Woman's Safety Audit', commissioned by Transport for London and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, so thematically it focused on feelings and experiences of safety and lack of safety, but this is adaptable. A Women's Safety Audit is a participatory research approach to assess the safety and security concerns of women in public spaces and identify appropriate safety measures.

Description of exercise

1. The researcher plans a short route within the area of study and chooses about four 'pause points' where it is practical for the group to stand for about fifteen minutes and which includes key locations.
2. The researcher arranges to meet their participant group on site. Multisensory scanning is best carried out with two to six people, allowing about ninety minutes. It is possible to do with a larger group and a shorter time, for example with fewer pause points.
3. At each pause point the researcher leads the group through an exercise which follows these prompts:
 - a) Pay attention to the feeling in your neck and shoulders. Are you tense or more relaxed in this location? At later pause points ask for comparisons with the previous point, and how you felt while walking between the points.
 - b) Stop and close your eyes for thirty seconds if you feel comfortable to do so (researcher sets timer on phone and keeps eyes open). What did you hear? What sounds helped you feel calm or happy, and what sounds made you feel nervous or ill-at-ease?
 - c) Big picture. Ask everyone to slowly turn round on the spot and identify three things they can see that either increase or decrease their sense of safety. You could repeat this looking up and down to capture different perspectives.
 - d) Close up. Spend a moment on the immediate space around you and whether you feel comfortable here. Ask if there is anything else that makes a difference: smell, a taste in your mouth, touch or texture?
4. After all the pause points are completed, a final discussion is helpful for participants to reflect as a group on what they learnt about the place from 'scanning' it in this way.



Reflections and tips

Reflections by community researchers using multi-sensory scanning:

- The exercise drew participant's attention to aspects of the site that they hadn't thought about before. Focusing on sound and smell was especially useful in prompting discussions that were more nuanced and reflective.
- Both researchers and their participants found the activity novel and enjoyable, supporting a more engaged research process.
- 'Being in the moment' was useful for prompting memories and sharing these between participants.
- The method was good for noticing details, being able to identify 'quick wins' for making the area safer.
- Because the 'in location' nature of the method, it is very responsive to how a place is at a particular time. This is both a strength and a weakness, so it is preferable to use in combination with other methods.

“Protestors [outside a women’s reproductive clinic] made both women angry, frustrated and indignant. One said she fills her lungs before she gets there - ready to argue. The other said she clenches her jaw and fists - ready to eyeball the protestors - particularly the regular man.” Community Researcher finding

“Being in the place at the specific time it was easier to interrogate why she felt how she felt. And it triggered memories of moments in the past where she felt similar, and gave language to those moments.” Community Researcher reflection

Emoji Storytelling

Why choose this approach?

Working towards spatial justice requires attention to different ways of articulating and communicating information, listening for subtleties of emphasis and giving space for the 'stories behind the story'. Experience of place can often involve mixed emotions, and it is important for these to emerge without being judged as inconsistent or careless. There are many ways in which language nuance may be embedded in an engagement approach, often using arts-based methods, and these need to be thoughtfully chosen in terms of relevance and use within the specific community context. Here we focus on one type of language which is easily accessible and doesn't require specialist support.

Note: allocating resource for translation services may be important, but here we focus on the quality of communication within a shared formal language.

The approach of 'emoji storytelling' used emoji stickers and postcards in a discussion group context to understand experiences of local places and is highly effective as a research tool for the following reasons:

- Using emojis is an everyday mode of communication for many people.
- Placing emojis together is a way in which people commonly express nuance or mixed feelings, for example joy and nervousness.
- There's a positive tactile and playful quality to using emojis within a group, supporting a sense of shared curiosity and emphasising that different reactions are valid.

