

## Bringing the spaces and places of community life into view

**Janet Fink and Helen Lomax**

This exhibition draws on three visual projects undertaken with adult and child residents from the Coffee Hall estate in Milton Keynes.

The work was supported by our ESRC funded seminar series, Visual Dialogues: New Agendas in Inequalities Research ([www.visualdialogues.co.uk](http://www.visualdialogues.co.uk)) which aimed to explore the value and insights of visual methods for policy and practice. Additional support was provided by the Centre for Citizenship, Identities and Governance (<http://www8.open.ac.uk/ccig/>).



## **Research origins and neighbourhood contexts**

Our starting premise was that participants should be able to define the research questions and methods that they wanted to work with.

This approach generated a series of interconnected projects, which drew on a range of creative visual methods, including:

- participatory video
- video and photography 'walk-alongs'
- video-interviews and photo-portraiture

The film, photographs and art work explore themes of friendship and social connectivity; individual and community histories; culture and geographies; and the ways in which these connect with personal and community well-being.

A total of 14 children (7 boys and 7 girls aged between 8 and 14) and 3 adults took part in the research.

## Performing place: play

One thing that the observation of children makes clear, though it has only recently entered the world of reports and textbooks, and has yet to enter environmental policies, is that children *will* play everywhere and with anything' (Ward 1977: 86, original emphasis).

Something that's not advertised as much ... council properties, that were built for the council ... I mean the kids on this estate are fantastically supplied; areas to play on, grassed areas, football pitches, god knows what else, but you won't find them on private estates (Ingrid, estate resident).

## Performing place: identity

In paying particular attention to the children's representational practices one can see the images that the children create, not as records of reality, but as investigatory landscapes, *where identities are played with and performed* (Poser, 2006:3, our emphasis).

Although these walks are in and of themselves spatial practices, they also express an emotional construction of personal life in public neighbourhood space, an experience familiar to each of us as we make our daily way through our neighbourhoods (Bendiner-Viani, 2005: 467).

## **Performing place: community**

*Cameron* (aged 11, estate resident): What do you like about Coffee Hall?

*Scott* (aged 11, estate resident): We live near everyone, there's a big park and they have like a café and a community centre. It's just fun to live around Coffee Hall.

An individual's network of social relations may be bound up with a particular place, extend far beyond it, or more probably combine aspects of both. And crucially, people within a particular locality cannot be assumed to follow similar patterns, and hence to have similar conceptualizations of community (Rogaly and Taylor, 2011: 19)

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