

**Can interaction with urban spaces and strangers in cities empower individuals to feel more positive about the area they live in?**

This document records the investigations made as part of an MA in Three-Dimensional Design at Manchester Metropolitan University in to the role of Arts and Design practice methodologies in addressing the social issues of modern city spaces.

P u b l i C i t y

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# P u b l i C i t y

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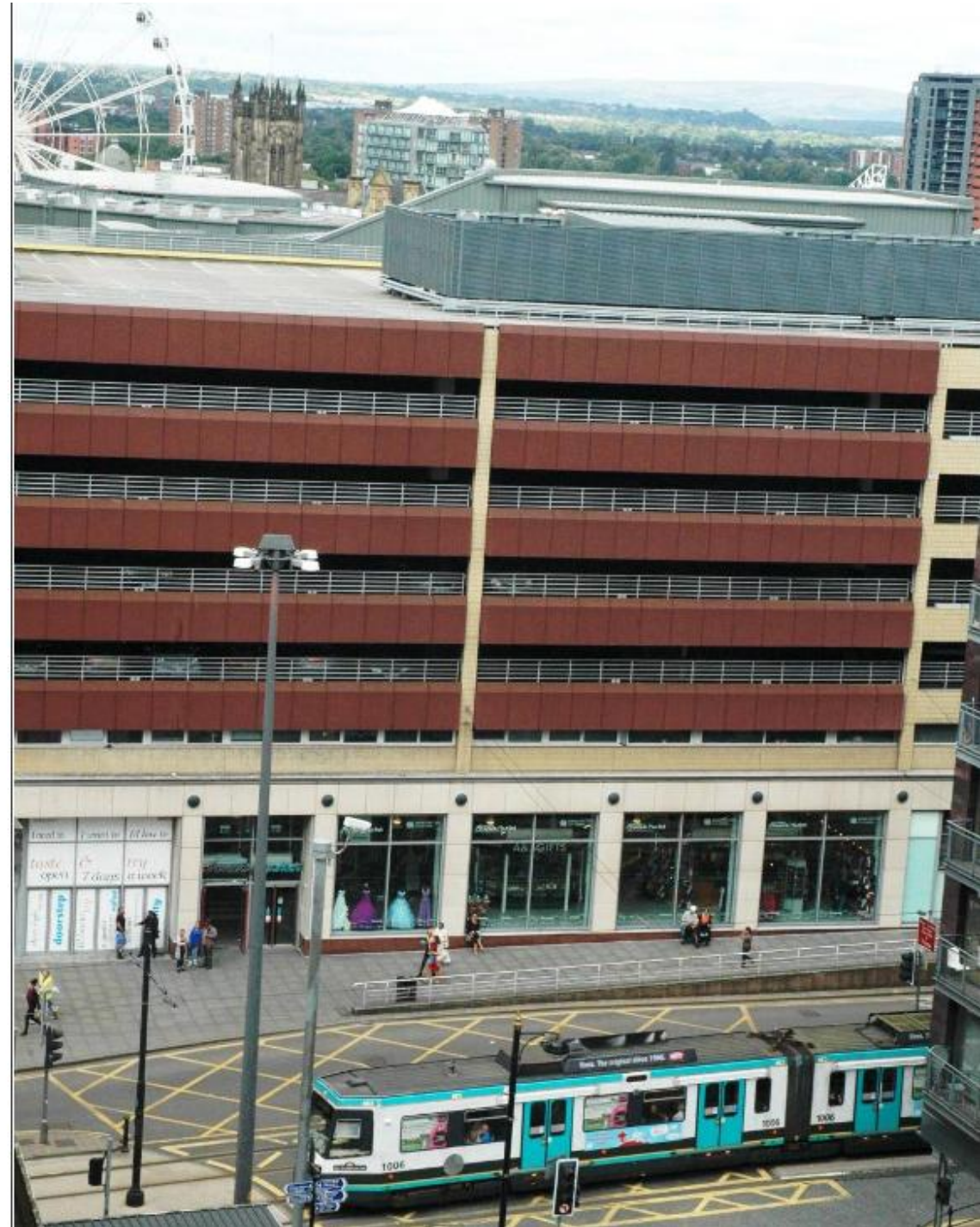
