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Power Grids: Community Energy and Comics Co-Creation

Exhibition Intro Text

Introduction

This online exhibition of photographs and artworks provides documentation of “Power Grids: Reimagining Energy Infrastructure in Comics” (2024-2026). This research project is funded by the BA/Leverhulme Small Research grant scheme and the images included here were exhibited at the British Academy’s Summer Showcase at 10-11 Carlton House in June 2025. The project brings together two discrete yet growing social movements: community energy and comics-based research. It uses comics co-creation workshops to conduct research into the way communities across England are organising to produce sustainable energy and that way to lower fuel costs, catalyse the green transition, and build place-making cultures of empowerment and belonging.

In this short introduction to the exhibition, we will provide some basic information about community energy and explain why we chose to use comics co-creation as a method of research into this quickly expanding sector. We will also briefly explain the activities documented in the exhibition’s images. The exhibition is aimed at readers with interests in community activism, sustainable energy production, and the development of innovative research methods to build stories and social movements around the pressing infrastructure demands of the twenty-first century.

Community Energy

Rapidly building sustainable infrastructure for the provision of green energy will play a pivotal role in reaching Net Zero and limiting the impact of the climate crisis both in the UK and globally. Community energy projects present an efficient and cost-effective way to roll out this infrastructure and move the UK towards a green transition. Comprised of localised energy infrastructures that range from rooftop solar and onshore wind power to rural heat networks and retrofitted buildings, these projects have both immediate and long-term economic, social, and political benefits for the communities that run them (Community Energy England 2025).

To begin, by producing clean energy at a time of rising fuel prices, community energy can provide collective security and protect vulnerable users from the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. It can also involve community members in the construction, repair, and maintenance of energy infrastructures, spreading practical skills that empower people who might otherwise feel alienated from infrastructure as a specialist service that is “done to them” by top-down organisations (Cose 2018). There are many obstacles to community energy, from growing opposition to Net Zero policies in right-wing politics, to aesthetic objections to green infrastructure locally, to on-the-ground

conflicts between infrastructure development and biodiversity loss (Davies 2023). Nonetheless, when broadly understood, the empowerment of communities to take control of their energy production creates space where these problems can at least be tackled out in the open, and in ways that feel immediately relevant to people's lived experience. In many cases, community energy has the potential to rectify a democratic deficit by bringing people together through collaborative action and increasing their involvement in local decision-making processes (Kalkbrenner & Roosen 2016; Pohlmann & Colell 2020).

Comics Co-Creation

What does this have to do with comics and graphic narratives? As many artists and scholars have shown, comics are a creative, accessible, and "infrastructural" medium, well-suited to mapping layered cultural geographies and communicating complex spatial systems in legible terms (Dittmer 2019; Peterle 2021). This is because comics and graphic narratives (we use the two terms interchangeably here) are built from what I have called an "infrastructural form" that includes frames, panels, gutters, and grids, combining image and text in a way that is planned out spatially on the page (Davies 2019). This very particular "narrative infrastructure" has made comics especially adept at representing and responding to forms of infrastructural violence, including ecologically devastating practices in the world's extraction zones (Davies 2024). As importantly, it has allowed comics artists to reimagine more socially and spatially just forms of infrastructure – including energy infrastructure – in cities ranging from New Orleans and Beirut to Delhi and Cape Town and beyond (Davies 2019).

Notably, this practice of using graphic narrative and other arts-based methods to reimagine alternatives to failing infrastructures often begins in the global South and works its way northwards, where it has recently come to be known as "comics-based research" (Moretti 2023). Importantly, while comics are often intuitively understood as a way to communicate the results of academic research, this emerging practice actively uses comics as a core part of its research method. Indeed, "research-based comics" or "research comics" are gaining traction across the humanities and social sciences precisely because they allow researchers to tell stories *with* people, rather than about them (Wysocki 2021). Building on this work, this project deploys emerging comics research and co-creation methodologies to empower practitioners to give artistic expression to their own lived experiences and personal understandings of community energy, as well as the social and political ecology through which it operates.

Comics-based research is rooted in the fact that comics creation lends itself to collaborative co-production between artists, writers, journalists, community members, and other stakeholders (Theodossopoulos ed. 2022). The multi-modal form of graphic narrative is particularly adept at building stories around diverse voices and perspectives, self-reflexively acknowledging different standpoints and their contexts,

and presenting both concordant and conflicting views together in juxtaposition on the page (Sousanis 2015). Comics build intergenerational and multifaceted stories, and they communicate ideas through intuitive and interactive sequences of images and icons. They do not necessitate specialist expertise in semiotics, drawing, design, or other creative practices, and they remain widely accessible to those who may lack confidence in textual or visual communication skills. Many of the artists Davies has engaged in his research have developed their work around infrastructure through comics co-creation workshops, deliberately “drawing” communities together through collaborative artistic practices that are often closely associated with social movements and other activist contexts (Davies 2019; see also Moretti & Della Puppa eds. 2025).

Power Grids

The title of this project, “Power Grids,” ties together these different concerns. First, it puns on the synergy between content and form, as the project documents the grids of contemporary energy infrastructures in the gridded form of graphic narrative. Second, contained inside this parallel is another double-meaning: while the “power” of “Power Grids” quite obviously refers to the wind and solar energy that is harnessed by community energy projects, it further alerts us to the forms of social power that emerge when communities organise to take control of their infrastructure (Colell 2019). It is very much our intention to continue developing these comics co-creation workshops into a collective space that can be used to document – and also potentially to inspire – similar forms of social power moving forward.

The exhibition that follows documents two comics co-creation workshops held with community energy practitioners in May 2025. These practitioners came from a range of backgrounds, from energy governance experts and social entrepreneurs to climate activists and community volunteers. The first workshop was hosted at City St George’s, University of London, the second at Hulme Garden Centre in Manchester. Practitioners attended from across England, from the Lake District through to Manchester and Sheffield, and from London through to Sussex and Devon. The images in the exhibition fall into three sections: the first documents the London workshop; the second documents the Manchester workshop; and the third presents a selection of individual and collaborative comics that were made during the course of these activities.

The project remains unfinished. Davies continues to work with his colleagues and collaborators, the visual illustrator Kremena Dimitrova and comics researcher Reed Puc, who have been instrumental in the delivery of these workshops. We continue to work with the comics made during these sessions and to develop them through co-production practices into longer graphic narratives that explore community energy in more depth and coherence. Nonetheless, there is a flavour of the progress and potential of the project in the images exhibited here. As they suggest, while the finished comics have rich uses as research data and communication materials that are still

under development, the process of co-creation as a research method is itself of significant social value for participants and the communities they represent.

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