INTRODUCTION

Women, who have been at-risk or are at-risk from being harmed by themselves or others, may be fragile, disempowered, and at times invisible. To be at-risk relates to psychological, physical, social or cultural conditions that can cause instability, reduced faculties or lack of control in some way, all of which affect the sense of self. How we experience a sense of self often arises from our position within a particular social setting. Erving Goffman, who refers to ‘impressions’ or ‘performances’ that create an ‘image’ of self, writes that this experience of self ‘does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of [her] action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witness [...].’ He – is a product of a scene. Often the ‘scene’ in which victims of domestic violence find themselves when they seek help in an emergency or as a means of escape, will continue to mark them as victims or as powerless [which can lead to a perpetuation of the cycle of crisis].

The intention of this research paper is to develop an understanding and a strategy to inform a way of working effectively and collaboratively with women who have experienced domestic violence. The collaboration will include a non-traditional design process that challenges existing paradigms that generate community and social infrastructure. This research team aims to establish a design process, that by listening closely to the people involved engages and empowers them to become partners in the final process of designing a women’s refuge. Drawing from a discussion and analysis of a number of national and international examples of participatory design practice, this paper examines potentially democratic relationships established through design. The research challenges the construct of consultation, and instead demands collaboration or consensus by melding diverse viewpoints in an open and equitable manner. It examines the efficacy of ‘participatory’ design in terms of the original intent of the design and the effect on the people affected by the process — and ideally, these people are those who are actively involved in the process.

Spatial designers are responsible for enabling and learning from people who occupy and have intimate knowledge of the places being designed. In addition, the occupants could be encouraged to speculate on and initiate other ways of designing the places they occupy. Architects such as Gordon Matta-Clark aimed to inspire people to seize control over their lives by changing the spaces they occupy. He strove to demonstrate how the process of altering built space could affect ownership over that space, as well as effecting ‘a kind of psychic alteration.’ By altering the physical matter of buildings, stripping away the skins, shooting out windows, undermining the structure and generally cutting the space up, his work was ‘a model for people’s constant action on space’. Fundamentally, through these works, Matta-Clark was protesting against the mid-twentieth century misinterpretation of early twentieth century modern ideals that had led to large scale re-locations of low socio-economic groups into problematic large-scale housing developments — ‘a de-humanized condition at both domestic and institutional level.’ He was concerned that ‘the notion of mutable space is taboo especially in one’s own house. People live in their space with temerity that is frightening. Home owners generally do little more than maintain their property.’ Historically, a lineage of radical designers, artists and writers (including from those within the cauldron of political forces of the Bauhaus, the Surrealists, including the outcast Georges Bataille, the Situationists and others) have railed in frustration against a general passive consumption of constructed space and people’s obedience to the spatial visions of others. Philosophically driven to enrich and empower the lives of ordinary people, these groups advocated for actions to shift the power imbalances incorporated within the agendas of particular public spaces such as auditoria, museums, suburbia, or circulation routes within cities. In these realms, people usually perform in the manner that it was envisaged they would. Throughout this lineage from the Bauhaus to Matta- Clark, there is a belief in people being empowered by the act of altering and creating their own space. In contrast, other
prevalent practices position the designer as the all-knowing designer-director whom others perceive as the designer as carer or ‘patriarch’ of less fortunate or uninformed recipients of the design.

Consultative processes in design emerged with the seminal work of C. Thomas Mitchell (2009) captured in Redefining Design: From Form to Experience. Mitchell ‘points out how many designs, particularly in architecture, fail to suit their intended purpose—not because of their style but because of the design process itself.’12 His focus shifts the convention from the designer as guru to human-centred processes that aim to capture the person in relation to the environment; and the activities or processes described highlight how users can actually participate in activities in order to convey their understandings. Collectively, the designer and the potential users construct the basis of the design.