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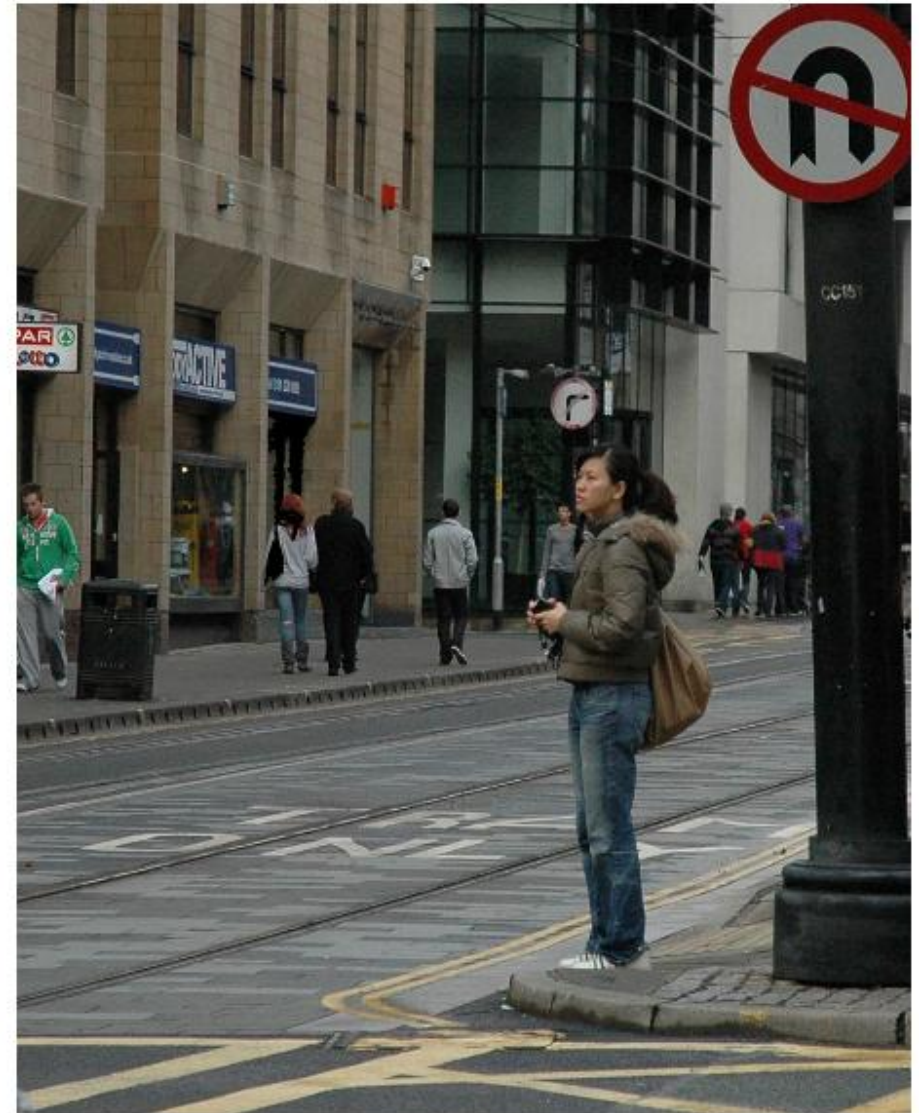




## Abstract

This body of work is concerned with how humans co-exist in urban environments. Following research into related issues that affect our habitation of cities including town planning, fear of crime and personal perspectives of place, it investigates how to use interaction to highlight areas of current concern in city spaces, especially those of civic identity, public ownership and social cohesion.

