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## Spaces for co-creating rural futures: Bridport's Living Lab

Alexandra Carr *School of Art, Design and Architecture*

Alejandro Veliz Reyes *School of Art, Design and Architecture*

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## **Spaces for co-creating rural futures: Bridport's Living Lab**

Carr, Alexandra; Veliz Reyes, Alejandro

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# Spaces for co-creating rural futures: Bridport's Living Lab

This case study outlines our partnership with Wessex Community Assets (WCA) on the codesign of material and housing futures for Bridport, Dorset. WCA is a community benefit society addressing the pressing need for more affordable housing — doing so alongside the integration of “home grown” modern methods of construction and low carbon, natural building materials’ supply chains and local enterprises.

Our collaborative research projects with WCA have been supported by funding bodies including EPSRC, AHRC and the Forestry Commission, alongside a broader set of partnerships with community interest companies and social enterprises (Common Practice, Bridport Area Community Housing, Woodlab Ltd, Open Systems Lab Ltd.). Over the last three years this stream of projects has allowed us to investigate the complex landscape of community mobilisation, natural material adoption, digital inequity and social infrastructures from different perspectives and channels of research. In this contribution we will focus on some of our tactics for facilitating collaborative and ethical engagement, giving opportunity to local voices typically excluded from mainstream “transforming construction” initiatives and innovation funding delivery mechanisms.

Amid turbulent financial conditions, community-based organisations must elicit value from partnerships in resourceful ways that can connect seemingly unrelated issues. Our discussions with WCA around the use of local timber for building, for instance, uncovered local concerns around the Ash dieback plague and the complexity of the sustainable management of local forests. Discussions around the use of hemp (a historically traditional crop in the area) as a material for housing insulation provided insight into the use of the plant as a break crop for farmers in regenerative agricultural systems. Discussions around housing shortages uncovered local frustrations of new-build housing developments focusing on maximising profits through 3-4 bed homes rather than meeting local need for 1-2 bed properties for younger and single people forced to live with family or move away into more urban settings. By collectively identifying these challenges, this research context is both complex and rewarding, with local community voices advocating for preferred futures not always considered within disciplinary, academic, or professional silos. Instead, ideas and potential solutions emerge from continuous and unrelenting passion and activity “on the ground” from mobilising social infrastructures and networks, including community development organisations and spaces already “in place”.

The case study “Building with/for Bridport” and the use of a “Living Lab” serves as an example of how research partnerships can support the facilitation of inclusive spaces and community engagement, paving a way towards more ethical and participatory design research and knowledge exchange practices. At the core of our work is ensuring the longevity (actual use and benefit) of community-based resources that are created as research project outputs. As part of this, two core elements are necessary:

- Embedding our research in and accessing an ongoing development context.
- Ensuring outputs are co-created through decision making with stakeholders to ensure they are wanted and used by the community beyond the parameters and timescales of grant requirements.

