CIRCE

Creative Fellow

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Design Picnic - A participatory design research method fostering reimagination

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Design Picnic
A participatory design research method fostering reimagination.

CARE
STREET CC1
CITY OF CARE

"There is a way to turn our world around. It requires us to recommit to caring for ourselves and others by accepting and rethinking our caring responsibilities and providing sufficient resources for care. If we are able to do this, then we will be able to enhance levels of trust, reduce levels of inequality, and provide real freedom for all."

Joan C. Tronto, *Caring Democracy*

What is this project about?

How can User Experience Design and Service Design act as catalysts for social transformation? This question lingered in my mind when I started the journey of this project. I wanted to focus on democracy and how these emerging design disciplines could transform the way we express, debate, and decide on ideas.

While I was mindful that certain design disciplines, like Design for Social Innovation (Manzini, 2015) and Design for Transitions (Escobar, 2018), are more directly focused on social transformations, I wanted to explore the concept of democracy as both an experience and a service to see where this approach would lead by the end of the project. User Experience Design and Service Design both emphasise a human-centred —and in recent years, planet-centric— approach. This emphasis gives priority to the needs, preferences, and creative capacities of people —and the planet— to develop products and services that are not just appealing but also engaging and sustainable. Although this approach has frequently been employed to advance the consumerist and extractivist goals of large corporations, it has also shown its effectiveness for companies committed to fostering a sustainable and caring future.

This people-centred —and planet-centric— approach has opened avenues for participatory design and co-creation, leading to more effective solutions to the questions that emerge during the design process. Individuals are now designing their own products, services, and experiences to better
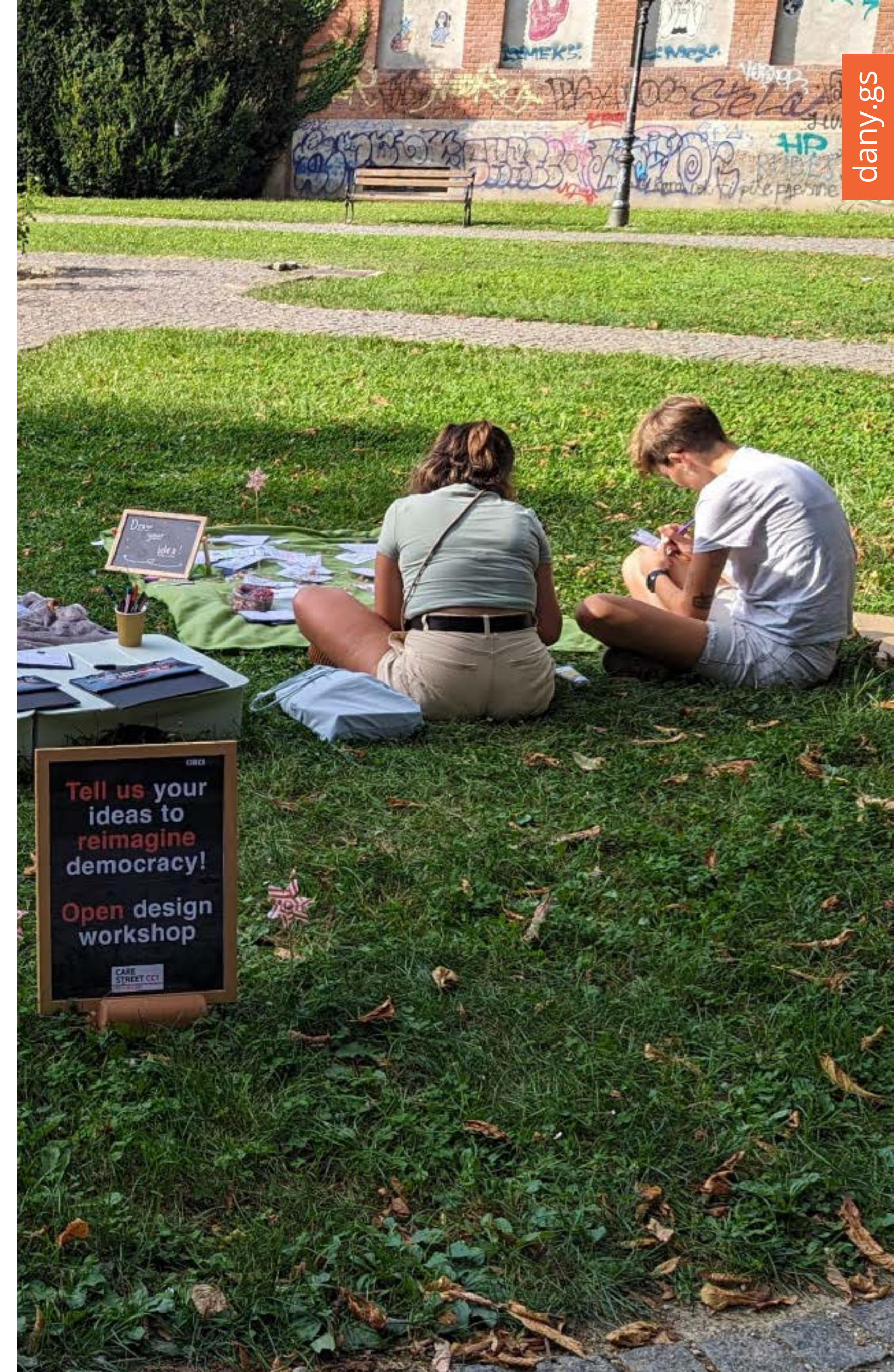
Participants in a Design Picnic

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meet their needs and enhance their relationships with others. This observation led me to consider how people could reimagine the way they participate in democracy.

Knowing that the questions raised here are both relevant and complex, I approached this project as a starting provocation to foster discussions on a local scale and to explore what these emerging design disciplines could contribute. This approach led the project to evolve into a new design research method, which I have named Design Picnic.

The Design Picnic is an open, horizontal, and intentional method of qualitative research. It is rooted in generative research and pays attention to the relational nuances that spaces can bring, aiming to promote social and convivial encounters. The method resembles a picnic set up in a park, where various stations provide different tools and materials to help participants answer predefined questions. A facilitator is present to help create a supportive and structured environment, enabling participants to engage with the questions at hand. The facilitator focuses on active listening, enabling participants to share their results, thoughts, and ideas without fear of judgment. Participants can join at any time and stay as long as they wish.

