

Engagement ethnographies

We spoke with Nicola about Social Life’s approach to placemaking, which is founded on a combination of community engagement and robust observational and ethnographic research. Challenging professionals to self-reflect and put aside their preconceived assumptions, she discusses the methods used to build up in-depth portraits of neighbourhoods and unpick their intricate social fabric.



Nicola Bacon

Interviewed by Lee Mallett, before the Covid-19 pandemic

Nicola co-founded Social Life in 2012, a centre for expertise in innovative placemaking and social sustainability. She advises central and local governments, foundations and third sector agencies, embedding fresh approaches to public policy and service delivery tackling inequality and disadvantage. Nicola has worked across sectors for the Home Office and homelessness charities, and until July 2012, was the Young Foundation’s Director of Local and Advisory Projects. She is an Academy of Urbanism fellow, a Design Council BEE, a Brent Design Advice Panel member, and a mentor for Bethnal Green Ventures.

Lee Mallett (LM) Do you describe what you do as community engagement?

Nicola Bacon (NB) Not often, but sometimes we do.

When we started, we were interested in bridging gaps between people and the professionals who are trying to change the areas in which those people live. Some of that was research, and some was engagement projects, but we were always interested in projects that were fundamentally aimed at involving people and thinking about how you make residents’ perceptions part of the design.

There is always a balance in understanding what residents say to you as a response to engagement and what might really be going on in the community. It involves a lot of observation, interpretation and analysis. There’s a participatory angle to our work, but there is also a substantial research angle where we are observing and reporting.

At Social Life, we have a mix between built environment and social research backgrounds. Some of us are architects, some of us are researchers; we have planners and ethnographers. I have a research and policy background; I used to run a homelessness charity and I worked for the Home Office. Design-led participatory work is great and we do use it. But you also need to be “real people”, so we’re not too removed.

LM How did you start out?

NB We worked with local resident’s body Brixton Green on the first Somerleyton Road engagement process with Metropolitan Workshop. We did a series of deliberative workshops – a health service technique – based on the idea that all of us make better decisions when we have good information, and when we discuss it with people who we think of as our equals. The idea is that you give people access to information and experts, and the decision they will make at the end of that process will be very different to what they started with.

Off the back of that, we started doing work for Lambeth. That became really difficult with the realities of their estate regeneration programme, so more of the work we do now is research. In the context of London, and particularly with housing development, the parameters to have genuine engagement are quite small because there are so many pressures on cost and planning assumptions. When you’re doing engagement, you are often talking about a particular scheme or plan, while research is a bit broader, and has a more open agenda.

LM Do these parameters tend to drive a solution before it has been examined?

NB Very much so. As an agency like ourselves, it’s very easy to say, “we really want to know what you think of this”, and then later you find yourself saying, “well, the residents want that, but it can’t be done”. There is more opportunity now because councils are developing more for themselves. There is more of a focus on figuring out how to get

social housing to really work, and how to deal with issues around regeneration schemes. Often, what we pick up on is not to do with a particular scheme, but about people’s life experience. People are terrified of anything that threatens their home because they feel very vulnerable. They know that in London, if you lose your home, you may not be able to afford another one, and then there are all the other issues like benefit cuts. You are dealing with this big issue of uncertainty and how difficult people’s lives are. Often people feel really under threat.

LM Does working with public and private sector organisations give you an understanding of the pressures from both sides?

NB Yes. We’ve done work with Grosvenor, British Land, and Countryside in the past. One of our first big pieces of work in 2012 was with Berkeley Group who wanted us to provide a social sustainability measurement framework. They were very data-driven.

It was canny public affairs thinking: How do we get ahead of the game? How do we impress the planning committees? We ended up working with a group of development directors. They do want to make money, but they want it to be a decent scheme. They were very brand driven and aware of reputation. All those things came together.

LM What proportion of your work is community engagement?

NB It comes and goes. At the moment we are doing many different in-depth research and baseline studies and talking to a lot of

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Above and below: Face to face street interviews and in-depth ethnographies on the Aylesbury Estate. We’ve altered how we work to adapt to the Covid-19 pandemic, and have found many people were happy to speak to us as long as they felt safe.

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A large part of our work is asking, “how do you feel about the area you live in?”. People generally think about areas in terms of deprivation – the physicality of it or the problems in it. They don’t often think about it in terms of what they like, if they feel they belong, if they feel safe, or if they like their neighbours. A lot of our work is about capturing those intangible things.