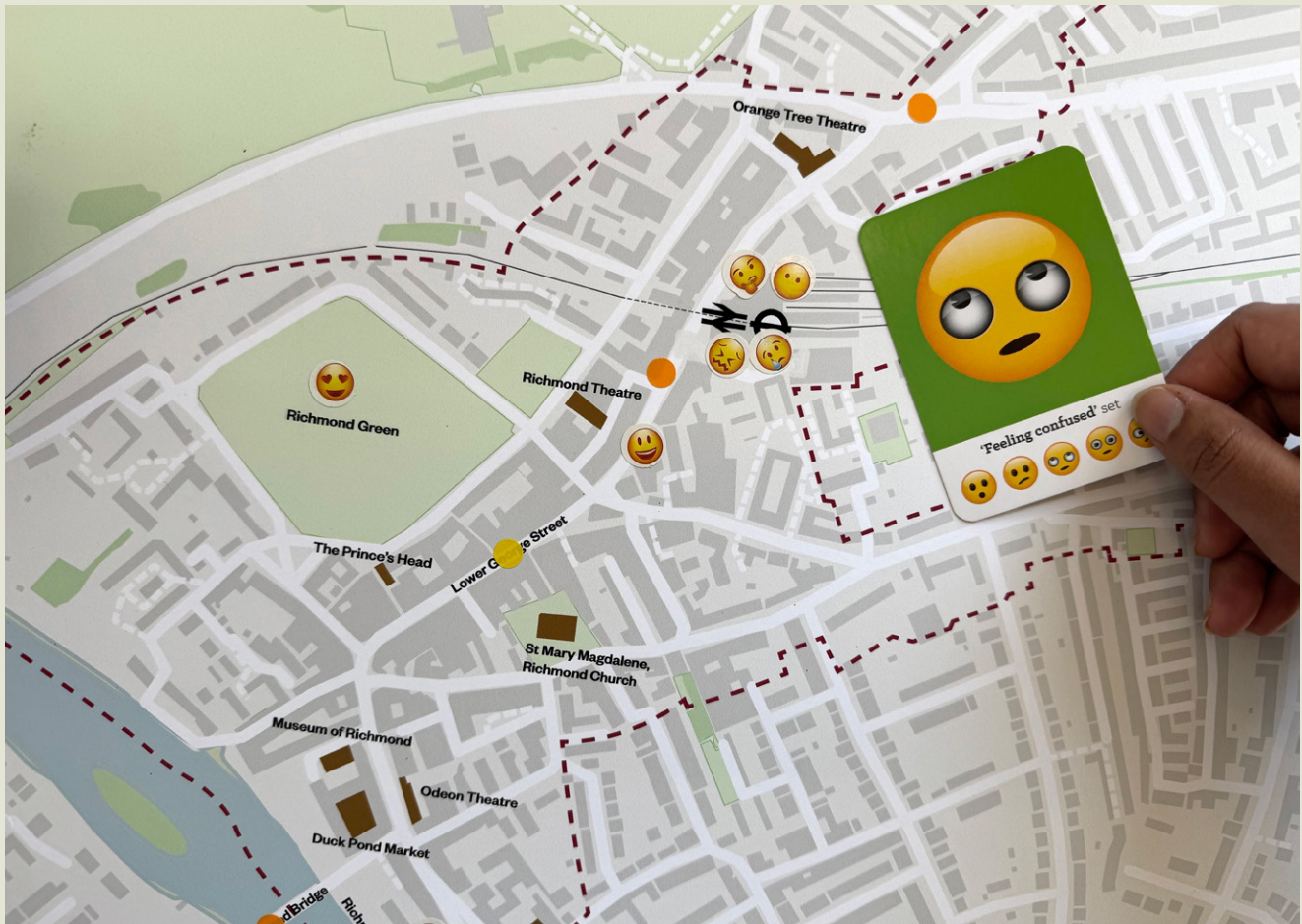
Description of exercises

We used two types of emoji resource: A self-printed pack of emoji cards, about A5 size, representing seven different emotions: happy, love, surprised, anxious, crazy, crying and angry; and purchased packs of small stickers that had a wider range of emojis.

Exercises to try with these resources:

1. Lay out a large map of the locality. Ask each participant to choose and pick up one of the emoji cards and then in turn talk about a time or a place that they might associate with this emoji.
2. Add stickers directly onto a map and then discuss patterns of clustering and where participants chose different emojis.
3. A sorting exercise using the large cards, with discussion as to whether participants agreed or disagreed.
4. All of these exercises can be adapted to use large printed out photos of different areas rather than maps if more accessible to the participant group.

We Made That developed and trialled the use of emoji storytelling to support communication as part of an engagement process to understand resident experiences of Richmond town centre in London in autumn 2023. We carried out these sessions with different groups including a youth group, users of a community food hub and within a school setting. The work was commissioned by the London Borough of Richmond to inform future priorities for the town centre.



