

## Fine art installations as expressions of cultural identity and catalysts for intuitive business models

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In this paper, fine art is viewed from a political perspective, as containing potential and, more importantly, having the power of expression that can penetrate the social, economic and political spheres. By projecting a sense of identity and a way of behaving that promotes more concern for the wellbeing of all citizens, fine art can enhance a change towards more democratic values, instead of supporting the individualistic, consumer-based model that has been intensifying over the past decades and has widened the gap between those who have opportunity and hope, and those who do not.

The area of fine art is wide and broad. This paper specifically concerns itself with cultural activity that is organically-evolving, not pre-planned into an overall vision or brand, but created out of a sense of place and a sense of community. This type of activity, more often than not ad hoc and emerging out of a local context, gives expression to a wider filter of voices. Accounting for its worth and contributions to cultural heritage thus becomes an important political imperative if we are to evolve our societal system to a more inclusive and democratic form than the one presently in place in Western societies.

The focus here is on the arts as a catalyst for change; in the form of fine art installations that explore values and behaviours that can favour more intuitive, holistic models and approaches for how we organise our systems in society. The aim is to support and promote those kinds of elements that help foment a more sustainable, equitable system within business activity. This means working at a local level, creating fine art installations adjacent to centres of production so that cross-pollination can take place.

The management question for me is can I design and curate works that go into public space to promote values and behaviours that help move away from a mechanical, efficiency-based model based on bottom-line economic principles towards more sustainable approaches based on a longterm view?

Social value becomes the focus in this approach, with cultural activities expressing and enhancing wellbeing in communities. Social value is defined here as benefit to the wellbeing of communities in holistic terms. There are two dimensions of this research: what kind of cultural activities are they? And how can we measure their effectiveness?

In terms of the project approach, it is useful to clarify the definitions of terms applied here; terms such as holistic, participatory, organic, osmosis, and intuitive. Holistic expresses a concern with complete systems rather than with individual parts: looking at interactions and interdependencies across elements within the systems. Intuitive refers to what is learned or understood from the environment and culture; an area where cultural activities can have a real impact. Osmosis is a process where information is diffused and absorbed via assimilation in space. Through osmosis, the intuitive reinforces innate feelings that people have, without relying on rational thinking and analysis. The organic is a process that occurs in living organisms, responsive to change and accounting for the interconnected whole, so the responses to change are done holistically. In terms of inclusive, participatory, and equitable, those are key words when considering how to involve people in local communities in these types of cultural and artistic activities; supporting the input of a wider range of voices into the activities. Sustainable is a key word here, always having a view to the future and what requirements we will have to survive in the kinds of ecosystems and communities that we wish to maintain.

The definitions of these words in themselves set up the problem of accountability. How do you measure something that is holistic, intuitive, and impacted by osmosis? It is quite difficult. These terms lend themselves to qualitative analysis, but what we actually need in society is to be able to quantify these factors so that they actually get accounted for properly in terms of how society manages systems and allocates funds and resources.

Actually, the first question is should they even be measured? Are organic activities, expressed intuitively and transmitted via osmosis, measurable? Does it go against the essence of what they are to attempt to measure them?



Street Interrupted. Prince Edward Road, Hackney Wick, London. July 2014.

There is a strong example of ad hoc creative output in the public areas of Hackney Wick, London, a new locus of urban renewal after London 2012 happened close by at the Stratford site of the Olympics. The area has gone through a lot of changes as a result of that. But there is a huge amount of organic activity going on there as well. During a recent Co-producing the Makeshift walk organised by Affordable Wick (<http://affordablewick.com/>), public space was replete with examples of different designers, artists, and people in the community who are using and applying public space for cultural activities and art-making that celebrate the local communities now being overrun by regeneration efforts led by market forces.

Street Interrupted by muf architecture/art (<http://www.muf.co.uk/portfolio/street-interrupted-2010>) is an area in Prince Edward Road, Hackney Wick where the artist/architects actually cordoned off motor vehicle access and created a street with asphalt and lines but no motor vehicle entry, identifying the street itself as a public space that anybody can use. With a touch of wry humour, the street is demarcated by street benches blocking off the road to traffic. So, the bench as object of public communal activity is deployed as barrier to motor vehicles. The benches are not only symbolic but are physical manifestations of an engagement with public space that is not just functional, but that is a catalyst for social activities, encouraging ad hoc interaction in public space.

