SOCIAL RESEARCH IN DESIGN

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PART 1:
INTRODUCING SOCIAL
RESEARCH IN DESIGN

INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL RESEARCH IN DESIGN

This handbook, and the workshop that it accompanies, provides a training in Social Research in Design; an approach to managing and integrating social research within lighting design. By the end of the workshop, you should have a clear sense of the roles that social research can play in design, and some experience of carrying out social research while designing. Over the course of this week we will develop social research skills as an integral part of the process of doing lighting design. The aim is not to train workshop participants as social researchers – which would be an impossible task in five days. Rather, you should come out of this with a better sense of how to think through social research in relation to design, as well as some experience of doing social research.

In part 1 of this handbook, we focus on Social Research in Design as an overall approach and introduce the basic concepts that we will be working with. The rest of the handbook will then work through four central themes and activities that are essential for social research in design:

- **What do (we think) we know,**

- **Doing social research,**

- **Articulating Light and**

- **Integrating social research in design.**

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Both the handbook and the workshop are organized around three key questions that should be addressed throughout a design process, in order to get a structured understanding of the social spaces designers intervene in, and of how to use social research effectively. These questions will be raised repeatedly over the week and we will be carrying out activities that focus on each of them so it's a good idea to keep them clearly in mind:

- **What do (we think) we know about the people we are designing for?**

  Being clear about the social knowledges and assumptions we are acting on

- **How can we learn more about them more efficiently and practically?**

  Designing targeted and appropriate research strategies

- **How can we integrate social knowledges into design at every stage?**

  Thinking practically about the role of research in design processes and decisions

It is important to be clear that Social Research in Design is not about controlling design, or constraining it to stick to the 'facts' and 'evidence'. Nor does Social Research in Design promise hard science and technical methods. Rather, the aim is to work with the design process, bringing out clearly the social assumptions that designers employ so that they can be questioned and developed. This connects design to the people we design for.

As designers, you already have various understandings of the social environment you design for. Indeed, in order to do any design for the social world you need to have some conception about how society is organised. However, time and money pressures, as well as typically having expertise in spatial and technical rather than social research, force designers to only superficially collect knowledge of the social spaces they design for, relying on common sense or client briefings.

This workshop and handbook build on designers' existing knowledge and expertise to further develop skills in understanding 'the social' by drawing on the insights of social science approaches, most notably sociology and anthropology. The 'tool-box' of skills that is provided - techniques, ways of thinking and working, concepts and analytical skills - can then be more systematically applied to different design briefs and applied at the workplace.

LIGHTING DESIGN IS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

Lighting design is a major social intervention, impacting people and their ways of life. It also depends on social knowledge – designers act on information and assumptions about the people and spaces they design for. Designers have to develop detailed understandings about the spaces they intervene in – not only in terms of the built environment, but also what these spaces mean to the people who use them.

These social understandings, however, are usually not made explicit and systematic, even though they are largely driving the design processes and decisions. Designers often need tools that will allow them to *systematically* capture the needs, understandings and practices of the social groups or communities they design for.

Social Research in Design addresses this problem by providing both a research approach and a research toolkit that helps to identify stakeholders and their practices, and to feed this knowledge back into the design process. As part of this, it also addresses the crucial issue of convincing clients of the importance of Social Research in Design as a basis for more effective outcomes.

Social Research in Design is an *approach*, not just a bundle of methods – and the workshop will aim to develop ways of thinking about research. Fundamentally, we emphasise that research should be integrated within design, helping to raise questions and respond to design issues; that it should help designers be reflexive and questioning about what they know and how they know about the people they design for; and that research can help make the process of knowing about users more systematic and effective.

LIGHT AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

Light is a fundamental infrastructure in all social life. It profoundly affects the ways we socialise, perceive and construct our environments and navigate through them, determining what kinds of sociability – if any - can be enacted after dusk. Light is the stuff we *need*, *make* and *shape* for and through living any social life.

Light is not only essential in the domestic realm, but plays an increasingly important role in urban design. New technologies, most notably LEDs, have opened up new debates on how the urban realm can and should be lit at night for different reasons: from preventing 'anti-social' behaviour and cutting carbon costs, to city-branding and spectacle. Lighting design, therefore, has moved into the spotlight of urban design and regeneration debates and is more and more recognised as a powerful aspect in not only determining way-finding in the nocturnal city, but also creating particular cityscapes.

Lighting design is, therefore, now situated within a complex array of historical, social and economic contexts. Against this backdrop, no social research tool can provide simple facts, nor can design provide ultimate solutions. Design – at its best – can only be a critical and creative engagement with the complexity of social spaces; and the aim of Social Design Research is to support this critical engagement.

LIGHT, LANGUAGE AND LEGIBILITY

Light is fundamentally important to social life, but it is also, paradoxically, 'invisible'. People generally take light for granted as infrastructure for their social lives, and do not often notice or talk about it. As we will explore in some detail later, getting people to talk about light in social research is quite difficult as they largely lack a language of light and an awareness of features of light that designers usually consider self-evident.

One concern of Social Research in Design (as in Activity 3 – Articulating Light) is to help develop a language and awareness of light. At the same time, much social research in lighting design is not directly about light at all. Instead we are focused on the social lives and practices of diverse people: who uses this space?

