

The Caring-With Practitioner: Diffracting Practice-Research Dynamics in Urban Care

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Abstract

This article casts a light on the role of practitioner-researchers working towards more caring cities within an expanded set of actors. By introducing the caring-with practitioner, we draw attention to engaged, relational, and constitutively entangled forms of practice within urban care discourse. This contributes to professional practice scholarship (within urban planning, built environment, and design professions) by intersecting theory on/in practice with contemporary discourses around care. The article revisits interview transcripts from a British Academy-funded project, Caring-With Cities (2021–2022), in which practitioners working across policy and community-led contexts discuss efforts to shift power dynamics within the urban realm. We also draw on our own experiences as design practitioner-researchers embedded within collaborative projects that seek to put “caring with” (Tronto, 2015) theories into practice. Through diffractive inquiry (Barad, 2007), the article moves beyond established modes of thinking about practice-research dynamics, which often use reflection-in-action/reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) or conceptualise the practitioner as mediator (Forester, 1987). Set against design debates on difference and the pluriverse (Escobar, 2018), the caring-with practitioner adds to and challenges thought on working in partnership to engage across difference. We contribute to an epistemology of practice founded on acts of caring-with. The caring-with practitioner operates not only through the apparatus of practice-research, but through an intra-active entanglement with the apparatuses and boundary-drawing practices of others. To practice in this way involves holding multiple roles that are co-emergent and mutually constitutive across projects and organisations, drawing attention to and determining what comes to matter.

Keywords

care; caring-with practitioner; design; diffraction; practice-research assemblages

1. Introduction

The starting point for this article was a series of virtual sandpits hosted during 2021 by the British Academy, in the grip of a global pandemic that stretched urban care infrastructures. Designed to “engender new thinking, develop interdisciplinary collaborations and further international engagement with a particular policy and practice focus” (British Academy, 2020, para. 3), we were brought into conversation to critically interrogate: What is a good city?

This article builds on the project that emerged from this dialogue, *Caring-With Cities* (2021–2022), which aimed to understand how care is embedded into community-led and policy-led urban development, the interface between the two, and how care can be designed into future urban policy at a systemic level. Our contribution to this thematic issue tunes into the role of the practitioner-researcher within an expanded set of actors and contributes to an epistemology of practice founded on acts of caring-with. We follow Barad’s (2007) diffractive methodology to bring a different set of readings to qualitative data collected through the *Caring-With Cities* project. Diffractive methods disrupt the binaries between theory and practice, data and research apparatus, researcher and “researched” to provide a richer understanding of the entanglements we come to characterise as “caring-with” in urban action.

1.1. *Caring-With Practices*

Achieving a caring city needs to emerge and be sustained through thoughtful interfaces between city dwellers and policy-makers. Although drawing attention to the fact that “no clear-cut definition of care in urban studies has emerged” (Gabauer et al., 2021, p. 5), we saw promise in surging scholarship within this space, including—but not exclusive to—Wiesel et al. (2020)’s editorial “Cities of Care: Introduction to a Special Issue” in *Cities*, Zannah Matson and Tim Waterman’s forthcoming “Landscapes and Care” in *Landscape Research* (Matson & Waterman, in press), alongside Davis’s (2022) *The Caring City: Ethics of Urban Design*, and Frichot et al.’s (2022) *Infrastructural Love: Caring for our Architectural Support Systems*. We noted that, when read together, these works provided insight into the diversity of urban caring capacities, typologies, and deeply entangled relationalities. We are also cognisant of Emma Power and Miriam Williams’ invitation for “an expanded scale of urban care analysis” (Power & Williams, 2020, p. 2) that pays attention to lived experiences of care that thread through the veins of the city, moving beyond interpersonal sites and situations to include more-than-human materialities and urban governance. Much of this work builds on Joan Tronto’s framing of an ethics of care (Tronto, 2015). In “Who Cares? How to Reshape a Democratic Politics,” Tronto (2015) makes a distinction between caring-*with* and other acts of care, such as caring-*about* or caring-*for*. Caring-with moves beyond understandings of care as a provision from institutions to individuals, or from individual to individual, which positions the cared-for as passive recipients (Tronto, 2015). Caring-with names a different and more holistic way of envisaging care as “an ongoing system of caring acts in which we’re sometimes on an extreme end of the giving–receiving scale, and sometimes in the middle” (Tronto, 2015, p. 16). Tronto “imagines the entire polity of citizens engaged in a lifetime commitment to and benefiting from” care principles of being attentive, responsible, competent, and responsive (p. 14). As well as combining different practitioner behaviours (attentive, responsible, competent, and responsive), there is also a dimension of time/lifetime in caring-with practices.

Through our British Academy-funded work, we took the notion of caring-with to the urban realm. Working in dialogue with four UK case studies of community-led development, we explored the interfaces between community-led projects and local planning policies to identify soft infrastructures of care.

