Enhancing Social Cohesion through the Design of Narrative Environments in the Public Realm

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Abstract

Designers of narrative environments are story listeners, story tellers, and that they also enable others to tell and exchange stories in physical spaces. The design of spatial narratives offers distinctive kinds of immersive storytelling experiences that differ from watching a narrative on screen, reading a book or watching a play because audiences literally enter and participate in the spatial storyworld transforming the public realm by nurturing social interaction and community cohesion. Four case studies will demonstrate that the active, physical participation of audiences in a narrative can lead to novel and resilient forms of co-creation and social innovation in the public realm.

Key words

narrative, environment, active audience, participation, social innovation

**Introduction**

Cities are multidimensional. While they are functional organisms comprising buildings, roads, railways and offices, they are *also* intense social spaces where people exchange ideas and goods, commune and play. The design of narrative environments can produce playful interventions in the public realm that bring strangers and communities together and revitalise social cohesion. By making inviting, interactive, social spaces that communicate particular stories, narrative environments can unite diverse audiences and provide moments of playful participation that lift people out of isolated routine living and create a feeling of warmth and belonging. The question is how are narrative environments conceived and designed?

It could be argued that all spaces tell a story, for example, the seashore tells a story of erosion, a busy high street tells a story of consumerism, or a French village fete tells the story of a rural community. If so, all environments would be narrative environments and this definition would be too broad to be useful in developing the practice and theory of the design of spatial narratives. Therefore it is suggested here that narrative environments be defined as spaces which have been *deliberately* designed to tell a story or enable a story to be told. In so far as narrative environments are deliberately designed they correspond to literary stories which are purposely crafted to convey an idea or message (Aristotle, 1989; Bal, 1997; Chatman 1978; Lodge 1992; Kermode, 1983; Porter Abbott, 2002; Propp, 1884). In other words, just as stories are not daily life, neither are narrative environments. They are intentionally structured content-rich spaces and situations that communicate particular stories to specific audiences (Potteiger and Purinton, 1998) and induce an emotional impact, social contact, and/or an inquiring or critical frame of mind in the audience/interpreter.

Narrative environments communicate both explicitly and implicitly. *Explicit* communications are evident in, for example, exhibitions, heritage sites, churches, temples and designed events that have been created to house and communicate particular content through images, texts, objects and face-to-face dialogue. *Implicit* communications, expressed through culturally and socially produced codes of form, scale, colour, light, sound, materiality and of course the behavior of others, could include gardens, playgrounds, markets and shopping zones, public realm where communities of interest may convene, architecture or landscape that deliberately signify political and social values, and city quarters that function as visitor destinations. Whether the spaces communicate explicitly or implicitly or both, they affect us. Spatial narratives can enable learning, prompt interaction, support commerce, shape communal and cultural memory, promote particular values that embody and play on power relations and orders of knowledge (Foucault, 1970; Hooper Greenhill, 1992; Lefebvre, 1991) Hence narrative environments, or, if you like, deliberately designed story spaces, are powerful sites for discursive practice and social innovation.

Many questions arise: what are the intersecting lineages of the practice? How do designers construct spatial narratives? How do narrative environments engage audiences and communicate, or indeed, enable audiences to communicate with each other? In what ways do spatial narratives differ from other narrative mediums? How can spatial narratives be used in social innovation to support more cohesive and resilient communities? This paper will respond briefly to each of these questions in turn.

**Lineages**

The last 50 years have seen discussion of the narrative experience of space in several related fields, architecture, cultural criticism, exhibition design, user experience design and service design. In 1970s architect Bernhard Tschumi started to write a series of reflections on architecture as the ‘pleasurable and sometimes violent confrontation of space and activities’ (1996). He rejects the view of architecture as static and functional. He proposed a definition of architecture as *experiential* sequence and disjuncture. In 1990s the narrative architecture movement, NATO, emerged in the UK foregrounding the *experiential* dimension of architecture (Coates, 2012) and emphasizing that everyday popular culture is key to the experience of architecture. In 2004 cultural critic Norman Klein published a provocative book ‘Scripted Spaces from Baroque to Las Vegas to Disney’ examining how the spaces can create awe and emotional immersion encouraging audiences to surrender to the script, in other words, encouraging audiences to allow themselves to be swept up into fantasies that play out dominant socio-political discourses and value systems through the physical environment.