How? Why? What are their needs and issues in this space? How do different people use it differently, perhaps in conflict? We can then fit lighting into the picture, developing and testing creative solutions to social spaces. In this sense, Social Research in Design is a way of thinking and a toolkit that enhances the designer's role as a space curator, sensitive to all these complexities in order to create nightscapes that can be 'read' (understood and used) by stakeholders.

A user's ability to 'read' urban spaces, pathways and forms depends on their perceptions and understandings of the layout of places and how they are connected. Spaces can be more or less legible – easy to read and understand, and therefore to move about it, feel safe in, do what you are trying to do in. One way of thinking about the relationship between lighting design and social spaces is through the concept of legibility (originally developed by the urban theorist Kevin Lynch in the 1950s): Lighting design helps make a social space more legible to users, highlighting architectural features, pathways or landmarks and gathering spaces so that the space is more readable and useable. For that very reason, lighting designers need to understand how different users in fact read the social space, their map or image of that space. We could say that lighting design is about helping people make practical sense of their space; and social research should help get at understandings of the space that will help both users and designers.

In addition, the vivid and legible images of the city that lighting design creates can play an important wider social role: they can give social spaces a distinctive, shared and memorable identity. This is aspect of lighting is usually thought about as place branding, but social research can help connect the image of the city to people's hopes and concerns for their city, their understanding of its history and their sense of what is important in their space. Knowing what to light and how to light it means understanding what people value. Social research can help finding out what exactly makes a place feel familiar, distinct and legible – or unfamiliar, generic and illegible – for the people who use it.

WHAT IS 'THE SOCIAL' IN SOCIAL RESEARCH?

'The social' is a slippery term, and we have already used it in several different ways. Firstly, we've already noted that design is already a 'social' practice in various ways. Designers design for the social world they themselves occupy and their designs are an attempt to meet the particular needs and practices of different individuals, groups of people or populations.

Secondly, we have started by saying that designers already have social knowledges and assumptions – ideas about how the world works, what lighting does, how people act and so on. A basic aim of Social Research in Design is to build on this existing social knowledge, making it more explicit and systematic, but also to show how various social research tools used widely by sociologists and anthropologists can be deployed to think more systematically about the social contexts and uses of design.

This still leaves the question of what exactly are we looking at when we look at 'the social' and do 'social research'. Speaking of 'the social' makes common sense for most people but is difficult to nail down. For the purposes of this handbook, we are talking about people's practices, beliefs, relationships and institutions – the way they are organised and organise themselves in very specific and different ways in different places. We also mean the specific forms taken by things and materials in specific places and social worlds.

The social is therefore – necessarily – a mess of disparate stuff related to each other in complex and changing ways. Think of all the things and interrelationships

that make up we call a street or an office, and about the arrangements that keep a street or an office keep its shape over time. Because 'the social' is basically a very messy complexity, it is useful to think of it as an 'assemblage': we understand a street or an office not by finding rules, laws or statistics but by understanding the way things are assembled or put together, and how they hold together (or fall apart) over time.

All this should make it clear that 'the social' doesn't mean an area that is deprived or problematic (has 'social problems'), or one that we think is more of a community rather than a commercial space (a housing estate is more 'social' than a shopping mall). In this sense, the Whitecross Estate is social not because it is social housing, or a community, or has more 'real' people (rather than businesses). It is social in the same sense as any other space we might be involved in lighting: they all involve the interplay of the many different understandings, actors and interactions that make up the particularity of any space. Systematically understanding these social assemblages is what it means to generate 'social knowledges'.

Thinking of the social as a messy complexity or assemblage of stuff raises two final issues that are important for lighting design and that underlie Social Research in Design as an approach:

Firstly, people often talk about the social versus the technical, or culture as opposed to science, or the human as opposed to the material. In fact, it is much more useful to work from the assumption that 'the social' does not include only humans and their relationships but also materials, technologies and objects. Social assemblages like streets and offices clearly involve integrated relationships between materials, technologies and social practices and people. This is crucial for lighting design: we do not simply light a social space, or respond to social needs. Rather, our lighting designs are part of constructing assemblages, are part of those social arrangements. We make 'the social' as much as we respond to it.

Secondly, this understanding of the 'social' is different from psychological or economic understandings. Psychology and economics are largely concerned with individuals and both might ask 'how do individual people chose or decide?' and both might add up those individual decisions to find out 'group behaviour'. Social research starts from the assumption that individuals are not always (or even often) the best place to start from. Individuals do indeed populate the social world but they do so as members of families, groups, subcultures, communities, villages, towns, cities, nations. If we focus solely on the individual's use of something we can only learn so much about social uses of design. In fact, the things that appear to make us an 'individual' are very much shaped by our identity and membership of our particular 'social' world. Our individual identity is something that is also shared with others, it is something that is shaped through social interaction. Social Research in Design is sensitive to these shared social characteristics shaping individuals' use of things and the shared and located social context of design use and aims at systematising these social characteristics. A systematic understanding of these social characteristics is called 'social knowledges'.

As social researchers, we are aiming to get at how the specific site we are designing for is put together, and how our design ideas will relate to how that complex assemblage works. And we want to know how the different people who use the site want it to work.

Finally, having said something about 'the social', we also need to say something about 'knowledge': academic social researchers are very biased towards words and tend to think that knowledge always takes the form of written or spoken language. Designers know better, on the basis of training and experience, that

knowledge is as likely to take the form of a sketch, a collection of images, the remembered experience of light on a particular material and so on. Moreover, this applies to what we referred to above as the 'image of the city' (or street or office): we know a place through many different senses that we put together in different ways.