The case studies were selected to leverage previous work by members of the research team and involved community organisations operating at different scales (city-wide, neighbourhood, building level, and around specific issues): Portland Works is a grade II* listed, purpose-built metal works in Sheffield. Built in 1879, it is the birthplace of stainless-steel cutlery manufacturing. Following a four-year campaign to save it from redevelopment into studio flats, Portland Works was purchased in 2013 through community shares. It is now owned by community shareholders and governed cooperatively, and it is home to a mix of artists/makers. Our research focused on its operations following the purchase of the building by the community. Tranquil City is a collective of environmental, built-environment, psychological, and data-science practitioners and researchers aiming to drive positive behaviour change that enables people to lead healthier and more balanced lives. They do this through experimental projects such as Tranquil Pavements, supported by the EU's Horizon 2020 project OrganiCity. Our focus here was on a partnership with the London Borough of Lewisham delivered in collaboration with local schools and community-led green space action groups. Lancaster Civic Vision is a civic society organisation aiming to promote and encourage initiatives relating to quality of life, design, heritage, and local economic development. It campaigns on local urban matters, development, and policy. Here, we focused our attention on the mechanisms through which the organisation influences urban planning and policy through the "community conversations team" at Lancaster City Council. These case studies were complemented by a smaller case study with AUAR Labs (automated architecture) based at The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. AUAR uses modular building systems and robotics to provide affordable, sustainable housing solutions in collaboration with communities. We looked towards the spaces, tools, and processes for experimentation within two community projects, which took place between 2020 and 2021: "Block West" in Bristol and "House Block" in partnership with the London Borough of Hackney.

Our enquiry was guided by a series of questions: How is "care" conceptualised and operationalised by policies and community-led practices in the cities? How does it inform visions and practices towards a "good city"? What are the individual and collective psychological processes involved in generating a sense of care towards urban environments? What forms of caring-with practices, across policy-makers and community-led initiatives, successfully recognise, value, support, and amplify care within cities? How can care be embedded and designed in cities' infrastructures? And, how could we design more holistic strategies to bring care into the heart of urban decision-making? What this work began to register was the relevance of engaged, relational, and constitutively entangled forms of practice within urban care discourse.

An innovative part of this research design was working with "participant researchers," community members embedded within each of the case study organisations that were recruited (and remunerated) to contribute to the project. This approach was possible because members of the research team each had established practitioner-researcher relationships with the case studies. The Caring-With Cities team worked with "participant researchers" using relational mapping to "explore the relations between elements within a situation of inquiry...by drawing lines between the elements on a map and by asking questions about the qualities of these relations" (Knopp, 2021, para. 11). This was a collaborative live mapping exercise in which diagrams were drawn to explore care systems within and around each organisation, including local

government and its policy-making mechanisms. “Participant researchers” responded to questions about the relationships within the case study organisation and others: Who does your organisation work with? What does this organisation/group do in relation to [case study]? How does this organisation connect to [case study]? “Participant researchers” were also invited to reflect on which of the relationships mapped involved care and where care manifested within the map. This mapping activity did not aim to give a comprehensive overview of the whole organisation, but rather to capture a trace of connections/relationships from the insider perspective of the “participant researchers.” As such, the relational maps produced could be seen as “a way to spatialise how care is understood, by whom and where it is positioned within webs of relations across institutional and non-institutional urban collectives, multiple sites of practice and loci of decision-making” (Orlek et al., 2023, p. 46). This relational mapping activity was a constructive way to reveal and then discuss caring systems across different scales. It also helped us to identify both community-led and policy-making stakeholders to interview, to gather deeper and more detailed understandings. Across the case studies, the Caring-With Cities team interviewed 12 participants with roles ranging from Community Forum Chair to Local Authority Officer.

Semi-structured interviews, together with relational mapping, suggested that for some, cities as a whole are conceptualised as a receiver of care, whilst in other cases, care involves specific groups and locales. Cutting across both “extremes” was the idea that caring-with practices are based on the creation, recognition, and maintenance of webs of relations between multiple communities and public institutions (Ferreri et al., 2022). Conceptually, these relations were understood through:

1. Interfacing practices, where recognising siloed thinking as a barrier to care in the city, community-led organisations act as *interfaces* between local governments and the wider community, on issues such as planning and public awareness-raising.
2. Digital tools, acknowledging the importance of a range of digital infrastructure with various capacities for democratic participation in decision-making.
3. Care over time—frequently described as long-term projects, caring-with practices require significant personal commitment. Both policy officers and members of community organisations remarked on the importance of managing boundaries and expectations of care over expanded timescales.

This work culminated in a contribution (Orlek et al., 2023) to the Special issue *Care and Critical Action of Lo Squaderno—Explorations in Space and Society*, edited by Cameron McEwan, Nadia Bertolino, and Cristina Mattiucci (McEwan et al., 2023).

2. Why Return to the Original Data?

What is markedly absent from urban care discourse are the multiform movements between academia and professional practice. This includes our own assemblages of practice-led enquiry inside/outside academia, alongside those of our community-based “participant researchers,” and practitioners within the professions looking inwards towards academia. Assemblages are “open-ended gatherings” which “allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them” (Tsing, 2015, p. 22). Brought to urban studies, we can see assemblage thinking “as a form of spatial relationality, [which] is attentive to both the individual elements and the agency of the interactive whole, where the agency of both can change over time and through interactions” (McFarlane, 2011, p. 208). The value of assemblage is something that we have become aware

of as a product of our research approach and professional connections to the case studies featured above, which we began to understand through relational mapping in the Caring-With Cities project. These attempts organised relations, exchanges, and interfacing practices along a linear axis between policy and community (for a template used in this mapping activity, see Caring—with Cities, n.d.), but did not fully trace dynamic and overlapping practitioner roles within each project.

In response, this article revisits our original qualitative analysis and, by working diffractively, brings an expanded set of practitioner perspectives to the notion of “interface” and how it operates over time. This is a positionality that we have termed the caring-with practitioner, the focus of this article, and see as instrumental to understanding the mediation of public urban cultures of care.