In the meantime, in the mid 90s, story-driven exhibition making became established. Multidisciplinary design teams established interpretive design for exhibitions as a commercial industry. There are several high profile companies now working is this way in Europe and America for example Kossmann Dejong in the Netherlands; Atelier Bruckner and Duncan McCauley in Germany; Metaphor, Event Communications and Land Design Studio in the UK; Ralph Appelbaum Associates in the USA. Many of the story-driven techniques and approaches developed in exhibition design have also been taken up by companies designing brand and leisure spaces, for example, the Shangri-La festival experience. More recently user experience design has stimulated research into audience drivers, engagement and interactions. It should also be noted that sequences of user actions are also central to service design. All of the above differ in their specific markets, audiences and intentions but their conflation of story and space is germane to the practice of the design of narrative environments. The designers of narrative environments may practice in many different sectors but there is a discernable trend in the last five years showing new design collectives pioneering story-led socially engaged design and innovation. Examples include The Decorators based in London, Daily Tous Les Jours, based in Montreal, and Snark-spacemaking based in Italy. MA Narrative Environments (MANE) at Central Saint Martins has pioneered multidisciplinary co-design since its inception in 2003. On the course, architects, communication designers and curators work in small teams to create story-led spaces for cultural, commercial and community environments. Students are taught user-centered design and how to apply lateral, creative thinking, strategic planning and mediation skills. Many of them are particularly interested in the being enablers and taking part in social innovation projects and exploring how spatial narratives can address social justice and involve participatory and co-design processes.

**The process of construction of spatial narratives**

Turning to the question of the construction of socially engaged narrative environments, they don’t just appear of their own accord. They are envisaged, discussed, debated, designed, and funded by individuals or communities, companies and governments. It can be argued that narrative environments are produced by an alignment of multiple stakeholders in a complex set of steps that are negotiated in order to transform an environment but also to produce socio-economic and cultural impact. Narrative environments are created by multidisciplinary teams because the design process involves many steps and layers. Teams initially research content, audience, location and context to produce initial propositions. Teams may fold narrative onto space by adapting or developing relatively stable architectural structures and spatial arrangements; they may produce more temporary printed graphics that appear in and around the space; they may include still and moving image in the space; they may use sound and light effects; they may add fast changing digital layers, usually accessed through mobile technologies; but throughout they are anticipating the most fluid and unpredictable dimension, the behavior of people in the space.

It is important to see designers here, not just the aesthetes who put a “face” on others’ ideas or stories but as active co-authors with clients and communities contributing to the shaping and articulation of spaces. Indeed the designer of narrative environments, being content driven, is particularly well positioned to engage with societal issues as demonstrated through the case studies below.

To sum up, the design of narrative environments draws on methods and skills from architecture, urban design, interior design, communication design, interaction design, exhibition design, user experience design and service design but, as will be explained below, the design of narrative environments differs from all of these in that it derives its foundational principles from narrative theory and practice. It uses these principles in conjunction with spatial theory and critical thinking to evolve new design propositions.

**Engaging and activating audiences**

Spatial narratives differ from other narrative mediums. While immersed in watching the screen or reading a book, you are, in many senses, always ‘outside’ the story. By contrast, you can walk right into a narrative environment, becoming physically, emotionally and intellectually immersed in narrative space. The argument here is that space as a narrative medium differs from the narrative medium of literature, film and theatre. Spatial narratives are distinctive because whole body immersion in spatialised stories *heightens* the sensory dimensions of narrative and simultaneously *reduces* fixed linear sequence expressed from a single viewpoint. In practice narrative environments transport visitors into a storyworld and prompt experiences that trigger new thoughts, emotional changes and even bodily changes to heart rate and breathing. However because of the nature of spatial behaviour visitors/audiences/inhabitants/users will tend to go where they like and construct their own narrative threads from the overall framing narrative. The visitor who enters this story world is not conceived of as passive receiver but as an active participant actively moving, interpreting, speaking and producing their own experience in mental space, physical space, social space and across social media in virtual space.