Make use of the ways of knowing that you feel work and that you feel comfortable with. If we ask you to 'take notes', there is no reason that these can't take the form of pictures, sketches, sound recordings, samples of material, and so on.

PART 2:
DOING SOCIAL RESEARCH IN DESIGN

THE PLAN OF ACTION

During the week of the workshop, you will be getting to know the Whitecross estate in the process of designing lighting interventions for this site. You will get to know the space, its people and social life. As part of this, we will be carrying out four activities which aim to focus attention on the whole process of making sense of a social space in the context of design.

The activities follow from the issues and approaches raised in the introduction:

- **What do (we think) we know about Whitecross?**

  Let's take stock of the assumptions, knowledges, images that we have, as well as identify gaps and uncertainties that could impact on design.

- **Doing Social Research in Whitecross**

  Each group will carry out one small piece of social research in order to think through the process of designing, conducting and analysing research

- **Articulating Light**

  Conduct small group discussions to explore how we can get people to be aware of and talk about lighting and lit spaces?

- **Integrating social research in design**

  Group discussions focused on identifying where and how social research can play a more integrated role in design

To underline our basic point: thinking about the social does not just taken place during social research exercises – we need to integrate social thinking through the design process, asking questions about the social assumptions we make, the social knowledges we can use, the way we take design decisions in relation to the specific social site we are designing for.

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WHAT DO (WE THINK) WE KNOW?

All good designers are already thinking in terms of the people or communities they design for and potential uses of their designs. They will use whatever latent knowledge or 'common sense' they may have of social groups they design for. If they feel less sure of this knowledge, or need to extend it, they may try to seek out information to aid them. However, since most designers are also incredibly busy and have not had training in social research methods, much of what counts as design research is based on a wide array of 'social data' that is gathered from different sources, but in rather unsystematic ways. Importantly, most design projects start with social knowledges and assumptions that are inherited in briefing documents or are embedded far back in the client's decision-making. Therefore social design research is also about identifying and challenging the assumptions that we start off with.

IDENTIFYING OUR SOCIAL KNOWLEDGES AND ASSUMPTIONS

The phrase, 'social knowledges', actually covers very diverse ideas about places and people. We may first think about 'facts' and 'data', and whether they are true or false or sufficient, and how we are to learn more, or test what we already think we know. But social knowledges also include ideas about: What kind of space are we dealing with? What kind of people are we dealing with? How do we think lighting affects people, movement and relationships? That is to say, we define 'social knowledge' as any belief we may have about the space we are designing for, and it may include not only facts but also theories, stereotypes, values and assumptions.

The first step in Social Design Research is to ask, 'What do (we think) we know?' – to identify and assess the social knowledges we start with in a design process: what they are, where they come from, where the gaps are, what we feel shaky about and what more we need to know. This is also what we mean by reflexivity: thinking about what we know rather than simply taking 'facts' or 'assumptions' as given. Taking stock in this way is not an academic exercise but a very practical way of opening up a learning process. In the following activity, we have simply tried to give this process a systematic form.

We place great stress on integrating social research in design. Taking stock of what we think we know is not just a way of improving social knowledge or our social evidence base. It should also be central to generating design ideas and probing avenues of design strategy (including generating doubts about particular ideas and avenues). For example, questioning assumptions about who uses this space and how may focus attention on different stakeholders or practices than the original brief, opening up new lines of design thinking.

Generally, in the process of design the social understandings of a place tend to derive from three types of data sources: (1) official and published data, (2) personal experience and investigations and (3) theories, philosophies, assumptions, stereotypes. Taking the question 'What do (we think) we know?' seriously means to critically assess the 'evidence' which derives from these sources. The table below outlines the three categories of data sources and how to critically engage with them and map out 'what we think we know'.

IDENTIFYING DATA SOURCES

OFFICIAL AND PUBLISHED DATA

Designers are briefed with statistical data and reports, and with information that has been filtered through clients and stakeholders. In fact, most data is 'mediated', i.e., filtered through processes set up for other purposes. For example, street crime and safety statistics are likely to be generated as by-products of police procedures. When we look at official and published data, we need to also look at the assumptions it was built on and how evidence was generated. This includes asking what this data is not telling us and who it does not speak about. We also need to assess whether and how we can adapt data to our own design purposes.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND INVESTIGATIONS

Working on a project is a continual learning experience involving both formal and informal learning. As you work on a project, you will gradually build up a richer view of it through different sorts of engagements with the place, e.g. stray conversations, developing relationships with stakeholders and clients, increasing familiarity from hanging out. This richer view is also informed by previous experience and instinct. Usually emphasis is put on official data as 'real' knowledge, but sometimes you might ignore this and go with your 'gut feelings'. Being more reflexive about your personal knowledge of a place can help develop the learning process more systematically, tying it in with more formal social research, and making it more convincing to clients or colleagues.

THEORIES, PHILOSOPHIES, ASSUMPTIONS, STEREOTYPES

We can't live or work without theories, concepts, philosophies, assumptions and stereotypes about how the world works. Professionally, a designer starts with views about the way lighting relates to social life, including beliefs about what makes for good lighting and good social lives. Social Research in Design means at least being aware of the conceptual baggage we are bringing to the job in the first place so that we can consider alternatives, and be open to new ideas, voices and strategic approaches. You can identify your conceptual baggage by asking, what kind of theories and beliefs about the different **social lives** and people that might inform how you approach a project.