The practice discussed in this document has developed a suite of projects that explore how interactions within urban environments can positively affect individual or group perceptions of place, encourage positive relationships and contribute towards improving quality of life in cities.







## Background to the Work

This practice was historically concerned with generic 'urban' themes and relied only on aesthetic qualities to discuss these. Due to my own political biases, these soon focused on the visual contrast between interventions that exist either inside or outside institutional control; for example, No Parking signs and graffiti. Though these are both common sights in city spaces, they pull in opposite directions, the former for a controlled and ordered environment, and the latter for freedom of expression. Many aesthetic qualities of earlier work were derived from an observation of this and it was central to the development toward an interest in public ownership.

Texts that explored related topics informed these investigations. Marc Auge's discussion of Place and Non Place in *Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995) led me to begin a visual discourse that critically interrogated specific political issues. Urban regeneration, forced relocation, the loss of civic identity and the increasing prevalence of 'Clone Towns' (a term initially coined by the New Economics Foundation but now commonly used to refer to the increasing homogenisation of the British high street) became featured issues. A public survey supplemented this research and led to the development of a research question;

*Can we use interaction with urban spaces to encourage an enhanced sense of ownership, which in turn empowers individuals to feel more positive about the area in which they live?*



This led me to the work of Jane Jacobs, an American town planner active in the mid-1900s whose seminal text *The Death and Life of great American Cities* (2009) identifies some key elements as central to successful communities and the wider wellbeing of residents across an entire city. Her discussion of fear of crime, crime prevention and relationships between strangers were further explored in a more modern text; Anna Minton's *Ground Control: Fear and happiness in the twenty-first-century city* (1997). These concepts led me to question not just interaction *with* urban spaces but also interactions between strangers *in* urban spaces. I developed a series of installations that used projection and physical objects to create environments that aimed to stimulate discussion of these issues. The most recent of these used analogue light sensors and Arduino technology to create opportunities for physical interaction. Participants were able to change projected images by casting shadows within the environment. I also began to develop objects designed for interacting directly with urban spaces. The most successful of these, *This Belongs To* provides participants with a device for temporarily claiming locations; a piece of laser cut card used to cast shadows of an identifying mark.

Despite much positive feedback for the installation work, I concluded that while they provided good exposure for the work within a professional context, these opportunities did not allow full conceptual development. This most recent body of work was subsequently concerned with addressing this and it was determined necessary to move out of the gallery in order to develop a practice that not only refers to social issues but operates directly in the community.



## Introduction to Stage Three

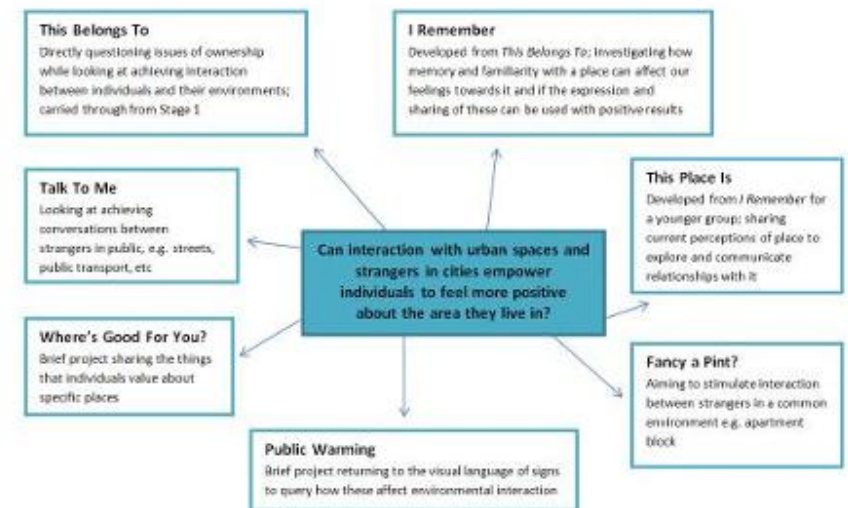
Stage Three aimed to facilitate interactions between people *and* urban environments and between people *in* urban environments. To validate this work, assessments were then made of whether these interactions had positively affected the individuals or community in which they occurred. Three strands were planned to pursue this aim:

**Public workshops** developed from *This Belongs To*, seeking to engage community groups with issues relating to connections with place.