The process of creating this method was divided into four stages: pre-design, generation, refinement, and post-design. During the pre-design phase, the exploration, synthesis and the design implications for this project were explored through secondary research, mainly literature and practical review, anchoring it in concepts such as Participatory Democracy (Bherer et al., 2016) and Caring
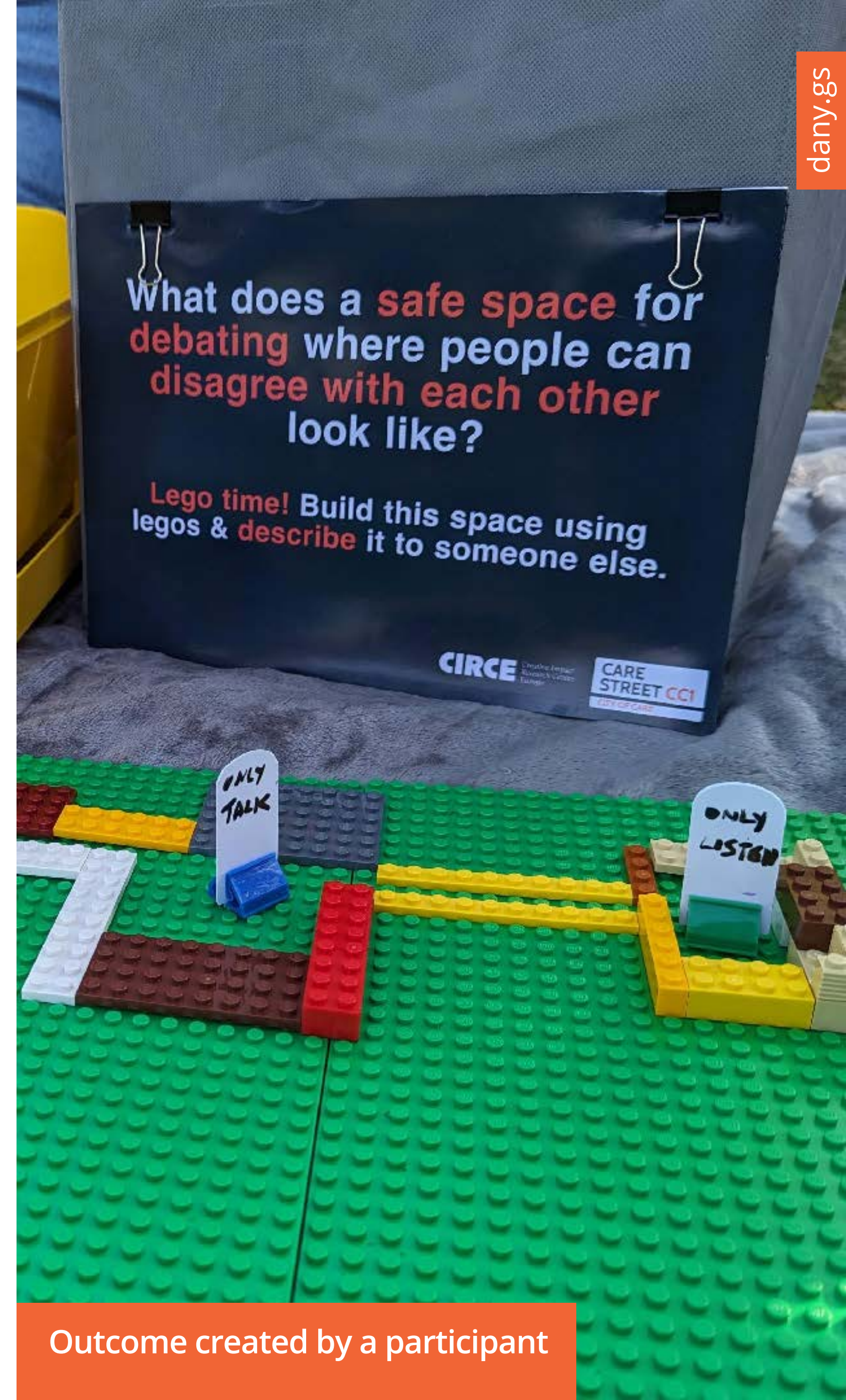
Outcome created by a participant

Democracy (Tronto, 2013). This led to defining a visual and conceptual system named Care Street to scope the reach of the initial phases of the project, and plan the following steps within the research. In the generation phase, key elements of bodystorming, storyboards, and creative toolkits were simplified into more fundamental forms, such as drawing, material manipulation, and bodily expression. This approach enabled the design of workshops that effectively facilitated the generation of concepts for the project. Three workshops were held in London to test and shape the generative relationships between ideas and materials. In this project, the refinement and post-design phases, typically distinct, overlapped significantly; the prototyping and evaluation originally planned for the refinement phase were conducted through seven workshops facilitated in five different cities across five European countries, as envisioned in the post-design phase, allowing for both local-scale prototyping and implementation. Although there was no direct involvement of local authorities or governments in the project, some people that contributed valuable perspectives during the Design Picnics were public workers in local or regional institutions. This contribution emerged spontaneously through informal interviews conducted during the Design Picnics. Although this civic servants did not actively participate in the method, their interest in it sparked several insightful conversations. Finally, the post-design phase also included a peer presentation of the project during the Creative Impact Research Centre Europe —CIRCE— convention in September and this report in which I will outline the findings and the framework in both the research method and my project overall so it can be used by citizens all around the world.