SOCIAL RESEARCH ACTIVITY 1:
WHAT DO (WE THINK) WE KNOW ABOUT WHITECROSS?

This activity asks you to assess what you think you know about Whitecross by going through a social knowledge 'checklist': it is like doing a social research 'inventory' or stock taking at the start of a design project. We ask each design group to sit down together and go through the checklist below. systematically. But not comprehensively, exhaustively or mechanically. The aim is not a scholarly critique of design knowledge, but a practical engagement with social knowledges, and gaps in knowledge, in relation to your design work. Some questions will be more important than others for this project and this site, or for your particular group's ways of working. You should touch on all the questions, but clearly some will be more important or more productive than others.

It is also important to take notes and come to conclusions and decisions: above all, you are likely to be most concerned to identify which knowledges and assumptions you feel are reliable, which are promising for basing design ideas, and which are both uncertain and important and therefore need further investigation.

And you can begin to sketch out a social research design: which one or two gaps in your social knowledge look most strategic for your design work?

You might also be concerned with how your group sees things in comparison with stakeholders or clients (in this case, Whitecross and the workshop organizers). Are there differences of opinion about social assumptions like, who uses this space and how? What are the central issues that lighting design should address? This Social Research Activity aims to help articulate what your group thinks it knows, and doesn't know.

Finally, notes and action points are crucial - but they can take different forms Take notes in whatever form is most useful or natural – sketches, designs, photos or voice memos might well be best for your group.

The aim is to identify and challenge what your group thinks it knows about the social life of its Whitecross design site, and to do this in order to generate both social learning and design ideas. The questions are grouped into five themes (plus space to add additional themes):

- **Contexts**

  How does this space relate to wider contexts: eg, its history; political or regulatory issues and structures; how this space connects to adjacent neighbourhoods; economic or development initiatives that set the context for our design work; organizations (eg, council, police or business) that shape this space.

- **Users and stakeholders**

  Which groups are officially recognized as stakeholders and why; is any group missing, and why; what do we know about the stakeholders who directly use this space? What design considerations does each group raise?

- **Practices, issues and needs**

  How do (we think) the various stakeholders use this space, and what problems or issues does it pose for them?

- **Mapping the space socially**

  Look at the physical features of your site from a social point of view: what features do you think are valued or problematic for users? Can you map pathways, activities, interactions onto this space?

- **Lighting**

  In this activity, look at the existing lighting last, in the context of the social questions. What kind of experience, issues, practices is the existing lighting creating for users of this space?

Remember that this is a stock-taking exercise. You will have some knowledge of Whitecross based on some briefing documents, discussion and walking about, but at this stage you will not have carried out any research yet. Moreover, you do not yet know how your answers to these questions might differ from that of various stakeholders.

Please discuss each of the questions in terms of the following issues:

1. What do we think we know?

What are the things we think we know about the place and the people and how it is used and understood by these different people and stakeholders?

2. How do we know it?

Where did this social knowledge come from ('stereotypes', or common sense, official data or briefing, etc)? Do we actually know...?

3. What are we not sure of?

What are we uncertain about and need to know more about? In any real world design process (as opposed to academic research) designers will never fill in all the gaps, and don't need to; but they can sketch out a map of where their knowledges are more or less shakey and prioritize gaps that seem most significant.

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**NOTES FOR
SOCIAL RESEARCH
ACTIVITY 1**

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1. Each group should spend an hour jointly discussing the questions on the checklist, one by one, identifying questions and concerns which are most strategic or problematic for their case study sites on the Whitecross estate.

2. During the discussion, please take notes in whatever form feels most appropriate and to whatever level of detail is useful for your group.

3. Conclusions: at the end of this session, spend at least half an hour assessing the overall state of your social knowledge and collectively identify which are the most strategic gaps or uncertainties – if you could commissions two or three pieces of social research that could most impact your design work, what would they be?

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CHECKLIST FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH ACTIVITY 1

CONTEXT

How is the space connected to adjacent neighbourhoods, events, transport, infrastructure, mobilities (working, living, playing)? Are there particular conflicts, competitions or reciprocities?

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

What do we need to know about the history of this space?

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

How is this space located in wider political and economic structures?

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

How is this space controlled and governed by different groups (e.g. police, council, stakeholders)?

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

CHECKLIST FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH ACTIVITY 1

USERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

What categories of people are officially listed as stakeholders? Do they see themselves the same way? How are they 'represented' (i.e. consulted, portrayed and organized)?

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

Are there other types of people who need aren't featured in lists of stakeholders? Why not? Should they be?

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

How can we find out more about each (official data, consultation and research)?

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

CHECKLIST FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH ACTIVITY 1

PRACTICES, ISSUES AND NEEDS

Considering each main stakeholder group in turn, how do you think they use and understand this space? – consider the following:

A) How this space might fit into their everyday lives and activities – when, why and how do they find themselves in this space?

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

B) What do they do there? (practices, activities, interactions)

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

C) How does this space feel to them (welcoming, threatening, exciting....)?

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

D) What issues or possibilities does this space pose to them?

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

CHECKLIST FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH ACTIVITY 1

BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL MAPPING

What physical features and arrangements are used, appreciated, enabling practices and which are acting as blocks or constraints?

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

What features are significant for whom and why?