3. Practitioner Concepts: Reflective Practitioner, Practitioner as Mediator, and Transition Activist

In this section we outline established thought leadership on the role of the practitioner, looking to the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983), the practitioner as mediator (Forester, 1987), and the transition activist (Escobar, 2018). These concepts are introduced as a starting point for our diffractive methodology, outlined in more detail in Section 4. In essence, diffraction is a feminist research approach that works within differences rather than seeking common ground. An important characteristic of diffractive research is the reading of insights “through one another,” leading to unexpected outcomes and knowledge (Barad, 2007, p. 30; Geerts & van der Tuin, 2016). The materials that we read through one another in this article are: three selected practitioner concepts, excerpts from original data from the Caring-With Cities project, and our own perspectives as practitioner-researchers.

3.1. The Reflective Practitioner: The Patient as a Universe of One

We cannot speak to the blending of theory and practice without reference to Schön’s (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, which examined five professions—engineering, architecture, management, psychotherapy, and town planning. Ramage and Shipp (2009) note the foundations of Schön’s reflective practice to lie in a “crisis of confidence in professional knowledge” (see also Schön, 1983). Articulated—in short—as a gap between the skills provided through education and the needs of professionals situated in the field (see Ramage & Shipp, 2009). For Schön (1983, p. 42), professional education follows a “technical rationality” that is ill-suited for the “swampy lowland where situations are confusing ‘messes.’” Some, such as Newman (1999, p. 146) have declared Schön to be “engaged in the search for a new epistemology of practice.” For Newman (1999, p. 146, citing Schön), “the inadequacies of the ‘rational mythology’ have led him [Schön] to conclude that ‘we need to think...about knowledge...in a different way.’”

To practice within situations marked by uncertainty requires professionals to reflect-in-action and embrace reflection-on-action after the event, Schön suggests. It is through the act of reflecting-in-action that the professional “becomes a researcher in the practice context” (Schön, 1983, p. 68). As Newman (1999, p. 149, citing Schön) describes, at other times this is a process of “turning thought back on itself...it is, [Schön] argues ‘a process of getting in touch with the understandings we form spontaneously in the midst of action.’”

As authors, we have become attuned to a body of critique attached to the act of reflection, namely that such practice does not look to the future or participate in future planning (Thompson & Thompson, 2008), where for others “reflection in and of itself is not enough; it must always be linked to how the World can be changed” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 217). We have also noted Schön’s commentary in the chapter “Psychotherapy: The Patient as a Universe of One,” where he not only regards each patient as a unique case, but acknowledges the role of conceptual apparatus in determining psychotherapeutic practice:

I have chosen a practitioner who takes a psychoanalytical point of view, while recognizing that a protocol drawn from the work of Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls, or Salvador Minuchin might have produced a very different set of materials for analysis. (Schön, 1983, p. 108)

3.2. *Practitioner as Mediator*

Within planning discourse, the scope of the practitioner has been expanded beyond technocratic roles by considering mediation between governance structures and values as one of its potentially central functions. The idea of “practitioner as mediator” was a starting point for John Forester’s seminal work exploring issues of power within planning practice (Forester, 1982). He warned against the perceived neutrality of professional mediations and validated the activist mediator “with a conception of how to serve particular needs” (Forester & Stitzel, 1989, p. 259). Later, Forester develops the notion of the planning mediator into a deliberative actor, who engages in real-time, situated communication with diverse stakeholders and becomes an “advocate of an ethic of care” (Forester, 1999, p. 189).

Forester further addresses the idea of care within (planning) practice, warning against the limitation of “caring about” and implicitly arguing for what Tronto (2015) would later term “caring with.” Reflecting on the account of community organiser Jim Diers, Forester (2012) argues that the expression of care needs to be critically examined to avoid unintentionally undermining the very communities that practitioners seek to support. The idea is that care should empower and enable community members rather than create dependency:

Many people in human services or government do...“care deeply about community,” but the way in which that care is expressed can have perverse and unintentional consequences: yes, they care deeply about community, “yet,” he suggests, “they’re often breaking down community, because they are doing for people what they can do better for themselves.” (Forester, 2012, p. 19)

The spectrum of mediation and negotiation strategies that planners might adopt to deal with “conflicting parties and at the same time negotiate as interested parties themselves” is further explored by Forester through a “repertoire” of six “mediated-negotiation strategies” highlighting the discretion and agency of planners (Forester, 1987, pp. 306–312): the planner as regulator; as representative of local concerns; as a facilitator of dialogue, but also as “performer of shuttle diplomacy” (p. 307); as an “active and interested” “nonneutral” party; and as an arbiter between conflicting interests. This work challenged established views of the practitioner as a neutral entity, paving the way for future emerging discourses, stating that “activist mediation is a viable, practical, and ethically desirable strategy” (Forester & Stitzel, 1989, p. 251).

3.3. Practitioner as Transition Activist

The practitioner's role can be framed in relation to Escobar's concept of "transition activist," which looks to indigenous and Afro-descended people in Latin America as a new way of understanding the "radical interdependence or radical relationality" of life (Escobar et al., 2022, p. 105). Drawing on his ideas about ontological design, transition activists are understood as those who design for alternative ways of life, actively challenging the dominant paradigm of modernity and seeking a pluriverse where multiple knowledge systems are valued (Escobar, 2018). This is a role that leans into new design methods and tools, where "effective meaningful design is a social activity in which the designer is one actor among many" (Escobar, 2018, p. 41).

