

Viva Slough's #Artscape: Applying ID principles to redesign the perceptions of a town

Tarcila Broder
Viva Slough, UK
tarcila@gmail.com

Abstract. This paper explores whether typical interaction design principles taught in university courses can serve as frameworks to encourage collaboration between academia and practitioners, ensuring the design process remains user-centred, inclusive, and iterative. Additionally, it describes my experience and reflections working as a designer for Viva Slough's #Artscape, an initiative aimed at transforming the perception of Slough's town centre through integrating public art and digital design. I focus specifically on the revitalisation efforts centred around The Curve Plaza, an unwelcoming pathway leading to Slough's town centre.

Keywords: Urban Design, Interaction Design, User-Centred Design, Design Thinking, Public Art, Urban Planning.

1 Introduction

Slough, a town in Berkshire, England, is often criticised for its industrial landscape, characterised by business parks and trading estates, which some find aesthetically unappealing. Additionally, Slough faces socio-economic challenges, including higher-than-average crime rates, which have perpetuated negative stereotypes. The town was famously satirised in John Betjeman's 1937 poem "Slough," which called for its destruction, and mostly recently in the TV series *The Office*, reinforcing Slough's bad reputation.

Slough is undergoing significant renewal initiatives to transform it into a more attractive place to live. Key projects include the redevelopment of the town centre, with plans for new retail spaces, modern housing, and improved public areas to create a vibrant community hub.

Viva Slough #Artscape is a project that proposes and implements creative ideas aimed at beautifying Slough. This initiative serves as a platform for diverse groups to work together, combining artistic vision and community input to enhance the town's public spaces.

By connecting local artists and digital designers with investors, the project seeks to transform ordinary areas into culturally rich environments that reflect the town's identity and aspirations. The initiative encourages the development of innovative installations, murals, and digital art that not only improve the visual appeal of Slough but also promote a sense of pride and ownership within its community.

This paper describes my experience and reflection in translating interaction design concepts and methods I acquired in a relevant master's course into my role as chief designer for the Viva Slough #Artscape project. I present a brief overview of relevant literature in the area, before describing the project in more detail and illustrating with some examples how I applied my knowledge of interaction design concepts and methods. I close the paper by discussing the implications, opportunities and pitfalls of these ID translations in urban design for the regeneration of public spaces.

2 Background Literature

Urban spaces have long served as platforms for artistic expression, offering opportunities to reshape public perception and encourage community engagement. Scholars have explored the role of public art in transforming neglected urban areas, asserting its potential to act as a force for social integration and community engagement, transforming how residents perceive and interact with urban spaces[1], and nurturing a deeper sense of ownership and attachment to their environment.

Zhang and Zhang (2024) explore the transformative impact of artistic interventions in cities like Teruel, Spain, and Chengdu, China, demonstrating that public art initiatives not only improve aesthetic appeal but also enhance social inclusivity and economic prospects. These findings reinforce the argument that projects like Viva Slough #Artscape have the potential to alter public narratives surrounding urban areas perceived as unattractive or unsafe.

The intersection of interaction design and urban spaces has been increasingly examined in recent years. Farkas (2015) suggests that applying HCI/UX principles to urban design can create more accessible, user-friendly environments that cater to diverse community needs.[2] Similarly, Brynskov et al. (2014) argue that urban interaction design contributes to participatory engagement by incorporating digital and physical elements to enhance user experiences in public spaces.[3] Interaction design provides a structured and effective methodology to navigate the complexities inherent in urban environments[4] (Pozzi, S., Bagnara, S., 2015).

In summary, the literature suggests that applying interaction design principles to urban renewal projects can enhance the usability and cultural significance of public spaces. By incorporating user-centred approaches, cities can create more engaging and inclusive environments that resonate with their communities.

3 The Curve Plaza Experience

The Curve Plaza, once a grey and uninviting pathway leading to Slough's town centre, was an area often avoided by passersby due to its poor reputation and unpleasant environment. Known for its smelly pavements and a concentration of drug-addicted individuals, the space had become a symbol of neglect and urban decay.

Situated directly opposite the main entrance of Slough, the Slough train station, it was the first impression many visitors had of the town, further exacerbating its negative impact. The area's depressing state not only deterred foot traffic but also contributed to a broader perception of Slough as an unwelcoming place.

