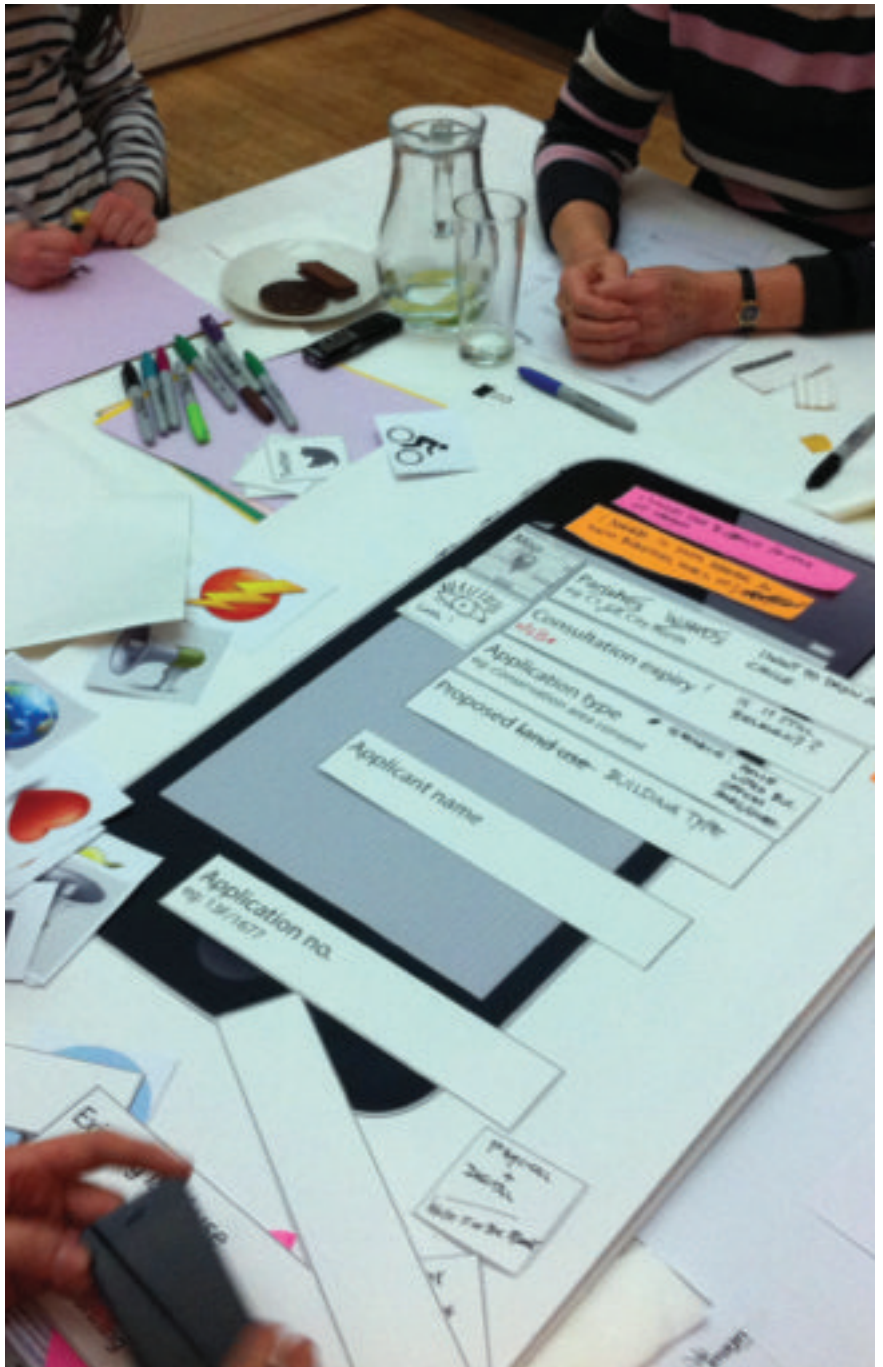O P
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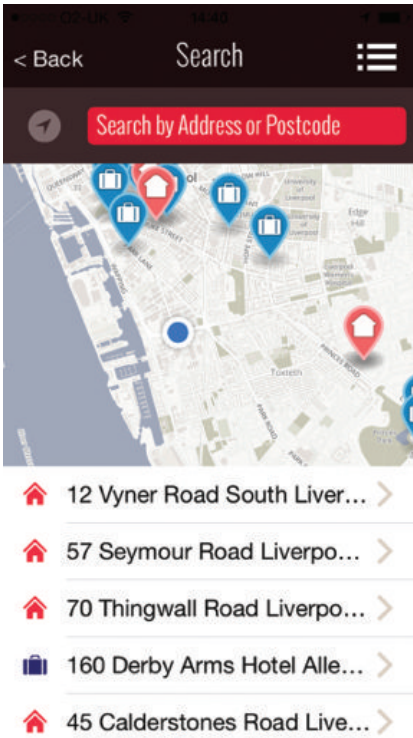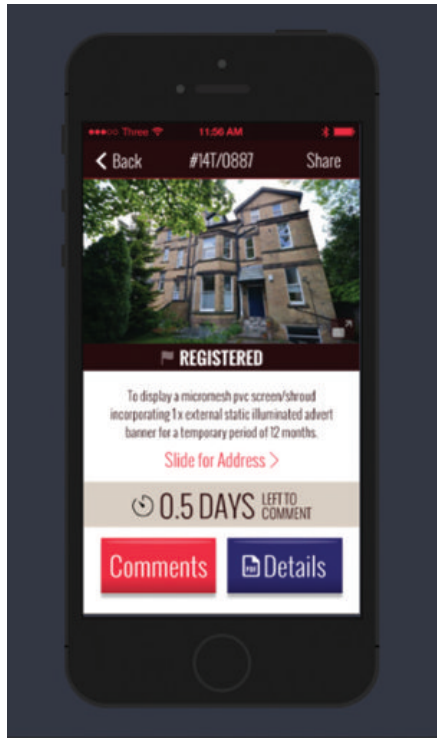# Open Planning
Lara Salinas