Coming at the end of a three-decade-long period of critical observation about how policy and planning (as design tools) structure and frame everyday lives, Escobar (2018, p. 16) presents his thesis for the pluriverse, "a world where many worlds fit." That is, "while the planet is singular, world is plural—for it is formed and seen in difference—as are we" (p. 21). Holding implications for design theory and practice, Escobar suggests design is fundamentally "ontological in that all design-led objects, tools, and even services bring about particular ways of being, knowing and doing" (p. X). Conceptually, the pluriverse has made tentative moves into care discourse; see for example, FitzGerald's (2022) *Care and the Pluriverse* as a way of challenging thought about how we engage across difference.

The transformative potential of the pluriverse sits in "the process of enacting other worlds/practices" (Escobar, 2018, p. 99), moving beyond theory into the practice of such encounters. "Said more simply, theorists cannot maintain both feet in the academy and purport that they/we are bringing about a different world; they/we need to put one foot in a relational world (or worlds)—to practice what we preach" (Escobar, 2018, p. 103). Evoking Winograd and Flores, Escobar (2018, p. 116) elaborates:

Ontologically oriented design is therefore necessarily both reflective and political, looking back to the traditions that have formed us but also forwards to as-yet-uncreated transformations of our lives together. Through the emergence of new tools, we come to a changing awareness of human nature and human action, which in turn leads to new technological development. The designing process is part of this 'dance' in which our structure of possibilities is generated.

One of the critiques leveraged at Escobar is that "the ideas proposed in *Designs for the Pluriverse* highlight the need for Autonomous Design but fail to offer a way to get there. Escobar does not and, indeed, *cannot* prescribe the exact contours or conditions for how this transition will (or should) occur" (Morris, 2018, para. 9). Others, such as Paola Pierri, writing in the *Journal of Design*, tune into this lack of blueprint:

Although on one hand, he traces a practice of design for and from autonomy, where the conditions exist for change to happen from within; on the other, he does not put forward a clear blueprint by giving us the definitive answer and a model, but rather he raises more questions and doubts, as it always happens as a result of an honest intellectual wondering into complex matters. (Pierri, 2019, p. 1036)

We thus see space to add to the thought on how we might work in partnership to engage across difference. We do so by looking to new materialist scholarship.

4. Methodology

New materialism scholarship over the last twenty years has made reference to diffraction, figuratively and metaphorically, in seeking non-hierarchical ways of working with multiple sets of texts, sources, and knowledges. This work makes use of the concept of diffraction from classical physics, an optical phenomenon when waves, such as light, encounter an apparatus that impacts and determines what is observed. For Barad and other new materialist scholars (Barad, 2003, 2007; Haraway, 1997), “the *diffraction of narratives*, like the movement of the waves” (Gherardi, 2023, p. 310, emphasis added) can be helpful in the production of new patterns of understanding and knowledge. We looked towards Barad’s (2007, p. 137) discussions of diffraction that have highlighted how “differences come to matter.”

Barad (2014, p. 168) speaks to processes of “re-turning,” seen not as a stable reflection on a past, but as a method of seeing new possibilities by “turning it over and over again”:

We might imagine re-turning as a multiplicity of processes, such as the kinds earthworms revel in while helping to make compost or otherwise being busy at work and at play: turning the soil over and over—ingesting and excreting it, tunnelling through it, burrowing, all means of aerating the soil, allowing oxygen in, opening it up and breathing new life into it.

Through working diffractively, Barad invites us to “unsettle” our ways of understanding interactions through what they term “intra-actions”:

The usual notion of interaction assumes that there are individual independently existing entities or agents that preexist their acting upon one another. By contrast, the notion of “intra-action” queers the familiar sense of causality (where one or more causal agents precede and produce an effect), and more generally unsettles the metaphysics of individualism (the belief that there are individually constituted agents or entities, as well as times and places). (Barad, 2012, p. 77)

Diffraction breaks normative habits (Mazzei, 2014). Moving beyond interaction requires researchers to recognise and respond to their own “intra-actions” within analytical practices: It is “a moment of plugging in, of reading-the-data-while-thinking-the-theory, of entering the assemblage, of making new connectives” (Mazzei, 2014, p. 743).

We use a diffractive methodology to cast a light on the caring-with practitioner. Our rationale for working diffractively was a desire to move epistemologically beyond established modes of thinking about practice-research dynamics, which often use reflection-on-action, as set in motion by Schön (1983). For Bozalek (2022, p. 553), “diffraction as a productive non-representationalist tool marks differences from within, whereas reflection holds objects at a distance to reflect on them.” An established body of scholarship provides a set of clear practices and protocols to guide us in engaging diffractively with interview data.

