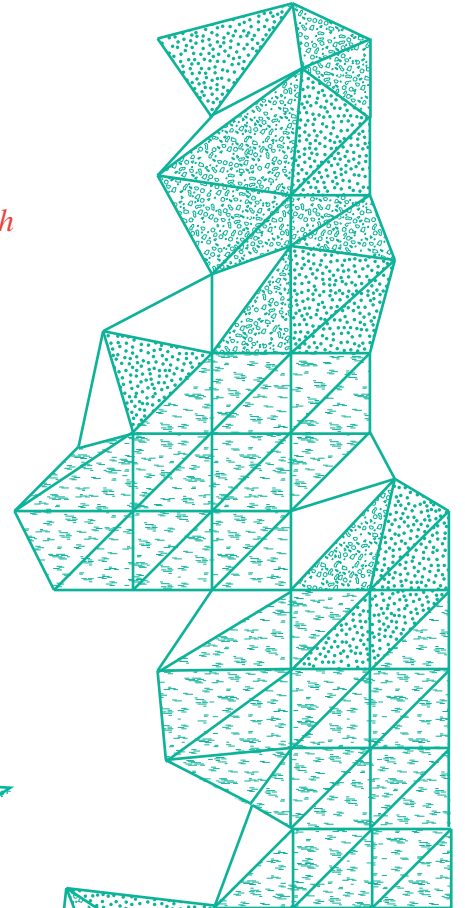
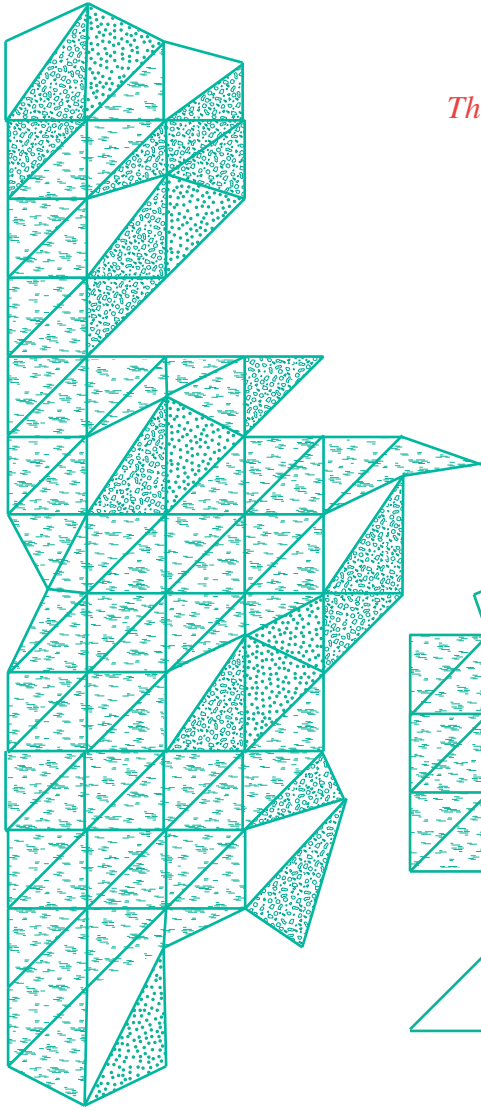
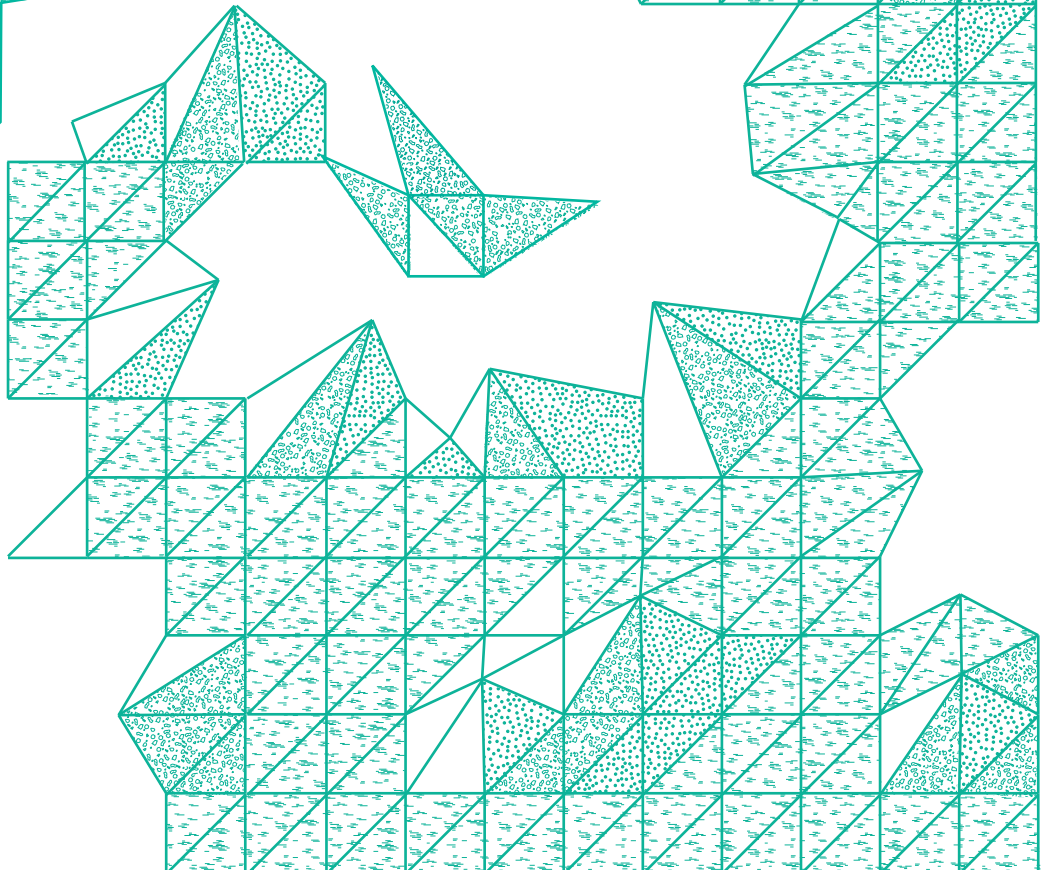
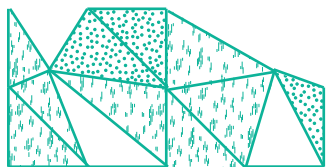