The Design Picnic for this project focused on the ways we express, debate, and decide on ideas. The questions posed were: "How can you give others the opportunity to express their ideas?", "What
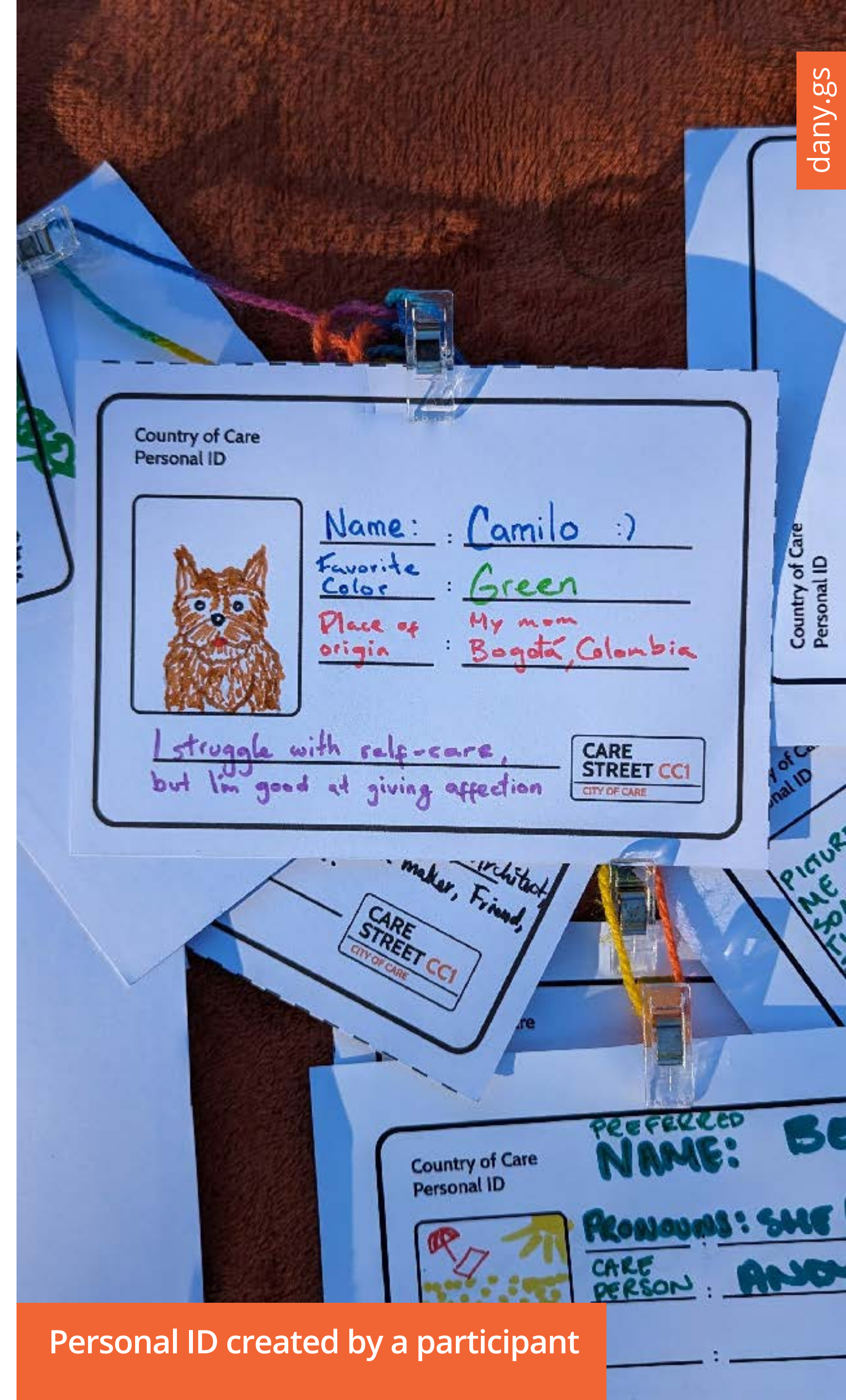
Personal ID created by a participant

does a safe space for debating where people can disagree with each other look like?", and "How can we all together decide on ideas in a different way?". These prompts were designed to be answered using specific creative methods. Drawing, Lego blocks, and a kit of materials were assigned to each question, respectively. Responses highlighted the importance of active listening in all three scenarios presented by the method. Participants also favoured the use of playfulness and relaxation in debating spaces and suggested innovative ways to make collective decisions. Most of the proposed solutions can be prototyped at a local level to further engage people in these discussions.

Shifting away from the method to discuss the project more broadly, I found that once the initial friction of unfamiliar spaces is overcome, people are eager to participate creatively in these types of discussions. Creative spaces generate responses and conversations rich in detail and perspective. This research method, in particular, identified common threads in thoughts and topics discussed by participants across different cities. Although the method fosters curiosity and engagement, breaking the initial friction to join the space can be challenging. In some cities, this friction was attributed to cultural behaviours. However, I argue that it is the absence of creative spaces for such discussions that makes these spaces feel alien to some citizens. This inference is based on informal discussions with attendees and passers-by across the five European countries where the Design Picnic project was refined. Local and national governments, public institutions, and non-governmental organizations should establish and promote these spaces to facilitate access and mitigate potential biases stemming from private-sector initiatives.
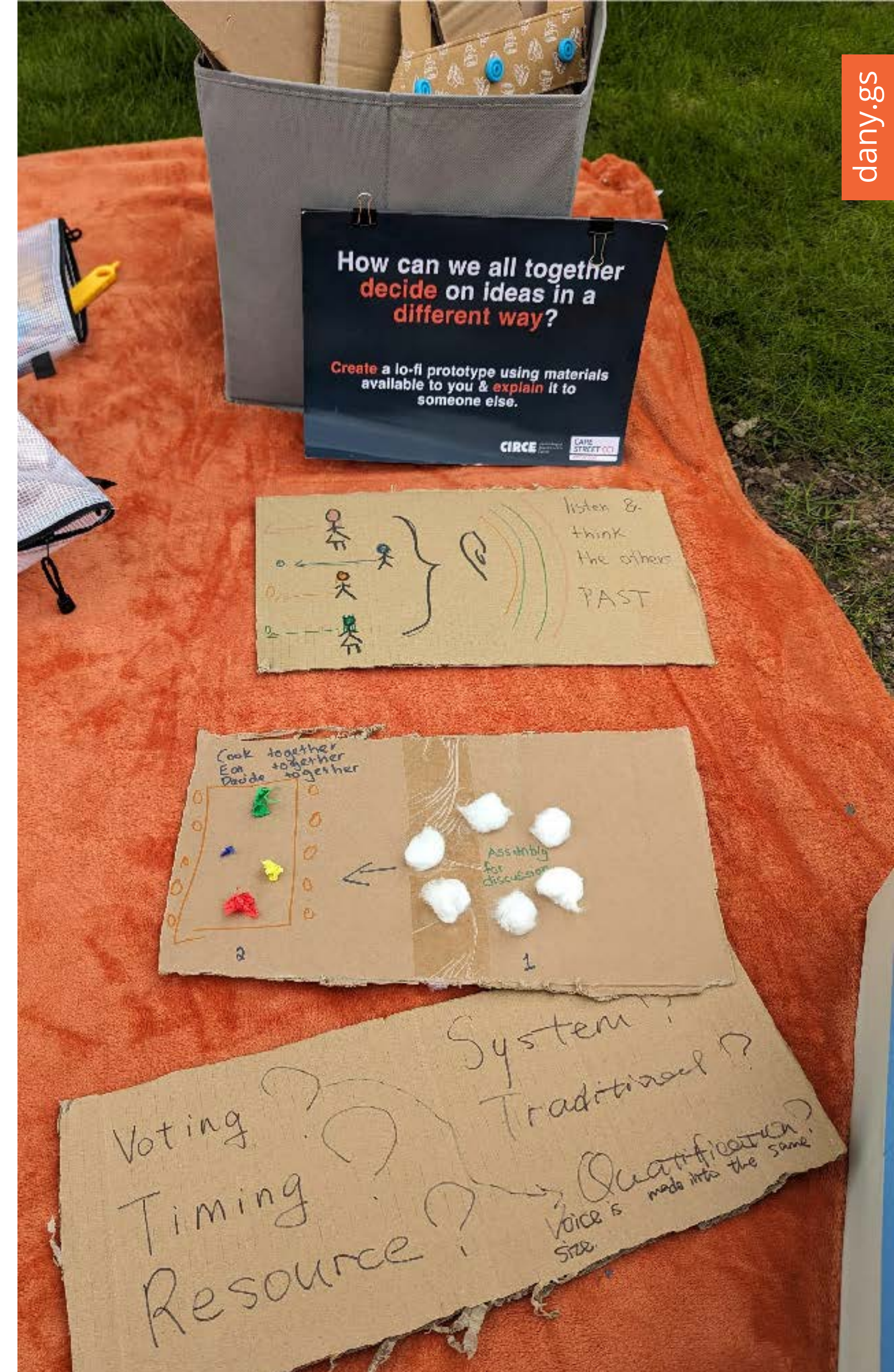
Three cardboard outcomes in a station