Diffraction has been used by qualitative researchers to read multiple theories through interview data (Mazzei, 2014; Taylor & Gannon, 2018; Ulmer, 2016). This is a practice of installing oneself in “differences that matter” (Bozalek & Murris, 2021, p. 54), which results in researchers connecting with data in unexpected ways:

The researchers fold data and theory into each other and install themselves in the differences that emerges from the intra-action....We will know that we are physically experiencing the working of diffractive analysis when we connect with data in unexpected ways. (Li, 2023, p. 21)

A way of intra-acting with the data is through focussing on what speaks to us more intensely. Harding et al. (2017) draw attention to “hot spots” within qualitative data that “‘glow’ for the researcher” (p. 1215) and are repeatedly revisited in their discussions. The “hot spots” they encountered used “unexpectedly rich language” or were transcripts for which “the researchers had vivid memories of encounters that left each feeling that ‘something was up,’ but we did not know what it was” (p. 1215). Responding to these confrontations with the unknown or unexpected, and as part of an iterative multi-stage process of data analysis, Harding et al. (2017) undertook a diffractive analysis which moved them “from reflexivity to being part of the abduction process—theories, data and researchers intra-acted in trying to make sense of the transcripts” (p. 1215). For this article, we revisited interview data that had been thematically coded as part of the Caring-With Cities project. We broke open (Mazzei, 2014; Taylor & Gannon, 2018) prior data coding with theory (Section 5) and questioned our own practices within and without academia in relation to this (Section 6).

5. Diffracting Caring-With Cities “Hot Spots”

In this section, we introduce “hot spots” from Caring-With Cities interview transcripts and diffract them with concepts of practice introduced in Section 3. This new reading of theory through interview data (and vice versa) has resulted in an experimental section—characterised as “re-turning”, to use the language of Barad—from which a series of generative questions for practitioner-researchers emerges.

5.1. *Re-Turning: The Reflective Practitioner*

There is a tension in Schön’s reflective practice as being about sameness (reflection as a mirroring between subject/object), and the idea of “the patient as a universe of one,” where each is seen as a unique case, an embodiment of difference. With difference in mind, are reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action entirely separated? If habit relates to reflection-in-action (where an immediacy of responses depends on past patterns of experience) and reflection-on-action is seen as a way to learn from past experiences about how to work differently in the future, could there be multiple forms of reflexive practice at play at once? For example, are practitioners simultaneously looking to past experience and anticipating how such patterns might play out in the future?

Schön’s work brings the assumption that in reflective practice the “professional” is an independent subject. And yet, here we can see the entangled, dynamic and relational qualities of reflection-in-action:

I find a lot of the work being in local government is about kind of opening up and being empathetic and vulnerable, and then having to close again because you’re having to make decisions about budget cuts, or you’re having to deal with very angry people, or being personally attacked and things, so it’s opening and closing of the armour. Which is really, really exhausting actually. The people who I think...can really stay in it for the long game, the majority, are people who sort of almost permanently have the armour shut. It’s a tricky thing. Definitely room for improvement in local government, I would say. Probably needing a bit more care. (Local Authority Cabinet Member)

Knowing when to pause and step away can be seen as a way of “sustaining caring” about others, but also, as we see above, as a form of self-care. We might think of care as being co-constitutive, that there are interdependencies between sets of actors, an intuitive form of “tacit-knowing in-action” (Schön, 1983). A way of having a reflective conversation with the situation: shaping and being shaped by it. If the sustaining of care over time requires a continual “opening and closing of the armour,” how can caring-about and -for others be negotiated alongside the receiving of care or self-care? This negotiation requires reciprocal relationships of care or caring-with. How might caring-with practitioners open and close their armour in ways that continually recompose their relationship to others and alter their capacities for giving and receiving care?

Does reflection lead to a compounding of power imbalances? Interviewees from both community-led and policy-making perspectives discussed local authority “enabling roles” of different kinds. Here, the council’s role is seen as “enabling people to take responsibility and supporting people in that role.” This type of dynamic might be seen as something akin to what Schön outlines in his chapter on psychotherapeutic practice, with the therapist functioning as a guiding force in understanding human experience. But such a reference point sits at odds with more formal recognition of community-led knowledge established through consultancy services:

They’ve engaged with the council in a more formal, regular basis, almost as consultants and stakeholders. I think that’s a slightly different dynamic that they’re potentially acted as a consultant as opposed to a stakeholder, which is a slightly different conversation. (Community Wealth Building Officer at City Council)

This positions community groups not as receivers of expert help but as experts in their own lived experiences and knowledges of a place which is of value to others, including through formal urban decision-making processes. In instances where members of the community are formally engaged (and remunerated) as “consultants” by policy-makers, to what extent does this meaningfully address power and resource imbalances and recognise the value of diverse knowledges?

5.2. Re-Turning: Practitioner as Mediator

Schön’s in-the-moment response of the practitioner’s reflection-in-action is echoed by some of Forester’s (2012) later work in which he explores “learning to improve practice,” focusing on “not what planners thought, and not what they did, but how they had to do their own in situ discourse analyses in the ongoing flow of their work” (p. 16). In relation to discourses around care, this real-time, pragmatic analysis can be difficult and requires vulnerabilities. From the perspective of practitioner-researchers working in local authorities it can sometimes be simpler to close off:

I’m a feminist, I’ve got an academic background, I’m open to [talking about care more directly within democratic processes]. But most, you know, you’re talking about in local government context, you’re talking about people who can’t open up to that vulnerability. Either because professionally they can’t, or because emotionally, psychologically, they can’t. I think when you start talking about care, and you talk about vulnerability, and you talk about people having needs, there are some people [who] just...won’t be able to engage with it, just because their minds cannot go there. Or it’s just so outside the language that we use in local government. I would like it if we lived in a world where local government was more, and

just the general world, was more open to talking about care and caring for each other. I don't know how you do that without kind of losing a certain kind of professional mask that you kind of need to protect yourself from some of the really difficult things that you deal with. (Local Authority Cabinet Member)

Do vulnerable moments of lifting a “professional mask” allow new relations and connections between policy-making and community organising? To lift the mask is to open up the potential for caring-with:

I think making the time and building the relationships and building the trust and understanding of the place and of the concerns, is really, really important to instances of care. (University Lead for Civic and Community Engagement)

This awareness of the importance of building trust as a scaffold for caring-with practices extends what Forester has described as the “in between” work of (planning) practitioners (Forester, 2012). Forester discusses planners as “intermediaries” who try to bring together deeply different and often distrustful parties and “do not produce ‘solutions’ or make ‘agreements,’ any more than midwives make babies” (Forester, 2012, p. 17). Bringing together the often tacit knowledges of community participants can yield surprising results for all involved: Community groups who “may know their problems better than any outsider...can still find themselves surprised by the strategic results they can sometimes achieve through such mediated processes” (p. 17).