**Innovating places:
A new role for 'Place difference'**

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Innovating places: a new role for “Place difference”

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Abstract

This paper develops the idea of “place difference” as a practical tool for supporting place-based social innovation. Originally developed by US sociologists, Harvey Molotch, William Freudenberg and Krista Paulsen, “place difference” provides a framework for thinking holistically about local context, change and innovation. The “place difference” model analyzes the multiple connections between people, organizations, ideas, opportunities, cities and neighbourhoods, and how they “lash up” to create place-specific processes and outcomes. We explore how “place difference” can be developed as a practical tool to increase understanding about local dynamics, how they can shape the success and outcomes of interventions and how they can boost or frustrate innovation.

1 Introduction

In cities around the world there is growing interest in finding new ways to improve the future of places that take account both of economic growth and social wellbeing. Many cities are seeing growing anxiety, among city leaders and residents, about processes of economic and urban development that increase inequality and social polarization. Austerity, scarce public resources and growing social problems are encouraging the emergence of innovative, small-scale alternatives to dominant regeneration and development models, such as community ownership, place-based social investment, and co-produced resident-led regeneration. The same trends are also fuelling social innovations that are intrinsically linked to place in their delivery. Examples include local examples of collaborative consumption, alternative currencies like the Brixton Pound, and skill sharing, such as the Brooklyn Skillshare; as well as the makers movement, which needs physical locations and supportive local networks to thrive.

This type of socially sustainable urban development is an emerging field of innovation in Europe, Scandinavia, the US and Canada (Woodcraft 2012). It reflects the convergence of three global trends: first, the expansion of sustainable development beyond environmental concerns to take account of social needs in the context of both economic and urban development; second, growing interest in the concept of placemaking, understood as an inclusive process for designing and managing resilient and thriving communities, drawing on local assets; and thirdly, the growing field of social innovation, and understanding of how to nurture and grow innovations with positive social outcomes, that challenge existing power relationships.

Discourses of placemaking and socially sustainable urban development advocate a holistic understanding of places: one which takes a broad view of the relationship between economic circumstances, land use, development opportunities, social conditions and local needs, rather than tackling a specific issue – such as job creation, housing or economic growth - in isolation.

Urban studies, and more recently research about urban social innovation, have embraced this view of cities and urban neighbourhoods as relational, dynamic and inclusive, rather than as bounded, physical locations (Graham & Healey 1999; Gerometta et al. 2005). However many of these ideas have yet to transfer from research to practice, or to be located in the growing social innovation field. The localization of difference in urban neighbourhoods creates enormous challenges for government, public agencies and private organizations; in spite of the growing popularity in urban planning of psycho-geography which offers close examinations of how people use and relate to space, and growing support for a holistic approach to understanding and intervening in places.

Cities, neighbourhoods, and sometimes even individual streets, have a distinctiveness or local character that intuitively most people recognize (Molotch et al. 2000; Hall 2012). While politicians and decision-makers acknowledge that places with similar opportunities and vulnerabilities can respond in dramatically different ways to change, opportunities and threats. Translating this intuitive understanding of difference from abstract, sometimes fuzzy descriptions of local culture, community strength or historical factors, into identifiable, measurable and actionable characteristics is challenging. For example, we often see how past events – historical migration patterns, local political relationships, failed urban development or even incidents of violent crime - continue to resonate and shape local responses to change in ways that are hard to detect using conventional approaches to understanding places. Consequently, there is a tendency in urban development or area-based public programmes to fall back on spatial and physical concepts of place and to understand the social life of places by focusing in problems: disadvantage, worklessness or public health rather than exploring their potential for innovation and creativity.

The need for new models and tools to think about social innovation and places is already widely acknowledged. Moulaert et al's research (2005) identified the need for existing theoretical models of territorial or regional innovation to be updated to take account of local, social knowledge and networks, and put forward the concept of ‘community-gear innovation’. Subsequent research has paid attention to the factors that encourage innovation in local government (Bacon et al 2008) and the importance of civil society and citizen engagement in driving social innovation, with a particular focus on governance, community participation, and more recently, the role of online networks and communities in supporting local social innovation (Davies and Simon 2013; Millard et al 2013; Gerometta et al 2005). However, we argue there is also a need for conceptual and practical tools that can take account of the complexity of places and their unique combinations of local and global networks, institutional systems, local knowledge, social networks, and psycho-social factors.

