

The Housing Project: A Case Study in Using Sound Art and Ethnographic Interpretation in a Social and Political Intervention

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Abstract

The paper poses questions of how can we represent the views of urban dwellers in public art. How can we as artists maintain a space of community participation, consultation, and conceptualization in our work? How can we gather people's views from all walks of life about how best to continue to live in major urban conurbations in a carbon constrained future. How can a public artwork take the pulse of a city and present the views of its citizens? What strategies can be implemented to do this while creating an inventive, playful and engaging interactive artwork?

I employ *The Housing Project* created in Melbourne, Australia as a case study for how these questions can be answered. This is a playful and engaging interactive sound/sculpture installation, which explores the experience of city life. It uses generative sound, edited interviews from a broad range of citizens of the city, and complex programming algorithms. The resulting sound/sculpture installation incorporates ethnographic investigative techniques, digital programming and a tactile interface. Small ceramic objects are employed to trigger an audio environment that has both a serious investigative intent (on the part of the creators) while providing an exciting and stimulating sound art experience for the participants/visitors. The presentation of the paper will include images, video and a recording of the sound work created by the installation.

In the exhibition of this work, participants/visitors generate urban audio stories by laying out a city, placing miniature ceramic objects on an interactive glass platform. This action triggers sound files to create an ever-changing sound environment, telling stories from a broad range of people living in a 21st Century multicultural medium/high density city.

The discussion of city life is contextualised within a composition of electronic sounds and field recordings made in and around the city, composed and programmed by Melbourne artists Chris Knowles, Keith Deverell and Marco Bresiciani. Heard in this changing cityscape is a mix of hundreds of people's voices from all walks of life and many ethnicities. Refugees, migrants, minority groups, children, parents, architects, university students, urban planners, design professionals, young people, and elderly citizens offer points of view, memories and stories about their experiences of urban life. Emerging from this work is a conversation about the current issues surrounding city living, shelter, urban design, sustainability, climate change, prejudice, tolerance, peace and reconciliation.

It was officially launched in the City of Melbourne in September 2012. It was generously funded by the national arts funding body, The Australia Council for the Arts, City of Melbourne, City of Yarra, government agencies – ArtPlay and VicHealth, and private companies Greyspace, and Tait Enterprises.

Keywords: sound art, interactive art, collaboration, social and political intervention, interactive installation, urban life, Sound and sense of place, community participation, positive soundscapes, Urban Sound place and identity, tactile interface, field recordings, urban design, sustainability and climate change

1. Introduction

This paper employs *The Housing Project* as a case study example to demonstrate how an interactive sound/sculpture installation can be seen as an archive, a snapshot of a community, and a social and political intervention. I describe how such an artwork can take the pulse of a city and present the views of its citizens. I outline the strategies adopted to create this inventive, playful and engaging artwork.

I will draw some conclusions about the management of projects that involve community participation and cross art form collaboration. I will make some informed observations about the management of complex collaborations, and describe how such projects can function as a tool for social and political intervention. I will also discuss some methodological aspects of the production process that are replicable in different communities, creating the potential for a series of comparable sound/sculpture based interventions to be created in further iterations of this work in other cities.

2. Overview

The Housing Project is the result of a creative collaboration between six artists working in the fields of ceramic sculpture, community arts, sound recording, composition, table construction and design, and interactive programming.

The Housing Project takes the form of a playful and engaging interactive installation that explores citizen's views about urban life. In the exhibition of this work, gallery visitors are invited to select miniature ceramic trees, houses, multi-storey buildings and factories and place them as they wish on an interactive glass platform. As the city is laid out and arranged the barcode on the base of each ceramic object triggers a sound file, which contributes to a generative, evolving, and responsive sound environment.

The work captures the views and stories of urban life of a range of people who live in a 21st century multi-cultural, medium/high density city. The discussion of city life is contextualised within a composition of electronic sounds and field recordings made in and around

the city, composed and programmed by Melbourne artists Chris Knowles, Keith Deverell and Marco Bresiciani.