In his earlier work *The Deliberative Practitioner*, Forester (1999) focuses on the micro-politics of planning in an attempt to “honor and yet add substantially to Donald Schön’s influential but politically agnostic reflective practitioner” (Forester, 2012, p. 14). Forester’s call for the need to look at “micro-politics” of planning practitioners acknowledges that everyday actions are “deeply permeated, staged and structured by relations of power” (Forester, 2012, p. 12). This focus on the political and on power relations resonates with Joan Tronto’s notion of “caring with.” For Tronto (2015, p. 9), care is deeply political, “with both a small ‘p’ and a capital ‘P,’” and “involves power relations” which are inherently unequal. Caring-with becomes a radical proposition to make care equal by establishing “patterns of care” that balance out giving and receiving across someone’s life and generations. When one moves beyond an apolitical position of being in the middle, how can practitioner-researchers operate in nuanced ways, mindful of power imbalances and by dynamically “opening and closing the armour”?

5.3. Re-Turning: The Transition Activist

Speaking to the “transition imagination,” Escobar (2018, p. xiii) writes: Ontological design as a “conversation about possibilities” presents a “transition from the hegemony of modernity’s one-world ontology to a pluriverse of socionatural configurations” (Escobar, 2018, p. 4). Such instances of design prompt him to ask: “Might a new breed of designers come to be thought of as transition activists? If so, they would have to walk hand-in-hand with those who are protecting and redefining well-being, life projects, territories, local economies, and communities worldwide” (Escobar, 2018, p. 7):

If part of my role is to interface between the university and community and partners, we have to really understand the place that we live in, and the kinds of challenges that are in that place, and the concerns that people have. (University Lead for Civic and Community Engagement)

Such interfaces of caring-with denote a paradoxical position: simultaneously occupying a boundary condition, whilst necessitating a deep understanding of place and all its messy relationalities. Could we think of the transition activist as a form of Baradian apparatus, co-producing “future logics”—to use Escobar’s terminology—from within entangled, material-discursive states? Futuring, therefore, might be conceived of as “boundary-drawing practices” (Barad, 2007, p. 140; enacted through apparatuses making performative divisions on the world), sanctioning what matters and what is excluded from mattering. Caring-, acting-, designing-with, requires us to reconsider our privileging of the apparatus of the transition activist, for design when everyone designs (Manzini, 2015). This is the oxymoron of autonomous design, as Escobar concedes.

With the *transition* inherent in *transition activist* speaking to movement and the practice of *futuring* as a forward-looking imaginary, how can acts of care move with community-led development as they evolve—particularly when, as Escobar (2018, p. 157) notes, “knowing is relating,” that is, it is a form of deeply situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988)?

The work of the transition activist can be positioned as a critique of local government and its inherent logics. Against UK austerity and public sector cuts, what opportunities might open from within this shifting landscape?

I think it will become more that the local government will be looking to be more enablers...just enabling people to take responsibility and supporting people in that role. Rather than it being something that the Government does in an area, actually it becomes something the community does, and the local government supports, which I think is how things are going to probably have to move anyway, because there just is no funding available and we’re having to cut all the time in local government. (Local Authority Environmental Protection Officer)

We might think of local government as an apparatus of care, but this neglects that communities are also imbued with their own power relations and that there is a multiplicity that exists that also creates impossibilities for others: caring-with-apart.

6. Diffracting Our Caring-With Practices

In this section, we draw on our own work as practitioner-researchers seeking to implement urban caring initiatives. We do so through three accounts in which each of the authors discusses and expands on the generative questions raised in Section 5 in relation to their own practice, in a continuation (or re-turning) of a multi-stage diffractive process. Each of these accounts surface elements that we see as foundational for the construction of the caring-with practitioner: (a) that acts of care are structured not only through the apparatus of practice-research, but through an intra-active entanglement with the apparatuses and boundary-drawing practices of others, (b) that multiple roles can be held that are co-emergent and mutually constitutive, and (c) that a shift is required from individual practitioners to ecosystem(s) of practices/practitioners that determine what comes to matter.

6.1. *Diffractive Account of Practice: Intra-Active Entanglements (Claire McAndrew)*

The previous section suggests that the caring-with practitioner is a form of Baradian apparatus or interface. Barad and Gandorfer (2021, p. 39) intimate that:

To engage in a diffractive practice of attending (to) the entanglements that we call “science,” for example, it would be necessary to understand “oneself” and the apparatuses that constitute “oneself” as being of the very material-discursive entanglements of which one is intra-acting (not in some self-reflexive epistemological sense where an individual self precedes the encounter but) in the sense of taking on a different sense of response-ability, including response-ably opening up and reworking the science itself, and the scientific imaginary embedded inside the political, and so on (*ad infinitum*).