Our hypothesis is that “place difference” can add a new dimension to research on place and social innovation, by bringing in local political, cultural or historical influences and examining how these dynamics shape local responses. This is relevant to innovation in placemaking and area regeneration and to the development of innovations to meet to social need that are specific to a place, for example the development of neighbourly support for vulnerable people. We propose that a “place difference” model could help circumvent the artificial barriers often assumed within spatial planning and urban development - social versus physical, grassroots versus top-down, local versus global - and open up new opportunities for creative innovation about place-based problems. This paper describes the process of developing a “place difference” model and applying this to two case study areas where Social Life has been closely involved in place-based innovation projects.

2 What is “place difference” and why does it matter?

“Place difference” is a dynamic conceptual framework for understanding how places come to acquire distinctive characteristics, and how this distinctiveness shapes local responses to change, opportunity or innovation. The concept was developed by a group of US sociologists, Harvey Molotch, William Freudenberg and Krista Paulsen, who were concerned with understanding the trajectory of development processes and how history works to create difference and locally specific outcomes. Molotch et al carried out a comparative study of Santa Barbara and Ventura, two urban areas in California with similar socio-demographic indicators and physical characteristics that responded very differently to the same outside forces: the development of oil and a major freeway project. The aim of this comparative study was to develop a research method that could take account of the many intangible factors and complex configurations that distinguish places.

“Place difference” can be understood as the distinctive ways in which unlike elements – people, collaborations, buildings, environmental resources, economic opportunities, policies or ideas - combine in a particular place at a particular point in time. Molotch et al describe these combinations as “lash ups”, drawing on Actor-Network-Theory to illustrate how specific ideas, institutions or events, come to exist through “the success of connections” across different spheres (eg. social, cultural, symbolic, economic, environmental) and how both physical things and spaces, social practices and abstract ideas “make each other up” (2000, p.793). For Molotch et al, “place difference” has two key aspects: “character of place” which is understood as the specific combination of elements in a local lash up, and “tradition” which stands in for the way these lash ups stabilize,

perpetuate or adapt over time to shape locally-specific responses to external forces¹. In this sense, “character” and “tradition” become proxies for a set of relationships, ideas and responses that can be mapped and measured, which means that formerly abstract ideas about say, culture, history or local identity, can be materialized.

Molotch et al asked, “What makes Santa Barbara more like Santa Barbara?” and “What makes Ventura more like Ventura?” as a way to frame questions about how change and innovation take place. The answers to these questions are valuable to studies of place and social innovation for a number of reasons. First, Molotch et al’s “place difference” model is an explicit attempt to materialize, and therefore make legible, the many intangible dimensions of place that are recognized to influence interventions and outcomes, yet often prove difficult to grasp and take account of in local decision-making. Second, this work pays particular attention to the connections and interactions between different elements at work in a place, rather than attempting to seek out individual factors that are driving change. Although this is a subtle shift in emphasis, it is important because it moves the focus of analysis from counting the mere presence or absence of local assets, institutions or opportunities in a place, to how they interact and behave. In this sense, surface similarities can be dissolved because no two lash ups will be the same, regardless of the initial conditions. Third, this work emphasizes the importance of community organizations in forming and perpetuating “place difference”. The comparative case study of Ventura and Santa Barbara identified how community organizations act as repositories of tacit knowledge and harbour memory traces, providing a crucial link between the past and present knowledge, experience and practice. This is a particularly important contribution to current research about the role of community organizations in social innovation that recognizes the role of citizens as experts on local experience (Davies and Simon 2013; Gerometta et al. 2005). This work is important because it identifies the value citizens bring to innovation processes, in particular, as partners in diagnosing local problems, deploying unused community resources and co-producing solutions. However, these approaches often struggle to take account of the tacit knowledge, embedded social relationships and historical events that shape dynamics and power in the present. One aim of this paper therefore, is to bridge between emerging research about citizen participation and social innovation and a wider body of research about the city and understanding places.

We feel “place difference” offers a means of identifying and analysing local dynamics and connections that may not be visible or legible using more conventional approaches to studying places. It allows us to think about places as ever changing combinations of social, cultural and physical assets, rather than as places that are fixed in time or space. We believe this matters to thinking about social innovation, in particular, to the way innovations are transferred from place to place or sustained and scaled within a place. A dynamic understanding of place that seeks out locally specific connections and processes, rather than focusing on surface similarities, will reveal that local context is always varied and will generate different outcomes.

This way of thinking about places can contribute to understanding about how and why places thrive or struggle, innovate or stagnate. Innovation is about generating ideas, sustaining and scaling these in the future. Places that are experiencing adversity, as the result of economic trends or because of traumas like flooding, often have the right conditions to spark new ideas or approaches to local needs, but these do not necessarily survive once the initial enthusiasm or challenge is over. Our hope is that “place difference” can offer a way of understanding the specificities of local context and the conditions that need to be met in each area for innovations to grow and be tested, scalable and sustainable.