Co-design workshop with citizens that led to the design of the Open Planning App (beta). Credit: Lara Salinas.

Open Planning App (beta) displays planning applications near a user's current location.

Open Planning App (beta) shows planning application details. Credit: Lara Salinas.

Site notice, tied to a lamp post in Bold Street, Liverpool. Credit: Lara Salinas.

Open Planning

Liverpool

Contributors
*Lara Salinas,
Lancaster
University,
Liverpool
University,
Liverpool City
Council,
Liverpool Vision,
Engage Liverpool,
RedNinja.*

*W thecreative
exchange.org/
projects/open
-planning*

Digital Tools Used
*Open Planning
App,
Liverpool Planning,
Portal Data,*
Facebook,
Twitter,
Open Street Map.

Open Planning is a Liverpool-based project aiming to empower and engage citizens in the local planning process, through a mobile phone app which improves communication channels with local authorities

About

Open Planning connects the planning process with people's everyday ways of communicating, enabling a more engaging, transparent and accessible planning system. The Open Planning mobile app (currently for Apple iOS devices) makes it much easier for the public to locate planning applications on a map, subscribe to digital notifications, engage in public conversations, and quickly contact local planning authorities, maximizing the 21 days of public consultation.

Our aim is to improve the current planning application process by taking a citizen-centred approach. From the point of view of communities, improving the planning system requires better communication channels with local planning authorities. The project is funded by the Creative Exchange, an Arts & Humanities Research Council initiative.

The planning system is a public mechanism that manages the use and development of land and buildings, shaping the built environment in which we all live. Although the planning system has been recently improved, changes have typically been to increase administrative efficiency instead of fostering engagement with communities and bringing quality into the process. By better connecting the planning system with everyday communication practices (such as mobile phone use), Open Planning seeks to make it easier for citizens to communicate effectively with local authorities and participate actively in the configuration of their city.

First, we reviewed the policy framework in England, learnt from similar initiatives, and ran a series of workshops with local community groups, local planning authorities and developers. Not only did we gain understanding of the planning system and how it may be improved, but this also helped us understand the needs of different people and organisations in the process.

In a hands-on workshop with community members in Liverpool, we developed an early prototype for a mobile app and discussed with local planning authorities. As a result, we went on to develop a first Open Planning prototype that provides a map-based visualisation of planning applications, a digital alert service that reaches citizens based on their physical location, a platform to comment on planning applications and a direct communication channel with local planning authorities.

Some authorities have embraced Open Planning's initiative as it results in a more efficient process, and follows the UK Government's 2012 White Paper on Open Data. The collaboration with Engage Liverpool, Liverpool Vision and Liverpool City Council has been paramount to the development of a first prototype that responds to citizens' needs and is fully integrated into the planning system.

What is the impact of the project?
Open Planning makes the planning system more accessible, making it easier for citizens to know about and engage with changes in their built environment.

How did digital tools make a difference?
A digital tool like the Open Planning app reconnects the planning system to citizens' everyday life. Open Planning provides the data that is already held by the local planning office, in a format that is more accessible for the public. The first version of the Open Planning app allows people to browse a map to find planning applications, set up a notification area and be the first to know when a planning application is submitted within those bounds, comment and discuss planning applications, share on Twitter and Facebook and have access to all available information online.

What next?
Open Planning is a proof of concept. It sets out to demonstrate how it is possible to make the planning system more accessible, democratic and engaging with quite a limited investment. In our opinion, future versions of Open Planning could provide a more adequate service than current providers, tailoring to the needs of local planning authorities, developers and citizens alike.

What Others Can Learn

When bottom-up and top-down initiatives meet
Collaboration between local communities and public sector organisations can be challenging, as different approaches to the same matter may seem opposed, even unbridgeable. We have found ourselves in the role of facilitators, liaising to create solutions collaboratively that meet the citizens' and council's requirements.

From consultation to participation
In pursuing the design of a system that favours knowledge and creative exchange, we have opted for a participatory and collaborative approach. However, in our experience, local public organisations feel more comfortable with consultation, and are wary of participatory processes where the outcome may be—initially—unclear.

Local councils' constraints
Initiatives that bring additional resources to help local councils meet governmental guidance are welcome. For example, Liverpool City Council explained that resource constraints not only hindered service innovation, but also limited their capacity to collaborate with us.