Typically, this work would be for someone developing a site. For Grosvenor in Bermondsey, or Notting Hill Genesis, research is our starting point and we want to be able to track change over time so we can see what the interventions have done in five or ten years. We’re also working with Countryside and L&Q in South Acton, and we are about to do our third round of research there to see how the estate is changing.

LM Are you generating an evidence-base for social value?

NB That’s one side of it. The other side of it, which I think is more relevant to the community engagement question, is if you want to masterplan or change a place, you really need to understand the detail. What is valued? What do people like? What’s the nuance of it? Often the things that people like aren’t the things that architects look at.

The Elephant & Castle shopping centre is a great example of an ‘ugly’ building that had a lot of social value. It was really well used by the Latin American community. It has shut and will be demolished soon, but three years ago, it was super busy. We did a little project, and found people were making a lot of money there and providing help within

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the community. It was a really interesting social space and really valued by the people that used it. That’s not a traditional built environment perspective, but you get a different view if you look at it as a social entity. You will often find places that you might not like the look of at first, but you need to be aware of what’s really going on there.

One of the things we like doing, and it’s quite difficult when we work with architects, is to see how that kind of information can affect their plans. How does it affect how you design places, what you demolish, what you save, and how you replace things? It enables professionals who are planning and designing to put aside a lot of their assumptions. Some are correct and need to be applied, but it’s also about understanding how a place hangs together socially.

LM And you’re dealing with a developer at the same time?

NB Yes. When we do work in South Acton with Acton Gardens LLP, we take that sort of information and interpret it for them – residents’ perceptions, for example. We make a short number of recommendations, and



they tell us three years on what they have and haven’t done.

One of the insights from the first piece of work, for example, was that people in the new homes were not feeling as comfortable with their neighbours as people living in the old estate. So, the recommendation was that Acton Gardens could explore how they could make people in the new homes feel a bit more like they were a part of the area. They organised events and other community development initiatives, and by the time we went back, it had evened out.

It’s about using and finding the balance between insight and engagement. Sometimes engagement can get very skewed towards just knowing about a narrow thing, or about things that are actually undeliverable in practice. How you interpret that information is really important. It can be challenging to other professionals.

LM In terms of deciding whether you take on a job or not, do you have to feel it has integrity to do what you do?

NB We’ve become more selective because it is unpleasant ending up in the wrong place with this, with difficult conversations and lots of social media attention. You can end up very vulnerable in those kinds of processes and it’s difficult for the people working with you. It’s quite stressful and it can get quite personalised – horrible phone calls and all the rest of it.

I do think boroughs are getting a bit better because there have been so many protests. There has been a real groundswell of rage about regeneration generally. And because there is now a requirement from the Mayor of London to have a ballot, you now actually have to get the residents onside.

LM Do you have to get your story straight before you engage?

NB Totally – you have to be clear about what you are doing. There are always community activists out there who are watching every detail and will pounce on anything inconsistent. These are people who put an enormous amount of effort into their communities. It is all very essential. It is easy to dismiss them as unreasonable,

over-suspicious or paranoid. But they are people who are doing a huge amount of community engagement and really hold things together. Things go well when you can work with some of those suspicions. It can work out.

LM What are the main challenges and changes you are perceiving at the moment?

NB There are now a lot more people living in poverty and vulnerability, and that does change people's relationship to the issues. There are more people who want to be invisible. There are a lot of people juggling various jobs, or maybe subletting a room in their flat. There are people who, for various reasons, don't wish to be engaged with and they are 'uncounted'. We're not talking about unemployed people, but people who are just struggling to keep it together. On all these estate regeneration projects there are big populations of vulnerable people. There are more extremes now. You also have people who are doing really well. Southwark is an area that's very socially mixed, for example, so there are people who have really different interests.

We did some work for Notting Hill Genesis on the Aylesbury Estate four years ago, and then again last year, and it was really interesting what had changed in that time. Just talking to the GPs was quite informative. They said, "We are out of control here and we cannot meet these needs". It felt like things had become a lot more difficult in those four years.

LM That's probably a metric that architects don't know about. Who else do you talk to that architects and developers might not?

NB There are always less obvious community groups to talk to. On the Aylesbury Estate, there were some great supportive social networks that were often invisible to people not directly involved in them. There was one corner shop on that runs a kind of informal advice and loans service. People go to him about their lives. You wouldn't find him straight away. There was also a sewing group, for example.

They were not formally funded services, but these informal groups were really important. There were a lot of people helping each other out, with local childcare, and all sorts of things that Southwark didn't think were there. The assumption was that the estate was really 'difficult', but it seemed there were a lot of people living really interdependent lives which was working quite well. There were many things about living there that were better than other parts of London, even though it was physically in a real state. People are very good at getting by. There are good things in every neighbourhood and working with the things that are already in place is really important.