3 Developing “place difference” as a practical tool

The aim of this project has been to test whether it is possible to translate Molotch et al’s “place difference” framework into a resource, which is both practical and replicable, for organizations wanting to understand the dynamics of places. The comparative study of Ventura and Santa Barbara was conducted by an academic research team who interviewed 100 people, reviewed policy and

¹ Molotch et al draw on Giddens’s structuration theory to describe the way “tradition” shapes and is shaped by local responses to external forces. See Giddens 1984 work *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*.

planning documents, memoirs and local media reports spanning a period of 100 years, and developed a number of quantitative indicators. A research project on this scale is beyond the scope of many organizations working in or with places undergoing change; in many cases both funding and time available to dedicate to this kind of work are limited.

One of the key questions for this project, therefore, is whether we can create a practical tool that is capable of capturing some of the richness of Molotch et al’s Ventura and Santa Barbara research, without undermining the robustness of the study.

Our starting point was, first, to explore the principles of “place difference” to determine how we could observe, map and analyze “local lash ups”. Second, to think about designing a conceptual tool and research method that is proportionate and replicable therefore affordable for others to use. And, third, to assess whether we can generate enough local insights and information using this approach to identify new ways of thinking about and working with places that will be of value to social innovators.

This early work is both small-scale and exploratory. Our intention with this paper is to test the hypothesis that a “place difference” model can be of value by exploring the feasibility of the approach and beginning to explore possible research methods and indicators. This section of the paper describes the process of translating and starting to apply a place different model to two case study areas: Brixton in south London and Malmö in Sweden. We identify a number of challenges and questions that future research could address.

3.1 Pillars of “place difference”

Our first step was to create a method for identifying “locally specific lash-ups” at a particular point in time, that could frame an exploration into the nature of these combinations of social, cultural, economic and environmental factors. Our aim was to map the interactions between ideas, cultural landmarks and historical events, as well as political connections and community associations, and to identify a method of unearthing the tacit knowledge and embodied relationships that shape responses to interventions. To do this we identified six “pillars of place difference”, against which we could map out local assets and relationships and the connections between them (see figure 1).

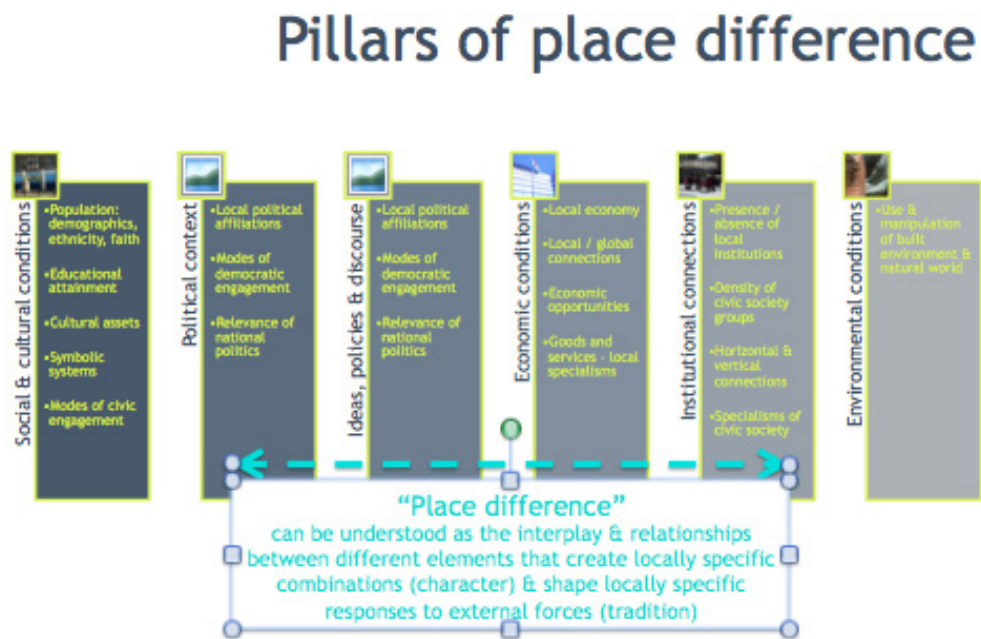
The six pillars are:

- **Social conditions:** intended to reflect measurable social conditions such as household income, public health and deprivation data, the type and condition of housing stock, or educational attainment; and, networks of social relationships including formal and informal, associational, faith-based or civic networks
- **Cultural systems and assets:** intended to reflect cultural systems and symbolic assets that exert influence over current experience, including specific cultural systems like Brixton’s Afro-Caribbean communities or Nuclear Dawn mural, or Malmö’s multi-ethnic Muslim communities
- **Political context:** intended to describe formal and informal governance systems such as the influence of local and national politics, the character of local political relationships, political events both present and past
- **Ideas, policies and discourse:** intended to describe the influence of ideas, such as Brixton’s Transition Town movement, policies such as Lambeth Council’s “Co-operative Council”, or discourse such as the thinking and practice around a “socially sustainable Malmö” involving the City authorities, academic institutions and public agencies
- **Economic conditions:** including measurable data about the composition of local economies, both formal and informal, and local specialisms, as well as locally-specific connections to regional, national and global markets

- **Institutional connections:** including the presence, density, specialisms of private, public and civic institutions and the horizontal and vertical networks between them
- **Environmental conditions:** intended to reflect both the natural and built environment, and the way these assets are put to work locally.