The dialogue surrounding the link between creativity and the promotion of social debates through design research could benefit from the integration of public spaces. Additionally, the creative and cultural economies could help encourage social inclusion and cohesion. This approach aligns with urban planning strategies that posit creativity as the centre of transformation such as neighbourhood-based creative economy (Stern & Steifert, 2008) and creative placemaking (Grodach, 2017). Both models foster collective creativity and social inclusion, thereby strengthening not only the networks of cultural and creative organizations but also those networks of citizens.

Reimagining Democracy

The project was segmented into four phases, drawing upon the frameworks suggested by Sanders and Stapler (2014), as well as those introduced by Martin and Hannington (2019): Pre-design, Generation, Refinement, and Post-design. It was also rooted as another contribution to the question presented by Arturo Escobar (2018): "Can design's modernist tradition be reoriented from its dependence on the life-stifling dualist ontology of patriarchal capitalist modernity toward relational modes of knowing, being, and doing?" During the pre-design stage, the focus of my

research was to create a theoretical foundation to better understand the topic I wanted to address. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2022) presents a definition of democracy that lay the ground for further exploration of the topic. In this text, democracy is broadly defined as group decision-making where participants have some form of equality. Equality can range from simple one-person, one-vote systems to more complex, inclusive processes. Furthermore, this applies to various group sizes and types, from families to nations, and includes different voting systems.

Certain questions emerge: Who are the participants in democracy? What role do they have within democracy? How is the power balanced among these participants? These questions lead to the exploration of more profound and intricate issues, such as the dynamics of leadership within democratic systems, the potential for tyranny even in democratic societies, and how minorities are represented, and their voices heard in a landscape where majority rule is often the norm. It is important to mention here that my goal was not to try to create a new system of government or to judge democracy or its several and diverse applications around the world. I was interested in framing questions about democracy to serve as starting points in later stages of the project.

The project was informed by several approaches to democracy. One notable influence was Dewey's 1939 essay, "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us." In it, he presents democracy as a way of life and urges citizens to be active in various capacities, not just in voting, but in ongoing conversations, education, and community responsibilities. Dewey presents democracy as a never-ending, creative process requiring everyone's active involvement. Similarly, Participatory Democracy, emerging from the 1960s onwards, aimed to empower citizens and make governments more accountable. This concept has proliferated into various sectors, such as public governance and private companies, serving diverse purposes. These range from enhancing transparency to improving efficiency and even contributing to social acceptability of decisions. However, the impact of these participatory methods has diluted as they have become mainstream. (Bherer et al., 2016)

David Graeber is also important in this context; in his book "Direct Action: An Ethnography" (Graeber, 2009) he delves into the planning, decision-making processes, and the sense of community within activist groups linked to Direct Democracy. He provides a detailed ethnographic account of how consensus decision-making is used within these groups as a form of Direct Democracy. Rather than depending on hierarchical systems, these activists engage in long discussions to arrive at decisions that everyone can agree upon. Graeber argues that the process is arduous but ultimately empowering for participants, as it reflects a commitment to the ideals of equality and collective action.

Two crucial concepts also emerged during this stage and laid an important foundation for the next stages of the project: Care and Caring Democracy. Before delving into the concept of Caring Democracy, it is crucial to define care. In the context of this project, Fisher and Tronto (1990) offer a comprehensive definition of care that underpins the idea of Caring Democracy:

"On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web."

Care and its links to democracy are explored further in "Caring Democracy: markets, equality, and justice" (Tronto, 2013). In this book, Tronto advocates for the reconfiguration of democratic processes through

the lens of care ethics. She contends that the care perspective, which has largely been relegated to the private and domestic spheres, should be brought to the front in public and political spaces. Tronto asserts that current democratic systems are not only fractured and inefficient but also marred by inequities and an inattentiveness to citizens' needs.

Tronto critiques capitalist approaches that either undervalue care work through inadequate compensation or commodify care as a product. She argues that when care becomes a commercial transaction, it reduces the intrinsic value of care and marginalises those who cannot afford quality care services. Against this backdrop, Tronto proposes a transformative Caring Democracy, one that elevates human needs and mutual interdependence above market-driven individualism.

The book presents the key elements of a caring democracy, emphasising that care must be democratically distributed, with everyone having a role in both giving and receiving care. Tronto identifies four ethical elements of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. These elements serve as a framework for political participation, suggesting that a caring democracy would encourage citizens to be attentive to the needs of others, take responsibility for addressing

these needs, ensure competent delivery of care, and be responsive to the effectiveness of this care. It is also worth noting that Tronto advocates for a redistribution of care responsibilities, arguing that care should not be a burden shouldered by a minority; rather, it should be a collective social responsibility. In a democratic system rooted in care ethics, Tronto argues, we would find a society that is not just more inclusive and egalitarian but also fundamentally more just.

I also reviewed practical approaches for citizen engagement, and participation in policy making. Three initiatives were review: Decidim (n.d.), the European Citizens' Initiative (n.d.) and the Petitions (n.d.) platform of the United Kingdom Government and Parliament.

Decidim serves as an open-source platform engineered to foster citizen engagement in democratic processes. It provides tools for public consultations, participatory budgeting, and discussion forums, aiming to make governance more interactive and transparent. The European Citizens' Initiative operates as a cross-border instrument, permitting European Union citizens to have a direct hand in shaping policy. By gathering at least one million signatures across multiple member states, citizens can ask the European Commission to introduce new legislation on specific issues. Finally,

the Petitions platform UK Government and Parliament allows British citizens and residents to submit and sign petitions online. If a petition gains enough support, it may be debated in Parliament, giving the public an avenue to influence legislation directly.