**Case Study One: Pipe Nest**

The first case study is the installation ‘Pipe Nest’ which was made in 2013 in the city of Jesolo, Italy as part of the EU-PA project. EU-PA comprised four partners organisations, The Municipality of Jesolo, Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, Association for Culture and Education KIBLA, Maribor, Slovenia, CIANT, the International Centre for Art and New Technologies, Prague, the Czech Republic. The partners from each city joined forces to investigate the role of art and design within urban regeneration and prompt a dynamic circulation of new ideas and expertise across Europe. The project sought more sustainable economic, social and environmental cohesion in each city.

In Jesolo, a specialist creative director, urbanist Scott Burnham, joined the team. He argues that cities often have considerable unrecognized resources that could be employed in creative ways to enhance the functionality of the urban landscape. He advocates ‘a new paradigm of making exceptional things happen in a city from an expanded appreciation of what the city already had to work with’. The EU-PA project positioned the municipality of Jesolo as a pioneer in this approach by reusing not only its municipal store of street furniture but also deploying the skills and ingenuity of its municipal employees. Burnham’s overall concept ‘Made of Jesolo’ led to three interventions, one of tge was Pipe Nest.

A multidisciplinary team of design students from MANE and local artists, Cristiana Favretto Alexander Augustus, Seung Youn Lee, Manuel Di Rita, Isabella Mara, led by Scott Burnham and Tricia Austin researched an underused site adjacent to the Para Allex municipal building. They found the key recreational activities in the summer in Jesolo are: going to the beach, dining out and shopping. There are some leisure centres popular with tourists but there is very little for local youngsters to do, particularly in the hot daytime sun, and the public spaces around the Para Allex seem almost abandoned due to their unfriendly, bland nature.

**Image 1: Pipe Nest 1.jpg**

**Caption: Pipe Nest at the Para Allex, Jesolo, Italy**

**@Tricia Austin**

The team developed the concept ‘Pipe Nest’, a large walk-through structure on the south east corner of Para Allex. It was envisaged as an installation made from recycled city pipes that were once lamp posts and railings. Pipe Nest supports a water sprinkler system to pump out mist above your head and create an oasis in the heat of the summer. In the cool, refreshing environment, visitors are also be able to interact with the pipes as a musical instrument. Knocking the pipes, which are all different lengths, produce different sounds. During the night and in the winter, Pipe Nest can also become a location where films can be projected onto the mist.

**Image 2: Pipe Nest 2.jpg**

**Caption: People playing Pipe Nest by knocking the pipes**

**@Tricia Austin**

Workshops with representatives from the municipality explored different options for the water system and the arrangement and scale of the clusters of vertical pipe and angled cross pipes. A prototype cluster of 30 pipes was developed with the assistance of the municipality’s technical experts and engineers and installed in May 2013. It proved very appropriate to the site and a further four identical module were produced and each set at different angles to create the Pipe Nest. Local expertise in water features and water engineering helped with the specification of the hose and the nebulalisers.

**Image 3: Pipe Nest 3.jpg**

**Caption: Pipe Nest Water Spray**

**@Tricia Austin**

The complete design was installed in July 2013 visitors and inhabitants of Jesolo found cool shade, play, freshness and a new unique environment to visit and play as an addition and alternative to the city’s other attractions. The intention was to provide a legacy in the form of a novel, playful and refreshing environment for the residents, particularly youngsters and tourists in Jesolo and also to support local artistic culture in the future. The installation, itself an implicit metaphor for the city, provided an inviting experience beyond a a functional physical structure. The mist and relief from the sun produced real bodily changes and the playful element of the pipes acting as a musical instrument enabled users to script their own narrative in sound.

