

The Most Inclusive Place



WHAT IS THE OPEN CITY PROJECT?

The Open City project looks at the social and political life of London to test whether the utopian ideal of the Open City exists in real life, and explores issues of race, migration, mobility and living with diversity.

TEAM

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The Open City project is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, and brings together researchers from the universities of Warwick, Oxford, West London, and the Open University.

The artists working with Open City on Hilgrove are Dana Olărescu and Natalia Orendain. Counterpoints Arts assisted with artist selection.

Over the past 1.5 years the Open City team has been working with residents on Hilgrove Estate to explore how people's geographical relationships can influence their everyday experiences of city life at the street or block level, the estate level or beyond.

We asked which places are important to people on the estate, how residents feel about their homes and local areas, and where people prefer to spend their time. The project also worked closely with partners at youth charity The Winch; Hampstead Theatre; and the Migration Museum.

This booklet includes some of Open City's findings collected through a survey, a photo crawl of the local area, mapping workshops, coming along to estate events, spending time in the archives, and listening to residents' stories. In summer 2022, artist Dana Olărescu joined the team to work with residents on the estate around issues of inclusive public space, and artist Natalia Orendain will soon follow.

1. HILGROVE HISTORIES

1733



The willow tree is planted on Boundary Road

1939-1945

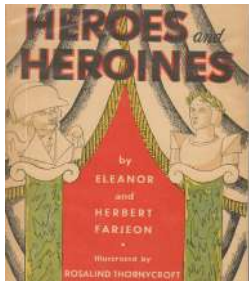


The area suffers extensive bomb damage

1956-1959

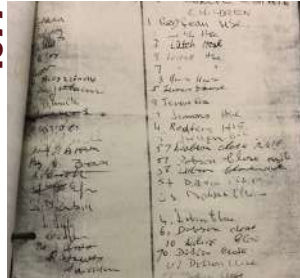


Hilgrove Estate construction, designed by award-winning architect, Louis de Soissons. Many estates in London at the time were designed by the architects' department of the London County Council. Louis de Soissons also designed Welwyn Garden City. Hilgrove Estate is built on garden city principles which is why there is an abundance of green space, and why so many homes are maisonettes with gardens.



Each block is named after a local artist (e.g. playwright Herbert Farjeon; painter Frederick Tayler)

1977



Hilgrove Estate was built without a meeting room for residents which led to several campaigns for one. In 1977, a group of Winch children who live on the estate wrote a petition for a clubroom on the estate.

Dear Sir. I am writing on behalf of my friends and my self, to ask if anything could be done for the childrens recreation of Hilgrove. As we do have two play grounds one which is used for football, ect. and the other which has been boarded up for a number of years. we are always bored and have nothing to do, we have got the Winchester recreation ground but to get there we have to cross very dangerous roads, and some of us have younger brothers and sisters to look after. So instead of having to do this we would like to have a clubroom built in the playground which is not in use. We also have tenants who are willing to help with the activities. A number of years ago there was a round about in the unused playground, but it got misused and damaged. But everybody is willing to help keep the club in good condition if we get it, because we know what it is like to have nothing to do.

THE SINISTER SIDE OF HILGROVE

Landowners The Eyre Estate desired to preserve the middle-class character of the area, so they insisted Hilgrove was built by a private architect.

The Eyre family became wealthy through the enslavement of people in Antigua and still own land in St John's Wood and South Hampstead.

In return for permission to build Hilgrove Estate, The Eyre family insisted that the London County Council also build homes for wealthier people in the neighbourhood.

Boydell Court to the east of Finchley Road was designed by Louis de Soissons to house higher income groups, and was privatised almost as soon as the building was complete.

2. GARDENS

This year, residents on the estate have planted two orchards: one on the green outside Freeling House and another outside Nalton House with the support of The Conservation Volunteers and the estate's Community Organisers through North Camden Zone.



The estate has two secret gardens. At times closely guarded and at others an open space for all, the secret gardens are also home to families of foxes.

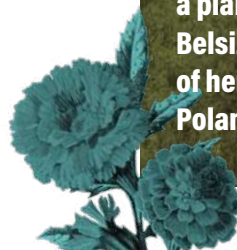
The Open City team have been exploring whether the gardens being kept a secret is what makes them special – by making them into sites of welcoming or hospitality – or whether their secretness sets limits on who can use the gardens and what they can use them for. Is a secret garden meant for tree climbing, planting and picnics; is it something to be appreciated from afar; or is it *for something else entirely*?