We acknowledge that some of these terms require closer definition and would benefit from some deliberation about how they are applied, in particular, definitions of cultural systems or symbolic assets, and clarity about the limits of a term like social conditions. However, while we acknowledge these challenges such a debate is beyond the scope of this short, exploratory paper.

Figure 1: Six pillars of “place difference”



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3.2 Mapping “character of place”

The six-pillar framework was used to identify and map locally-specific combinations of people, places, politics, things and ideas, in three areas where Social Life has recently carried out local innovation projects: Brixton in south London, Malmö in Sweden, and Chicago’s south side neighbourhoods. In the next section we discuss one of these case study areas, Brixton, and describe how we have used the idea of “place difference” to illuminate local dynamics that are intangible but highly influential in shaping local responses to change and innovation². We then briefly discuss the key points from our case study of Malmö.

2 Word limits have prevented us from including the full Malmö case study or the Chicago case study. However, in the conclusion we reflect on insights and lessons from using the “place difference” framework in all three areas.

Social Life has worked in on two projects in Brixton over the past 18 months. First, with Brixton Green, a community owned mutual organization that was formed to give local residents a voice in the redevelopment of Somerleyton Road, an under-used strip of land in the centre of Brixton. Second, with the London Borough of Lambeth to develop a new approach to involving residents in decision-making in estate regeneration schemes (see Bacon 2013). In Malmö the Social Life team has worked with the City on three projects: understanding Malmö’s innovation story in 2010-11; exploring wellbeing and resilience in one peripheral diverse area in 2011-12; and in 2013, exploring a new placemaking model for the City, and how this could be supported by social investment.

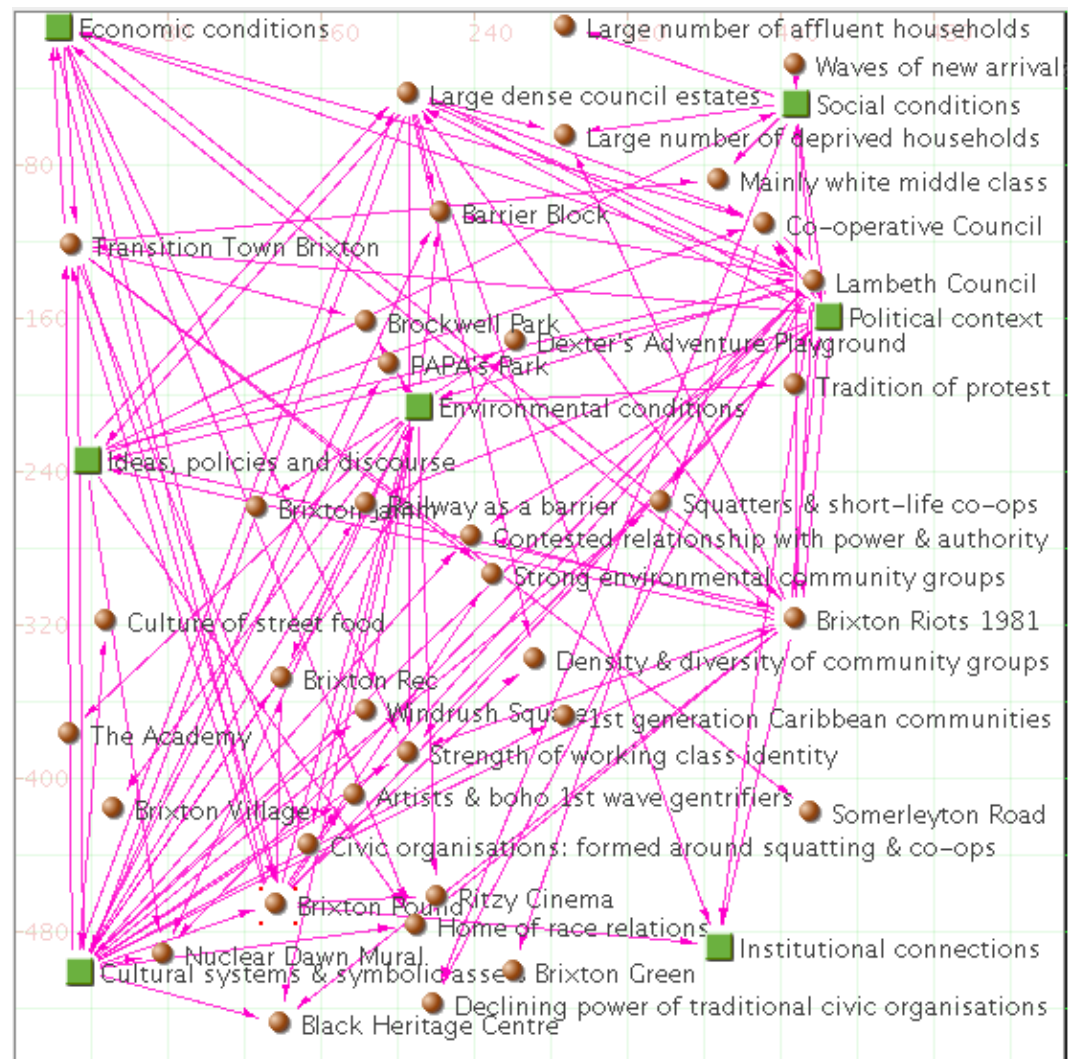
In preparing these exploratory “place difference” studies we have used a combination of research methods to identify and map locally-specific “lash ups” in the case study areas, including a rapid asset and network mapping exercise and qualitative interviews with council officials, individuals involved with community organizations, and people delivering front line services to the community. This exercise also drew on data previously collected by Social Life, and on insights and direct experience from our work.