Since Mitchell, others have sought to develop modes of practice that reflect the spirit of democratic design. Importantly, Christopher Day’s Consensus Design: Socially Inclusive Process13 (2003) highlights the distinction between collaboration and consultation; to be collaborative is to listen and to act together. Day’s work contrasts this with any consultative process by which focus groups and community gatherings invest in workshopping their needs and aspirations, only to find that their voices are only used as context rather than as initiators of change or catalysts for positive or responsive design. Unfortunately, where the consultation lacks collaboration, the participants’ impact is minimal, and/or they may be removed from the design process and disconnected from the final outcome. Such an outcome may reinforce disempowerment. Day proposes an alternative, consensus design, that is, design for everybody.14 He stresses that people come to want things by working through things together, and thereby avoiding the pitfalls of compromise15 and understanding the importance of being aware of others’ emotions.16 Thus he challenges democratic design, because democracy, he believes, involves the need for voting and majority-based decisions. For him, consensus design overcomes these limitations.

It should be noted that the term, democratic design is also used to refer to design outcomes that are inclusive of all. One example is the well-established practice of Universal Design. Its aim is to overcome ‘barriers to integration, whether psychological, educational, family-related, cultural, social, professional, urban or architectural.’17 Examples are widely available within both architectural and interior design developments. Design processes are also implicated; for example, Demirbilek and Demirkan (2004) discuss participatory design in relation to universal design goals.

‘...[a] participatory design model is proposed where human beings can improve their quality of life by promoting independence, as well as safety, usability and attractiveness of the residence. Brainstorming, scenario building, unstructured interviews, sketching and videotaping are used as techniques in the participatory design sessions...’18

In this paper, we use the adjective democratic to describe a construct that opposes one where the designer is situated as the authoritative voice in a relationship. Instead, we aim to design a process whereby the potential users—or their representatives—are empowered to participate in discussions and decision making, and thereby, to contribute purposefully to the design of environments and their realisation.

In order to achieve that end, we have adopted an integrative strategy, whereby we can identify both similarities and diversity in regard to people’s understandings of a phenomenon. Thereby, this process leads to a deeper understanding of the issues revolving around the particular place that is being designed and the potential consequences. The process, which has evolved to achieve this end, has a strong potential to involve users and designers in collaboration to build a framework; one which similar user groups will apply to help express their needs and aspirations, as well as cares and reservations.

Three sources of information regarding women who live with domestic violence are applied to the enquiry, and processes to inform the design of facilities for these women are proposed. Knowledge from
key literature, built works, and past-user narratives are used to ascertain: what are the characteristics of an environment that engender a sense of vulnerability and/or a sense of security?

By combining these three sources, we can identify the principles that could positively influence and inform design [in this case, for vulnerable user groups]. The first step of this integrative strategy is that the findings emerging from the discussions with the women provide insights—insights that almost immediately can be confirmed with these women. Then these findings will be integrated into a non-verbal installation (or tool) with which the next potential users of a women’s facility could engage. The use of non-verbal triggers is a radical change to the normal briefing process—most commonly involving dialogues with carers, managers, and the like. We have based our assumption on the ability of people to extrapolate meaning through non-verbal means because it is known that environments can communicate—the physical environment participates in the way people construct meaning. The physical environment is known to impact on how we interpret the environment physically, emotionally, and aesthetically.

Spaces, places and buildings are more than just props in people’s lives; they are imbued with meaning and resonance, as they symbolize people’s personal histories, interpersonal relationships, and shared events in people’s extended relationships, families, communities and wider culture.

Therefore, we will analyse three examples of built works, which encapsulate aspects of potentially democratic processes. By examining the commonalities, key attributes are revealed and may be harnessed into our proposed process. These examples, The Lift Project, London, The First Nations Longhouse, Vancouver, and Kojonup will now be described.

The Lift New Parliament

Where did you last have a great conversation? This is the question explored during 2006 and 2007 by 250 participants within 46 creative workshops exploring possibilities for the creation of a new community space for London’s ‘Lift New Parliament.’ Led by AOC architects and a number of artists, the participants workshopped how people feel in different spaces and ways in which different spatial elements can affect communication across different cultures. The process commenced in 2006 when London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT), one of Europe’s leading arts organisations, and The Architecture Foundation ran an open architectural competition for the design of the LIFT New Parliament building. Their brief called for a transportable, mobile meeting and performance space that would ‘promote a culture of public participation’ within a budget of 400,000 pounds. The competition itself was considered part of the participation process because, after the architectural adjudicators had shortlisted the top four entries, the public were then invited to participate in selecting one of the four designs to be the winner.