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

How does the space make you – as a designer – feel and how do you think it makes different stakeholders feel? What is appealing or unattractive about it?

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

CHECKLIST FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH ACTIVITY 1

LIGHTING

What are the different kinds of lights used and where (e.g. type of technology, position)?

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

What are the effects aimed at and achieved with this kind of lighting?

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

In what ways does the lighting relate to the social activity in that space (e.g. is it designed to be supportive of a certain social activity, for example playing football on the street or to prevent anti-social behaviour?)

What do we know? ☐

How do we know it? ☐

What are we not sure of? ☐

OTHER THEMES OR QUESTIONS:

2

DOING SOCIAL RESEARCH

Designing and carrying out social research is a creative and (hopefully) surprising process – much like design itself. It is a dynamic engagement with a unique social world that you are trying to understand better in order to make an effective design intervention. Every design brief and every social space is different and therefore will require a different combination of tools, strategies and approaches. This section focusses on designing social research that will help develop design work.

We need to start with asking about the kind of social knowledge that we are actually trying to produce. The image many people often have in mind is 'social science' knowledge, usually statistics based on large surveys. This kind of data is useful when we need to make claims about the generalizability of our knowledge (for example: surveys could allow us to claim that 75% of older people won't use that street, or that footfall increases by 30% between 8.00-9.00pm). This is quantitative knowledge: it aggregates people into large social groups.

This kind of social knowledge, however, does not tell us how people use and understand a space. If we want to see the space from the point of view of different users and give voice to their social practices we need to conduct qualitative research since numbers alone are not usually enough. We do still want our information to be reasonably certain (for example, we need confidence that we did not talk to too narrow a selection of people) but also rich and complex. Finally, we want our social research to offer structured insight and open up creative possibilities; and to raise more questions that can be investigated.

The overall aim of social research in lighting design is best described as wanting to make sense of a social space and the people and practices that go on within it; and usually to make sense of specific issues that are strategic for the design process. 'Making sense' as an aim stresses interpretation and understanding. Raw data – whether statistics, interview quotes or observations – are not enough: we need to be able to interpret the data and give a rich picture of what is going on and how lighting can intervene. How we go about this can take very different forms.

In this section we focus on the stages of designing social research: how can we think through these stages in close relation to our design work? We will introduce a range of tools and strategies which you can deploy as you see fit the design problem or question/s you set yourself for your case study site. You should come out of this with a better sense of how to think through social research in relation to design, as well as some experience of doing social research.

DESIGNING SOCIAL RESEARCH

The basic steps in designing and carrying out social research are fairly standard:

1. **Formulating research questions**

2. **Choosing appropriate methods**

3. **Doing and recording fieldwork**

4. **Analysing the material**

FORMULATING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The first step in any piece of social research is working out what we need to know, usually in the form of a clear puzzle or question. This question structures research more effectively and prevents you being pulled in wildly different directions by what you hear and see. A clear research question is also a good way of thinking about what questions can and can't be answered. We will probably start with a broad research question (e.g., who uses this particular space, how and when?) and this will usually lead to further more specific ones: from, 'who is using this space?', 'how are these specific different users and uses important for this space?'

The Social Research Activity 1 should help you in formulating research questions, identifying gaps in your knowledge that are actually important for your design work on your case study: Your research question/s should be connected to the design task, it should be concerned with the things you actually need to know in order to decide between design options to pursue.

CHOOSING METHODS

Good social research is usually a bespoke mixture of methods: you want to design a research strategy that is appropriate for the situation you are trying to understand. The methods we employ are closely linked to the research questions we are asking. If the only question we think we need to ask concerns footfall in a particular area, we might decide that we only need to use statistical data generated from a survey or CCTV. However, the questions that concern us are usually more complex than this and therefore more complex or mixed methods.

In fact, choosing methods is - and should be – a creative response to the social world you are designing for, a way of knowing and responding to this particular space. Most importantly, social research in lighting design is usually not directly about light itself or people's opinions about lighting: because lighting is deeply embedded in social life, social research in lighting design has to take a broader approach, looking at how a space feels to users, how they experience it, how they use the space for various social practices (navigating, socialising, shopping, and so on) and the issues it raises for them.

We need a full arsenal of social research methods
which include the following:

- **Interviews**

  Structured conversations

- **Observation**

  Watching, listening, experiencing, participating

- **Demonstrations and interactions**

  Setting up lighting displays and situations, experiments,
  using photographs, software and drawings

- **Mapping/reading/decoding**

  Representing and visualising urban structures and practices

- **Big data/social analytics**

  Social information produced by social media,
  monitoring, smart systems

- **Published data/demographics/statistics**

  Information searches

We can always innovate new methods, including ones that come out of your professional training and design practice and may be more visual in nature than some of the methods listed above.

An obvious but difficult question in choosing research methods is the 'what and how many' question. What kinds of people should I talk to, and how many of each? Which spaces or interactions should I observe, and for how long? As every piece of social research has limited resources, we need to think carefully about targeting research effectively. Firstly, how many people or events will allow you to be as confident as you need to be in making claims about what is going on? Speaking to only two or three women probably will not give you confidence in generalising about all women. Two or three very long, rich and detailed conversations with two elderly women about the lighting on Whitecross, on the other hand, may give you enough depth of information and thus confidence to make claims about lighting issues for the elderly in Whitecross. Secondly, 'diminishing returns': at the point where you keep hearing or seeing the same things repeatedly, it is probably time to come back and analyse.

