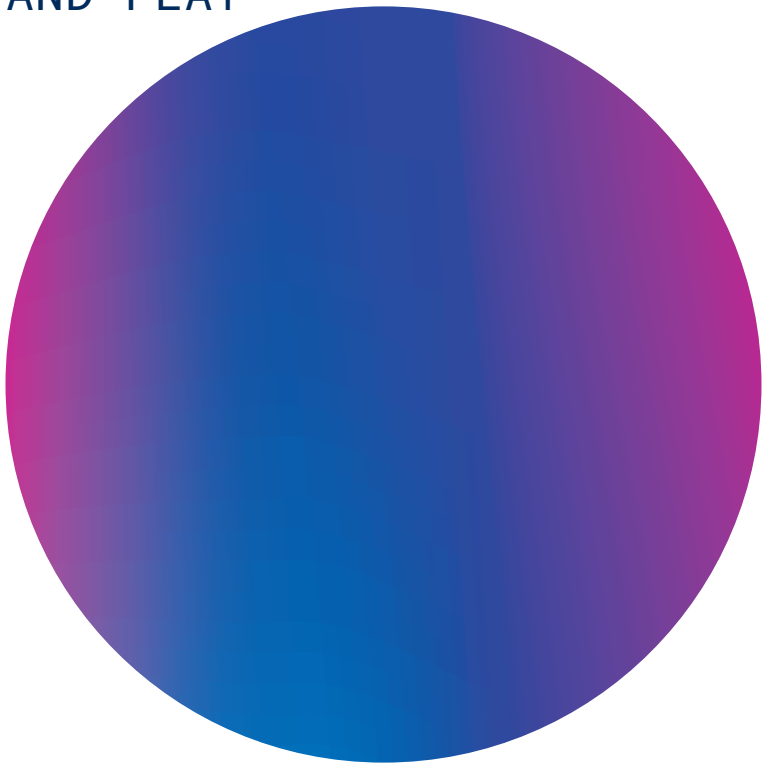# DISCOVERING A HYBRID PUBLIC REALM THROUGH AMBIENT STORYTELLING AND PLAY

JENNIFER
STEIN

Tokyo

Where Strangers Meet: Art and the Public Realm

Foreword/Preface by Jo Beall

'I'm not saying I told you so but rappers have been reporting from the front for years.'[1]

Why is the British Council interested in the public realm? 'The public realm can be simply defined as a place where strangers meet'. So says the eminent urbanist, Richard Sennett.[2] If this is the case then the British Council, a cultural relations organisation that brings people together from different cultures, countries and continents, works squarely in the public realm. For around eighty years, through promoting the English language, the Arts and educational links, the Council has fulfilled its Royal Charter mandate to 'promote cultural relationships and the understanding of different cultures between people and peoples of the United Kingdom and other countries',[3] bringing strangers together from all corners of the globe to encounter each other. While formal or mainstream diplomacy primarily involves bilateral relations between national governments, the pursuit of cultural relations happens largely among people – in and through educational institutions, cultural organisations, communities and cities.

Unlike the private realm, such as the family where we know each other well and close up, the public realm is characterised by incomplete knowledge and, significantly, by place:

'Traditionally, this place could be defined in terms of physical ground, which is why discussions of the public realm have been… linked to cities; the public realm could be identified by the squares, major streets, theatres, cafés, lecture halls, government assemblies, or stock exchanges where strangers would be likely to meet. Today, communications technologies have radically altered the sense of place; the public realm can be found in cyberspace as much as physically on the ground.'[4]

While much of the literature on the public realm focuses on politics and citizenship, class and social identity,[5] the so-called 'performative school' offers a more cultural approach, derived from anthropology, focusing on 'how people express themselves to strangers'.[6] Taking this as our starting point our interest was in how arts professionals and performers, policy makers, and citizens, connect through the arts in different public realms.

Cities exhibit a critical mass of social, educational and cultural organisations, concentrations of actual and virtual communities, public spaces, and physical and digital connections. As such, they present a unique opportunity to use the power of arts, culture, education and the creative industries to power city and regional economies, catalyse urban renewal and to promote and share our cultural assets. The British Council has a presence in five cities in the UK and over 180 cities around the world, with its work extending far beyond this to several hundred cities and their rural hinterlands. From this base we are working to support cities in the UK and abroad to be internationally inspired and globally connected.

By using our knowledge, experience and connections we can support cities to achieve their international ambitions, working in partnership to create more livable, inclusive and vibrant urban spaces and places and to improve the quality of life for their citizens through exchange of knowledge, people, ideas, insight, culture and experiences. Our cultural relations approach is built on a spirit of

mutuality and co-creation, which inform this collection and how we engage with art and the public realm.