Heard in this changing cityscape is a mix of hundreds of people's voices from all walks of life and many ethnicities. Refugees, migrants, minority groups, children, parents, architects, university students, urban planners, shop owners, design professionals, young people, and elderly citizens offer points of view, memories and stories about their experiences of urban life. Emerging from this work is a conversation about the current issues surrounding city living, shelter, urban design, sustainability, climate change, prejudice, tolerance, peace and reconciliation. Included are comments on city design and planning, tales of the worst student share house experiences imaginable, life in public housing towers, and views about how to make our cities more sustainable and enjoyable to live in.

3. Collaboration

The Housing Project concept was devised by Greyspace artists Sue McCauley and Keith Deverell and produced by Sue McCauley through a Creative Producer Fellowship awarded to her by the Australia Council for the Arts. At the commencement of the project, shared ownership and a collaborative production method was negotiated amongst the artistic team. A second programmer joined the team for the second year of development. The other artists valued his contribution greatly and agreed to add him to the credits as a collaborator.

There are many definitions of creative collaboration. One that I find resonates with my practice comes from the Helsinki Design Lab. They define creative collaboration to be, "a particular kind, in which by interacting with others you discover genuinely new ways of thinking about and then doing something together. ... for collaborators ... not only conceive of the work, they also play principal roles in carrying it out. (Downie, et al, 2012 p. iii). The identification of principal roles and the management of the various timelines required by professionals working in this unusual cross-disciplinary creative collaboration meant that attention to timeframes, and a focus on shared problem solving was critical in developing this project.

The essential nature of sharing and building together in a creative collaborative context has always fascinated me as a media artist and a creative producer. Ernest Hemingway's often cited quote, "It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end." (Hemingway, 2014) provides a perspective on the collaborative creative quest. In an effective collaborative journey, a team can create a work that exceeds the capacity of any individual involved. The "journey" of sharing of ideas, skills, and problem solving delivered in "the end" a shared creative vision, a well received interactive sound sculpture, and a production process that was challenging and frustrating, but ultimately, a rich and valuable experience for the creative team.

Could projects such as *The Housing Project* be made in other development contexts? The answer is that it needed the collaboration to deliver the range of skills and the shared problem solving which was so effective in the production process. Vera John-Steiner discusses modes of authorship in collaboration, in her books *Notebooks of the Mind: Explorations of Thinking* (1985), and *Creative Collaboration* (2000). She investigates the relationship between group authorship and creative innovation in the work of artists and scientists. She observes that innovative collaborations are those, "that lead to change in their domain's dominant paradigms." (John-Steiner 2000, p.196) She suggests that this is because creative artists who are interested in working collaboratively are those who see the value in working with people from a range of disciplines. All artists in the team assembled for *The Housing Project* came with a wealth of experience and expertise in their own field of activity. Some of them had worked on cross-disciplinary projects before, but never with such an unusual cast of characters, combining as it did, ceramic sculpture, furniture design, community art, digital programming and sound design. One reason that an artist may find it creatively satisfying to be engaged in such an unlikely collaboration, is that it is in trans-disciplinary collaborative practice that innovation can occur. It is in the clash of traditions and methodologies that new knowledge can be created. (McCauley 2007, p.13).

The notion of there being a leadership role in collaboration may seem to be a contradiction in terms - but this is the best description of the production method employed during *The Housing Project*. This management role is that of the Creative Producer, and in this production I played this role. It is increasingly found in practice, particularly in the development and management of successful projects that have a focus on social and political intervention through community engagement.

I examined and theorized the role and its impact on production in PhD research completed in 2007. I found creative producers to be instrumental in developing effective strategies of community engagement and in creating a successful collaborative production models

to suit project conditions. The inclusion of the creative producer fundamentally supports the creative dynamics, the team relationships, the management activities, and the communication processes within the collaborative team and that the introduction of the Creative Producer role may create a new production model for such community-based, multimedia productions that may affect not only what media products are made, but also how they are produced. It is a production model that is particularly effective in small productions, where multi-tasking is inevitable. In larger productions, the creative producer, is often less hands on, but still critically involved in creative visioning, communication, and team management.