**A series of drawings** visualising modifications to existing street furniture which would require co-operation between individuals to function, supplemented with a proof of concept model using Arduino hardware.

**A series of objects** designed to stimulate interaction between strangers in public.

The second of these was abandoned as impractical after initial investigations and instead, a suite of projects as illustrated was developed from the other two areas. Each of the subsequent projects took a different angle of approach to investigating an updated common goal:







Workshop Responses I Remember

## Discussion of Practice and Contextualisation

In previous stages, practical work primarily focused on the single goal of developing a series of interactive installations to encourage discussion of social issues in cities. Recently, this has shifted to spread across a wider range of smaller projects seeking to highlight these issues from a variety of approaches that are based directly in a public context. Though taking different forms, these projects have shared the aim of facilitating interactions between individuals and the urban environment. They were then assessed to determine if they had positive outcomes for the individuals and communities concerned. The move away from exclusivity toward a 'suite' of projects appears to be a common feature of work by creative practitioners currently engaged in what is increasingly described by the amorphous term 'social practice'. Many of these practices share the characteristic of featuring various smaller projects that explore different facets of their primary concern and this may be symptomatic of the work as it becomes necessary to adopt a flexible and responsive approach to public feedback, as well as the constant need to update ideas and develop new approaches to address the needs of different community groups.

Since adopting this new angle, I have generated seven sub-projects; the most developed and tested of which are two community workshops I Remember and This Place Is. These have been of central importance to the aims of my work, and through them I have realised



Workshop Responses This Place Is

the aim of directly engaging community groups to interact with their chosen environments by discussing issues of connection with place. I consider these to be more tangibly successful than installation work produced in earlier stages because they have reached out to people who would not have found gallery based work easily accessible. As these projects ran with existing community groups and do not engage strangers, I was initially concerned that they failed to directly address the objectives; however, upon reflection I feel this is actually a key step in the process towards building bridges in divided communities. Having built up a good relationship with the first group, they are now interested in meeting the second to share and discuss their responses. The workshop can in this instance be seen as an initial point of commonality which has opened up an opportunity for engagement between separate community groups. This begins to meet the aims of my current practice and the potential for applying this in communities with poor cohesion is clear.

U.S. based Candy Chang is a contemporary practitioner whose work also aims to meet community needs. Her public projects often focus on providing residents with a voice and are frequently characterised by an interactive element. Her concepts have found success across the globe by providing communities with toolsets they can take ownership of, increasing accessibility for those who might not usually engage with arts or design practices.

Chang recently initiated a live conversation on [www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com) exploring the topic of civic





engagement, and the value of working with existing groups was recognised by Colin Kloecker of Minnesota based artists collective Works Progress during this discussion. In response to a comment by the Works Progress group, I called for a sharing of good practice by artists in methods of achieving good numbers of participants, recognising that I have experienced higher successes when approaching existing groups. Kloecker agreed, responding 'the first thing we do is try to find a partner on the project that is as excited about creating connected communities as we are. It's actually become one of our "simple rules" that we don't do a project if we can't find a community based partner for it.' Comments from participants to I Remember such as 'it was nice talking about who would write down our common memories' demonstrate at ground-level the value of utilising existing relationships as starting points.