3.1 The Challenge

The challenge of transforming The Curve Plaza into a welcoming space that celebrates Slough's diverse community was ambitious and inspiring. The following goals needed to be achieved:

- Embracing Slough's multicultural identity
- Making it more attractive to visitors
- Making the space safer as a path to the town centre
- Communicating a change through design
- Encouraging residents/visitors to use the space for cultural events such as music performances and artistic pictures

The project started with the makeover of The Duke's House the idea was to transform the once sad building into a welcoming display of Slough's multicultural identity. Its 45 windows featured portraits of residents representing the town's varied communities. Below these portraits, the word "Welcome" is prominently displayed in numerous languages spoken in the city. British Sign Language was included to give the artwork an inclusive spirit.

The adjacent stairs have been revitalised with bright, eye-catching colours, while the walls have been converted into an open gallery featuring eight large picture frames. The central part of the Plaza has been transformed with music-themed murals, the most prominent of which covers an area that previously housed an abandoned green wall with dead plants.

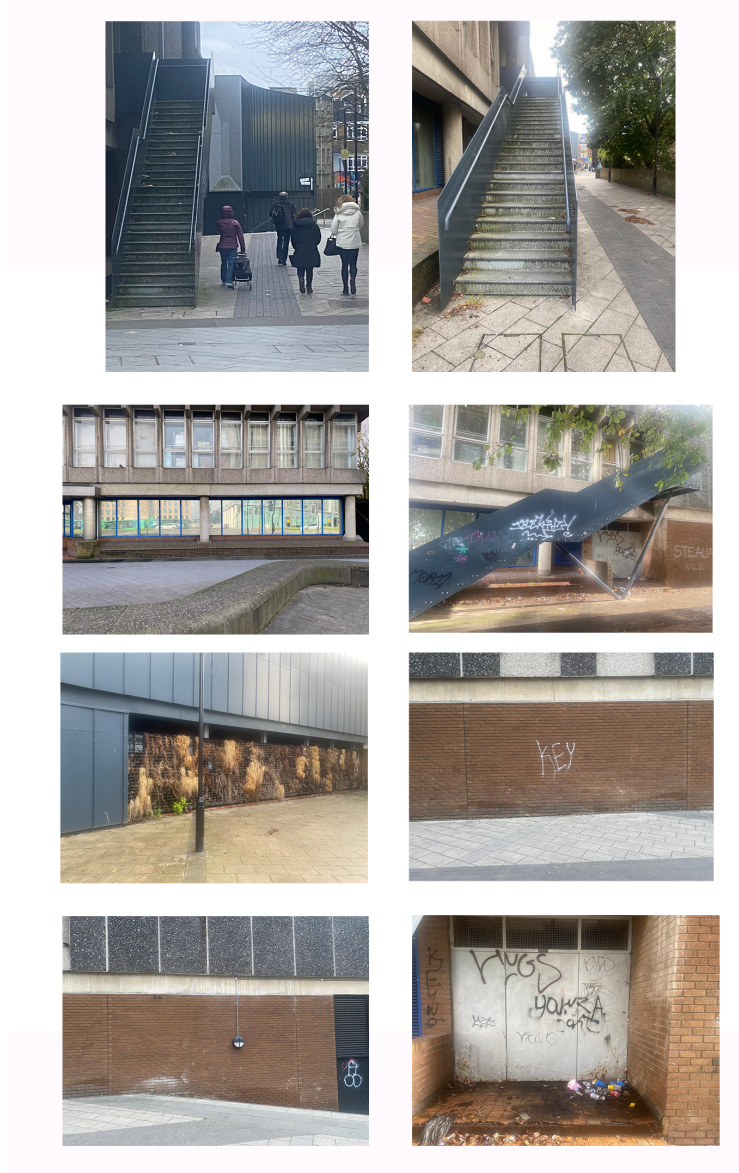


Fig 1. The Curve Plaza before the makeover

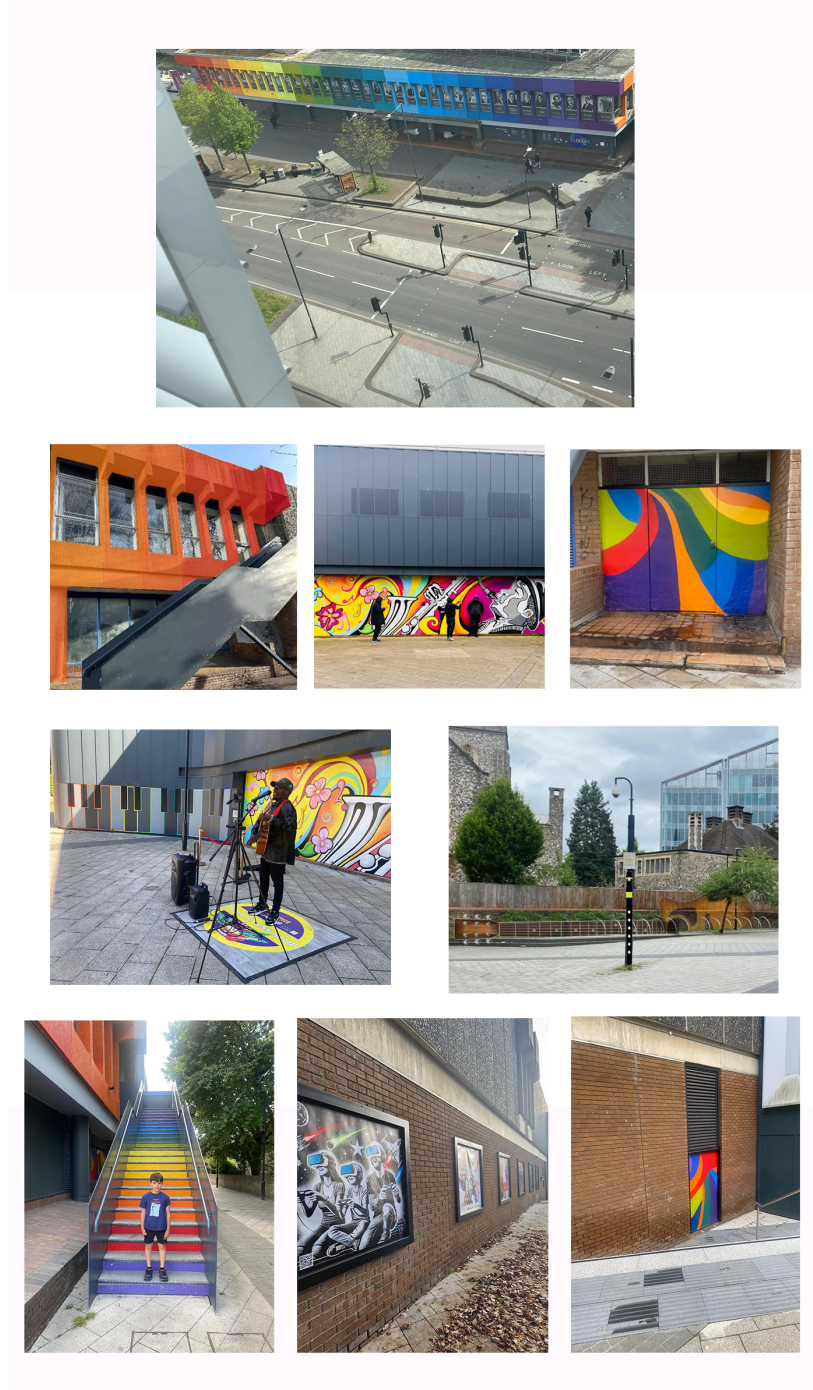


Fig 2. The Curve Plaza after the makeover

This project was brought to life through the joint efforts of organisations, photographers, digital designers, and artists, who worked to create a meaningful tribute to the town's unity and cultural heritage and aspirations for the future.

As the chief designer, I have tried to connect this real-world challenge with a digital user interface and to apply principles of interaction design [5] such as:

- Visibility

Visibility is one of the fundamental principles of interaction design emphasising that users should be able to easily understand and navigate a system by making key elements and functions apparent. When designing The Duke's House, I have tried to use this idea to make the building as visible as possible from the main Slough train station and to invite visitors to explore its surroundings. Striking colours were used all over the Plaza to indicate a change of perception of once a very grey area, to indicate the need for a change.