DOING AND RECORDING FIELDWORK

Design is always a learning process in which you use things like conversations, observation and published data to get to know a space in relation to particular design issues. The difference between this and 'social research' is that the latter tries to be more systematic and reflexive, and that our engagements with the space are structured into a research design.

Crucial to this structured learning process is the fact that you analyse your material later and in relation to other similar fieldwork so that you can build

up a richer picture of the space you are designing. Hence, recording is crucial for social research in lighting design. You may digitally record conversations (with permission), and may or may not transcribe them afterwards; you might photograph or record walks or observations; you might take detailed fieldnotes in a notebook/iPad, whether these are words or sketches. The main thing is to think in advance about how you are going to record and remember what you encounter, and do so in a way that is sensible and appropriate for your situation (for example, ask yourself 'How much detail do you need? What means of recording might disrupt the situation you are trying to understand?')

RISKS AND ETHICS

All social research which involves talking to human subjects must be given ethical consideration. All organizations have their own formal procedures for considering these ethical concerns. As sociologists, we subscribe to the British Sociological Association guidelines[1]:

Members have a responsibility both to safeguard the proper interests of those involved in or affected by their work, and to report their findings accurately and truthfully. They need to consider the effects of their involvements and the consequences of their work or its misuse for those they study and other interested parties.

All social researchers have a responsibility to ensure that the physical, social and psychological well-being of research participants is not adversely affected by the research. They should strive to protect the rights of those they study, their interests, sensitivities and privacy, while recognising the difficulty of balancing potentially conflicting interests.

As far as possible participation in sociological research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility on the sociologist to explain in appropriate detail, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be disseminated and used. Research participants should be made aware of their right to refuse participation whenever and for whatever reason they wish.

Research participants should understand how far they will be afforded anonymity and confidentiality and should be able to reject the use of data-gathering devices such as tape recorders and video cameras. Sociologists should be careful, on the one hand, not to give unrealistic guarantees of confidentiality and, on the other, not to permit communication of research films or records to audiences other than those to which the research participants have agreed.

Where there is a likelihood that data may be shared with other researchers, the potential uses to which the data might be put must be discussed with research participants and their consent obtained for the future use of the material(iv). When making notes, filming or recording for research purposes, sociologists should make clear to research participants the purpose of the notes, filming or recording, and, as precisely as possible, explain to whom it will be communicated. It should be recognised that research participants have contractual and/or legal interests and rights in data, recordings and publications.

There are also considerations of risk that must be attended to. Social researchers face a range of potential risks to their safety. Safety issues need to be considered in the design and conduct of social research projects and procedures should be adopted to reduce the risk to researchers.

[1] http://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/27107/StatementofEthicalPractice.pdf

ANALYSING MATERIAL

Analysing the material you gather in the research process is as much of an art as is research design: it is a matter of interpretation, of making sense of your material, and it is usually a fairly messy business - there are no mechanical formulae. Even apparently technical statistical analysis requires endless debate as to what tests to apply and, after the results are in, what the numbers actually mean and what sense, if any, they make of the situation.

The process of interpreting material involves exploring the data and questioning it from many different angles. We read through the material to get very familiar with it, and along the way identify bits of data (for example, quotes, stories, observations, numbers, sketches) that are particularly rich and raise interesting points, and bits of data that look like they are forming patterns or speak to issues and questions that interest us.

It is usually helpful to explore the data by coding it – labelling interesting bits in terms of what themes they relate to. For example, we might be able to code some interview quotes, photos and observations all with the label – 'pathways taken by teenagers' or 'concerns about physical safety'. This would allow us to find all the bits that speak to these two concerns. It would also allow us to see what things we can say overall about them, from our material, to identify any patterns or potential generalizations.

SOCIAL RESEARCH ACTIVITY 2:
DOING SOCIAL RESEARCH IN WHITECROSS

The aim of this activity is to get experience of designing, carrying out and analysing small scale social research in the context of lighting design for your case study site. In the process you can also get experience of some research methods and an understanding of how to put research methods together into a research strategy. This should also help make activities you might ordinarily do in your design practice (e.g. looking at a site, mapping it, talking to stakeholders) more reflexive, structured and developed and be used more productively and creatively.

To reiterate: the aim is not to turn all participants into social researchers in one workshop. Rather, by getting experience of designing and carrying out some research, you can develop a clearer sense of what role social research can play in your daily design work, and of how to commission and assess social research that might enter into your work.

In this activity, each group will design, carry out and analyse a small piece of social research in relation to their case study site on the Whitecross estate. Make sure that – at every stage – you relate your research back to the focus your group has decided upon: what kind of research will make a difference? This must be a small piece of research (a few interviews, short observations, some online research, or a combination of these): it is more important that you focus on all stages of designing research than attempting something which is over-ambitious.

**NOTES FOR
SOCIAL RESEARCH
ACTIVITY 2**

1. Each group will design, carry out and analyse a small piece of social research in relation to their case study site on the Whitecross estate. Make sure that – at every stage – you relate your research back to the focus your group has decided upon: what kind of research will make a difference? This must be a small piece of research (a few interviews, short observations, some online research, or a combination of these): it is more important that you focus on all stages of designing research than trying something over-ambitious.

2. Please ensure that all of you get a chance to participate in all the stages of research. If you are using mixed methods, you may not all have a go at all of them, but you should each have a go at one bit of fieldwork.