Direct feedback from participants is undoubtedly important when critically reflecting on such work, however, that this and other projects have also gained responses and interest from other practitioners is equally indicative of success. I have begun various dialogues with practitioners who work in similar areas and these have informed projects by providing an alternative perspective of my practice.

Initially, I spoke with Lawrence Cassidy, a local artist who runs the Streetsmuseum project, which gathers materials to document Salford's intense history of regeneration and provide a resource for residents to celebrate their area. Meeting to share our respective projects



influenced the course of my work and a discussion of his experiences working with communities affected by compulsory relocation helped assess the social needs I might encounter in community workshops. I have also approached practitioners from further afield with direct questions relating to their work and in some cases these have opened up channels for on-going communications. I contacted Tim Devin, an artist based in Boston and Broken City Lab; an artist-led research group in Ontario, as I identified aspects of their respective practices were concerned with the same issues as my own. My initial enquiry aimed to determine how they assessed the impact of their community projects, as I was keen to be rigorous in critically reflecting on my own. They responded thoughtfully and I have now exchanged emails back and forth with each. These dialogues have highlighted important differences in approach, which may be related to the contrast between fine arts and three dimensional design practices. I was surprised to discover little formal assessment, with both practices content to raise levels of dialogue, without feeling a need to demonstrate other results. Speaking on behalf of Broken City Lab, Justin A. Langlois articulated this by commenting 'trying to measure success and findings places a value on our work and process that we're not comfortable with'. Equally, Tim Devin raised an important point by recognising the difference between an arts practice and a social study, commenting that he does not consider himself equipped to perform the role of an anthropologist. Many of his published findings are formatted in what he describes as a





pseudo-scientific fashion simply to raise levels of discussion. Devin points out that social change can be achieved in more than one way and that small acts should be considered as equal to the work of larger agencies. Langlois reflected this by saying; 'we try not to think about assessment or metrics, as it would immediately diminish the range of things we can take on.' Devin recognises one purpose for formally assessing projects is to support applications for funding but states that as his projects are cheap to run and this is often unnecessary he considers 'gut instinct' and comments from participants to be more important factors for determining success. This approach is further exemplified in a response to the same questions from arts collective Illegal Art. Their spokesman commented that 'if people participate, it is a success, if there is no participation, then we scratch the idea or reform it'.

These on-going dialogues have encouraged assessment of my own objectives and have led me to consolidate my practice. Following these and other correspondences I have received confirmation that I will soon be included in a directory on the Social Practices Art Network (SPAN) website (a new resource for those engaging in socially concerned arts activities) and have been invited to attend the HOMEWORK: Infrastructures and Collaboration in Social Practices conference in October run by Broken City Lab. Such contacts and opportunities not only validate my practice but more fundamentally connect the community work undertaken on a local level to a global network of creative professionals. Recognising the



position of my work in a spectrum of practitioners is not limited to those with whom I have had correspondence and an awareness of the wider field of public art has been key in considering the development of purposeful contributions to the field.

In recent decades it has been recognised that the arts have a key role to play in the regeneration of urban areas, and this has been reflected in the changing priorities of local and national government policy, especially since the recession of the early nineteen eighties. Charles Landry et al reflect on the potential impact of public arts projects on economic recovery in the report *The Art of Regeneration* (1997) and present case studies that reference a range of cultural activities and their successful management to positive effect in various communities. Landry discusses urban issues and the impact of culture on cities from medieval through to modern society, stating 'problems change but a vigorous cultural identity and artistic sector remains an asset in dealing with them' (pg 21). Landry identifies one impact of the modern move toward service based 'clean' industries is that career mobility has in many instances disconnected individuals from a lasting commitment to the place in which they live and recognises that those who do remain in one area frequently have less resources and power to improve their quality of life.

These statements relate back to findings from an interview I conducted with residents' association chairman Kieron Kirk during an earlier stage of research, in which he stated that many local people do not know how to approach or influence local government. Kirk





identified that the role of the residents' association was in 'empowering the people who appear not to have a voice. They probably don't even know they've got a voice.' It is these individuals who the works of practitioners such as Chang and Devin also aim to empower.