A key to the role is communicating effectively with the artistic team, community stakeholders, organisations and individual participants involved in the process. In such collaborations, the Creative Producer is involved in developing the concept, team selection, and financing. He or she is responsible for the development of an effective production design that incorporates the specific requirements of various creative practices.(McCauley 2007, p.13)

The key focus of my practice as a creative producer is to develop projects constructed through a collaborative process with other artists, while seeking to maintain a space of community participation, without compromising the high standards of professional arts practice. In the “creative” side of the role my activity is focused on creating and maintaining a clear project vision, thematic development, community engagement, and the process of creative collaboration. In the “producer” aspects of the role my concern is with the “nuts and bolts” of budgets, timelines, and project management.

In this production, I was both inside the collaboration working as a sound recordist and editor, engaging in the creative process and the discussion around how to build the work. At the same time, I was managing the production, problem solving, and keeping the community engagement process activated.

The multi-level engagement and management process was successful in this instance because it kept me fully informed of progress, provided a deep understanding of process, and enabled me to be aware of difficulties, disagreements, and problems as they arose in the creative/technical team.

4. Process

The thematic and presentation challenges that the project team explored in the creation of this work were about how to gather and present people's views about living in cities. This was not to be an exercise in didacticism, but a social and political intervention that was playful. The aim of the team was to make a work that was an engaging interactive experience. The creative idea that was the inspiration to make this work came from looking at a collection of little ceramic houses, and wondering what might be heard if you could eavesdrop on the conversations of people who lived in them. This interactive sound/sculpture installation acts strategically as an archive of sentiment, a snapshot of a community, and a social and political intervention. In its construction, the work incorporates ethnographic investigative techniques, digital programming and an unusual ceramic tactile interface.

The Housing Project had an initial production schedule of more than six months culminating in its first proof of concept exhibition in an architecture and design festival. This initial exhibition was followed by a further twelve months of debugging and technical refinement and two further exhibitions. In such a lengthy process it was essential to have effective leadership and excellent communications amongst project team and contributing community participants.

The Housing Project was created with serious investigative intent on the part of the creators, while at the same time it provided an exciting and stimulating sound art experience for the users. Technically the project design was a complex experiment. The collaborators wanted to investigate how to create an interactive installation using the ceramic objects as an interactive interface. They wanted to develop some type of triggering device that used audio clips from citizen interviews as part of an evolving, captivating, and never repeated sound/sculpture work.

Critically, in this model of production there was space for expert knowledge and cross-disciplinary innovation. The selection criteria for team members were threefold. Each member was selected for their specific expertise in technical and creative domains, proven ability to collaborate and to do so across disciplines, and sensitivity to community engagement. Each was responsible for their particular area of activity, such as programming, or sculpture design and construction, over which they had substantial autonomy. failure.

When it came to overall project design and implementation there was considerable discussion and opinions sought as to the success or otherwise of technical and creative pro-

posals and developments amongst the team members. Critical decisions were made through collective agreement.

It was fascinating watching the team in action, testing ideas quickly, intuitively judging what was most likely to work at both a creative level, in the design of the table, the sound and the objects used as the tactile interface to trigger the soundscapes, or working out how to integrate and work with different software programs for interactivity and file selection. Cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner (1979) in his observations about the role intuitive knowledge in professional practice argues, “Intuition implies the act of grasping the meaning or significance or structure of a problem without explicit reliance on the analytic apparatus of one’s craft.” (Bruner 1979, p.102). Donald Schon (1983) investigates the nature of intuitive knowledge based on experience. He acknowledges that, “competent practitioners ... exhibit a kind of knowing in practice, most of which is tacit... Indeed practitioners themselves often reveal a capacity for reflection on their intuitive knowing in the midst of action and sometimes use this capacity to cope with unique, uncertain and conflicted situations of practice.” (Schon 1983, p.viii-ix). It was this intuitive knowledge based problem solving capacity of the team as a whole and individuals within it that made the role of the Creative Producer, satisfying on one hand and challenging on the other. I had to display trust in the team, respect intuitive leaps in thinking, and provide space for experimentation and