On Hilgrove estate, there are planters filled with geraniums, guerrilla gardening marigolds and mature rose gardens. Some Hilgrove residents even take care of vines and flowers planted by residents who have long since passed away, and water the trees in the summer.

One young person described how a particular fig tree in Regent's Park reminds him of a fig tree in his grandfather's garden in Kosovo.



For another local resident, a planter of flowers on Belsize Road reminded her of her mother's garden in Poland.



3. NEIGHBOURLINESS

>60% Hilgrove residents think the estate is somewhere people get on well together. *People who are new to the estate are less likely to think so.*

Newer residents and residents who are private tenants are less likely to stop and chat with their neighbours. What do different types of tenancy mean for how people get along?

Models for the provision of social housing have changed radically since the estate was built and today, we are faced with a housing crisis. The policy of Right to Buy completely changed social housing in Britain and transformed many estates. With private rents soaring, home ownership impossible for many, huge waiting lists for social housing, short term tenancies becoming the norm, and the hostile environment making housing ever more precarious we asked what different forms of tenancy mean for how we live together.

75% residents have helped their neighbours in some way

sweeping/picking litter in communal areas

listening to or sharing problems with neighbours

exchanging favours with neighbours

borrowing things

Hilgrove has **370** properties

197 council owned

173 private ownership

8 freehold

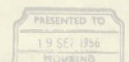
165 leasehold

44 privately rented (whole flat)

83 owner occupied

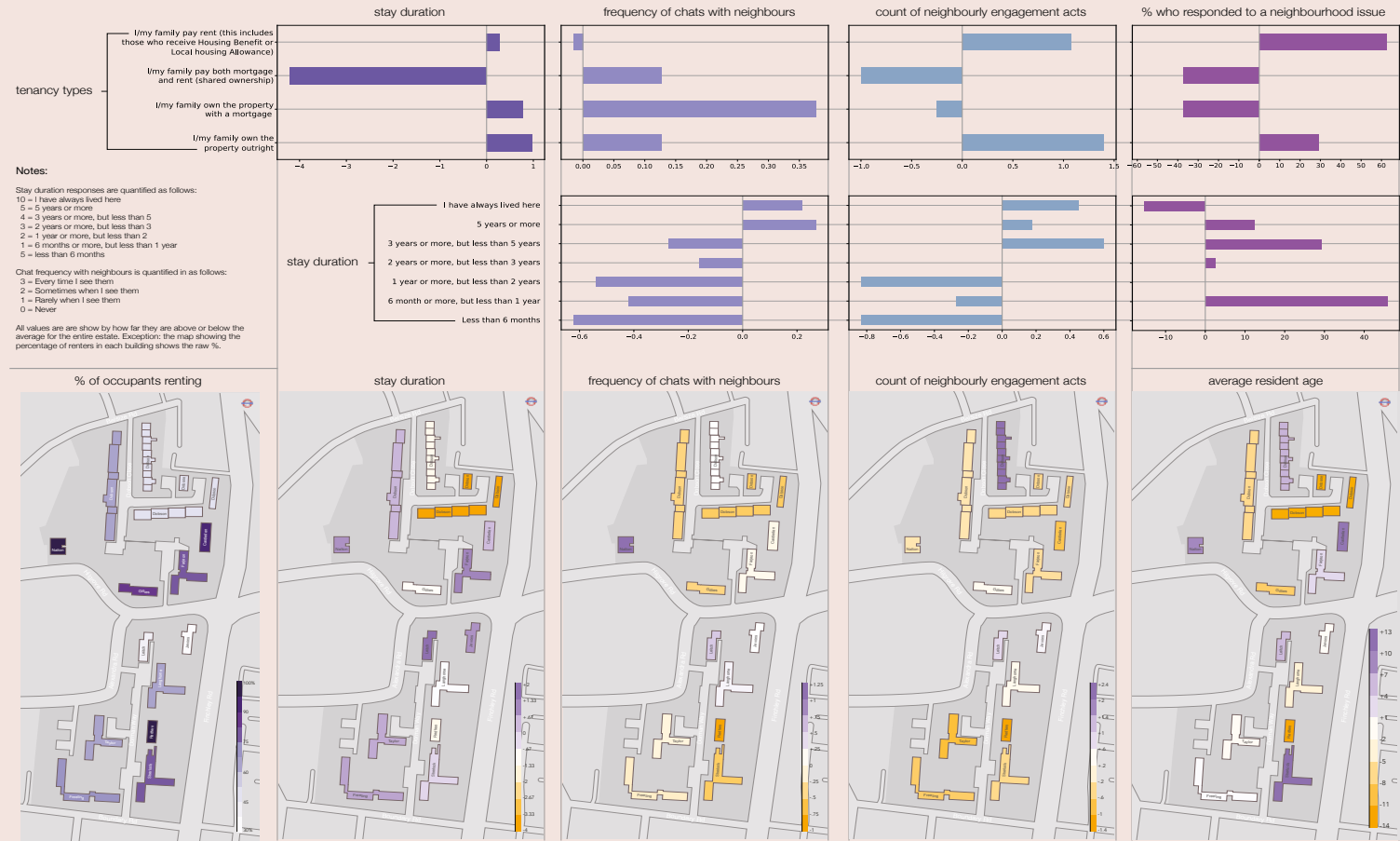
44 privately rented (by room)