- Consistency

A consistent interface follows rules, such as using the same operation to select all objects. Consistency in this project can be seen in the central area of The Curve Plaza, where music is the theme of 5 different murals. The intention is to communicate that this is now an inviting area where musicians/artists can use as a stage for their performances.

- Affordance

When the affordances of a physical object are perceptually obvious it is easy to know how to interact with it. Design can shape the purpose of an object. In the context of a town, design can also communicate the purpose of a location. With this in mind, we have completed the work around The Curve Plaza by introducing 8 frames into the walls to make it look like an open gallery. Each frame showcases posters created in partnership with artists from local art groups. Expressions of Art in opposition to anti-social behaviour are now the purpose of this location.

In my experience designing The Curve Plaza, I could connect not only the principles of interaction design that I learned during my master's degree but also identify the need for a more user-centred approach when designing public space[4].

Residents are users of urban spaces. Farkas, P. (2015) explores this correlation by stating that cities are supposed to be designed with one aim in mind: to provide inhabitants with an excellent user experience.

While the process of creating these installations has been organic and adaptive, its alignment with the design thinking is evident. For instance, prototyping played a crucial role in testing and refining ideas before final implementation, allowing for iterative improvements based on feedback and observations. However, the design process lacked user research and input to improve its outcome. This issue highlights the potential for more structured interdisciplinary approaches when creating artwork for a town.

User-centred approaches emphasise that successful innovations are best achieved by deeply understanding user needs and desires. This involves observing and engaging with users through interviews, as well as identifying their long-term goals and requirements.

Pozzi & Bagnara (2015) ask relevant question: who are the users of a city? Are they inhabitants, or recent immigrant, or tourists, or one-day businessmen?[4]

4 Discussion

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Although interaction design focuses on designing the interactions between users and digital products[6], artwork planned and created digitally for the physical world presents an opportunity to apply its principles.

The concept of viewing a town as a digital interface has been explored, particularly in the context of smart city development[7], where interactive digital media art is integrated into urban public spaces [8] (Michiel de Lange, Kåre Synnes, and Gerald Leindecker, 2019). However, this idea can also be extended to non-digital artwork that is conceptualised and planned digitally for public spaces.

When designing for a town to shift the perception of a location, it is essential to incorporate principles of User Experience Design. The collaborative nature of the design process—engaging artists, community members and investors—reflects the participatory and co-creative methodologies that are fundamental to design thinking. This approach ensures that diverse perspectives are integrated, promoting a sense of ownership and connection among those involved.

The correlation between these disciplines is still a field to explore. In a recent article, Harri Heikkilä (2024) investigated the lost connection between urban planning and interface design. It suggests that viewing the city as an interface and

examining it from the perspective of UI/UX design, can present an opportunity to understand how urban planning might benefit from interface design principles[9].

However, the challenge lies in the difficulty of defining who the "users" of a town truly are. A city is home to diverse and multifaceted users, and before any meaningful analysis can begin, it is essential to identify and categorise these distinct groups.

5 Conclusion

Community initiatives such as Viva Slough's #Artscape provide a valuable platform for collaboration between academic researchers and practitioners, enabling the application of interaction design principles and user-centred approaches to develop public art projects aimed at revitalising urban spaces. These efforts promote a shared goal of creating meaningful, inclusive, and engaging artwork that contributes to the transformation and renewal of town areas.

Through observation, it is evident that the revitalisation efforts around The Curve Plaza have led to noticeable changes in the behaviour and mood of transients. The area now feels and looks more welcoming, with a reduction in the concentration of anti-social behaviour, particularly during daytime hours.

The art installations and colourful murals have created a more inviting atmosphere, encouraging positive interactions and a sense of community pride. Further research is necessary to obtain comprehensive data on the impact of this initiative on the perception of its inhabitants.

There is significant potential for cooperation between industry and academic researchers to utilise interaction design principles in planning the regeneration of areas of Slough and other "socially wounded spaces"—cities struggling with existential challenges, where residents feel disconnected from their surroundings[10].

By combining the creative expertise of designers with the analytical and methodological approaches of academic research, this partnership can lead to innovative solutions that enhance urban spaces. In-depth research and community input will be crucial to comprehensively assess the impact of these transformations on reshaping the perception of a town. Such studies can explore how these interventions influence the identity, engagement, and emotional connection of its inhabitants, providing valuable insights into the long-term effects of designing art for public spaces.

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