**Case Study Two: Songboard London**

Songboard London was part of the London Olympics city dressing initiative developed and funded by by the Greater London Authority. It was one of several temporary installations that showcased work from some of London’s top design colleges and provided engaging interactive public installations along the city-centre route taken by the six million visitors to the London Olympics and Paralympic Games. The goal was also engage inhabitants and mass media in a celebration of the collaborative ethos of the Olympic Games. It needed to work all day and throughout the night.

**Image 4: Songboard whole length.jpg**

**Caption: Songboard London at Kings Cross Station**

**@Matthew Haycocks**

Students Alexander Goller, Katie Russel, Mahsa Damigah, Yuri Zampirolli, from MANE and BA Architecture, formed a multidisciplinary team to design the massive 35 metre interactive hoarding, located at the entrance to King’s Cross Station, engaging visitors, commuters and local residents. The hoarding comprised of 2940 plastic spheres, the coloured balls were lined in a 210-by-14 grid. The spheres were yellow on one side and black on the other side. Users could rotate them to create unique patterns, signs, words and images and in doing so provide a visually captivating show for the passing audience. Some of the spheres triggered recognisable sounds and melodies. A large graphic panel invited users to photograph their work and upload the images onto the Songboard website.  Many visitors pre-arranged displays to print on the board, then ‘flash mobbed’ the space to make their plans a reality. Student Alexander Goller, who was part of the team realising the Song Board, reflects: ”It was nice to see how fast a project of this size can be thought and built, and how well it works and how everyone interacts with it without really testing it before. It is an amazing project which went far beyond all expectations.” Songboard acted as a metaphor for the collaborative nature of the Olympic Games and the public who used it expressed their personal and group narratives implicitly through images but also frequently explicitly through the words they constructed by moving the spheres. The installation created temporary communities of place and a feeling of social cohesion as people, often strangers, gathered to write and read the words and images.

**Image 5: Songboard 2**

**Caption: members of the public playing Songboard**

**@Matthew Haycocks**

**Case Study Three: Parlour Games’**

‘Parlour Games’ was a collaboration in 2015 between MANE, the Francis Crick Institute, the Wellcome Collection and Origin Housing Association in London. It demonstrates how designers can play a strategic and creative role in researching user needs and aspirations; how they can provide creative direction for public engagement and mediation between different users, partners and stakeholders through a process of co-design. Design here is underpinned by a conscious political and ethical stance.

Local partnerships were key to this project located on the Sidney Estate in Somers Town. Urban poverty and its associated problems persist in Somers Town where the population of 30,000 comprise of a long-standing white, working class community living alongside a large population of Bengali and Somali immigrant communities. Much of the housing in Somers Town is owned and run by Origin Housing Association, a charitable business whose mission is to provide housing and connect tenants to local resources, for example, helping its residents to find employment.

In 2015, the Wellcome, the Crick and Origin Housing conceived a public engagement project as part of the UN ‘International Year of Light’. Their research at the Sidney Estate revealed the residents were unhappy with their bleak, under-used and poorly-lit courtyard. They wanted the courtyard to be welcoming and comfortable like ‘an outdoor living room’. Among the three organisations sufficient funding was available to implement a physical intervention but they recognised they needed creative direction and invited Central Saint Martins, as another nearby neighbour, to join the group and co-design a change to the court yard.

A team of six students and a mentor from MANE joined the partnership and started by researching inspirational case studies and documented the physical affordances and limitations of the site as well as researching its history on-line. Over two months, they attended several ‘On Light’ events run by the Crick and the Wellcome in the courtyard where they met and talked to the tenants. They devised and ran a creative participatory workshop, piggy-backing on existing events.

**Image 6: PG Public workshop**

**Caption: Design Workshop for residents at the Sidney Estate**

**@William Price**

The aim of the workshop was to elicit residents’ ideas about what constitutes a living room, its possible functions and the kinds of emotions residents would want to feel there. The design team prepared images, colour swatches, material samples and questions to engage and draw out responses from the residents. They acknowledged the tenants as experts on their own environment and tried to insure they got input from a cross-section of the whole community. The team drafted a report and met with Origin, the Wellcome and the Crick to discuss their research insights. The student team recognized at that point that in addition to being mediators who could facilitate consensus among the partners, they were also a driving force who could develop a design direction that satisfied everyone’s different goals.