Difficulties most commonly faced were often about understanding what issues a team member working in another discipline were facing. For example, there was confusion about the meaning of terms. This was the first time the ceramic artist had worked with programmers, and sound designers. She had some difficulty understanding the technical language of the discussion at certain points. It reminded me of the scene in Lewis Carroll’s (1872), *Through the Looking-Glass*, when Humpty Dumpty and Alice are discussing words and meaning:

When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’ ‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’ ‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s all.’ (Carroll, L. 1872, p. 72)

Just as Alice recognised that there was the potential for confusion in the meaning of words, we had to make agreements about the meaning of terms because disciplines interpreted certain terms completely differently. An “object” to a ceramic artist and an “object” for a programmer for example are not the same thing.

Another example of a cross-disciplinary issue, was one faced by the ceramic artist about the size of the ceramic objects to be produced. The objects had to be big enough so that when a glyph (ambisonic barcode) was attached to the base of a tree or a house it could still be read by the camera. The camera would recognise the glyph and then trigger a sound file to start playing. Until the size was determined, the ceramic artist could not build the objects. The artist had concerns about making objects too large and losing the aesthetic she desired. The programmer was concerned that if the objects were too small the glyphs might not be recognised by the camera. The determination of the glyph size therefore had to occur before the ceramic sculptures could be made. Often solutions required input from various members of the team.

5. Community Engagement

5.1. Ceramic Workshops

One connecting activity of this project was that the key artistic collaborators all attended the community workshops enabling some shared experiences across the team, and general acknowledgement of the power of the workshop process, and the value of having a practical workshop connected to an interview process. We wondered if trust that developed during the making of little houses meant that when we interviewed these people, there was greater preparedness to talk about their experiences of urban living. We think it did, but we have no proof of this.

Many of the audio recordings used in this installation were made during community workshops where people made ceramic houses under the direction of ceramic artist, Ann Ferguson. The ceramic houses made by community participants at these workshops were fired and exhibited as a community-made city alongside the installation. The ceramic objects used in the installation were made by Ann Ferguson. We used these in preference to the community made pieces because they were more regular in their sizes and more robust in their construction. Darren Tofts (2011) in catalogue essay for the project notes, *“It’s hard to not touch, fondle and enjoy the pleasing solidity, mass and rough grittiness of Ferguson’s ceramic buildings and trees. They put us back in touch with basic elements of the earth, of clay*

and pigments, the fire and heat generated by a kiln. And in doing so they awaken us to other fundamental and immersive qualities of immediate experience.” (Tofts, 2011) Ann Ferguson’s ceramic objects have a rustic and almost universal quality of “home”. They are far from the plastic mouse used to drive most interactions. They are tactile and beautiful and evocative of childhood toys.

The workshops were hosted in Melbourne at a children’s art centre called Artplay, a youth art centre called Signal, with classes of recently arrived refugee children at Carlton Primary School, at Re-inforce – an organisation lobbying for rights of the intellectually disabled, and with the Jesuit Social Services who run a successful program for teenagers at risk of homelessness. The workshop participants included planning, fine art and architecture students, parents and their children, people with disabilities, refugee children, town planners, architects, elderly people living in a nursing home, and young homeless people.

5.2. Interviews

During these workshops we took the opportunity to interview participants about their views of urban living and their personal housing stories. Esther Anotolitus (2011) in her review of the exhibition in the journal *Architecture AU* notes that, “Recording ceramic workshop discussions and interviews with housing professionals, the installation spoke from a diversity of perspectives and communities of interest. “You can’t negate personal experience,” says Chris (Knowles, sound designer). “You can’t just say ‘That’s not true.’ There’s no questioning it.” Homeless people, newly arrived refugees, children and their parents could be heard alongside planners and developers – a striking array of voices expressing their passions, frustrations, strategies and hopes. An ambitious and complex proposition, *The Housing Project* succeeded in giving architecture a compelling voice on contemporary residential development. (Anotolitus, 2011). The range and authenticity of the contributing comments from the general public add to the sense of the content being central to this interactive. This is the level where this work can be said to be a social and political intervention.