Frontside Gardens skatepark (<http://www.frontside.org.uk/frontside-gardens.html>) is an example of a completely ad hoc project initiated by a member of the community, engineer Andrew Willis, who created a skatepark out of makeshift materials and lovingly has developed this over time. It serves as a great example of an activity that is ad hoc and is beneficial to everybody in the community. Another example is White Post Lane. White Post Lane is quite meaningful to me, because I curated a series of exhibitions and coincidentally in 2008 I was there to document one of the artist projects for that series. It is of historical interest to see how it has developed since then. There are a number of artist live/work spaces there now, even after regeneration. These spaces are ad hoc, and inhabitants never know when they





Frontside Skatepark. Hackney Wick, London. July 2014.

might have to move out, but people have made the commitment of time, effort, ingenuity and money to take these spaces over and create working communities. Stour Space (<http://www.stour-space.co.uk/>) is an excellent model of how to move from informal ad hoc to formalised ad hoc space that is recognised by the local council and that maintains operations much the same as in its inception. Stour Space has been there from the very beginning in terms of the redevelopment of the area before the Olympics came to Hackney Wick. It started off as an ad hoc activity that has now solidified into artists' studio spaces with a very communal feel, integrating the activities that individuals do in their own studios with a communal ethos and responsibility. There are regular activities and frequent tours and visits. The Co-producing the Makeshift walk showed that ad hoc activity in the area is very much still alive, but there is a lot of effort that goes into maintaining that, because prices are going up and different types of populations are moving in, and maintaining that type of activity with consistency is a difficult thing to do. This is why it is important to quantify the value of these types of activities, so that they will be respected for their contributions and win the support and funding allocation required to maintain and protect them from the economics-only imperatives of market forces.

The other side of the argument is that trying to capture those types of ad hoc activities, initiated intuitively and expanded through osmosis, is not a good thing. There are urban researchers looking at the potential harm it causes to attempt to quantify activities that are essentially non-measurable. Davi Boontharm, part of the Measuring the non-Measurable research project at Keio University, Japan (<http://colaboradovic.blogspot.co.uk/>) spoke at the Mapping Culture Conference in Coimbra, Portugal in May 2014 about mapping urban intensities and the importance of the subjective in that activity. The argument there is that the subjective cannot be specified as data points to be plotted on a graph. The subjective is beyond measured data.



Stour Space. Hackney Wick, London. July 2014.

This paper proposes that instead of trying to quantify the entirety of the organic, perhaps the focus can be on extraction of key elements that are influencing everyone's engagement within a community and how they are impacting, positively and negatively, on social value for the community. Key spaces, communal points, and activities can be plotted as values, alongside economic and political factors, to be considered on equal footing when making decisions for a community. What remains in place in a community and what becomes transformed is guided then not only by economic and political imperative but by social value as well. The alternative is not to account for them at all, which removes value from them and makes them vulnerable to transformative forces driven solely by macro-economic and political needs beyond those of the local communities affected.

Ad hoc activity, generally perceived as non-measurable, can be viewed in this way as having measurable elements. It can be expressed through the textual and the numerical; textual being the subjective experience that is not necessarily translated, and the numerical being elements that can be extracted out and accounted for in terms of allocation of resources. There are experiences that are meaning-making in a quite personal way that can be understood as subjective, and then there are key values in those experiences that will sustain those experiences longterm if they are accounted for explicitly and have an impact on decisions for the future in that community.

That is the main problem when accounting for iterative processes: activities and groupings that happen through osmosis. They are resistant to quantification. People who truly enjoy engaging in those types of activities are resistant to enumerating them, because they do not want to take away those special qualities that are embedded in them through quantification. It is possible, though, to recognise that there are things that cannot be enumerated but still extract out those things that can be, so that support can be gained for those activities on an ongoing basis and their value for community-building be recognised as part of the process. Towards that end there are means for applying quantitative methods to express gains





LanDesign installation. Heritage Architecture LanDesign Conference, Aversa, Italy. June 2013.

in social value. It is not a matter of replacing a system that is in place for accounting for impact and value. Instead, it means acknowledging that value is made up of more than just economic worth, and that by adding complexity to the system, we can provide communities with the tools to be more in control of their wellbeing and the way that decisions are made regarding their social make-up.

Aldo Cibic has been developing the Rethinking Happiness project since first presenting it at the Venice Biennale in 2010 ([www.rethinkinghappiness.info](http://www.rethinkinghappiness.info)). During a talk at the Heritage Architecture LanDesign conference in Aversa, Italy in 2013, Cibic emphasised how important it is to build communities that are integrated to natural functions in nature as we move into a technological society that is further and further removed from the natural world. So, it is vital for our sense of humanity that we stay as close to nature as possible. Instead of retreating into the digital and removing ourselves further and further from nature, he argues for more integration with nature as we move towards a more technological way of communicating with each other. Through that we can reactivate that sensation of being part of a process and encourage more holistic thinking when considering what is best for our communities.

