

Faith and Suburbia: Photography project

Overview and Context

This case study outlines the learning from the public engagement project Faith and Suburbia. The project builds upon research undertaken by Dr Claire Dwyer, UCL Geography, and Liz Hingley's photographic practice. Senior citizens from six different places of worship in West London were involved in a participatory photographic project resulting in an exhibition shown at UCL (7th December 2012-31st January 2013) and at the Gunnersbury Park Museum (16th February-30th June 2013).

This project was funded under the UCL Public Engagement Unit Beacon Bursary funding scheme. This case study identifies key findings from the project and highlights learning for any similar projects of this nature.

Project aims:

This project aimed to use a creative approach (participatory photography) to engage participants and new audiences with on going research on suburban religious landscapes, particularly with communities from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds.

Furthermore the project lead hoped to:

- build awareness, develop networks and generate ideas for further collaborative (and policy relevant) research on local inter-faith encounters and social cohesion;
- to build the capacity of migration researchers at UCL to develop participatory visual methods to communicate research findings and generate new research tools.

What happened?

The project involved six senior citizens from six different places of worship in West London (St Thomas Church, St Joseph's Church, West London Islamic Centre, Shri Kanaga Thurkkai Amman Temple, West London Sikh Centre, Ealing Liberal Synagogue).

Participants joined an initial workshop in which Dr Dwyer shared her research on 'Faith in Suburbia' and Liz Hingley shared her photographic practice in 'Under Gods'. Participants then joined in joint visits to each others places of worship to take photographs. A second workshop reflected on their participation in the photographic project and invited participants to select photographs for the exhibition. The exhibition was curated by Dr Claire Dwyer and Liz Hingley as a series of Faith Banners, academic findings and images by Liz Hingley.

The exhibition was shown at UCL, South Cloisters (7 December 2012-31 January 2013), at the Gunnersbury Park Museum (16th February-30 June 2013), and has toured each participating place of worship (from September 2013) as a temporary exhibition.



Facts and Figures

6 participants involved in the participatory photography project from **6** places of worship in West London involved

2 exhibitions held (at UCL and at the Gunnersbury Park Museum)

The project involved **9** key partners

The project was lead by Dr Claire Dwyer, UCL Department of Geography, with support from UCL students from the Msc Global Migration

Emerging themes from the evaluation

Faith and Suburbia was a public engagement project grounded in and informed by a research project, which was highlighted in the course of public engagement activities.

The project exceeded the aims set out in the following ways:

- Engagement with the project was greater than expected. Participants chose to visit more places of worship than the project lead initially suggested and as a result they took a full part in the project. Interviewed about the project participants were very positive about being involved in the public engagement project.
- Favourable feedback on the exhibition was elicited both from interviews with visitors to the opening receptions for both exhibitions and on comment cards collected over the six months in which the exhibition was up at Gunnersbury Park Museum.
- The exhibition was reviewed in the national religious and local press (*Ealing Gazette*, *Church Times*, *Ealing Today*, *Third Way*) and online (<http://www.culture24.org.uk> ; <http://suburbs.exeter.ac.uk/virtual-exhibitions/faith-in-suburbia/>). An article about the exhibition has been commissioned for the *Journal of Material Religion* and a second article will be submitted to the journal *Cultural Geographies*.
- Students on the UCL Msc Global Migration Courses *Postcolonial Theory and the Multicultural City* and *Issues in Global Migration* used the project as a case study.
- The project has been presented at seminars at UCL (Migration seminar) and at an international Conference (Emotional Geographies, Groningen, July 2013) and featured in discussions at the London Museums Group/Share Academy Conference (UCL April 2013).

Faith and Suburbia provides an excellent example of how key relationships and networks can be built through such public engagement projects. The project involved staff at UCL and Msc students in the project itself. The work has been presented to the department and to students at both undergraduate and graduate level as well as to the wider geographical and interdisciplinary community.

The project has developed good links across UCL (the project lead worked with Prof Margot Finn, History, and colleagues on an exhibition at the Octagon Gallery, and the invitation to write an article for *Journal of Material Religion*, as well as the links with Share Academy).

London Citizens has invited Dr Claire Dwyer to work with them in engaging faith communities in West London for future inter-faith activities.

Further information about these events is available at: <http://faithinsuburbia.wordpress.com/>

Learning from the Process

What worked well?

- the team developed a range of communication tools, such as a dedicated facebook and wordpress site for the exhibition, to promote the project.
- having such enthusiastic and involved partners and participants meant that the project worked very well and ran smoothly.
- due to the enthusiasm of the Gunnersbury Park Museum, the team added new elements to the exhibition there including displays of religious material culture from the museum's own collection and as donations for the participating places of worship.
- the public engagement project was linked to a research project, and fitted in with courses within the UCL Geography Department.

What could be done differently?

- the team had some technical problems with the cameras they used which did not produce photographs of a high enough resolution for display.
- the material used for the banners which curled on display due to the central heading, so needed some fixing.
- the team a very short lead time to the exhibition opening at UCL which meant they had to work quickly on the display, but this did not negatively affect the outcome.

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