While these initiatives and platforms aim to foster citizen participation in the policymaking process at different levels -local, national, or international-, their methods for doing so remain grounded in traditional practices of expressing and debating ideas. These platforms migrate the practices of public dialogue and debate from the physical world into the digital world without necessarily innovating the way these discussions occur. They offer digital equivalents of town hall meetings, petition signings, and public consultations without substantively altering the experience or dynamics of such interactions. Through this mere digitalisation of existing practices, these platforms miss opportunities to truly innovate democratic participation, whether that be through the integration of creative methods for citizen engagement, or the incorporation of mechanisms explicitly designed to amplify underrepresented voices.

On the design domain, Sanders and Stappers (2012) offer a comprehensive framework, describing emerging design disciplines, like User Experience Design and Service Design a part of the design practices that are moving the focus from creating products, to conceptualising and embodying forms beyond them. This transformative approach requires participation and co-creation from individuals of diverse backgrounds, both designers and non-designers alike. This situates Design and Design Research in a position to find ways to connect with what people say, do, and most importantly, make and feel in the context of their lives. In this landscape, generative research methods and physical artefacts work as thinking tools that allow people to engage with creative problems at a much deeper, more meaningful level.

In the conjunction of all these theoretical frameworks, and the participation platforms, and informed by my personal interest in bringing generative design research into the physical grounds of social and political explorations, the project moved on onto the next stage to start the exploration of visuals and materials.

The process

After framing the research motivations, the next task was to design a creative framework for the project, a leitmotif that would give a graphic

identity and visual cohesion to the project during its subsequent phases. This led to the birth of Care Street, a visual identity which provided visual cohesion to the project in its subsequent phases. My interest in the exploration of Caring Democracy, as well as care in a broader sense, served as a means to reimagine our societies and their relationships. Care Street thus served as a conceptual space where all participants could explore the relationship between care and the questions posed during the workshops.

Following the establishment of this leitmotif, the next step was to design and facilitate the initial two workshops for the project's generative phase. The aim of these workshops was to explore the connections between generative design research and the concept of democracy. I initiated the project with an open-minded approach, allowing myself the freedom to explore various potential directions in each phase.

These workshops were designed as closed sessions and were intended for students enrolled in the Master of Arts in User Experience Design programme at the University of the Arts London (UAL). Having completed the same master's programme myself, I anticipated that the current cohort, with its diverse academic and cultural backgrounds, would serve as an ideal starting point. Their familiarity with generative research as a tool for prototyping experiences also presented an opportunity to build bridges between UAL and CIRCE. For each workshop, a group of five participants was invited.

Care Street visual identity

The first workshop was crafted to explore diverse elements of citizenship and democracy into the context of the project. Curious about how people perceive certain elements of belonging and citizenship, I introduced participants as the inaugural citizens of Care Street. The workshop began with an activity that allowed them to create their own identification for this imaginary place. This activity was designed as a warm-up to bring out-of-the-box thinking into the workshop. Afterwards, I proceed to ask them two questions to be addressed on the reverse of their identification: "Who gets to be a citizen of the Country of Care?" and "Who should be able to make decisions?".

For the second activity, I asked each participant to draw their own map of Care Street, based on five institutions or services they consider necessary. We had a group discussion in which each participant shared their responses to these two activities. Following that, we did a Crazy8 exercise, a creative brainstorming and ideation technique where participants propose and draw eight ideas in eight minutes to answer a brief. Participants were tasked to come up with new ways to express, debate and make decisions on Care Street. They then described their ideas and collectively voted to select the most appealing ones. After a short break, I outlined the framework of my project. I intentionally deferred this presentation to that moment in the workshop to assess its impact on the generative process. Finally, we moved to the last activity, where participants were asked to construct their vision of Care Street using Lego blocks and to define five key areas or corners within this collective space. The workshop concluded with a group reflection and feedback from the participants.

Participants during the first workshop

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The second workshop began with an exploratory activity using design fiction techniques to allow participants to use their bodies and Play-Doh to come up with new ideas about the future. After that, the project's framework was introduced and the same identification exercise from the first workshop was repeated. This workshop quickly transitioned into prototyping. Participants were asked to prototype one of the most popular ideas from the previous workshop, and then collectively decide on a new idea to prototype and test briefly through role-playing.

These first two workshops were connected, not only through activities that echoed from one into the other, but also as a form of A/B testing for the interactions and engagement of the participants. In both workshops, the reimagining of identification served as a useful starting point to build momentum. Participants explored various approaches to their own identifications, even going beyond the limitations of the paper surface by incorporating cut-outs. For most participants, this exercise provided an opportunity to describe themselves more consciously and comprehensively.

Unexpectedly, presenting the framework at the beginning of the second workshop seemed to constrain the scope of the discussion. This channelled the conversations during the second workshop towards the definition of care presented, not allowing participants to approach the topic form their own perspective and then letting their own concepts dialogue with the project's definition.

Participants in the first workshop felt that transitioning from drawing the map to constructing Care Street enabled a natural flow into using Lego blocks for debate, idea generation, and role allocation.

Participant during the second workshop

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However, initiating the creative process with a pre-determined idea in the second workshop created unexpected friction. The lack of ownership over the initial concept led to hesitancy when first engaging with the materials. Once that friction was overcome, the participants of the second workshop engaged in the last prototyping activity with more confidence and were eager to give shape to their own ideas.

Lastly, although both workshops had scheduled start times, some participants arrived midway through the second workshop. I had not anticipated this, but it offered a chance to explore how to design activities that allow for participants to join or leave at any point. This variability in attendance slightly affected engagement in the second workshop but provided valuable insights for the design of future generative phase activities.

With all these insights, the next step was to design a third workshop for the generation phase, aiming to synthesise the findings and ideas that I had in mind after facilitating the first two workshops. The use of generative research proved itself enormously valuable in helping people connect with their curiosity and in motivating the creativity to address the topics being discussed. I aimed to create an open space, in the sense that anyone could join and leave whenever they wanted during the workshop.

Nonetheless, the connection between these two ideas had a slightly problematic implication: I would not have time to build momentum within the workshop. Participants would have to go directly to using the materials without gradually engaging with them. To address this, I decided to design three stations with different sets of materials that would appeal to different levels of comfort among the

Participants during the second workshop

participants. Drawing, Lego blocks, and a kit made of cardboard, screws for cardboard, plasteline, and an assortment of different tapes and papers were selected for the stations, and each one was set apart from the other materials.