(Open City team's estimation)



The maps show how long people have lived on the estate, their interactions with their neighbours, and their tenancy types.

Correlations between tenancy type, stay duration, and neighbourliness



4. CONNECTIONS

Camden as a borough historically has a high level of churn¹. Understanding population churn is important for service planning and allocation, budget estimates and democratic participation. This can also shed light on neighbourly interactions and the multiple, multi-scale connections people have to place such as the impact of moving from one flat in North Camden to another, or moving to Britain for a new job.

Population churn in Camden has slowed down over recent years and it now has one of the most stable populations in London. Even though Camden is more stable, this changes when taking tenancy types into account. On Hilgrove, we found that people who move the most are younger private tenants living in shared accommodation, and the people who move the least are older social housing tenants or working age homeowners. This has implications for how neighbourly interactions, local connections and a sense of community is fostered on the estate.

¹churn: the movement of population, including small moves within a local area, moves from one borough to another, from one city or region to another, or to different countries.

20% of Hilgrove residents have spent less than a year living in their current home.

37% of Hilgrove residents have moved home in the past five years.

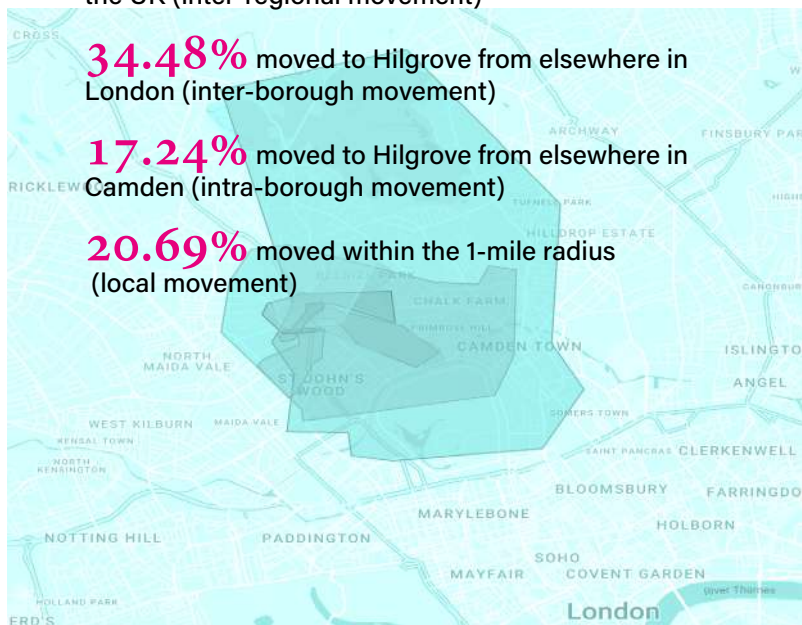
20.69% moved to Hilgrove from abroad in the last five years (international movement)

6.90% moved to Hilgrove from other parts of the UK (inter-regional movement)

34.48% moved to Hilgrove from elsewhere in London (inter-borough movement)

17.24% moved to Hilgrove from elsewhere in Camden (intra-borough movement)

20.69% moved within the 1-mile radius (local movement)



Where people move to and from are powerful stories of love, loss, refuge, and togetherness.