British social design agency Think Public demonstrates the potential economic success of arts projects in relation to social change and employs a range of professionals including artists and designers to provide services to organisations wishing to connect with service users. Particularly focusing on public sector agencies, their work aims to give organisations the means to draw on user experience to make meaningful and positive changes. Their work neatly bridges the gap between the necessary bureaucratic procedures of many public sector services and the reality of human need and demonstrates the potential of arts and design practices as consultative tools that increase participation by providing alternative channels to those members of society who are often the hardest to reach.

Engagement of individuals and communities is not just a challenge for local government agencies, however. It is an equally familiar problem for the social practitioner or one exploring methods of interactivity and this is an unavoidable topic of discussion for many in the field.

One such debate relates to the use of digital media and questions how social networking tools may be used to enhance physical communities in the face of an apparent erosion of

Stage Three Proposed Project: *Fancy a Pint?*

such by the same means. Shanai Matteson, also of Works Progress discussed this in Chang's TED conversation, recognising that social networking and blog sites had been useful to connect and expand artist's networks but that 'when it came to connecting in our own neighbourhoods, and generating the same kind of energy, it was a whole lot harder.' Kloecker continued, stating 'I really believe that we have only just begun to harness social networking online for face-to-face community-building. There is so much potential here, but as Shanai points out, the key is in building real/virtual communities that bridge cultural silos rather than reinforce them.'

Though *This Belongs To* explores the potential of the internet for sharing perspectives, the *Fancy A Pint?* project deliberately excluded such methods by planning to use exclusively physical locations for residents of a potential community, such as an apartment block, to make contact. The project proposal explained this as 'an alternative to the increasing use of online social networking which allows global relations to be formed effortlessly but does very little to encourage local interaction.' However, the project is currently still seeking a location as the proposal was not accepted by the property management company I approached. Though I was unable to derive a specific reason from them, I am aware that privacy and security may be amongst the concerns of any managing agent.

Such modern worries are linked to a lack of 'casual public trust' as discussed by Jane Jacobs, and trust continues to be a central issue to community work of this nature. It is discussed by





Candy Chang



practitioners as key, not only as it can be an obstacle to public engagement in projects, but because it is at the root of the poor community cohesion such projects seek to address. Landry says that fear of crime is an increasing urban problem which must be seen in the context of class and wealth divides, recognising that efforts to reduce property crime have isolated residential areas while the introduction of control systems such as CCTV may 'intensify the soullessness of the urban experience.' (pg. 13) Earning public trust must be a primary goal of community projects as potential participants will not engage if basic levels have not been established; this is supported by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which positions safety as second only to physiological need. It is important, however, not to confuse trust with permission to breach privacy. When developing aims and objectives for projects such as these, Jacob's reflections on the role of the stranger in cities should also be recalled. Social arts projects may be used as tools for encouraging informal, impersonal exchanges to build and strengthen communities but it is important to recognise that these must be facilitated in such ways which allow social contact without threatening privacy. Jacobs recognises that "cities are full of people with whom, from your view point, or mine, or any other individual's, a certain degree of contact is useful or enjoyable; but you do not want them in your hair. And they do not want you in theirs either." (pg 66)

Clearly communicating the benefits of participation is an equally fundamental issue, and Emma Dyer recognises the importance of a return for participants in an essay for SPAN that



addresses the question 'How do we open a dialogue with the hardest to reach people using creative methods of research?' Dyer discusses her experiences working with various agencies including Think Public and says of community engagement 'The golden rule here is always to give something back.' Getting across the message of what you intend to give back, however, is often one of the most challenging parts of the work. Candy Chang responded to my experience of non-acceptance for Fancy A Pint? during the TED discussion, saying that it 'struck a related nerve.' She went on to discuss the difficulty of utilising public messages, identifying the conventions that allow businesses to 'shout about their products on an increasing number of public surfaces, while the flyer about the community-improving event is illegal.' Continuing, she used this observation to ask; 'How can we change the perception of informal messages in public space?'