As a social scientist, cutting apart my ingrained habits of over 20 years, framed by a particular educational apparatus, has been hard to undo. Moving from the familiar frame that gave pattern to our preexisting thematic analysis required an opening-up of possibilities rather than a following of threads of sameness. To work diffractively meant a kind of re/working of “science” itself that Barad and Gandorfer (2021) note above. A process through which the resistance of a customary social science apparatus brought a sense of friction against the framing of each thought, to be actively—or more aptly, intra-actively counter-acted.

To bring a diffractive lens to collaboration, perhaps requires recognition of one’s own practice forming through a particular apparatus to be intra-actively entangled with the apparatuses and boundary-drawing practices of others? This comes from my own understandings across academia/practice: as a social scientist working first within communication design and then within the field of architecture, on publicly engaged, participatory works. This insider/outsider set of perspectives—as a social scientist within the field of architecture and as an academic engaging with local communities—frames the dance of caring-with within my work. Acts that are porous to and changed by encounters from the lived experience of other worlds. This understanding of the life space sits differently to academic/architectural practitioners with whom this article is written, to practitioners in local authorities, and actors within community-led developments with whom we conversed in the production of the original work.

This re-turning of “data” as experiential accounts through theory suggests the caring-with practitioner to be constructed through an intra-active entangling of apparatuses, that is, of different types of agencies that enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering. Could this form the backbone to our understanding of how Escobar’s future logics are co-produced? Might this also be a way of reconsidering the innate privileging of the apparatus of the Transition Activist, for design when everyone designs? If so, we arrive at a sort of complex interweaving of apparatuses that sheds light on understanding how the caring-with practitioner “performs porosity” (Chan, 2020) and how practices of care move with community-led development.

6.2. *Diffractive Account of Practice: Co-Emergent Roles (Jonathan Orlek)*

This account explores some of the ways in which the caring-with practitioner can hold multiple roles that are co-emergent and mutually constituted. For me, as an architecturally trained researcher—who researches experimental spatial practices by arts organisations and practices (as part of the social enterprise architecture practice Studio Polpo) between art and architecture—practice has been a porous term used to describe work

both by myself and subjects of my research. During PhD research, I embedded myself within an artist-led organisation in order to follow and study a pilot housing project, resulting in the development of an embedded ethnographic (Lewis & Russell, 2011) research project. In this context, practitioner roles were overlapping and ambiguous (for example, within arts organisations, staff responsible for artistic support and curation may carry out this work alongside an artistic practice of their own and/or may understand this work as a creative or research practice in its own right). For embedded ethnographic research such as that conducted for my PhD, practices of both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action seek to change projects/organisations as they unfold over time. Feedback loops extend beyond “the moment” of reflection-in-action or in situ discourse work; they require long-term commitments and trust.

In articulating my own role as an embedded ethnographic researcher, and seeking to differentiate myself from employed staff or commissioned artists—while also being open to invitations to collaborate across these roles—I arrived, at the time, at the following:

I had expected and anticipated a shift from being a removed outsider to [an] embedded “in-house” researcher. The invitation from [an artistic duo called] Sophie + Kerri to be part of their residency opened further opportunities and research positions that I had not imagined. Their interest in inviting me—both my research and wider practice—into their residency questioned a linear narrative and spectrum from individual outsider to insider. *I could be in multiple positions at the same time!* (Orlek, 2021, p. 185)

Threaded throughout the Caring-With Cities interview transcripts are similar discussions on the adoption of multiple roles, positions, and strategies, for example, in acting as both a stakeholder and consultant. I have come to question my hold on this multiplicity of positions in embedded research projects. A diffractive insertion into difference requires a continual seeking of ways to practice and arrange, which are both receptive and enactive of change. This dynamic reframing of agency and holding of multiple positions at once is akin to what Barad describes as quantum entanglements (Barad, 2007).

6.3. Diffractive Account of Practice: Ecosystems (Cristina Cerulli)

This final account prompts us to consider the agency of the caring-with practitioner and the dynamics between the multiple positions that they hold at once and those of the multiple actors operating within and across projects and organisations.

My practice is situated within ecosystems that straddle architecture education, research and professional practice (with Studio Polpo), and focuses on creating situations with the potential to trigger transitions towards more equal, just, and regenerative socio-technical environments. Forester’s repertoire of strategies for planners discussed above includes “active and interested mediation,” which sees the practitioner “thriving as a nonneutral,” “keenly aware that emotion and substance are interwoven, and that planners who focus only upon substance and try to ignore or wish away emotion do so at their own practical peril.” (Forester, 1987, p. 308). This idea of “thriving as a nonneutral” strongly resonates with my approach to research and practice, which I have developed over time, moving beyond the technocratic view of practice and professionalism that had shaped my professional education. My own politicisation as a practitioner and researcher echoes that of many practitioners who are “getting political” in response to the neoliberal

mechanisms shaping our built environment. I recently co-edited a book (Turan et al., 2025a) exploring the complex interplay of politicisation and depoliticisation within planning and design, particularly as these fields are shaped by neoliberalism:

Planners, landscape architects, and architects in different cities across the world witnessed, or sometimes joined, protestors reclaiming public spaces as a way to express their discontent. These professionals were prompted to re-explore cities and public spaces as spaces of politicization. (Turan et al., 2025b, p. 1)

As a practitioner, I strive to work with many, in multiple capacities, negotiating multiple value systems and trying to spot the potential synergies across them. I have previously written about the need to understand and embrace the productive tensions across the “extended learning networks” within collaborative, interdisciplinary pedagogical practices across universities and external partners (Cerulli, 2017), to unpack the “mutually beneficial arrangements and value created through those collaborations” (p. 12). The diffractive readings of our Caring-With Cities data resurfaced my idea of the “ambiguous and multifaceted nature of the designer educator” with “their double design role in academic project-based research—as designer of pedagogies and designer of interventions” as a “key to shaping the power relations and the scope of projects” (p. 13).