Through analyzing the research information and drawing lateral connections, the students produced three creative directions which were put to the vote among residents and institutional partners.

**Image 7: Selection event.jpg**

**Caption: The residents vote for their favorite design**

**@William Price**

The winning design team, Julie Howell and Zhongxi Liu, settled on a theme ‘Parlour Games’ because it was playful and engaging and responded to residents’ wishes to capture the social spirit and history of the living room. They then drilled down to one specific game, ‘Pick Up Sticks’. They made a 3D model comprised of a checker-board floor and giant ‘Pick-Up Sticks’, 20 cms in diameter, reaching up into the trees. The poles were fitted with solar powered lights at the ends giving a warm glow in the evening and providing light at night for safe passage through the courtyard. The poles also lent themselves to seating of different kinds that would turn the courtyard into a convivial social space. The giant Pick-Up Sticks were sufficiently large to allow two-dimensional images and words could be added. The poles presented an opportunity for residents to display their own images for temporary exhibitions recording their present day experiences. The poles also provided opportunity to display the results of future workshops among the residents, the Crick and the Wellcome. Importantly the project produced the material conditions for continuing shared activities.

**Image 8: Parlour Games Model.jpg**

**Caption: Parlour Games Model**

**@William Price**

The installation is scheduled for Autumn 2016 and will make a material and permanent difference to the physical and social environment and has provided Origin with new ways to work with their residents. The entire project was built around listening, building trust and developing a sense of ownership among the residents with a strategic view to enabling a more social, safer and more welcoming environment.

**Case Study four: Crisp Street On Air**

In Nov 2014 the multi-disciplinary design group, The Decorators, based in London, won a tender to research what makes Chrisp Street Market in the Borough of Tower Hamlets, east London, great and develop a project that demonstrated its value as a civic and community space in order to help secure its future. The Decorators are a multidisciplinary design practice working with local authorities and public institutions to design, produce and deliver community building interventions in regeneration areas. They looked into the history of the place and found Crisp Street Market was built in 1951 as a utopian project promoting a new way of city living. It was part of a council estate comprising housing with a market in the middle and landmark in the form of a clock tower. Everything you might need was on your doorstep and there was therefore less need to traverse the city. By 2014, like many of these 20th century public housing schemes, the area had become really deprived and the market was barely financially viable. This was all the more ironic since Canary Wharf, one of the main finance centres in London and one of the wealthiest zones in the world, is just five minutes away.

In 2014 the pressure on housing in London, due to the lack of housing stock for a rapidly rising population meant Tower Hamlets, the local council, needed to build more accommodation and they wanted to explore how the district could be changed. Several government departments and private property developers were involved but controversy over private/public partnerships and experiences of gentrification, that drives local people out of newly fashionable areas, made the local residents quite wary of any changes.

The Decorators, Carolina Caicedo, Xavier LLarch Font, Suzanne O’Connell and Mariana Pestana, brought a research-led design process to this complex multi-layered environment. The Decorators design principle is to first research the context through ‘conversations’ with all parties, collecting stories from the widest range of groups and individuals. They go into spaces without assumptions or preconceived design propositions. Where other companies may ‘cut and paste’ solutions, The Decorators use their process of research and collaboration to evolve and test design proposals over a period time. Their design proposals are tailor made and site specific. They ask “What works for *this* place?” They look with fresh eyes at what should be celebrated, what should be improved, creating communication networks between all of the actors including residents and clients. They prefer not to make a one-off spectacular intervention but to create a communication strategy and events that play out over time. Indeed their first move was to insist on extending the length of the project from two months to five months to allow time for research and building trust.