They can also have a lot of meaning for how we feel about our immediate local area. The maps opposite show places in the local area that Hilgove and Chalcots residents love, feel comfortable, where they can come together with others. Some of these nearby most loved places also connect people to other more distant places. Whether it's the shop where a resident can buy a mobile phone top-up connecting them to family members in Iran or the local Tesco's being a place where you can buy comforting food from a childhood growing up in the US.

Hilgove residents



Chalcots residents



● Spaces where I feel comfortable ● Spaces where people come together ● Well loved spaces ● Overlap

5. MIGRATIONS

When the estate was first built, many early residents were **Jewish** people from other parts of London.

In the 60s and 70s, Hilgrove became home to people who moved to London from **Ireland**.

In the late 90s and early 2000s, Hilgrove welcomed **Kosovan** and **Albanian** residents.

Hilgrove reflects the way London has changed in the past 60 years and many different people have called the estate home.

Today, residents include students from **South Korea, Germany, and the USA**; people whose families once lived in **Somalia, Jordan and Bangladesh** and people who have lived in many places over the course of their lives – moving from **Morocco to Spain to Camden** or moving from **Germany to Portugal to Camden**.

6. THRESHOLDS

These photos were taken by residents on a self-led photo crawl in and around Belsize Park. The photos capture where residents live, shop, and spend their free time; things, places, or people that reminded them of 'home'; and objects or signs that connected them to other people either locally or further away.

These feature four themes – **foliage**, **storefronts**, **doors-windows-fences**, and **signs** – selected by residents in a group discussion. What does it mean to cross a threshold? Are some thresholds easier to cross than others?



doors-fences-windows

Windows, front steps, and benches together signify the thresholds between public and private space. They show the variety of architectural detail in navigating these thresholds, and the transparency and reflection evident in the openings between home and street.

signs

Signs show the ways we mark our world to either include, exclude, advertise, communicate, or mediate posted exclusions. Some signs tell us what to do or not to do, and others invite our participation



storefronts

Many people photographed the laundrette as a place where people come together; a place of casual connection with familiar or new faces in the neighbourhood where people might sit apart together while they wait for their laundry.



foliage

Everyone had a story about gardens and potted plants on porches, balconies, and window boxes – whether it was pruning roses for an elderly neighbour or thinking about buddleia growing out of rubble along train tracks!



Do fences protect residents, or do they exclude?

7. BOUNDARIES

Hilgrove Road splits the estate into two halves. Each side of the estate falls into a different postcode. To the South of the estate lies Boundary Road marking the boundary between Camden and Westminster. South of Boundary Road can feel very different to the North, with a row of schools beginning with Harris Academy just next door to Hilgrove ending in an elite private school.

We spent a lot of time puzzling over Hilgrove's many fences and padlocks.

There are many different layers and types of fencing on the estate. Sometimes, these block views to playgrounds, lawns, and open spaces. At others, they shield the estate from Finchley Road where a combination of fencing and undergrowth hides Castleden House from the busy main road. To the West, the estate is bordered by brick walls separating Hilgrove from private homes. At times, these walls are topped with wire fencing and are broken only by the railway tracks. What might fences mean to different people?

We also asked residents to draw the boundaries of what they think their neighbourhood is. For some, what they think of as their neighbourhood spans Kings Cross to Hampstead Heath, but for others, the neighbourhood begins and ends at Hilgrove.

How do you define your neighbourhood?



Do you find fences protective, intimidating, or both?

8. THE MOST INCLUSIVE PLACE: CONTEXT

Prompted by the estate's fenced-off boundaries, artist Dana Olărescu chose to focus on the topic of inclusive public space. In her work as a socially engaged artist¹, Dana regularly involves diverse people in the creation of culture. As top-down and hierarchical power benefits no one, she attempts to address this by looking at alternatives: imagining non-capitalist realities, spotlighting communities and the communal, and encouraging meaningful connection with our neighbourhoods. Dana also prefers to make work outside of traditional arts institutions, where it can be experienced for free, by everyone.

Why Inclusive Public Space?

Minorities² often gather in spaces where they feel secure and protected from abuse. These spaces are generally indoors, as they have more privacy and are more easily managed. It is more difficult to remain vigilant against potential aggressors in outdoor public spaces, so minority individuals and often even groups prefer to avoid it.

