

Reminiscing the Future Village

Intergenerational exchange for better communities.

By Nick Gant

Whilst getting old is a fundamental, natural and defining part of life itself, the idea of being old can often appear alien to young people and conversely older people can feel disconnected from young people. In both cases this can breed misunderstanding and even fear or distrust between different generational groups despite the unifying fact *we are all young once* and might all be old too. This situation is highlighted when we consider the politics and process of planning the places in which we live. Localism legislation and radical changes in planning policy have seemingly afforded local people greater rights and statutory processes which might enable them to have a say in how the places they live develop in the future. But who possesses the knowledge required to act upon this? Old people possess experiential knowledge and lived, tacit comprehension of a place, affording great insight. However when considering planning for 20, 30 or even 50 years time surely young people need to be engaged in the discussion as they will live the consequences of decisions in the future? Additionally, how might young people benefit from the knowledge and wisdom of those older than themselves and could this lead to shared visions for the future of neighbourhoods?

The Community21 project developed by The University of Brighton and Action in Rural Sussex works with communities to collaboratively design and use 'accessible technology' in ways, which help to unify and exchange ideas and experiences between young and old people in inclusive and engaging ways. This results in relevant and meaningful co-designed visions for liveable places in the future. Equally these processes have demonstrated the power to elicit empathy in young people of what it is like to be old and what their lives might be like in the future when they are older too.

By involving old people (in their eighties) and young people (in their early to mid teens) from the community of Heathfield in East Sussex project leaders Nick Gant and Zoe Ganderton encouraged old people to think back 50 years in *the past* and tell stories about this time in the to young people from the community. The young people helped capture these stories using modern media tools such as digital video as a part of their citizenship lessons at school. Young people also reflected on *the present* and both parties shared and compared their experiences. These included issues relating to isolation and the geographic separation of parts of the village, changing economic fortunes of the community over time and the need for places to meet and socialise. A lack of work opportunities and appropriate housing also meant both older *and* younger people leaving the community.

One key method involved using 'ageing apps' on smart phone and tablet devices. The young people photographed their faces and applied an ageing effect using the apps. The funny and engaging process of ageing themselves so they looked 50 years older was not only quick and good fun but it provided striking images of the young people that united them with their older collaborators. Recent developments of this method used in the County Town of Lewes as part of their neighbourhood planning includes reanimating the young people's old personas to tell their stories in uncanny, moving video clips. By imagining and visualising their lives in 50 years time, the young people adopted some of the views of their older collaborators and they empathised with the issues of their older neighbours, relating this to their own lives in the future.

Both groups combined their views into coherent visions and ideas that responded to the collective concerns and ideas for the village. With the help of students from the University and some photo manipulation and 3D modelling apps, the participants were able to subvert recognisable images of places in the community and augment them to illustrate their visions for the village in 2061. Examples included a vision for the local supermarket, identified by the older participants as being one of the only places to meet their local peers. Their collaborative design added laybys and places to stop and talk but without annoying other shoppers – something the older members often experienced. The supermarket also has local fruit and vegetables grown by the community as part of an integrated social-economy that reflected historical experiences. Local, ‘traditional’ materials were applied to affordable housing with integrated work units and water conservation features – all identified through the shared experiences from the past and present. Young people imagined their lives as older people working as farmers or café owners that seek to utilise local, indigenous meat – something older people routinely ate in the past but younger people had never even considered as an abundant, sustainable food resource. Collaboratively they envisioned and depicted images of the community where once plentiful species of wildlife have returned due to the communal actions of the village.

These processes that utilise contemporary technology, offered new insights into how older people’s experiences could inform younger people’s expectations, needs and understanding of their futures. Equally the visualisations of places augmented to represent shared visions provide a motivating and dynamic voice and locally authenticated steer for action and development in the communities. Parish and Town councils have engaged in these processes and Community21 and Action In Rural Sussex lead community development exercises utilising these tools as a way to engage formerly disconnected generations. Technology is often considered the domain of the young, ‘digital natives’ but these approaches demonstrate that they can be a unifying force in helping utilise and share the valuable experience of older people. It also reinforces the fact that the quality, value and meaning of digital content is still defined by the people who create and use it – regardless of age.

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