3. Please follow the steps or stages below, and get a sense of the whole workflow. Try and leave sufficient time for analysis at the end. The task of research is not just to collect lots of material; the point is to make sense of things.

4. At the end of the process, reflect on what difference this research might make to your design ideas and design decisions. Also reflect on how what further research questions arise and what further research could be carried out.

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO DOING
SOCIAL RESEARCH IN DESIGN AT WHITECROSS

STEP 1

PREPARATION: DESIGNING RESEARCH

Agree a research question

(start from the points your group agreed at the end of Social Research Activity 1): What social knowledge gap seemed most important and most researchable?

Choosing research methods:

What research method or mix of methods will answer the question? What methods are practicable, given time and resources?

'What and how many?' Who and how many people are you going to talk to? What are you going to observe, and how much of it, etc.

STEP 2

FIELDWORK

Doing Fieldwork

Do the fieldwork in accordance with your research question and the methods you chose. Please ensure that all members of the group get some experience of doing fieldwork. You should also make sure that you decide on a method of recording your material, and do this scrupulously: it could be short notes, tape recording, photos, or some combination.

STEP 3

ANALYSING YOUR MATERIAL

Explore your material – together – by looking for themes and devising codes or labels

What interesting findings have you got, what insights, patterns, problems and further questions? What findings should have consequences for design ideas and decisions?

Reflection

What difference could social research make for your design work in Whitecross? What further research could be carried out?

3

ARTICULATING LIGHT

As discussed in the introduction, it is usually not easy to get people to talk about lighting directly. Firstly, light tends to be in the background, taken for granted. Light is 'infrastructural' in the sense that it is the enabler of activities and thus tends to be – ironically – invisible. Unless the lighting fails or is problematic, people often have very little to say about it. Secondly, people generally draw on an impoverished language of light, tied to very specific issues – for example, people think public realm lighting should be very bright for reasons of safety and domestic lighting should be cosy. Finally, articulating lighting and its effects involves articulating feelings, moods, atmospheres, sensual and embodied experiences – which most people often find rather difficult.

In fact, much social research for lighting design, as mentioned above, is not directly about light and lighting at all, but about things like pathways, atmosphere and anticipated uses of spaces. Based on these findings, designers then figure out what to light and how. However, there are also good reasons to focus directly on people's experiences of lighting. Having users who are more aware of and able to speak about lighting can help the designer see more creative possibilities. This data can also help identify how different users sensually experience a design and it can produce richer understandings of how people understand and experience design solutions. Ultimately, there is an educative role to this kind of social research: by helping people be more aware of more aspects of light we can have richer conversations and collaborations with them.

The task for social research in lighting design is to help people reflect on more aspects of lighting – but without being directive and simply generating the responses we expected in advance. As professionals, lighting designers can be intensely attuned to light features that are entirely invisible to users. Social Research in Design needs to identify what people do not see as much as what they do see. The situation is compounded by another feature that lighting professionals take for granted: we experience lighting effects through their complex interactions with other materials (for example architecture or landscape) so that much of our understanding of light is very site-specific.

It is useful to think about these issues in terms of the 'parameters' of light, i.e. the different features that designers can change, and which people notice and can discuss:

Luminosity/brightness: people will often *only* comment on the presence or absence of light, and on perceived brightness. How can we get them to notice and talk about **contrast, relative brightness** and **distribution**? In research, people are often shocked to hear that streets they perceive to be dark are in fact lit to official standards; this can lead to an awareness of contrast and options for redistributing light.

Similarly, we can point to **lumieres, mountings** and **other furniture**, as well as **lighting heights, positions, lighting directionality,** and **vertical versus horizontal planes**. Moreover, as most lighting in a scene may not be planned or designed or controlled, can we lead people to be aware of and comment on **shadows, spillage** and **casual lighting** such car traffic and lights in windows.

People may notice and think about the **colour** of lights, when colours other than white are used, but how can we make **colour temperature** choices visible and discussable? Even more challenging is **colour rendering**, even though that might have a considerable impact on how street users appear to each other.

These parameters are part of the common sense of lighting professionals and other designers and planners. But they are generally beneath the radar of the people we design for. Social research in lighting design should help close this gap in aid of better design and more informed clients and users.

There are potentially many ways of doing this. However, they mainly come down to some form of *experience* of different lighting parameters and possibilities. We often need to show the effect of different lighting arrangements and then articulate responses and understandings.

Whichever approach is used, we need to generate the right kinds of conversations and discussions around the experiences we set up. Simply asking people, 'what do you think of the lighting?' is not usually enough in order to get at, or develop, understandings of light. And we want to avoid just slipping back into standard responses ('More light, please!'). Moreover, the aim is not to get users to comment on technical details or to pretend to be designers. Rather, we simply want to focus on lighting features sufficiently to get at how people may respond to different designs.

SOCIAL RESEARCH ACTIVITY 3:
ARTICULATING LIGHT

During the workshop, each group will be setting up small light installations and demos to develop their design ideas on site. This is a perfect opportunity to do a small exercise in articulating light: the idea is simply to interact with residents who come to see the installations. The objective is to think about the difficulties and complexity of getting people to articulate their experiences of lighting, and to think about strategies for doing this.

During this activity, we would like you to focus on what kind of changes in lighting people notice; getting some responses to features they did not notice but we would like to know about; and seeing how people talk about the overall feeling and atmosphere that the installation is trying to produce.