However, one of the dangers of democratic design processes emerged. Who in fact has the power? Who controls the destiny of a project and the character or quality of the outcome? In this case the design, unanimously selected as the winner by the adjudicators, was the design least preferred by the public. Arguing that the public vote was close—only 5.2% between the most and least preferred designs—the adjudicators then overrode the public’s decision and appointed the architectural firm AOC to the project. Other discriminating attributes are also evident. For example, the online voting procedures can be seen as potentially exclusive because it is a medium more likely engage younger generations than older. Likewise, as London is the most culturally diverse city in the world, equitable access to the process would require the message to be delivered in numerous languages.

In addition, Day’s warning, mentioned above, concerning the limitations of consultation rather than true consensus comes to mind; for what followed the voting ‘incident’ were the workshops in which the
public participated to further develop the ‘winning’ design. LIFT’s 2008 Report states that ‘the creative workshops most strongly influenced the design through the introduction of a giant front window providing natural light and fresh air, and the idea of internal curtains that allow the LIFT to be both a public and an intimate space.’ Therefore, as this involvement appears to be, especially considering 46 workshops were run, at the public opening of the completed building, AOC’s Daisy Froud thanked the participants for ‘their important contribution’ because the ‘LIFT would not be the building it is without [their] ideas, energy and commitment.’

Despite the questionable process of ‘participation’ in this project, underpinning and driving the process was the laudable ambition that the project would engage ‘East London communities who face significant change through regeneration,’ thereby increasing the community’s opportunities to participate in civic life. While Youtube and other images of the building process and subsequent events and performances portray a culturally diverse range of young, happy and engaged people, there is no evaluation of the efficacy of the participatory process, and therefore, the enduring outcomes have proved impossible to identify. In late 2007, funding was cut to numerous arts organisations including the newly launched The LIFT New Parliament. While a replacement sponsor was quickly found, we have been unable to source updated information on the project, indicating that following the initial surge of activity—we can only speculate—the logistics of managing the erection and dismantling of the mobile structure as it moved around London had proved unviable. This would seem a pity because, as John Middleton, the architect, reported, ‘the Lift provides a platform for local residents to come together as a community and engage with their changing environment.’ According to the LIFT 2008 Report, embedded within this project were training schemes for 16-25 years olds to develop basic skills for both festival crews and volunteering including front-of-house and backstage work, venue management and health and safety training.

The First Nations Longhouse

Located at the University of British Columbia (UBC), in Vancouver, Canada, the Longhouse was developed to address both philosophical and pedagogical issues of importance to First Nations people. The First Nation Longhouse exemplifies self-determined architecture in the process adopted. Marina Lommerse identifies a number of key strategies that constituted the design of the Long House: A Talking Wall process; decision making, ceremony and witnessing; building management and design outcome; and from her analysis, a number of key attributes emerge which complement the aims of our research team toward design of spaces for women at risk.

Strong themes emerge from the study that explain why the building is a success. The ability to speak for oneself meant the cultural group drove the project from beginning to end, resulting in a building that suits their functional and spiritual needs. Cultural symbols were selected that represent the community members in this place and time. The Longhouse also serves as a tool for the community to move forward. The process also enabled redefinition, that is, it created a self-generated identity that suits them in this transformative period. Regeneration was made possible through the involvement of elders and respect for the Creator and traditional ceremonies, while synergies between the time, the players and the processes created something where the whole is larger than the sum of the parts.