The clock tower suggested the mechanism of radio as a means to communicate and connect. They created a radio station, a sort of a fictional new institution in the market. ‘Everyone understood the idea “Crisp Street market now has a radio station, of course, lots of places have radio stations”. The Decorators did not have enough time to go door to door to connect with individual residents so they set up a physical presence, a radio station in an empty shop so they were visible and welcoming and people could come to them. They also designed and built a mobile radio unit that could be pulled out of the shop and into the market and fit in with the other market stalls. They took the mobile structure to local institutions and invited individuals en route to contribute. They tried to find out what would excite and motivate local people rather than imposing their own idea on the residents. What would excite local people rather than what would excite The Decorators. Radio was an ideal tool as it is a conversational tool and a platform for political opinion. They held live shows and discussions bringing invited experts from outside, form the council together with local people, in other words, citizen experts. They brought discussions about the future of the market, which normally take place in formal settings out into the public realm, flattening hierarchies and creating connections.

**Image 9: Crisp Street 1.jpg**

**Caption: Stakeholders from Chrisp Street in conversation during 'The Future Market Show', April 2014.**

**@ DOSFOTOS**

**Image 10: Crisp Street 2.jpg**

**Caption: A Saturday live event during 'The Chrisp Street On Air Market Shows'. Image by @ DOSFOTOS**

**Image 11: Crisp Street 3.jpg**

**Caption: Female boxing match at the market, 2014.**

**@ Philipp Ebeling.**

In the process of collecting stories and meeting different people they came across various thriving groups for example the boxing club. This discovery gave rise to their culminating design for 3 live events, accompanied by radio. These took place on Saturdays and brought a huge footfall to the market place. In doing so they reminded people that the market is not just a place for shopping but a civic space where things can happen. They also designed a number of alternative market stalls and business models that would for example increase dwell time in the market or allow for shopping after hours. In being in the space, connected to and connecting the various communities, observing the affordances of the place The Decorators defined and developed a range of strategies to build on the history and culture of the place whilst accommodating new development.

These case studies shows how spatial narrative can be is used as both an inclusive creative tool, and a critical tool. They exemplify the role of the designer as researcher, as co-author, as a story listener and a story teller, as a creator of space but also of interactions, as a designer of systems, as politically aware and socially motivated, and, design as active intervention.

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**Links**

Atelier Brückner <http://www.atelier-brueckner.de>

Daily Tous les Jours <http://www.dailytouslesjours.com>

Duncan McCauley <http://www.duncanmccauley.com>

Event Communications < <http://www.eventcomm.com/>>

Kossmann Dejong < <http://www.kossmanndejong.nl>>

Land Design Studio <http://www.landdesignstudio.co.uk>

Metaphor <http://www.metaphor.eu>

Ralph Appelbaum Associates <http://www.raany.com>

Shangri-la experience < <http://www.glastonburyfestivals.co.uk/areas/shangri-la/>>

Snark-spacemaking <http://snarkive.eu>

The Decorators <http://www.the-decorators.net>

MA Narrative Environments <http://www.narrative-environments.com>

**Tricia Austin Biography**

Tricia Austin is a PhD supervisor and Research Leader of the Spatial Practices Programme at Central Saint Martins (CSM). She is also Course Leader of MA Narrative Environments at CSM. She is co-author of New Media Design, 2007, Lawrence King Publishing, UK. Her paper “Scales of Narrativity” is included in Museum Making published by Routledge in 2012. She has lectured in Europe and Asia and led a number of collaborative narrative environments projects with universities and governmental organizations across the world. Tricia led CSM’s partnership in the EU funded, two-year EU-PA project <eu-pa.net> which facilitated design installations in cities across Europe exploring culture-led city regeneration strategies. Most recently Tricia curated the Museum of the Future exhibition at the OCTloft Shenzhen Festival, December 2013 - March 2014; she curated the international summit on exhibition design, ‘Chaos at the Museum’ <re-xd.org> April 2014, in collaboration with Prof. Tim McNeil, UC Davis. She published ‘Designing Narrative Environments’ in the Journal of the National Academy of Art. Vol 35, Number 4, August 2014. In January 2015, she presented a paper ‘Spatial Storyworlds’ at the symposium ‘Against the Grain - on the narrative characteristics of architecture’ at Bureau Europa, Maastricht, Holland.