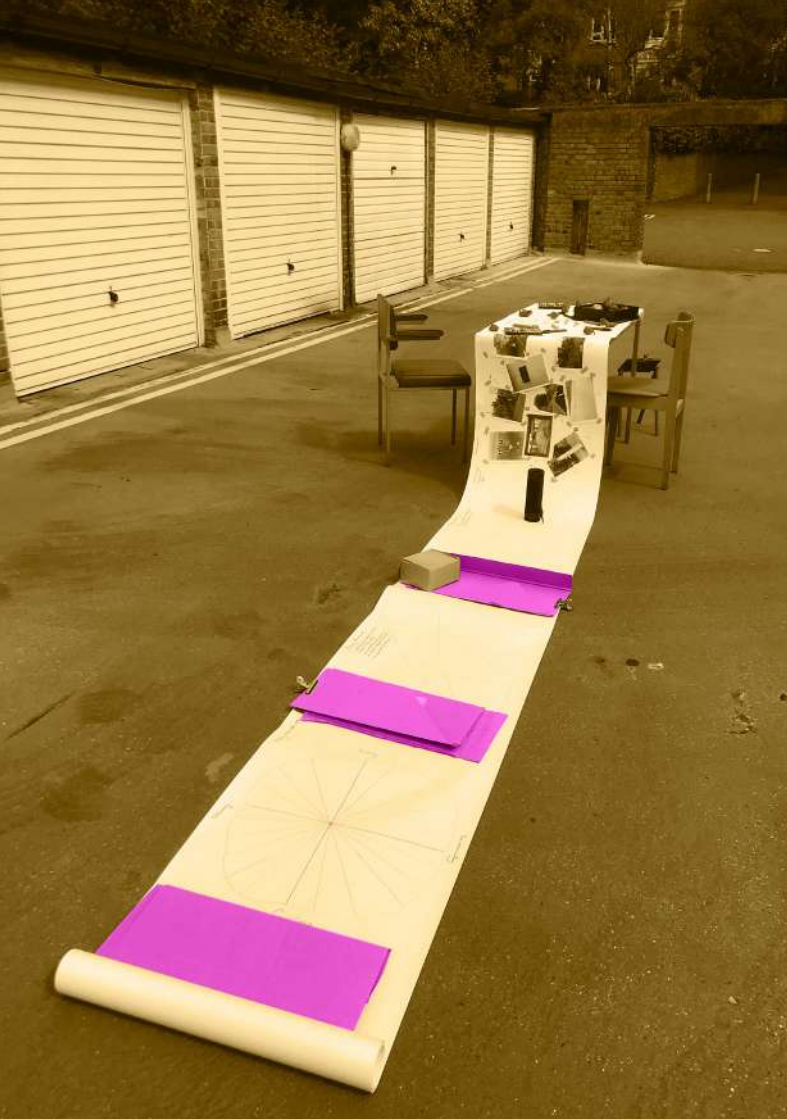
Socially engaged art can include any artform made in collaboration or through participation with people, often deals with political issues, and serves as a catalyst for change.

What would London look like if it was truly open, and not just a mayoral slogan?

Over several months, Dana roamed the estate, asking residents what inclusive public space meant for them, before running four outdoor workshops in the summer where residents and locals offered their views through drawing, model-making, and conversation. Following the brilliant Hilgrove party, another two workshops took place at Swiss Cottage Community Centre, where participants delved into the topic, imagining how Hilgrove might look if they were in charge.

What would Hilgrove Estate look like if all residents participated in decision-making processes?

²Minorities: in this context, anyone from a demographic which does not dominate public space: women, people of colour, trans people, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, teenagers, the elderly, etc