Most would agree that a good city is one where people's basic needs are met, where public services are delivered affordably and efficiently, where the economy thrives, the environment is protected and where public spaces are not only safe, accessible and affordable but also interesting and inspiring – alive places in which people can engage with each other and where creativity can flourish. Contemporary urban planners adhere to the view that beautiful cities are more liveable cities and culture-led development has become *de rigeuer* for urban planners in many places around the world. Within the arts the concepts of public art and public space are intertwined and as Geoffrey Crossick writes in *Understanding the value of arts and culture*, the cultural force of the city and its built environment plays a significant role in this. Yet as Crossick acknowledges, the tangible role that the arts play has been largely untested.[7]

This is a contested area with some seeing the harnessing of the arts to promote creative cities and urban economies as the instrumentalisation of culture.[8] Conventional public art can also be viewed as exclusionary, foregrounding the interests of elites over ordinary urban dwellers and artist-led gentrification.[9] The conversation surrounding cultural value is engaging with such challenges and the need to develop appropriate means of engagement and participation in the arts. Cities, with their vast and growing populations, their density and networks of public services, spaces and institutions are central to this wider discussion.

Underpinning our approach and captured in the spirit of this collection is that cities are about people and the character of a city itself and expressions of its attractiveness and liveability is generated as much by those who live in it as by its built environment and infrastructure, its governing body or political leadership. Cities are the sum expression of all their people, civil societies and the institutions that define the experience of being in the city.

Where there is an inconsistency between political rhetoric and local reality then city diplomacy efforts will likely be undermined. We cannot project an image of a city as the 'greatest place on earth to live' if the reality is only that for some of our citizens.[10]

This collection focuses on what happens to both identity formation and place making when people engage in the public realm through the arts. Its starting point is to recognise artists less as individual producers of *objet d'art* and more as collaborators, participants or producers of situations, shifting the focus from 'production to reception, and emphasises the importance of a direct, apparently unmediated engagement with particular audience groups'.[11] It explores facilitating participation in the arts in everyday and extraordinary spaces and shares ideas and experience of the public realm internationally.

The collection shows public artists grappling with often complex, social dynamics and relationships as they play themselves out in and through public space. Because art operates beyond the rational and the functional, it often challenges urban planners who by definition are Cartesian in their approach. Yet planners do recognise that cities are social spaces and that social spaces continually change and in the process, that cities are constantly made and remade. Amin and Thrift see the city, 'as everyday process, mobilised by flesh and stone in interaction',[12] growing and morphing around the actions and engagement of ordinary people. This is at the heart of the British Council's cultural relations approach, sharing international experience in the hope of inspiring understanding and opportunity.

Footnotes

¹ *Ice T, Los Angeles Sentinel, 7th May, 1992 at the time of the Los Angeles riots. Cited in Edward W. Soja (2000) Postmetropolis, Critical studies of cities and regions, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p. 374*

² *Richard Sennett (2016) 'The Public Realm', Quant, www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/templates/general2.aspx?pageid=16&cc=gb*

³ *British Council (1993) Royal Charter and Bye-laws, London: British Council*

⁴ *Richard Sennett, 2016*

⁵ *See for example, Arendt, Hannah, 'Public Rights and Private Interests." In M. Mooney and F. Stuber, eds., Small Comforts for Hard Times: Humanists on Public Policy. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977; Noel O'Sullivan, 'The Concept of the Public Realm', 2010, Routledge; and Douglas Kelbaugh, 'Three Urbanisms and the Public Realm', Proceedings. 3rd International Space Syntax Symposium Atlanta 2001, www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/3sss/papers_pdf/14_kelbaugh. pdf; and Richard Sennett, 'Quant: The Public Realm', 2016, www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/templates/general2.aspx?pageid=16&cc=gb*

⁶ *Richard Sennett, 2016*

⁷ *Crossick, Geoffrey and Kasynska, P, (2016) 'Understanding the value of arts and culture', AHRC Cultural Value project*

⁸ *See for example, R. Florida (2002) The Rise of the Creative Class, New York: Basic Books and C. Landry (2008) The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators, London: Earthscan*

⁹ *See for example Miles (2005) 'Interruptions: Testing the rhetoric of culturally led urban development' Urban Studies, 43(2) pp. 421-440; J. Peck (2005) 'Struggling with the creative class' International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 29(4), pp. 740-770; and S. Zukin (2010) Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places, Oxford: Oxford University Press*