For the full Brixton case study we attempted to identify and map across the six place-difference pillars the locally-specific combinations that contribute to Brixton’s local character. We used a simple, free social network analysis tool to map this data to build up a picture of the connections between different local elements (see figure 2).² Second, we made a qualitative assessment of the most influential elements in each place (see figure 3), by which we mean elements that are exerting an influence over current responses, experiences and decision-making. For the purposes of this paper our assessment was based on qualitative interviews and observation of the dynamics at work in each place during our innovation projects. As a next step in developing “place difference” as a conceptual and practical model, we propose to develop a research tool - a survey and a set of indicators - to systematize this part of the research process. Third, we attempted to apply Molotch et al’s idea of “tradition” by investigating how Brixton’s character influences local responses to external forces focusing on Brixton Green’s work on Somerleyton Road.

3.3 Case study: What makes Brixton like Brixton?

Brixton is a residential area of south London that is well connected to the rest of the City. It has a population of 73,000, with a flourishing market and shopping area, and a growing number of food-related businesses. It is well-known for its ethnic diversity and history of attracting people who are artistic or interested in alternative lifestyles. Brixton was built as a middle class suburb in the mid 19th century. Electric Avenue, in the heart of Brixton, was the first London street to be lit by electricity. Brixton was bombed in the second world war and many of these gap sites, alongside sites from slum clearances, were developed as large council estates from the 1950s onwards.

Figure 2: Mapping “character of place” in Brixton



The first migrants from the Caribbean – the “Windrush generation” – arrived in the area from 1948 onwards. Their first shelter was in the deep tube stations in nearby Clapham. Brixton’s private rented housing was the nearest accessible and affordable housing. By the 1970s Brixton had become the centre of London’s growing Caribbean community, but poverty, discrimination and poor education were common and work opportunities were limited. The Brixton riots in 1981 were the biggest of a wave of uprisings in England that year, sparked by tensions between the black community and the police, and high unemployment among Brixton’s black residents. The enquiry into Brixton’s riots, the Scarman report published in 1981, set the framework for a new approach to tackling racism, and was very influential in subsequent national policy and practice on area regeneration. Riots happened again in 1985 and in following years including in 2011.

After the 1980s other new communities arrived in Brixton, often inspired by the area’s cultural diversity, its history of protest and alternative lifestyles, and its relatively affordable housing. Brixton’s squats and short life coops in the 1970s and 1980s contributed to the arts and cultural heritage of the area; both Vincent Van Gogh and Damien Hirst lived in Brixton in their time.

In the last few years, Brixton, like many inner city London neighbourhoods, has experienced rapidly rising property prices, new economic activity, and a growing number of young professional homebuyers who are attracted by the area’s cultural diversity, nightlife and restaurants, and good transport connections. This change is exemplified by Brixton Village, a revival of the Granville Arcade that is part of Brixton market built in the 1930s. The revitalization of the Granville Arcade began in 2009 as a “meanwhile project” – offering empty shops in the partly-vacant arcade rent-free for three months to new or emerging businesses, food ventures or organizations. Today Brixton Village is thriving and has just opened Brixton’s first champagne bar, prompting angry protests from Yuppies Out a group campaigning against gentrification in south London. Opinions differ about whether Brixton’s economic changes have created new wealth and opportunity for longstanding local residents, or if the main benefit has been for people from outside Brixton and newcomers to the area. Meanwhile, many residents from more established communities in Brixton continue to struggle. Some wards, including Coldharbour (which includes Brixton Village) are amongst the most deprived in London; and in these areas wellbeing and resilience are low.

Political activism and radicalism have been a strong characteristic of Brixton, both within and outside formal institutions, over the past 60 years. Alongside grass roots protest, Lambeth Council (the London borough that includes Brixton) was characterised as “loony left” in the 1980s and refused to cooperate with central government financial constraints. In recent years the Labour administration has developed its “co-operative council” approach, which promotes the involvement of residents and local communities in service planning and delivery.

Brixton now has strong local media in the brixtonblog and Bugle, and pride in its heritage: a new Black Heritage Centre is being built. Brixton has many, diverse community organizations who play a significant role in local politics, activism, and local activities and events. Brixton has a particularly strong and well-established network of community-based environmental organizations and activist concerned with food growing and urban agriculture. There is a local currency, the Brixton Pound; Brixton Energy sets up cooperatively owned renewable energy projects on local estates, and Transition Town Brixton was one of the first of its kind in an urban area. But there are also visible signs of the pressure Brixton’s communities are facing. As in many parts of inner city London, a soup kitchen has been started. The longer standing creative community, linked to the squatting movement is now less visible than in former years. Some people have left as the housing prices rose; many squats and short life coops have been evicted.

Brixton’s many and diverse communities have arrived in distinct waves over time. The gentrifiers of 20 years ago are now at the forefront of concern, debate and protest about local people being priced out of the area. There are tensions between longer standing and new groups of residents, and between those from different social classes. Older established communities – black and white - now compete with many different new comers for a voice in local issues. There are intense feelings within Brixton’s many diverse communities about their future and protecting what they value about Brixton’s local character, in particular, its vibrant street life and cultural heritage, and socially and racially mixed communities.