9. WHAT-IF TOOLS

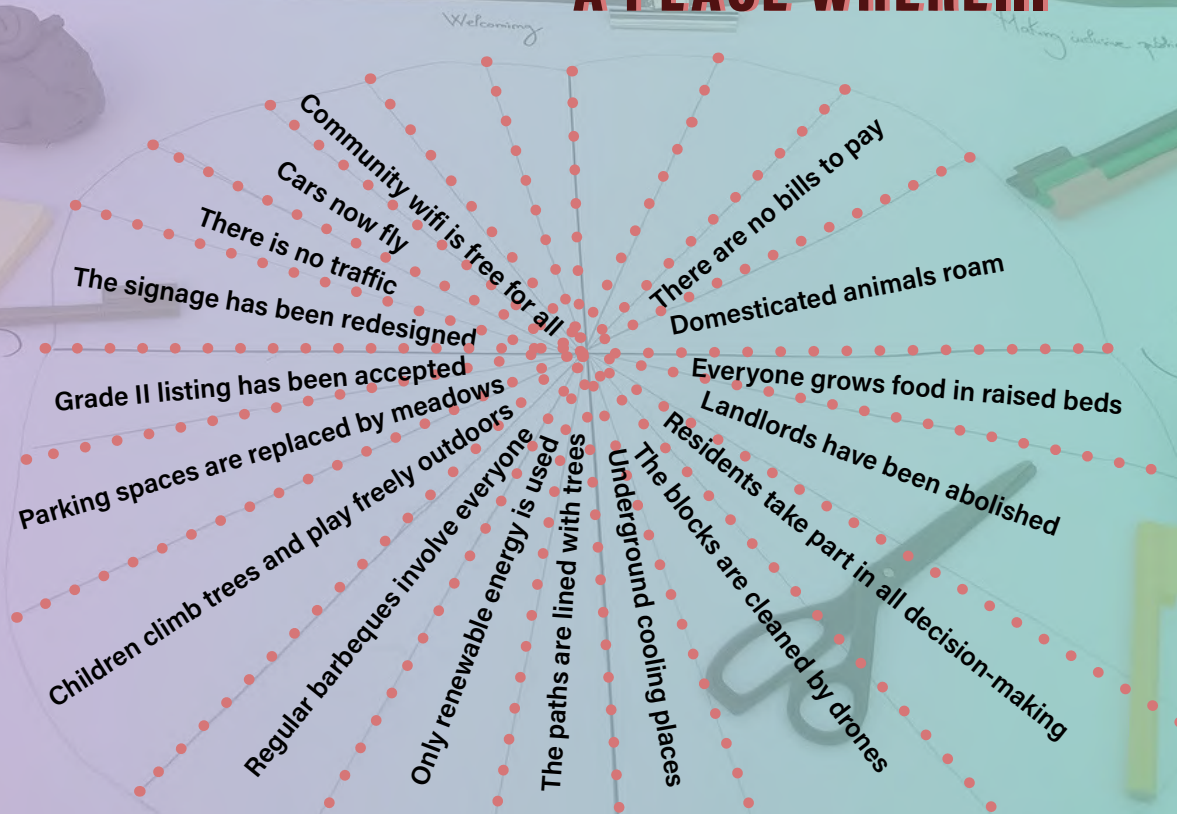
How can we imagine alternatives if London's daily grind never leaves a moment for reflection? One participant exclaimed that he was too worn out to think of the next 10 years, he needed to see changes right in that moment, when prompted to envisage Hilgrove in 2023.

Using Rob Hopkins¹ 'What If' method, which asks people to close their eyes and imagine what their neighbourhood/area could become in the near future, 11 people sat in a circle in silence for two minutes and allowed themselves to dream. Each then shared their vision, all listening with intent and encouraging ideas that might seem radical compared to most statutory services.

¹ Rob Hopkins is an activist and writer on environmental issues, co-founder of the Transition Network, and the author of several books, including *From What Is to What If*, which helps people imagine better futures.

ACCORDING TO PARTICIPANTS' IDEAS, IN 2023, HILGROVE ESTATE WOULD BE A PLACE WHERE...

By chance, these imagined futures are largely compatible; despite some contradictory elements, they could co-exist (see no cars vs. flying cards). Most participants met for the first time, and welcomed others' perspectives without judgement.



Key to imagining futures is building upon what is already present. In terms of changes that are already being made, Community organiser Fateha McDaniel has set up the Hilgrove Food Co-op¹, a resident-led group that organises itself to buy food in bulk and provide access to free food on a weekly basis. Everyone is welcome to join. What if all residents were members of the food co-op, and Hilgrove became the UK's first estate to become self-sufficient?

Fateha also hosts the monthly Know Your Neighbour Night, where residents meet over a shared meal.

Imagining other possibilities and futures might seem daunting at first, but by drawing on existing initiatives, residents are able to craft their own plans. Participants talked about helping each other out during the pandemic, babysitting neighbours' children, looking after the elderly, and watering the trees. These alternative economies weave a powerful web of services that residents don't have to pay for - a resilience strategy which strengthens the estate against capitalist exploitation.

¹Food co-ops are food distribution outlets organised as a co-operative rather than as a public or private company. Decisions regarding production and distribution of its food are made by its members.

10. BILLBOARD FUTURES

Since the estate is split into two by Hilgrove Road, many residents stated that they are unfamiliar with the 'other side', and even with the people who live across the road. At the intersection of Alexandra and Hilgrove roads, an advertisement billboard² promotes unnecessary purchases.