5.3. Interaction

A further level of interaction and community participation take place in the exhibition of *The Housing Project* installation. In the exhibition of the work it performs as an interactive game that provides intellectual and emotional rewards in the form of sound, familiar yet mysterious, and spoken content – in direct response to the actions of its players. In short, the sound design that provides an emotional and intellectual journey, and can also be played as a game.

6. Sound Design

Hundreds of short sound files about the public and personal experiences of living in an urban environment are triggered by audience interaction with the ceramic buildings on the table. *The Housing Project* software tracks the movement, location and density of the ceramic factories, highrise buildings, houses and trees. It interprets the information to control the sound clips, to create ever-changing audio mixes, to moderate the discussion themes and voices, and to locate these sounds in space around the players and audience. Professor Darren Tofts (2012) writing in the exhibition catalogue notes,

The physical act of triggering unexpected sounds by moving objects around a responsive table is suggestive at once of a board game and the balancing of different channels on a mixing desk. Once you have cottoned on to this effect it is possible to play the installation as if it were a musical instrument, a responsive DIY kit for synthesizing the look and sound of cities, as well as an urban story generator in which you play the role of conductor, interviewer and neighbour. In this the work intuitively exploits the contemporary Esperanto of interaction that has been hardwired into the psyche through the experience of a generation saturated with new media. (Tofts, 2012)

The sound files form the components of a modular composition that is moderated through software, but is ultimately composed by the audience players. *The Housing Project* work was made through the generosity and genius of many programmers worldwide who publish their software through the GNU and open-source movements. At the core of this project are two technologies, reactIVision and ICST-ambisonics. We are grateful to them and all the others who have without knowing given much to this work.

7. Exhibition

The Housing Project was officially launched in Melbourne in September 2012. As one visitor to the first exhibition of the work at Pin-Up Gallery in July/August 2011 noted in the comments book, “A playful perspective on housing issues that affect us all. I really like the interviews and the interactive/tactile nature that makes this a pleasure to watch and/or participate. Great project”. Another visitor to the first exhibition wrote, “Great sense of togetherness emanating from *The Housing Project* – you can really feel the true sense of community. I really enjoyed playing and listening to the different configurations that are possible” and a third picking up on the social and political intervention aspects of the project said, “I loved the idea to play like a child about a serious subject: housing, spreading suburbs ... A very independent way to give a message!” (Comments Book, 2011).

An additional element of the exhibition of this work was the performances of the table by the artists. The artists performed *The Housing Project* at advertised times, providing audiences with the opportunity to hear the work at its best, and to see how the table could be manipulated to create a contemporary sound composition of unusual power and impact. The value of the sound composition was recognised by an Australian radio program, called *The Night Air*. This was devoted to broadcasting and discussing sound art and compositions. The radio producer came to see the installation and took a feed from the table and presented it in a radio program broadcast as a unique sound composition along with interviews about people’s experience of interacting with the work.

8. The Future

The Housing Project is in many ways a proto-type that tested a technical and creative idea. The workshop process provided an effective way to engage with members of the community. It provides a mechanism for communities to tell their own stories. Now that it has been built, exhibited, revised, and exhibited in two further contexts, we can observe the interaction. From comment books and watching people interact with *The Housing Project*, we know that it is a successful model. It is fun to use. It creates beautiful evolving soundscapes. It gives a

community a voice, and is a social and political intervention in a city. It could be recreated in other contexts.

The Housing Project takes ethnographic snapshot of a city, and can operate as a storytelling machine, which, in further manifestations could be stocked with stories from other cities, making the work replicable and relevant to many urban contexts. For example the next version of this project might occur in the remote city of Alice Springs and explore the disastrous situation of housing for indigenous Australians. It could be implemented as a work in Cyprus, investigating the experience of life in a politically and culturally divided city.

I am open to discussion about how and where and with whom Stage two of this work could be developed. There is the potential for a series of comparable sound/sculpture based interventions to be created in further iterations of this work in many other cities around the world. Stage two will present this global perspective and to do this the project will be renamed - *The Global Cities Project*.

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