Focusing on the convergence of values and agendas and the synergy between caring-with practitioners operating within specific (project) ecosystems speaks to Barad’s intra-action and of how the caring practitioner both shapes and is shaped by situations within the ecosystems they operate within, in mutual patterns. This is at odds with discourses and norms around (architecture) professional practice, which tend to privilege competition and antagonistic relationships.

What if, as practitioners, we are to move beyond the self to include broader actors and ecosystems, mutually entangled and constitutive to specific projects and sites? Caring-with within community projects that are sometimes fleeting can be seen as a long-lasting convergence of multiple situations constructed by multiple practitioners within that project ecosystem. This suggests incremental, durational, and forward-moving practices with provisional positions that co-evolve with the contexts that practitioners embed themselves in.

7. Concluding Remarks

In this article we have employed a diffractive method to “break open” data from our British Academy project, bringing new understandings to the practitioner within public cultures of urban care, which we term the caring-with practitioner. Working diffractively, we moved forward the legacies of scholarship on the role of the practitioner, re/casting engaged practices as caring-with. Rooted in our own practices (with one foot in academia and another outside) and those of our research participants contributing to cultures of care in urban action, our diffractive exploration speaks to entangled practice-research dynamics. We have contributed to an epistemology of practice founded on acts of caring-with, which enables the work of practitioners to be thought about in new ways as part of an intra-active ecology of practice. Here, specifically, we have focused on practitioners embedded within community-led initiatives, which have received less attention within care scholarship than other collective urban practices (such as self-organised and autonomous groups).

In our construction of the caring-with practitioner, we suggest that acts of care are structured not only through the apparatus of practice-research, but through an intra-active entanglement with the apparatuses and boundary-drawing practices of others. We propose that multiple roles can be held that are co-emergent and mutually constitutive. This expands literature about individual practitioners towards ecosystems of practices/practitioners that determine what comes to matter. To rigorously navigate through these entanglements, our methodological approach also embraces difference in researching a just and more caring city. We deliberately worked diffractively to move beyond incremental insights through potentially homogenising qualitative analytical methods. Our diffractive way of working follows an established scientific lineage, which is being advanced by new materialist thinkers, from theoretical concepts through to specific methodological protocols. Responding to Barad's (2012) invitation to "unsettle" our ways, we have brought an expanded set of practitioner insights and perspectives on the mediation of public urban cultures of care.

Diffractive methodologies and approaches have been advanced by researchers who have developed "a vocabulary of practices, doings, and actions in order to prevent the recycling of tropes of optics and reflection" (Pfizenmaier, 2018, para. 6). The diffractive reading and writing of texts—for example reading texts "through one another" and "the diffracting of narratives" requires practice. On one hand, this is a limitation of the approach—it takes time to become attuned to diffractive reading and writing. On another hand this might also present an opportunity to step out of disciplinary comforts and fixed patterns of behaviour; but might there be tensions between an open-ended approach, a slow and careful path that avoids a "rush to application" (Murris & Bozalek, 2019, p. 1505) and what is required to influence urban processes through policy-making mechanisms?

We see our article making significant contributions to knowledge across three areas.

First, we expand canonical theories about practice. We use diffractive enquiry to expand established scholarship of the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983), practitioner as mediator (Forester, 1987), and the transition activist (Escobar, 2018), contributing to contemporary scholarship within urban planning, built environment, and design professions. In doing so, our work responds to specific critiques of theories of practice, including the lack of a blueprint on how to work in partnership to engage across difference.

Second, we intersect professional practice scholarship with contemporary discourse about ethics of care. Whilst attention to the collective, relational and ethical dimension of practice is not new—e.g., they were central to Forester, who as Wagenaar (2002, p. 234) notes saw the limitations and the "instrumental bankruptcy of the expert model"—through introducing the notion of the caring-with practitioner we recognise a plurality of urban caring efforts and prepare the ground for these to be understood more equitably. This raises the profile of work undertaken in support of community-led development and practices associated with this that may not be fully recognised using established concepts of professional practice.

Third, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how to work with care at the nexus of academia and practice, which has received little attention to date. We challenge the binaries of practitioner roles, contributing to relational and co-constituted understandings of urban caring practices across academia, policy, and community-led development. The caring-with practitioner works across multiple registers and diffracts research-practice dynamics in urban care, recasting previously siloed boundaries or mirror-fashioned relationships between professionals.

Our proposition for the caring-with practitioner is of relevance to urban planning and built environment practitioners working towards the just city. Drawing on Barad's notions of intra-action as mutual constitution of entities through their relationships, we explored how the caring-with practitioner might shape and be shaped by situations within the ecosystems they operate in. We have moved back and forth between policy insights and the deeply situated by "cutting together-apart" (Barad, 2014) material about practices of others, our own practices, and established professional discourses.

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