What if the billboard was used by residents who had a say in what it displayed? What if it highlighted what locals were up to, offered invitations to get to know other parts of the estate, or advertised produce at the Hilgrove Food Co-op? What if the back of the billboard was covered in pollinator-friendly climbing plants?

These are possibilities offered by Adfree Cities, an organisation which is concerned about the impacts of corporate advertising on our health, wellbeing, environment, climate, communities, and the local economy. It helps communities to build campaigns or reclaim billboards for better use. Find out more at <https://adfreecities.org.uk/>

² Network Rail, the owner, submitted a planning application to turn the billboard into a digital screen in 2022, but later withdrew it.



11. WHY THIS ARTWORK

Following the conversations, interviews, and workshops which took place on the estate, Dana was influenced by residents' desire to experience artwork that is joyful and "lifts the spirits". Mentions of the 1977 Silver Jubilee being celebrated on the estate with bunting, children playing, and coronation chicken raised the question: what if Hilgrove Estate residents were celebrated with as much jubilation as the monarchy?

UK street parties started as 'Peace Teas' in 1919: a way to feed children dispossessed by WWI. With these parties now organised for every royal occasion, where did the original meaning get lost? Who is now taking care of those experiencing hardships, especially during the cost of living crisis?

As a result, she made 1,500 bunting flags displaying the statement 'What if', and used them to embellish the estate, inviting locals and passers-by to complete the question. 'Bunting' originally referred to a fabric used in the 17th century as Royal Navy signal flags which communicated vital messages.

Additionally, Dana made 20 hand-painted flags which were mounted on the public green and used 'What if' questions to interrogate the inclusivity of public space

These slogans aim to encourage everyone from residents to stakeholders to reimagine the area and become agents of change. How can local identity be preserved while adapting to new needs and challenges while welcoming and accepting all comers?

The Most Inclusive Place attempts to create a space in which people are actively encouraged to engage with their immediate surroundings, ask uncomfortable questions, hold stakeholders to account, and help democratise access to local resources and initiatives.

Use the flags as prompts to help you imagine, continue to hold space for yourselves and your neighbours. Imagination is not a luxury but a necessity for community healing and wellbeing. Dream of borderless spaces, refuse politics which do not benefit you, and mobilise by caring for one another and for Hilgrove. Imagining is not for a distant future, but for the current moment.



12. SIGNPOSTING

We would like to thank The Winch, Hampstead Theatre, North Camden Zone, The Community Organisers, and everyone who lives on Hilgrove for helping us create *The Most Inclusive Place* and for everyone's contributions to the Open City Project.

If you have any comments, queries, or thoughts on the work we've done that, you can contact us on

Instagram: [@opencitywarwick](#)

Twitter: [@OpenCityWarwick](#)

Email: opencity@warwick.ac.uk

Want to see more of our work? We currently have a **photo exhibition display** at **Belsize Community Library, Antrim Road, NW3 4XN**

If you would like to get involved with the next round of Open City activities, please get in touch using the contact details above.

You can also check out Hampstead Theatre and The Winch's free programmes of arts activities, Community Creates.



13. IMAGE CREDITS

Front and back cover and pages 33, 34, 35, 36, 40: *The Most Inclusive Public Space* installation © Alisa Boanta and Maria Tanjala

Inside front cover: Hilgrove Estate cut-outs, edited by Dana Olărescu from archival images

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Pg 3-4 clockwise: Willow tree © Camden New Journal; WWII Second World War air raid shelters on Swiss Cottage Underground station © Fox Photos, 1941-1945; Hilgrove Estate colour plan; Herbert Farjeon, *Heroes & Heroines* book cover; petition for a clubroom signatures

Pg 7-8: Hilgrove secret garden taken by the Open City workshop participants

Pg 11-12: Correlations between tenancy types, duration, and neighbourliness. Compiled by the Open City team

Pg 16: Hilgrove residents' boundary maps. Compiled by the Open City team

Pg 19-20: Images of thresholds taken by the Open City workshop participants

Pg 21: The same images compiled by the Open City team

Pg 23, 25, 27-28: *The Most Inclusive Place* workshop flyer and set-up © Dana Olărescu

Pg 29-30: Cut out of Fateha McDaniel © Nefeli Kentoni

Pg 31-32: Google maps image of Hilgrove Road, postcard designed by Dana Olărescu