It struck me that this pertinent question referenced the same uneasy relationship between institutional and informal environmental texts I utilised aesthetically in earlier stages, and that I am still clearly engaged in the same area of interests, despite a change in approach. I take this as being indicative of successful focusing on my chosen topics and evidence that I have effectively facilitated a deeper exploration of the selected issues. My understanding of the role of community arts has also developed beyond my initial biases and expectations. The current trend in community arts or 'social practices' is a far cry from the days of painting murals with youth clubs and it is not about basket weaving for elderly ladies in





sterile day centres. Community art is not only an area of increasing economic importance for artists and local councils, it is possibly one of our greatest weapons in the fight against urban decay and a foremost tool in remedying the modern social problems that appear to be beyond many elected politicians. Community arts projects are now recognised as not only cost effective and flexible regeneration tools but also targeted and effective methods of consultation, which put users at the centre of the creative blueprint. That such initiatives be locally driven is essential to the process and Landry recognises that those which enable people to affirm their personal and cultural values are often the most successful. These opportunities, he says, 'help people identify with a place, celebrate its strengths and articulate concerns about its problems.' (pg 12)







Stage Three Workshop I Remember

## Progression and Continued Development

To develop my practice and generate opportunities for community projects there are several areas I will focus on. Though levels of interest for projects have generally been good, to fully realise the potential of such ventures, I need to raise participant numbers. An initial method of achieving this may be through use of existing artists' resources (AN/Arts Council websites etc.) to advertise projects more widely. Continuing to pursue connections with existing agencies as 'launch pads' for projects will also be an important factor in developing the work, as will continued applications to appropriate opportunities.

The maintenance and development of existing relations with community groups and the further development of workshop opportunities will be a priority and a recent approach from Wythenshawe Regeneration Team to request my involvement as a paid workshop leader at an upcoming event is indicative that I have already made progress toward achieving some recognition for this work. Building contacts and relationships of this nature will support development and sustainability of practice.

As well as exploring local community links, I plan to continue and expand my levels of



Stage Three Investigation Talk To Me

contact with other practitioners in the field and would highly value the opportunity to work on collaborative projects should these be practical. I am especially keen to explore the potential of web-based applications in strengthening physical communities and this would be more realistic in co-operation with others who have complimentary skill sets.

I also intend to continue working on existing projects which have not yet been fully realised (such as *Fancy A Pint?*) and will keep trialling new ideas which address related issues and respond flexibly to a variety of communities. These will be in the context of a practice seeking to research and exemplify methods of meaningfully applying creative projects to the goal of supporting and enhancing civic engagement in cities.





## Conclusion

This body of work operates within a contemporary, if rapidly evolving, field of interest. It has contributed to wider dialogues concerning modern social issues as well exploring arts and design practices and methodologies as models for addressing these concerns. It validates its position as a three-dimensional design practice by investigating the orchestration of positive behavioural characteristics through providing objects and interventions that affect the habitation of city spaces. Through the learning evidenced here, I have built up a strong, critical practice and am equipped to pursue my aims as a professional who recognises the community as intrinsic to the work and not just in the role of audience.

Progression will involve the expansion of my understanding of many of the socio-political issues that lie at the root of the problems I seek to address, alongside cultivating an increasing awareness of the economic and industrial fabric in which they exist. Developing these insights within a wider community of creative professionals who are engaged in similar areas will support practical developments and improve the scope of future projects.



The work has also demonstrated financial value as I begin to receive payment for it and the realisation of projects such as *I Remember* and *This Place Is* with clear benefits to existing community groups exemplifies that such projects may be presented as commodities of genuine interest to various agencies.



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