3.4 Character and tradition at work in Brixton

From this mapping exercise, qualitative interviews and observation, we identified four critical elements of Brixton’s “place character” that exert a powerful influence over contemporary local responses to change and innovation. These are first, Brixton’s history of in-migration and demographic change, and the emergence of a local identity that embraces pluralism and diversity as key to Brixton’s sense of self. Second, the particular impact of the Caribbean and squatting communities, and the requirement for local activism to protect their legacies. Third, a local tradition of oppositional protest and activism that has included riots, protest by local against central government and popular current protests against gentrification. Fourth, is Brixton’s street life that clearly makes visible the area’s diversity and global connections: reggae playing from tiny shops squeezed into railway arches, market stalls, shop fronts that spill onto the street, rows of independent fresh

food sellers specializing in Caribbean and Latin American food, African fabrics, a bicycle co-op that is now 30 years old. Brixton’s character is highly visible, in a sense performative, and reinforced through everyday routines and rhythms.

These elements resonate in powerful ways in contemporary debates about change in Brixton. Each one became apparent in our work with Brixton Green about the development of Somerleyton Road, and shaped the way that residents, businesses and community-based organizations came together to create a plan for the proposed development that protected and preserved what local people value about Brixton’s character.

Brixton is still strongly defined by two formerly strong communities whose powers have waned: the Caribbean community and the alternative squatting and short life movement of the late 20th century. In our work with Brixton’s residents and businesses, we found certain places, buildings and objects to play an important role in carrying Brixton’s character, in particular in relation to these two communities. A local mural, the recreation centre, shops, open spaces, play a very important role in local debates. In interviews and observations it became clear that these places and objects materialize intangible ideas about local ownership, territory and shared history, and in this sense they become agents or actors in the story, process and practice of change in Brixton. For example, a local mural took on particular significance in debates about Somerleyton Road and Brixton’s past and future development. “The Nuclear Dawn” mural is on the side of Carlton Mansions, a short life community under threat of eviction, which is next to the Somerleyton Road development site and opposite Brixton Village. Protecting and preserving “The Nuclear Dawn” mural was a major concern for many people, both as a historic cultural landmark in its own right, as a means to acknowledge the importance of Carlton Mansions to Brixton’s cooperative housing movement, and some people would say, as a symbol of the local fight against gentrification.

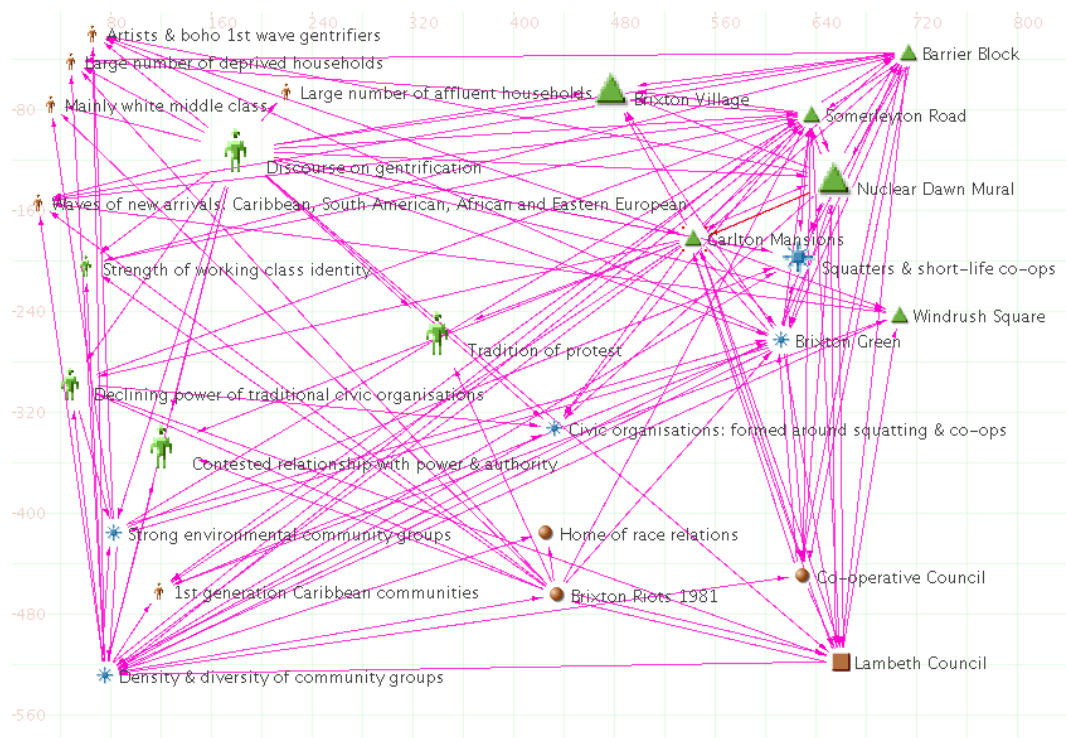
Brixton’s tradition of protest is defined by political activism, vocal opposition and contested debates. Current local debates about gentrification are heated and protests can be fierce. In our work with Brixton Green, local concern about gentrification directly influenced the ideas and proposals that residents put forward for the way Somerleyton Road should be developed. Key concerns were providing low-cost affordable housing for rent for local people, encouraging communities that were socially and ethnically mixed, including options for self build housing and interest in co-ownership. Most importantly, local people wanted to see power and influence over decision-making for the local community, both during the planning process and long-term through some form of local governance.