¹⁰ *Jo Beall and David Adam (2017) Cities, Prosperity and Influence: The role of city diplomacy in shaping soft power in the 21st century, London: British Council, p. 23 www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/g229_cities_paper.pdf*

¹¹ *M. Kwon (2004) One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity, Massachusetts: MIT Press*

¹² *A. Amin and N. Thrift (2002) Cities: Reimagining the Urban, Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 10*

Where Strangers Meet

Introduction by Claire Doherty

I am making my way along a train station platform in my home
town of Bristol in the west of England. It's early summer, a time in
which this harbour city reawakens, its public character more extrovert
and social for a few short months before hibernating come October.
But this morning, most of those around me are moving with the
speed of a ritual commute — already mentally occupied with the day.
Though physically moving through the concourse of a railway station,
these people are already somewhere else — their knees locked under
a desk, their faces buried in a screen. There are very few bodies at
leisure — unlike the lingering space of the public square, or, for some,
the lingering time of the lunch-hour. This is a public space in which
bodies are propelled onwards; this is not a place of looking, agitation
or agency, nor unexpected encounter. And then something changes…

In amongst the moving crowd are two stationary figures —
in worn, khaki soldiers' uniforms. They are standing by the platform
edge, waiting, occasionally catching the eye of a stranger. Incongruous
due to the anachronistic nature of their historic costumes, they are
all the more startling because of their stillness. They're not drawing
attention to themselves through any words or movements. They are
not exactly theatrical, but they're performing precisely because they
should not be here. They are out of time and out of place.

On approaching them, I am handed a card in silence. It bears the name of a Lance Corporal who died on the first day of the Somme in the First World War – 1 July 1916 – and his age, 17. This is a memorial of sorts, but one that understands the public realm not as a stable site, but as a place and a time in a constant state of becoming; a place in which we are all implicated as actors and in which past, present and future are colliding. This is the progressive sense of place that geographer Doreen Massey once evoked as she described 'place' as a collision of events and times, memories, fictions, material culture and meeting points.[1]

My encounter that morning in Bristol was later revealed to be one of over two million uncanny encounters of First World War soldiers in public spaces across the UK on 1st July 2016. Though it felt intimate and specific – it was an artwork of immense scale, disbursed through multiples times and places throughout that single day, accumulating online as a mass public encounter and public memorial.

A project by artist Jeremy Deller in collaboration with Rufus Norris, Director of the National Theatre for 14-18NOW, the UK's arts programme for the First World War centenary, *we're here because we're here* became one of the most celebrated public artworks in the UK of recent years (explored in detail by Kate Tyndall in this collection), and it was a catalyst for my interest in working with the British Council on this new collection of essays: *Where Strangers Meet*.

We're here because we're here is representative of a diverse network of artistic interventions, projects, gatherings and actions globally that are challenging the way in which we think about ourselves, our pasts and our future potential, by changing our experience of the urban public realm. But even within the 12 months since Deller's performers infiltrated my consciousness and changed my perception of the temporal limits of public space, the title given by the British Council to this collection – 'Where Strangers Meet' – seems all the more provocative, all the more politicized than the phrase used by Richard Sennett in 2009 to describe the anthropological character of public space.[2]

Within the past year, as a culture of fear has built around the fault-lines of intolerance, strangers have become the silhouetted figures of potential violence lurking in the shadows of public space. Sennett's promotion of the 'unfinished' city plan, which allows for its inhabitants to adapt and change the public realm, seems all the more fragile.

"In a 'post-truth' world," UCLAN's Professor Lynn Froggett suggests in this collection, "the meeting of strangers in civic space demands ever more effort, reaching across gaps in recognition and understanding, and in urban environments beset by division and discrimination the need arises again and again. It impels the citizen to take a critical and self-reflexive perspective on their relations with civil society and the body politic. One of the key services that art can perform in urban environments is to change the conditions under which 'strangers meet' so that we can know each other better and imagine other ways to live together."

Where Strangers Meet considers the recent artistic, technological and political shifts determining emergent new forms of cultural experience in the public realm and in turn, what is at stake in the emergent forms of our cities' cultures. The voices included in this collection speak from disparate locations across the globe, distinguished from one another by their own set of conditions, and in some cases, distinct political positions. There are, however, some significant shared concerns which emerge globally. These include:

- The encroachment of privatisation on public space and the implications for freedom of movement or cultural expression and new cultural forms;

- The risks of 'artwashing' urban development, thereby disguising social implications and speeding the rate of gentrification at the expense of urgent community needs;[3]

- The growth of a culture of fear which threatens to infringe civil liberties, stalling the potential for individuals to freely adapt public spaces for personal or collective cultural activities, whether that be through exclusions due to political or environmental upheaval or the imposition of state forces of control;

- The rapid development of mobile technology and significant changes to the way in which people are authoring, co-creating and participating in culture and the emergence of simulated experiences and their ramifications for our understanding of what 'public' space might be and how it is constructed;

- A tension between self-initiated, self-directed cultural activity and organised programmatic approaches to city-wide cultural programmes for economic growth.