At that point, I realised I could link each material to one of the subtopics I had been using to explore democracy: express, debate, and decide. However, knowing that participants would be free to move around the workshop, I recognised that I would need to simplify the topic facilitation process into a set of three questions. These questions would guide and focus the participant engagement as effectively as possible. After analysing the discussions from the initial workshops, I formulated three questions to guide each station: "How can you give others the opportunity to express their ideas?", "What does a safe space for debating where people can disagree with each other look like?", and "How can we all together decide on ideas in a different way?". Each prompt then was tied to a specific material. The question about expressing, was connected to drawing, the one about debating was linked to Lego blocks, and the prompt about debating was to be answered with the prototyping kit. Participants could respond to one, two, or all three prompts if they wished.

Originally, I planned to set up each station on a table indoors at cultural centres, imagining that people could join whilst visiting these venues. However, I soon realised that this would exclude those who rarely or never visit such places. Hence, the idea of hosting these workshops in open spaces, specifically parks, materialised. This concept aligns with Barker et al. (2019) in which parks foster diversity through convivial encounters. An important point to note is that I wanted the space to subtly invite people without approaching them; I wanted to ensure that participation was motivated intrinsically. This led to the idea of using a poster to attract attention and serve as a call to action.

All these ideas were clustering in my mind during the summer of 2023. After a walk around London, and after seeing lots of people hanging around in the park, I saw a group of people setting up a cosy and inviting picnic in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Then all these ideas took a concise form Why not create a space like this for public ideation? What if we could do research through design in a picnic? That is how the idea of the Design Picnic emerged.

The Design Picnic idea consolidated the analysis and synthesis from the previous work into a new design research method, a structured guide aiding designers in learning how to meet specific goals, considering the

circumstances and resources at hand (Daalhuizen et al., 2019). In this specific case, a systematic procedure that would allow to collect tangible and intangible insights through a participatory and design-led approach. Then, it was moment to bring these ideas into the real world and run the third workshop for the generation phase.

In the effort to bring ideas to life, I usually recall Tim Ingold's (2013) reflection:

"Human endeavours, it seems, are forever poised between catching dreams and coaxing materials. In this tension, between the pull of hopes and dreams and the drag of material constraint, and not in any opposition between cognitive intellection and mechanical execution, lies the relation between design and making. It is precisely where the reach of the imagination meets the friction of materials, or where the forces of ambition rub up against the rough edges of the world, that human life is lived."

How to make these ideas real? How to make them portable? After several days of planning, designing, and gathering materials —with a bit of help from my friend and designer Carla Fernández— I was ready to run the first Design Picnic in London. I chose a park near my home that was

logistically convenient and offered a comfortable atmosphere for open discussions. After setting everything up and waiting for nearly an hour, the first three participants joined the Design Picnic.

Their experience and the conversations that followed provided the perspective I needed to better understand this new method. For the participants, the concept was engaging and the space inviting; however, it came across as tailored for children. My role as a facilitator needed to be clearer, a realisation that became increasingly apparent as the day progressed. Certain elements did not work as expected: the concept of building a prototype at one of the stations proved too complex, and what was intended as an introductory activity to the Design Picnic ended up feeling like an additional workshop station. Nonetheless, the depth of responses to the prompts was impressively insightful, and the ensuing discussions were clearly intentional and well-facilitated by the generative nature of the method.

Following this experience, it became clear that I wanted to explore this new research method as the outcome of my project and decided to move into the next phase of it. The refinement phase helped keep understanding the strengths and weaknesses of it as a design research method with a

mean focus on social discussions. To this end, I brought the Design Picnic to five different cities in as many countries, aiming to test it in a range of scenarios beyond my comfort zone.

The cities where the Design Picnic was tested included London, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Helsinki, and Tallinn. These locations were chosen based on the ease of transportation and accommodation, facilitated by their connections with the CIRCE project, Garage48 research lab in Tallinn, and Naja Kikelj, a creative fellow in Ljubljana. The layout of the Design Picnic remained consistent across all cities, with variations in the day of the week it was conducted and the types of locations it was set up in, ranging from small to large parks and from high to medium traffic plazas with green areas. In total, the method was tested seven times across these five cities.

Before discussing the analysis of this design research method and the insights gathered during the refinement phase, I would like to outline a description of the Design Picnic as a research method and the considerations for its implementation in various contexts. This guide is intended to enable designers, researchers, policymakers, or anyone interested in generative design research to apply the Design Picnic effectively and responsibly in

their specific settings. The method can be adapted, simplified, or expanded to meet the unique requirements and characteristics of each context.

The Design Picnic

The Design Picnic is an open, horizontal, and intentional research method that uses generative participation and relationality to give people a place to express their thoughts, ideas and emotions through tangible objects created or built by themselves. Participants should be able to join at any given time, and to stay as long as they want, answering as many prompts as they would like.

The space is divided into three to five stations, each station with a specific generative activity mediated by a set of materials, collages, drawing, plasteline, cardboard, Lego blocks are example of these materials. The same number of questions than stations are prepared beforehand. The questions can be directly link to each station or they can be loose so people can pick the activity they want to do to answer the questions. These questions should be written down or printed so participants can read them and come back to them any time required. It is important to note that designing these

prompts is a key aspect for the success of the method. If there are four or five stations, a minimum of two facilitators are required to run the space.

The method is mediated by a facilitator, whose role is to guide people through the Picnic while being an active listener. They must foster a space were each participant feels comfortable to share their thoughts and ideas without feeling judge. The facilitator should check in from time to time with participants that are still in the process of bringing their idea into the real world to see if they have questions or need any kind of help related to the activities. Once participants finish, the facilitator should ask questions that allow an engaging conversation on the research topic mediated through the tangible outcome created during the Design Picnic. They could also link ideas from different participants during conversations to draw common points within the discussion. It is part of the facilitator role to gather collect information either through photos, videos or audio recordings —asking permission to do any of those first—, and, if possible, keeping the physical outcome created by the participants.

It is highly suggested to run the Design Picnic in a place related to the topic and the people that are participating on the research —not necessarily a park. The idea is to foster a relational approach between people, and people and the places they are related to. Whether run inside or outside, the space should be cosy and comfortable, so people feel comfortable staying as long as they want. Finally, depending on the setting, is important to bear in mind the wellbeing of the facilitator and the participants —Water and food, access to restrooms, helping hands, etc.

Analysing the method

From this point onwards, I will discuss findings related to the Design Picnics conducted across various locations, without specifying where each took place. My primary aim was to test the method with diverse participants in different scenarios, rather than analysing or comparing its reception across diverse countries or cultures.