Figure 3: Nuclear Dawn mural on Carlton Mansions, Brixton



Source: Brian Barnes and Christine Thomas, flickr

Figure 4: “Character of place” and “tradition” influencing plans for Somerleyton Road



In Brixton, we see how new initiatives that offend against Brixton’s history of pluralism and acceptance of marginalized groups often lead to local opposition. We also see how the symbolic power of the established black and “squatter” communities is stronger than their formal influence on local decision-making. They have created important cultural assets that demand respect. In Brixton, it is important to include the full breadth of local communities in social action – a concern that was raised repeatedly in our work with Brixton Green.

This work suggests that Brixton’s character and tradition have enabled the area to adapt to change over recent decades, while retaining many of its distinctive social and cultural values and assets. However, our case study of Malmö in Sweden, suggests the city’s character and tradition, which were fit for purpose in the 20th century, are proving less appropriate for many of its critical 21st century challenges. Limits on word count mean there is not space to include a full case study about Malmö in this paper, however, we have applied the same “place difference” framework to explore Malmö’s character and tradition. This has offered a useful lens to explore the city’s current strengths, weaknesses, and potential to nurture social innovation.

4 Case study: “What makes Malmö like Malmö?”

Malmö is in southern Sweden. It is the country’s third largest city by population and one of the largest in Scandinavia. Malmö was an industrial and shipbuilding centre until the late 1980s.

Malmö has been adept at influencing wider frameworks – of government and society – to create the conditions that have allowed it to thrive. A “place difference” analysis suggests Malmö’s character stems from its geographical location, the strengths and weaknesses of its economy, its heritage of social solidarity, the strong relationship between local politicians and those in central government, and its rapidly changing demographics. Malmö’s geography and proximity to Denmark, and therefore to Europe, have given it economic advantage, and also made the city a gateway of arrival for economic migrants and refugees. This has created the diverse city of today.

Malmö's tradition is characterized by the strong relationships between local and central government cemented economic success up to the 1970s and 1980s, and underpinned the city's cultural and economic rebirth from the 1990s. We see this in the influence Malmö's local institutions had in the development of the Swedish welfare state, in the City's manufacturing success, and in its reinvention as a city of culture and high tech sustainable industry in the last two decades. Malmö's successes have been led by the ability of the City's elites to work with national government, and to embrace trends in wider society and the economy, to craft solutions that are backed by the Swedish state.

However the growth of a largely Muslim minority, of significant size and from many countries of origin, often living in considerable poverty and deprivation, has challenged Malmö's agencies and here we see the lash-ups that underpin Malmö's character fail. Dealing with plurality, with people from different cultural backgrounds, with different expectations and life experiences, requires a set of skills that are very different from providing high quality welfare services for a homogeneous population.

One example is how public agencies and institutions take account of local social networks and groupings, the ties within communities that provide support and self-help. In the past these were closely associated with the associations - the “föreningar” - including the churches, trade unions - that were characteristic of Swedish life. The power of these bodies is now less than in the past, and immigrant communities are more likely to turn to their own networks for help and support. There is some evidence that informal support in the deprived suburbs is relatively strong, helping residents get by in the face of quite profound deprivation. Malmö's agencies find it difficult to engage with these social networks as they seem temporary and insubstantial, compared to the solidity of the föreningar. Swedish statistics on social need only collect data on föreningar, rather than less structured volunteering and collective action, perpetuating the notion that less formal self help that has developed within ethnic minority communities is less valid than Swedish institutions. This is Malmö's innovation challenge, and many of the challenges that agencies are facing in crafting responses to this situation are explained by this analysis of character and tradition.

5 Conclusion

Our starting point for this work was to explore whether “place difference” could offer a means of investigating and understanding the specificity of local experience, and in doing so throw light on how social innovation is created and sustained in particular places. Our aim has been to try and take account of local dynamics, shaped by the way people, politics, ideas and discourse come together in specific ways that are often hard to detect but are highly influential in shaping local responses to change and innovation.

We feel this early, exploratory work about Brixton and Malmö generates valuable insights about local context that are relevant to both innovation in placemaking and area regeneration, and more broadly, to thinking about place-based social innovation. In particular, to understanding how local context is likely to shape responses to change and the success and outcomes of interventions. We have explored the unique combinations of factors that “make Brixton more like Brixton” and that continue to fuel its tradition of innovation, finding also that current trends and demographic change may threaten its “character” and “tradition” in the future; we have also seen how the features that “make Malmö more like Malmö” have only partially set it up for success in recent years, and how these are failing to equip it to generate and sustain the innovations needed to tackle its current most pressing problems.

Further work is needed to challenge and refine the idea of “place difference” and to develop a research tool and set of indicators to systematize the collection of local data. However, this initial work has given us a direction and strawman framework to take this forward. This analysis of Brixton and Malmö has confirmed that “place difference” can offer a dynamic way of conceptualising local experience that sheds useful light on how places innovate to challenge their most pressing challenges. As a conceptual and practical tool place difference has the potential to open up new insights and opportunities for creative and innovative responses to place-based problems.

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