In order to get to more articulated understandings of lighting, you can take the following steps:

1. **Before and after**

   By asking people to compare two photos, or two scenes from a demo, they can develop their own awareness of lighting parameters and options.

2. **Systematic discussion**

   Take people through the full range of lighting parameters in a sequence, and highlight issues along the way. The aim is to cover all the issues relevant to the brief without being directive.

3. **Record discussions, and/or take extensive notes**

   Recording and analysing doesn't have to be an arduous process, and it is not some kind of magic. It is simply important to carve out some time to look again at the discussion, and mine it. Rich material is often lost to the design process simply because it isn't recorded or written up.

4. **Feelings and moods**

   Try to ensure that questions and discussions address all experiential aspects of lighting – feelings, moods and sensations. The crucial question is often 'How does this space make you feel?'

You will need to organize this activity in terms of your group's installation, and how many people are available to talk to. The idea is to do something like this:

1. Aim to have 3-4 conversations over the course of the evening: these can be conversations with individuals or with small groups of by-standers. They can be conducted by one or two members of your group but be sure that everyone in your group has a go sometime over the evening.

2. Each conversation should aim to get at the three questions above. Try out different ways of asking questions and developing the conversation to see how different the conversations can be.

3. Take notes on each conversation. When designing over the next days, the group should spend some time comparing notes and discussing this activity: what were the problems in getting people to articulate lighting? What kinds of questions worked or did not? What features of lighting did or didn't come out without prompting?

4

INTEGRATING SOCIAL RESEARCH
IN THE DESIGN PROCESS

Social Research in Design aims to facilitate social research throughout the design process. Research is often external to the design process – providing background information such as briefs and statistics or bought in from external consultants. This also means that social research is given a role of setting a context for design, or of testing ideas, rather than as forming part of the creative process.

Social Research in Design can be more productive and creative when the research and the design work are more tightly integrated throughout. We can aim for a dynamic in which design and research keep posing questions to each other, suggesting possible directions, problems and gaps and leading to more precise design suggestions that are site-specific and thus more effective.

Practically advocating and integrating social research into your daily design practices can take the following forms:

1. Making implicit social knowledges explicit: Designers are always doing social research in the sense of gathering information and making sense of the social worlds they are intervening in. The main thing is to make this process explicit so you can build on it and make it more systematic. The checklist in Social Research Activity 1 can be used at several points in a design process, asking the same questions at different stages.

2. Organisationally integrating social research into design in simple and practical ways: Can research have a set (short) agenda item at all key meetings? Similarly, a standardized subheading or appendix in pitches, reports and other design documents? Can a person in each design team take responsibility for social research and thinking, representing this element of design work?

3. Retaining a level of reflexivity: This workshop has provided a space for thinking about more structured ways of looking at the social worlds we design for and intervene in. We need to keep reflecting on what we know about the social world and how we know it – research is not just a bag of techniques but is rather an approach that can help create better designs.

'CONFIGURING THE CLIENT'

An important – probably decisive – aspect of integrating Social Research in Design work is convincing the client that social research is a worthwhile expense, both in time and money, and that it will significantly enhance a project in demonstrable ways. Different kinds of clients respond differently (councils are likely to be more sympathetic than corporate developers) and different kinds of projects need different kinds of arguments (public realm lighting should involve knowledge about social inclusion, commercial lighting needs more sophisticated knowledge of footfall). Moreover, integrating social research should produce not only better design, or more evidence to support design decisions, but potentially a different relationship between clients and users of their space that goes beyond the specifics of lighting (for example, social research can engage users and promote a sense of ownership, and can provide clients with a sense of the users' wider way of life).

We would want to make the case that research costs should be included in design as a normal budget item, and that it can be done efficiently and with costs tailored to budgets. But this is clearly not always an easy case to make.

SOCIAL RESEARCH ACTIVITY 4:
REFLECTING ON SOCIAL RESEARCH IN DESIGN

This final activity is a facilitated group discussion. The aim is to look back at the week's work in terms of the social research component within the design work. In particular, this discussion aims at exploring what role social research play in the design process? And how could it have played a different/better/more defined role in design?

In your group discussion, you should focus on the following key themes and questions in order to reflect on the workshop and explore how you can make Social Research in Design work for your own design practice and work environment:

1. **Identifying follow-up questions:**

    Look back at the social research checklist you worked on the first day: How would you fill the checklist in now? What important gaps, unanswered questions or doubts do you have now?

2. **Reflect on social research in design**

    Looking back at the design process over the week, where did social questions, knowledges, research play an important role in the design process? Are there points where they should have done so but didn't? Were there particular moments or phases in design where social research issues were more (or less) important? Give examples of some of the ways in which social questions/research were significant: generating ideas? Raising doubts? Providing evidence? Discovering new features of your site and stakeholders? Did social research hinder design at any point? How could have/was this dealt with? Who or what do you think you need to know more about?

3. **Discuss how to 'Configuring the client'**

    Share experiences of projects where social research could have made a difference – how would you argue for the benefits of research to clients.

4. **Discuss the organization and integration of social research in design**

    Think about how your group has worked through the week: did particular people raise social knowledge issues more or differently from others? How could your group and its work have been organized differently to integrate and generate social research more effectively?

    Make sure that you take notes during the discussion in order to be able to share your experience and learning with your colleagues, and to have an impact on how you go about projects in the future.

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