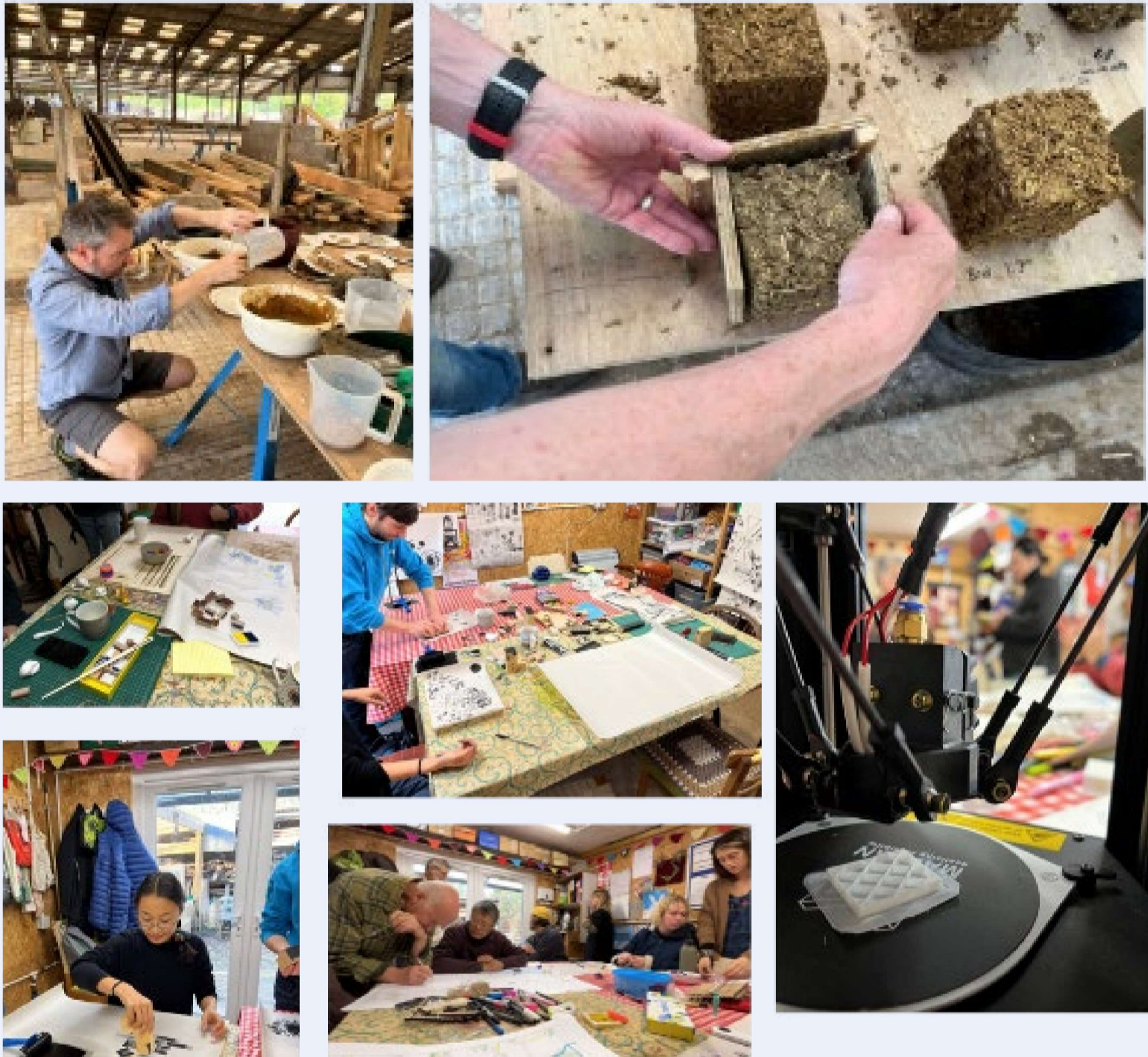


Our research work has contributed to the creation and evolution of a physical Living Lab at Denhay Farm, just outside of Bridport. Placed within a disused barn, the Living Lab provides the necessary space, tools and connection to the local landscape to prototype housing elements, material systems and building processes. The use of a rural facility in this context additionally exemplifies opportunities for rural communities to redefine and take advantage of local infrastructure. Contributing to current environmental and economic transitions, we are supporting farmers on diversifying their income streams by making use of land and spaces otherwise unavailable in urban (let alone gentrified urban) settings. The space at Denhay has been further developed by the locally based design studio Common Practice, ongoing contributors to Bridport’s green transition and collaborators within our research projects. Common Practice leveraged the use of the space to pre-fabricate and construct a timber frame system and straw bale infill walls for a recent build project “The Common House”.

The space at Denhay Farm, then, has become a testing ground for experimentation and play as well as the facility in which actual buildings are imagined and built. Instead of engaging with materials from a purely technical perspective (a narrative normally resulting with new design rights or academic intellectual property assets), the Living Lab approach instead offers a place to investigate the physical qualities and design opportunities of local materials (including hemp, timber, clay and lime) whilst prompting discussion, new ideas and the exchange of knowledge around material provenance and community perspectives on their uses for housing construction. Through material experiments and studies, prototypes, site visits and workshops the work at Denhay continues to lead towards a body of collectively developed creative output, generating physical creative outputs that address local challenges while retaining community ownership, empowerment, and self-determination over the direction of their own landscape. As well as academic outputs and pathways to impact, recent uses of the space have included a design workshop hosted by Local Works Studio in collaboration with Assemble (Turner Prize 2015) and their students from EPFL<sup>2</sup> in Switzerland, as well as a previous workshop delivered by Automated Architecture Ltd and the We Can Make program from Knowle West Media Centre, Bristol.