Therefore, key attributes of a process that engenders democratic relationships seem to have been present. As a result, a number of principles may inform the proposed model which we are developing for projects such as those for the women at risk. Two aspects seem to be prevalent. Firstly, respect for the contributors and their needs. For example, a range of participants were included to capture all relevant groups; and it is evident that time was spent identifying principles that are important to community subgroups, as well as what meaning the building/interior has for the various peoples. Secondly, procedures were adopted which enabled those attending to access the process. For example,
there was variety in the way material was gathered, using modes relevant to the people and including the participants’ rituals. Opportunities arose from consensual decision making, and communication was facilitated by taking time to listen (rather than telling), making points arising explicit and visible (such as using the Talking Wall31), reiterating and reflecting on ideas emerging in previous sessions, as well as making external parameters, such as the budget, explicit. Although it takes time to build confidence, processes that rank those issues identified as important for the community need to occur with the community members. Lommerse highlights, that when undertaking such processes, there is a need to be cognizant that there is a link between the activities that the person engages in and his/her sense of who they are through their investment in the process and what they are contributing toward.32

Kodja Place:

Museology is a field inherently fraught with misrepresentation and power imbalance, as lives lived and events passed are re-presented and re-interpreted elsewhere in time, place and culture. One example to the contrary is the conception and development of The Kodja Place Visitor and Interpretive Centre, where, over a period of years, approximately 600 local, culturally diverse people were able to contribute their stories in their own particular way toward the development of the local museum. Set in Kojonoop, a small farming town of south of Perth, Western Australia, this regional museum, completed in 2007, tells ‘One Story, Many Voices’ and represents a community’s hopes for the future.33 According to Robert Sexton, Shire President at the time, even though there were a lot of disparate people involved, everyone wanted the same thing; the Noongar people and the white population wanted to tell their story together.34 To achieve this end, three elements that catalysed, drove and sustained this community project were community involvement, excellence in design35 and local skills development.36

Through participation and collaboration, many personal and confronting stories are told within Kodja. Craig McVee reiterates ‘we wanted to tell it the way it was’.37 Elders wanted to portray their battles for survival, which continue to impact on aboriginal society today, although even now not everyone can or wants to understand.38 In her recent critique of the experience and aesthetics of Kodja, Annalise Lemm (interior architecture academic) recounts, ‘past cultural power imbalances of the twentieth century are not explicitly declared but are experienced’.39 However, she remains concerned about the porosity created by the visitor’s own lived cultural understanding and experience, because this is the filter through which the curated representation will or will not be read. Lemm writes: ‘much depends upon our cultural understanding and past experience and our willingness to examine these issues and interpret the many-layered meanings as our personal transaction permits.’40 That is, the outcome of any design has its own life beyond the initial process.

The community speaks with pride and hope about the Kodja design process, the innovative approach to telling their story ‘with one voice’, and about the significant interest the outside world has shown in their story— their interior.41 This re-definition of a disparate group as one, derived from the telling of their story, distinguished them from the outside world. Yi-Fu Tuan states that ‘the aspirations, needs, and functional rhythms of personal and group life’42 are distinguishing features [of what?]. For him, these rhythms reiterate a kind of ritual of ownership and love of place that is performed through both rivalry and conflict or their antithesis—cooperation. Ultimately, catalysed by a shared desire to tell their intertwined stories and carried along by their shared commitment, the process of creating The Kodja Place exemplifies how building community ownership and understanding through participatory design practice was able to empower a community to positively affect broader community reconciliation.

On reflection, what are the key attributes of this exemplar that can inform future projects? Essentially, the inclusion of ‘many voices’ in order to gain a deep understanding of issues and viewpoints is essential—it enables a sense of belonging as well as enriching the data from which the project is built. In addition, access to the diversity of voices facilitates different individual and groups within the
community’s understandings so that people may be truly heard. Community ownership is a key attribute, and therefore, the processes and outcome must reflect the local context as well as participants. Participation in the design process, as an instrumental part of the project realisation, is mandatory to achieve belonging and authenticity of the stories.

APPLICATION

The three case studies are juxtaposed to the concept of democratic design, revealing that community participation does not necessarily equate with democratic design. Although democratic design definitions are evident within the theory, each case study exemplifies community participation, but not all reflect the definitions of democratic design extrapolated from those in the literature.

On reflection, a number of issues are synthesised as a driving force to our pending practice. In summary, these are, firstly, if engaging in democratic design, the designers must be willing to enable the non-design voices to be heard. When it comes to the final project resolution, how do designers navigate the issues of power and commitment to equality of voices to ensure a quality outcome that embraces the needs and demands of the user group/s? How can different voices be heard equivalently, while contributing to the overall projects differently? This may mean that an open and respectful process makes these roles and differing forms of knowledge explicit from the beginning. Or, it could mean that what is deemed to be good design is re-evaluated.