The project relies on qualitative research primarily because it seeks to deeply understand the intricate experiences and perceptions within specific social and cultural settings. Qualitative research is more focussed on exploring and interpreting these experiences, rather than just establishing empirical facts or analysing variables as in quantitative research. This approach is particularly chosen for its ability to generate detailed data, which quantitative methods might not provide. It emphasises understanding

events and actions within their context, encourages active engagement between the researcher and participants, and maintains a flexible and interpretive approach in its design (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Hence, the focus here is not on the quantity of responses, but rather on the quality. However, to provide a clearer picture of participant engagement, some quantitative data will also be incorporated.

Friction to enter the open space was a constant factor each time the Design Picnic was run. Many people would pass by without giving it a second thought, while some would approach the space out of curiosity. Some of these curious people would leave after checking the invitation poster, and others would engage in a brief conversation about the project before leaving. However, once the initial friction was mitigated through the facilitation process, participants would stay for varied lengths of time, ranging from ten minutes to an hour. They engaged not only in generative aspects of the method but also in the arising conversations, allowing me, as the facilitator, to ask additional questions related to democracy and care and to elaborate more comprehensively on the project's core ideas.

It is crucial to clarify that the observed friction, in my view, does not emerge from a lack of public interest but rather from the absence of creative spaces for social discussion encouraged by local and national governments, public institutions, and non-governmental organizations. If such spaces were more widespread by public policy, the extent of this friction could likely be substantially reduced. This particular friction was present across all the cities I visited. Particularly, it was in scenarios where public spaces were engaged as leisure and relaxation spots that this friction seemed to reduce. In such contexts, it is not just the availability of public spaces designed for leisure that nurtures social dialogue.

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Participants working together

Rather, it is the active promotion of these spaces as places to express, debate, and decide on ideas that contributes to a reduced level of friction or distance.

Regarding the interactions within the stations, the range of materials offered was generally appealing to participants, with drawing being the most popular form of expression, followed by the use of Lego blocks. Participants showed some reluctance when it came to using the prototyping kit, which was perceived as more challenging compared to the other options. Out of the 21 responses to the prompts, 11 —or 52.4%— were drawings, six —or 28.6%— were Lego block models, and just four —or 19.0%— involved the use of the prototyping kit.

However, it is worth noting that on the few occasions when participants decide to use the prototyping station, their responses were not just visually compelling but also demonstrated a deep level of engagement with the questions posed. This suggests that while the prototyping kit may have been a less accessible medium for some, it had the capacity to produce insightful and deeply considered answers.

In terms of question engagement, among the 17 participants who chose to respond to any of the prompts, 11 —or 64.7%— limited their responses to just one question, five —or 29.4%— answered two questions, and one participant —or 5.9%— took the initiative to answer all three questions presented. This distribution shows varying levels of engagement among participants, showing that while a majority

Design Picnic in progress

chose to focus on a single question, a smaller yet significant group were willing to engage more extensively with the other questions and stations.

Across all stations and cities, certain common themes emerged from the participants' answers. In this set of Design Picnics, three key ideas consistently reappeared: first, there was an identified lack and need for active listening in the process of expressing and debating ideas; second, participants stressed the importance of having comfortable and relaxed spaces to facilitate and mediate debate; and finally, in specific cases, it was possible to identify a need for covering basic human needs as a requirement for meaningful debate and decision-making.

These recurring themes suggest a common desire for more intentional, inclusive, and holistic environments for public expression and debate. The emphasis on active listening shows a deficiency in current methods of communication and debate, where the focus is often more on speaking than on understanding different viewpoints. The call for comfortable and relaxed spaces indicates how places can play a vital role in facilitating open and constructive discussions. Lastly, the mention of the need to meet basic human requirements suggests that unless participants feel that themselves and others are safe and well-cared for, they are less likely to engage meaningfully in any democratic process. Overall, these common threads offer crucial insights into the people's expectations and necessities for more effective democratic engagement.

Personal ID created by children

These findings offer valuable insights into public expectations and requirements for more effective democratic participation. However, it is worth noting that this project was more invested in designing the research method itself than in the ideas generated through it. Given this focus, it is important to acknowledge some limitations that would require further prototyping and refinement in the use of the method.

On certain occasions, some adults initially thought that the Design Picnic was designed specifically for children. This misconception might have originated from the playful and hands-on nature of the activities, yet it emphasises the broader pertinence and appeal of the approach. It also suggests that the Design Picnic method has a latent potential to bridge generational gaps, fostering spaces where both adults and younger participants can meaningfully engage in democratic dialogue.

As a matter of fact, during specific moments in both the generation and refinement phases, children participated in the workshops under the supervision of their parents. While I had not originally accounted for the presence of children in my planning, their engagement with certain activities and materials presented an unexpected but informative dimension of the Design Picnic. This experience led me to realise the potential for creating innovative social spaces that also focus on involving children and teenagers in these social conversations. This approach could offer new perspectives on democratic participation and would be entirely worthy of further testing and analysis.
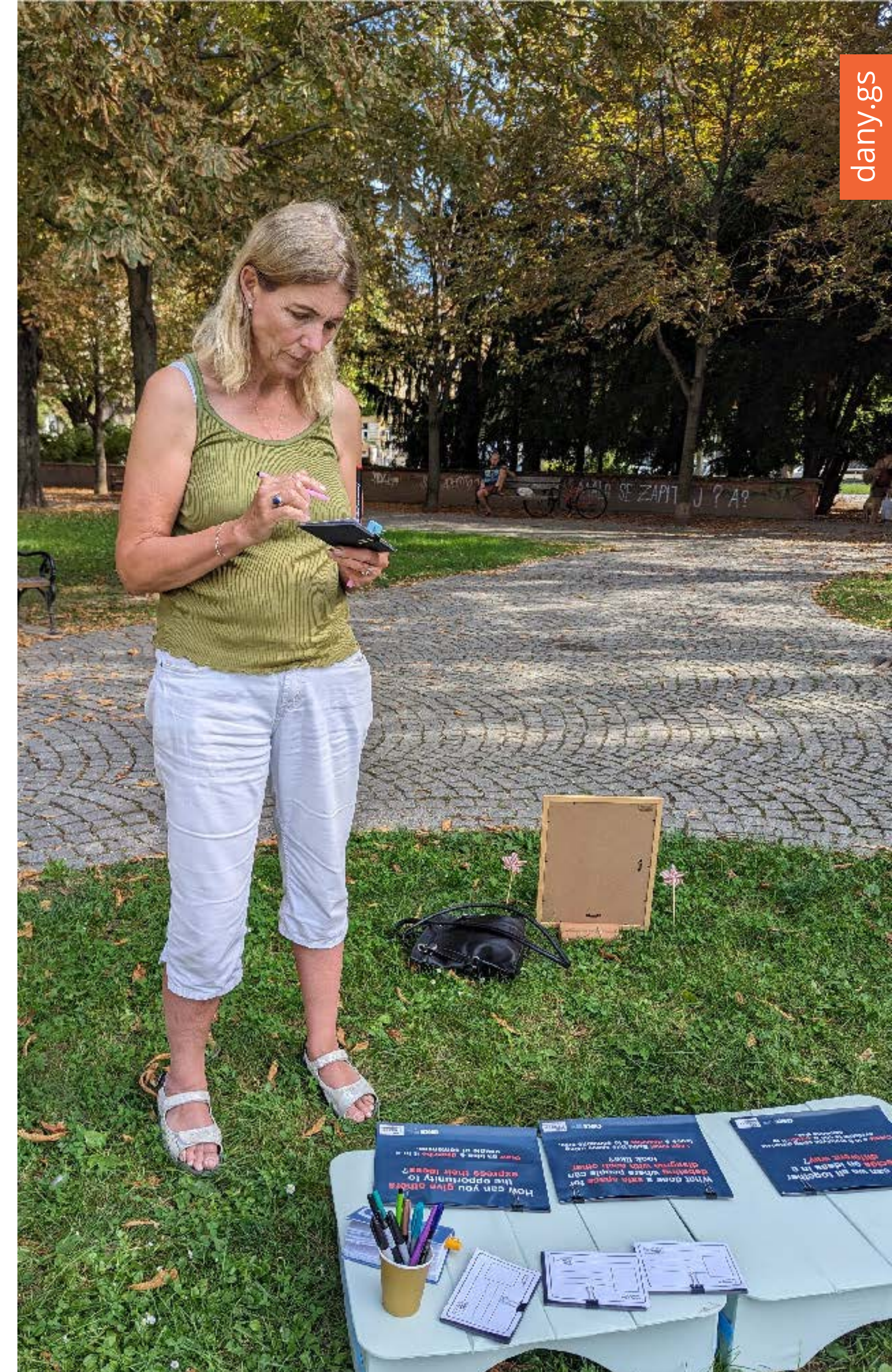
Participant working on a prompt