There's something about just observing and having really good eyes – and not just going along with assumptions. Sometimes we use ethnography and observation. But if you are



Above: Elephant & Castle - a psycho geographic project to explore how we can understand our emotional reactions to places. This is a group walk; engagement with residents living behind our office.

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an agency working for someone and you've got deadlines and planning applications, then there is a limit to resources. It can be quite difficult to justify that extra cost for things like chatting to people.

The engagement we would really like to do would be more end-to-end. It would start really early, at the pre-design stages, and then we'd feed people's ideas and responses in as designs as the masterplan progressed.

LM What would be the conclusion you'd draw from that process to put into the design ideas?

NB Some of it is policy stuff, some of it is about how to rehouse people. If a community is looking after each other's kids, it would be really good to reflect that somehow in the design, for example. Aylesbury Estate has these really big deck-access balconies, which works well if you are looking after lots of children. People can be nostalgic. The kids talk about, "when there were lots of walkways", because that was fantastic if you were eight years old, even though it probably terrified their mothers.

Including lots of spaces for social interaction is very important – really good public areas or communal spaces for people to meet that don't necessarily cost lots of money.

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LM What about the people who are on the receiving end of engagement processes? How do they feel about it?

NB There is a lot of community engagement going on where I live in South London, for example. You wander round and can see there is local design-led consultation going on in Peckham, especially in regeneration areas. Things can go incredibly slowly, and people say, "you asked me this four years ago, nothing has changed." Why should people believe the things they are told are going to happen when they don't?

I had a great conversation with a nineteen-year-old on the South Acton Estate while we were doing some work for the government – a review of people who live in areas of change, talking to them about whether they've been involved or not.

He was talking in a loud, teenage way, but what he was essentially saying was, "I don't feel part of this change. I don't know if I like it, or if it is for me. I'm worried about my Mum. What I really feel is that no one has made themselves available for me or my mother to talk to. I don't feel that any of the engagement has actually involved us. I'm not stupid; I'm realistic about what is going on in London. If I felt that I could actually make my points known or visible somehow, I would be so much happier. All I want is to feel I have a voice in this, and I understand that certain things can't be done."

It was SO reasonable – it was painfully reasonable.

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LM Do you think politicians have any greater understanding of this than they used to?

NB Some local councillors certainly get it. But, national politicians? I don't know. There hasn't been that much policy on these sorts of things. Policy is so hands-off now, compared to what it used to be. If you go to Scotland, for example, intervention is everywhere. It's much more like how it used to be down here. It's much more market-led here now.

I was thinking about Labour's announcement in late November 2019, before the December election, about building hundreds of thousands of more council homes. The practicalities of doing that in terms of skills and delivery would be a fascinating challenge. But there is a lot of potential for getting it wrong. At that speed, how would you do the planning, how would you get the process right, how would you design it well? It's a really good ambition but local authorities would probably do it much better if they had more thinking space.

There is a squeeze on every job in local government, because of austerity and the amount of time involved. You just do not have the time, whatever role you're in, to think about the softer things – and this is one of the softer things.

Local authorities used to have good engagement teams – I used to work in Southwark for a community organisation and there were resident engagement officers – but those have all gone.

LM What needs to happen to make community engagement more effective?

The current planning process makes you engage in such a rigid way. The basic thing that people need to do in order to get through planning in terms of community involvement isn't particularly difficult. You employ someone, get an agency, to do X amount of work, and gather X number of opinions. Write it up in a nice report. Get it into the design. Tick.

It needs that longer-term thinking and there needs to be a spectrum of things coming together, not just something one-off. Good engagement works well when there are existing community organisations you can work with. It works well when you understand where all the networks are and when it builds on what's there already. If what's there is very fragile, then that is difficult.

It also works when professionals listen and are willing to be challenged and willing to bend. I think a lot of architects and built environment professionals are incredibly bad at self-reflecting about these things, and have very fixed ideas of what is going on and what is good.

LM Is that also true of their clients – the developers and the local authorities?

NB Yes! So, it's very difficult for the person doing the planning to be really sensitive about these things because the response might be, "What!? Why are you doing that?"

LM And do communities have fixed ideas too?

NB People do have fixed ideas; there's a two-way going on there. But often that's to do with lack of knowledge, time, and expertise, and the history of things that have gone wrong in the past that they don't want repeated.

Below: Woodberry Down Estate - Social Life worked with the council, tenants and residents organisations to develop a framework for monitoring social value. This event presents the research to residents. Images provided by Social Life

