
The Oxenham House Neighbourhood Project: How can Photographic Research be Used to Facilitate Community Among Neighbours?

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Abstract

One of the central questions in community studies has been whether community can exist in a neoliberal, individualistic urban society which suffers from a decline in civic participation, but very few studies have investigated the social processes that create active community and the visceral qualities of community spirit. This study I carried out with my neighbours, who are living in an area in south-east London which is currently undergoing rampant regeneration, leaving existing residents behind in the drive to make urban space for the wealthy, investigated what community means to them and how, through participatory photographic research, a sense of community could be created in order to face change together. The Oxenham House Neighbourhood Project found that community needs to be understood as communication, as informal social bonds created through repeated encounters, collective action and a shared dialogue, resulting in communal values such as familiarity, trust and a sense of common purpose. The project created these social processes through socially-engaged photographic research, visualising the process to aid residents in consultations, image-production and the dissemination process. Working in dialogue with my neighbours in the identification of problems, finding solutions and working towards change, has transformed strangers living alongside each other into neighbours who engage in active community. Community is clearly still valid in the 21st century city and this project demonstrates that visual and socially-engaged research has the capacity to bring about social change, however small. This paper examines this project in greater detail, showing the images created in the process.

Keywords: community studies, community arts, socially, engaged art, participatory photography

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