Reflections and tips

Reflections by the research team comparing the different ways of using the resources:

- The emoji stickers and cards were successful prompts for sharing a range of stories. Often these focused on sociable times, for example using the heart emoji with friends or family, but also included trickier experiences like walking home after dark.
- Because of the wider range of choice with the stickers, there was a cheerful creativity to choosing the emojis such as sweating for the station being too noisy, snorting face for lack of disabled access, sleepy face for a bit boring. This enabled additional insight relating to values and problematic settings.
- Sorting and moving cards enabled collective attention to be given to different emotions, whereas placing the stickers was good for understanding the cumulative effect of different perspectives.
- Older teenagers were less engaged with the stickers than younger age groups, and sorting the cards prompted a more in-depth discussion.
- More purposeful prompting was needed to encourage people to place emojis together to describe mixed emotions. Having more cards per person would be useful for this.

“One girl immediately picked up the ‘heart eyes’ emoji and chatted about how much she loved the Green as it is a place with so many memories for her of good time with friends.”
 Researcher fieldnotes

Working with Community Researchers

Why choose this process?

Community research is a collaborative effort where community members and researchers work together to address issues important to the community. It can also be called peer research or citizen science. Typically, community researchers are employed for a specific project, receive training, conduct independent research with people known to them, and report back. Working with community researchers acknowledges that those closest to the impact of change may have the best questions as well as the best answers. There are different degrees of participation related to community-based research, and a wide range of publications relating to good practice (link). In this guide we focus on how community researchers can be supported to use methods which surface nuances of 'feelings in place'.

In the Women's Safety Audit Pilot the process of working with community researchers was effective in achieving both breadth of engagement and depth of insight:

- Working with community researchers allowed us to engage in a more sustained way with people with lived experience of negotiating safety in five locations.
- Trusting community researchers to recruit their own participants enabled us to engage with a wider number and greater diversity of local residents.
- Integrating on-location training into the community researcher programme allowed us to build confidence in research skills, including using 'Feelings in Place' methods.

A Women's Safety Audit is a participatory research approach to assess the safety and security concerns of women in public spaces and identify appropriate safety measures. We Made That was commissioned by Transport for London and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime to design and pilot a range of methods suitable for the London context. We Made That embedded community researchers into this project.

Description of process

The specific process for working with community researchers will depend on the scope and focus of the project brief and client requirements. Here we set out the process we used in the Women's Safety Audit Pilot:

1. In five locations across London, chosen by our clients, we recruited 47 community researchers. The researchers worked were paid for twelve hours each which included time for training, fieldwork and feedback.
2. We designed or adapted five different methods for the researchers to use, including interviews, participatory mapping and multisensory scanning. We delivered a full day of on-site training in each location, where the researchers had a chance to try out and discuss the methods.
3. Community researchers conducted the methods with friends and family, and a further 110 people were involved in the research as participants.
4. We gathered the findings from the community researchers by an individual web-based questionnaire and group reflection workshops (online).
5. We hosted Audit to Action workshops in each location for key professional stakeholders to understand and apply the research findings. At a London-wide level there were two awareness raising events that communicated the potential and delivery of the audits and highlighted implications for policy and practice.



Reflections and tips

Reflections on how the process of working with community researchers supported use of 'Feelings in Place' methods:

- Given a free choice of methods offered, almost half the researchers chose to use the method most strongly related to 'Feelings in Place', the multisensory scanning exercise. Some also noted that they wanted to use this method but found it too difficult to arrange a group on-site compared to conducting an interview.
- The community researchers were extremely thoughtful about who they recruited as participants and highlighted how the peer-to-peer dynamic was good for talking about tricky experiences in safe, sensitive and honest ways.
- The reflections workshops were important in supporting an initial informal evaluation between the community researchers, reflecting on what they had found out and the significance of this.
- Some of the community researchers reported that they gained confidence more generally to advocate for safety in their local area.

“The group felt really empowered afterwards and that they had made a positive influence of their situation. They expressed feeling like they had some ‘control’ and that they are tired of not feeling safe in these spaces. They also said it made them feel warm and like a community.” Community Researcher reflections

Further information

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Thanks to all the participants who were involved in these projects, in particular the community researchers in the Women's Safety Audit Pilot. The methods were developed in collaboration with We Made That team and Advisory Board members including Holly Lewis, Tasnia Alam, Hanna Baumann, Annabel Precious, Tiffany Lam, Mary-Helen Young, Joseph Cook, Eleanor Langdale, Larry Botchway, May Collins and Thomas Aquilina.

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