dany.gs

Another significant limitation worth mentioning is that the Design Picnic method was not explicitly designed to accommodate participants with physical disabilities. While this issue never posed a problem with people that expressed their intention to participate, as a design researcher, I believe it is crucial to be mindful of this aspect going forward. In future iterations, it will be important to design and evaluate approaches that promote inclusive participation, accommodating not only to people with visible disabilities but also to those with hidden or less obvious conditions. This could involve incorporating accessible materials, providing alternative means of interaction, or ensuring physical spaces are accessible for everyone, among other adjustments.

In essence, the Design Picnic method serves as an experimental space to explore democratic dialogue and engagement while bringing insights into how people involve in democratic processes and spaces for public conversation. The method's adaptability across different scenarios has demonstrated its broad relevance, but it has also unveiled areas for further refinement. These include the necessity for more intentional and inclusive practices to encourage meaningful dialogue. Other insights point towards important considerations for any initiative aiming to facilitate public discussion, democratic participation, and inclusion. Thus, the work done

helps to continue the conversation to design more comprehensive and thoughtful approaches in future design research.

CIRCE and the Design Picnic

One of the primary insights of this project, as it relates to the objectives of CIRCE, is the transformative potential of cultural and creative economies in urban scenarios. These economies have the capacity to foster social inclusion and cohesion. This is not just an outcome of the impact that these economies have on societies, but it is also an effect of policymaking focused on places to foster local creativity, such as neighbourhood-based economies, urban creativity initiatives and creative placemaking. Essential to this insight is the idea that "[c]reativity should not be seen as residing in a specific class of people or a specific industry or industrial cluster. Creativity can take place anywhere in business, economic, and social life." (Dubina et al., 2012)

To extend the discussion, the idea of a neighbourhood-based creative economy (Stern & Seifert, 2008), presents creativity as a community-driven process. It emphasises the role of social and spatial networks and infrastructures in supporting creativity. This perspective

brings a horizontal approach to cultural and creative sectors, underlining the need for a robust public policy framework for their sustenance and growth.

By adopting this approach, communities could become more inclusive and egalitarian, better prepared to tackle the various social, political, and economic crisis they encounter. The horizontal model promotes local involvement and ownership, which can lead to more sustainable solutions to these crises. In addition, it fosters creative networks that offer support and care, further enhancing the community's resilience and well-being.

Supporting these networks and infrastructures, there is also the strategy of urban creativity (Goldberg-Miller & Fregetto, 2016). In this approach, the focus of urban planning is centred around people emphasising entrepreneurs and the creative class, in association with the social and intellectual resources of the city. Urban centres should provide or cultivate resources and communication networks through diverse and easily accessible spaces. Such networks are only achieved through the cross-collaboration of public and private sectors in urban planning.

Another creative strategy worth mentioning from the policymaking perspective is creative placemaking (Grodach, 2017). Here, creative placemaking serves as a bridge between a more entrepreneurial model and a more people-centred, arts-driven approach to community development. In a similar tone to urban creativity and design-thinking paradigms, it involves multi-sector partnerships and prioritises local engagement over merely attracting a creative class.

Nonetheless, in all these strategies, it is important to consider the risks and limitations associated with creative approaches to urban planning. Jakob (2010) summarises these limitations as follows: first, top-down planning, lacking community engagement, can extend gaps of inequality, lack of participation, and social exclusion; second, an excessive focus on economic profit can overshadow the social benefits of innovative urban planning; and last, gentrification poses a problem, displacing local communities and culture at the expense of creative planning.

In this section, I have focused on innovative approaches to urban planning. During the development of the Design Picnic, one idea that frequently emerged was the need for creative spaces to facilitate social conversations. These spaces would enable dialogue about the socio-political crises we are currently facing, providing a platform to express our ideas and engage in debate without fear of judgment. This is where the public

sector and policymakers can play a vital role in designing, prototyping, and delivering such spaces aimed at fostering social participation and inclusion. The effectiveness of these changes could be further enhanced if members of the cultural and creative economies recognise their role in facilitating processes and dialogue among all community members.

In summary, the three strategies and frameworks examined here emphasise the transformative potential of cultural and creative economies within urban environments emphasising social inclusion and cohesion. The importance of policy frameworks that engage with local communities, cannot be stressed enough. A concerted, multi-sectoral effort is needed —one that ideally integrates public policy with communities and places social engagement at its core. Such a holistic approach could profoundly benefit from generative design research to facilitate more equitable, resilient, and sustainable urban futures for all.

Acknowledgments

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