Although the concept of a living lab is not new, it has often been used as a tool within institutionalised and academic discourses as a way to gain access and deliver fieldwork activity — a space of cocreation “on the ground” that simulates the social entanglements that influence the

<sup>2</sup> EPFL is an acronym for the Polytechnic of Laussane: Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Lausanne / École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne, in English).



creation or adoption of technologies. Our work is embedded within local community organisations mobilised to address local challenges, not only facilitating cocreation but also empowerment and agency — a “way of working” highly influenced by the communities themselves, with projects that often need to respond to local conditions (such as lack of funding) and the limited time availability of community organisations. In keeping with this, the approach of the Living lab isn’t fixed to a physical space and we have translated this method beyond Denhay Farm by delivering pop-up digital fabrication activities in the Bridport Community Shed, a local wood workshop and maker space run by community volunteers. Transferring the benefits of the open and creative approach to more accessible locations, specifically in the town centre of Bridport, open up alternative opportunities for the local community to gather and exchange their views on housing, the environment and local supply chains within 2-hour creative workshop sessions. Held on Saturday mornings to open up to a wider range of individuals who may not be able to attend mid-week day or evening events due to work or care commitments. The underlying principle is generating a social and experimental safe space to try things out together and contribute to positive change.

To achieve this engagement “on the ground”, the AHRC Design Exchange Partnership (DEP) scheme funding “Building with/for Bridport” is loosely modelled on the Innovate UK Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) scheme. KTPs are initiatives that require the injection of innovation

in an organisation through an “associate” mentored by a research organisation, directly benefiting industry partnerships by translating research into actionable, on-site business growth. The DEP scheme follows this approach through a “designer in residence”, embedding the research objectives and practice directly into communities which would benefit from creative, research-driven interventions. Here we have identified a strategic impact opportunity by working directly with communities, as well as an emerging new design professional profile able to navigate the complexities of academic research and knowledge mobilisation on-site. In doing so, challenging institutionalised narratives of “KE”, “Impact”, or “IP” being left as desirable by-products of research. Instead, we consider knowledge exchange as a core method of research progression, helping us to explore the nuance of collaborative practices and to co-create research methods with communities and tangible outputs with community partners. Through ethical knowledge exchange it is possible to generate mutual benefit for both academic and non-academic partners, to both specific, context-bound resources (series of workshops, contributions to development proposals) and broader, transferrable resources (events, toolkits, literature). Within our ongoing research collaborations, we have been able to produce tools and outputs directly used by communities to shape and build impactful activity in line with the strategic visions of our local partners, including the Bridport Investment Plan, Bridport Neighbourhood Plan, Wessex Community Assets’ ongoing mission and Bridport Area Community Housing’s immediate development plans. This has included — to date:

- Engagement with 57 people and 6 local organisations in the co-imagining of housing and material futures, mainly focusing the social concerns of housing and the areas of hemp and timber for housing construction.
- Fieldwork evidence consisting of creative visual media, interviews, and workshop activities that (so far) consist of 14 hours of data and 24 hours of footage for follow-on analysis.
- Delivery of this case study in the form of academic literature, with a chapter accepted for publication in The Gruyter Handbook of Automated Futures.
- Presentation of the project at The Future Observatory Research forum 2023

**Alexandra Carr,**

School of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Plymouth

**Alejandro Veliz Reyes,**

School of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Plymouth

### **Authors’ bios**

Alexandra Carr is the Research Associate and Designer in Residence for the “Building with/for Bridport” Design Exchange Partnership. Also a Doctoral Researcher within the School of Art, Design and Architecture and the University of Plymouth, her research explores the roles of the creative thinking and material experimentation within collaborative design development and works with rural and coastal community groups often disenfranchised from mainstream ‘design economy’ discourses. Recent work has included facilitation and participation in explorations of digital fabrication innovation, digital inclusion, and interdisciplinary collaborations with areas such as Health.

Alejandro Veliz Reyes is an architect and Associate Professor in Digital Design at the University of Plymouth (School of Art, Design and Architecture). His research revolves around codesign and participatory methods in relation to technological inequities, and focuses on spatial production in areas such as manufacturing and digital health. His work has been supported by EPSRC, ESRC, Forestry Commission, and AHRC funding in partnership with external partners such as EPSON, Open Systems Lab, and Wessex Community Assets.

## Links

<https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/research/building-with-for-bridport>

<https://www.raisetherooof.info>

<https://wessexca.co.uk>

<https://www.bridportach.org.uk>

<https://www.bridportcommunityshed.org.uk>

<https://commonpractice.io>

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Bridport Town Council: David Dixon

Common Practice: Georgina Bowman, Jack Cardno

Bridport Community Shed: James Tigg, Charles XXX, Eileen Haste

Image captions:

Image 1: Building prototypes at Denhay Farm Living Lab, Source A Carr

Image 2: Common House build, Source G Bowman

Image 3: Engagement with materials as WCA Open Day events, Source A Carr

Image 4: Creative activity during pop-up workshops, Source A Carr