

What Next: Digital Engagement

Peter Mason

6–7 minutes

This month, our very own Peter Mason took part in a discussion with New London Architecture exploring the impacts of COVID-19 in the built environment, and what digital lessons can be drawn to shape the coming decade. This is an adapted version of his talk.

Commonplace's mission is to use the digital community engagement platform we have created to connect people impacted by change to the decisions and decision makers who are shaping the world around them.

Before COVID-19, the build environment world had been grappling with the persistent theme of growing distrust, and how to restore it. This partly reflects the challenge faced by the town planners and urban designers alike.

Re-evaluating the planning process

In a changing world, the debate over future visions of communities and places has been focused on the planning process. Many believe that in its current state, it does not capture the competing ideas and interests of people, the politicians that represent them, and the companies and authorities shaping their places.

A growing unease over the lack of control of major, world shaping events, has produced a real desire for people to be able to have a greater say and a greater impact on the very local, tangible and tactile environments around them. That desire can be seen in the increasing urban forms of unrest.

Whether in the shape of the extinction rebellion protests of 2019, or reclaiming the public square and the monuments within them during

the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, direct action is an increasing feature of increasingly layered conversations with communities already sceptical about change.

For the built environment world, seeking out consensus to achieve support for new plans and proposals has been the predominant theory of change for nearly two decades. For professionals tasked with curating spaces and the conversations that shape them, all too often these good intentions have led to a largely replicated and often exclusive, antagonistic relationships with the most passionate people.

The art of possibility in the built environment is limited. Within the tricky balance of financial viability, planning policy and the politics of place, achieving compromise can too often be a process of conflict. The public versus the developers, with planners attempting to referee the fight and inevitably having to force a compromise.

Making more inclusive planning decisions

Commonplace attempts to answer this challenge.

What if we were able to find ways to engage large numbers of people, at their convenience, in positive conversations about change? Not just to provide councils and authorities with the evidence they need to justify their decisions from accurate and representative data, but an active dialogue between people impacted by change and the plans for change themselves.

That's really the principle at the heart of Commonplace. Achieving compromise requires conversations, and conversations require a platform for different stakeholders to come together.

Before Covid-19, Commonplace had been working with pioneering councils, public bodies and developers to apply that model. Not as a replacement to important face-to-face engagement, but as an always-on digital tool to extend reach into communities.

After 500 projects, engaging with over 1.5 million people, we found that 65% of people engaging through Commonplace expressed positive support for projects, achieved through the core principle of social proof. By providing a fully transparent platform for people to share their thoughts, ideas and concerns, fully accessible just as

they would be in non-digital conversations, we help foster a greater sense of trust. That is also achieved by rapidly expanding the reach and kinds of people engaging in the conversation.

Reflecting the fact that most people lead busy lives, unable to engage in a traditional exhibition or face-to-face town hall meeting, our always-on platform offers digital convenience, with 70% of people engaging through Commonplace being under 45.

By curating communities of people willing to engage in positive conversations about change, we help foster a common understanding of the neighbourhoods and spaces people interact with. It is this understanding that enables policy makers and property developers to better understand the impacts of their proposals and reflect the aspirations and demands of the people impacted by them.

COVID-19 has turbocharged demand for digital engagement. The need to keep the planning process moving, as well as understanding how people have experienced lockdown has seen a rapid migration of engagement online. Likewise, hyper connected people locked down into their local neighbourhoods and high streets have looked to digital tools to keep them connected to the world beyond the limits of their walking range, and the decisions being taken to aid social distance and active travel to name but a few.

Join forward-thinking place-makers

At Commonplace, we've been proud to play our part offering free use of our platform to local authorities to connect to their communities. In just a few short months, working with a range of new councils, we've channelled hundreds of thousands of contributions into the plans and proposals being rapidly implemented across the country. Here are some of the councils that we have worked with during lockdown:





As the world begins to emerge from lockdown, our collective relationship with the built environment is going to be very different for an extended, but temporary period of time. But the lessons learnt during the pandemic over how we connect people to the places around them are here to stay.