During the Aversa conference, there was a presentation of a LanDesign project envisioning how this could work: communities where activities are embedded in natural space; designed interventions to help people move through and make their place in those spaces; the natural world as main feature, with agriculture showcased for the integral function it plays in our survival. This model embeds cultural and artistic activities not only in the lived spaces but also in the spaces where we grow our food. A key element of this model is engaging people as part of the process so that everyone is inputting into these activities. There seems to be a commonality to this system, lacking strict hierarchies or rules, allowing for ad hoc engagement with the system components, so that different people can relate to different elements at different times. The Rethinking Happiness project approach is one that creates interconnected nodes and allows people to move through them in more intuitive ways.



The Rise and Fall of the Olympic State. Performance organised by Jem Finer at Stratford site of London 2012 Olympics. February 2008.

Can this be measured? Can the effectiveness of this system be quantified? Can it be translated as social value? Yes, it can. There are a lot of different organisations that have done tremendous work so far in terms of developing systems for accounting for social value. Bhutan established the Gross National Happiness Index. In England, the Social Return on Investment (SROI) has created a guideline of principles for accounting for value which are important to consider. The Sustainable Procurement Task Force set out guidelines on procurement of goods and services to account for the social value accrued to the community where those economic activities are happening. That led to the Social Value Act of 2010, which made the guidelines into policy and is now implemented at the local council level.

This paper proposes to develop a more iterative-based model of visualising and enacting collaborative-based activities that embed fine art practice into local production centres. Building on LanDesign principles, the approach could be to foment small nodes of activities that benefit each other, that strengthen each other, and together contribute to the social value of a community. In terms of expressing the community engagement, the outcomes, and the worth of the activities, visual mapping is a powerful explanation and visualisation tool.

Following Cibic's thinking, people's actions determine the identity of places, not vice versa. Space is developed out of the needs of those communities that are being shaped. Looking at the meaning-making function of place, there was a series of exhibitions I curated, previously mentioned in this paper, that took place from 2008-2012 and related to the Stratford site of the 2012 Olympics, entitled Sound Proof. For the first exhibition in 2008, Jem Finer did a performance at the site of construction where he and a troupe of musicians symbolically trumpeted down the wall. At the time we initiated this exhibition, the space was raw and not demarcated in any way. By the time Finer conceived of his performance, the London Musician's Collective he supported had lost its arts funding and a massive blue wall had been erected around the site. The symbolic meaning of these two actions was not lost on the artist, who made a direct link between loss of support for local art activities and the shutting off of the site from public view. His performance was a direct response to the creation of that wall. The identity of that place was shaped, for me in any case, by the fact that he did this action in response to the wall being put up. It



is in accounting for those types of actions by artists, by designers, by people in the community that place identity can be more holistically determined. Those types of responses can then contribute to the dialogue around the reshaping of places, instead of simply following hierarchical models of decision-making to determine what stays and what gets stripped out.

Visual mapping as an exercise is very much about that. It explicitly conveys what is inside, what is outside, what gets accounted for, what doesn't get accounted for, what gets centre stage, what gets a smaller part, what does not get mapped at all. And, so, mapping is quite an important function in providing place identity and can be activated in a fine art project. It captures a feel of a place at a particular time and provides indications of how space is currently used and where shifts might be happening. When a space is mapped by an artist or by a citizen, there is the expression of a very subjective view. This can lead to concerns over qualitative versus quantitative and measurable versus non-measurable.

Still, elements from creative works as a whole about a particular site and/or activity can be distilled into key concerns that represent social value indicators for a community. The subjective qualities of the works are independent and unique to each vision, and those can remain textual and opaque; a part of experiencing the work and making personal interpretations. There are, however, clearly identifiable concerns, data points that can be plotted on a graph, that can help make sense of what matters to people about these spaces.

My findings from doing a cultural mapping of the exhibition artefacts of Sound Proof I (2008) showed a serious concern overall for the loss of sense of place of the Stratford site of London 2012, with a fear that the process would landscape out the site's unique quirks and flatline it into an amorphous space devoid of any distinctive characteristics that could link it to its past. Also, there were real concerns expressed about the impact of global entities such as the Olympics on the health of the local communities that were there before the Games arrived. Who benefits from these massive regeneration undertakings? Accounting for social value of such endeavours can help lead towards decisions that sustain rather than deplete the local communities affected by the changes.

In terms of looking at fine art installations and cultural activity and how they can be catalysts for change, visual mapping is a potentially powerful initial activity. It becomes a means to engage communities in expressing what is meaningful to people, and can help guide the development of projects in response to those meaning-making places, things and activities, so as to reinforce the social value of them to us in our lives.

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