Secondly, equality of access for all potential users needs to be addressed. Therefore, strategies need to be introduced to ensure that all the potential participants have access to the process. Considerations such as language, educational level, cultural background, technological competencies, and the like, need to be considered, depending on the context. In association, participants may require methods that enable them to be able to access the processes, for as part of their daily lives, they may or may not be comfortable with certain processes. For example, modes of interaction with Indigenous people or particular daily requirements for religious groups need to be considered. Therefore, open dialogue is essential to reflect needs such as their functional and spiritual needs.

Thirdly, as noted above, demonstrating respect for the contributors and their needs is an essential aspect of the process, so that opportunities are orchestrated or arise to preference consensual decision-making and communication. In addition, the participants may have opportunities for local skills development. Overall, the most important aspect of the process is to be cognisant that there is a link between the activities embedded within the design process and community engagement. As a result, a person’s sense of who they are is implicated. As stated previously, participation in the design process, as an instrumental part of the project realisation, is mandatory to achieve belonging and authenticity of the stories.

Fourthly, the sustainability or viability of the process and the project are important. Consensus design is about belonging and about longevity. It is important that intervention through design results in a substantiated outcome that supports local needs and aspirations. As a result, community members are influenced so that they positively affect broader community issues. Essentially, the inclusion of ‘many voices’ in order to gain a deep understanding of issues and viewpoints is essential; and the development of a sense of belonging is critical for a successful outcome. Community ownership is a key attribute, and therefore, the processes and outcome must reflect the local context as well as participants. The outcome of any design has its own life beyond the initial process.

As stated at the beginning of this paper, Day questions concepts such as consultation, collaboration, and democratic processes. Because we define democratic as a construct that opposes one where the designer is situated as the authoritative voice in a relationship. In relation to our emerging project, we
are hypothesising such an approach. As a priority, the findings emerging through the discussions with the women who are involved in the first stage—the survivors of domestic violence—will provide insights that can then be confirmed with the women who may use the designed facility in the future—these are the women at-risk. In turn, these findings from stage one will be integrated into a non-verbal installation (or tool) with which the potential users of a women’s facility could engage as a means to promote discussion, and as a result, understanding.

The use of non-verbal triggers is a radical change to the normal briefing process—most commonly involving dialogues with carers, managers, and the like. Although proposed around the social issue of women at-risk, we believe that this process will be relevant and transformative for other socially sensitive design projects. It recognises that not all voices believe they are equal or that they can express themselves openly. Therefore, visual, aural and oral communication, as well as tangible models or equivalent objects or installations that are created through the processes of making, are incorporated as strategies to explore and apply, depending on the people for and with whom we are designing.

‘Women feel it’s them – they need to learn about the cycle of violence and boundaries.’

1 Goffman, Erving. 1959. The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. 244-245.
4 Melbourne: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. 6.
5 Bingo 1974, and Conical Intersect 1975
6 Window Blow-Out 1976
7 Day’s End 1975
9 Wall, “Gordon Matta-Clark’s Building Dissections.”
11 Walter Gropius Total Theater Project 19027
13 Mitchell From Form to Experience... Mitchell, back cover
15 Day, C. 2003. 19-20
18 Ginerup, Council of Europe. 9.
20 Rappoport, A. 1982; 1990 Meaning of the Built Environment
22 Melbourne: Victorian Health Promotion Foundation. P6
24 Woodman, Ellis. ‘Public Platform,’ July 18 2008 www.BONLINE.CO.UK, quoting Geoff Shearcroft AOC (the architect who won the competition)
Talking Wall is a strategy where people record issues on a wall where the contributor and others can see the contributions as they develop.
Robert Sexton, Shire President at the time citing a Noongar community member’s plea. ABC podcast accessed 18 February 2012
Architects Phillip Gresley and Marco Vitino designed the museum that has embodied the Noongar philosophy that there ‘are no straight lines in nature so please let there be no straight lines here.’ Robert Sexton cite Noongar request. ABC podcast accessed 18 February 2012 http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/2008-09-12/3183860
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