The collection embraces a broad definition of 'art' in the public realm which encompasses unexpected and unannounced artistic interventions, immersive, dispersed and networked performances and simulated experienced, direct actions and collective, grass-roots resistance through imaginative cultural activities. The collection gives insight into the concerns of architects and planners, but focuses less on form and design, than on the social, political and environmental implications of those creative practices in public spaces. It recognises residents, visitors, commuters and passers-by and new arrivals as active respondents – protagonists in, rather than just witnesses to, the stories unfolding in the public realm.

The meaning of 'public realm' itself is stretched and redefined through these essays by contributors who are concerned less with the theoretical discourse around the terms 'public space' and 'public realm' (see Habermas, Arendt, Mouffe and Sennett) than with the lived experience of publicness. There are clearly defined cultural differences of course in the conditions of public space across these distinct localities: for example, the provisional nature of public realm

from Mexico City to Rio to Cairo and Lagos contrasts starkly from one other, each with its own particular set of political and social conditions, ritualised public practices, architectures and topographies; furthermore the formal character of interior public space evolving through the privatised urban development explored by architect Diba Salam in Dubai contrasts significantly to that described by Karolin Tampere in her consideration of Oslo's harbour area and the work of artist collective Futurefarmers or Dave Haslam's exploration of the club scenes of Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham.

What does emerge are a common set of tactics that use degrees of subversion and collective action as a means to work as artists and cultural producers in the gaps between planning and lived experience. In his description of two consecutive forms of exclusion which emerged in Cairene public space following the momentous events of the spring of 2011, for example, Omar Nagati describes the revolutionary reclamation of public space by the public which led to exclusion through fragmentation, and the securitisation of public space by state control. "Art intervention in public space", he suggests, "work[s] through the cracks of the system, both geographically and politically, using design as a negotiating tool, and subversive tactics to mediate the different forms of exclusion resultant from the periods of flux and of securitisation." This responsive and agile mode of operating by artists, designers and creative practitioners is a common thread to emerge particularly where a city is in flux.

As this collection unfolded in 2017, a 7.1 magnitude earthquake hit Mexico City, rendering contributor Gabriella Gomez-Mont's words all the more resonant, as she spoke of cities who are in the process of imagining themselves out loud. Yet equally, whilst some are becoming acutely attuned to the need to adapt to environmental shifts and changes, so for others the public realm is increasingly mediated and filtered; this is a disbursed and connected public, largely occupying a virtual public space. Rather than explore specifically the internet as a form of public space, however, three writers have considered the implications of creative technology on our experience of physical spaces.

Professors Lynn Froggett and Jill Stein explore how 'play' through digital interaction in this shifting landscape holds out the promise of integration and connection. Stein surveys the digital platforms for collectively authoring spaces, such as location-based and location-specific mobile ambient storytelling; location-based mobile games; augmented reality experiences; and social location tagging/sharing, all of which, she suggests, "blur the lines between the digital and physical public realms by engaging city dwellers with a persistent layer of ambient information."

Froggett asks: "What is the impact on the public consciousness of this repetitive simulation, widespread engagement in flow states... and the 'Disneyesque' aesthetic of much game design? How does it affect human interaction in public space?"

Both authors look at critical, creative practices which are emerging as a form of resistance to a simulated, anodyne public realm to enable what Froggett refers to as a kind of 'deep play' whereby critical reflection and individual agency is triggered, rather than repressed. Furthermore, Tony White offers an insight into a live-streamed takeover of libraries by young people in the West Midlands of the UK as a means of considering the library as a public place free from judgement and catalyst for co-created content and unregulated behaviour. This chimes with Dave Haslam's assertion of the need for self-organised, uncontrolled spaces. "The fact is," he suggests, "great ideas come from the margins."

There is no shortage of future forecasting against which to set these reflections on arts and the public realm, but as William Gibson suggested, "the future is here, it's just not very evenly distributed."

Froggett suggests, "The capacity to affect and be affected by the needs and claims of others – who are not of one's friendship group, community or kin – is a neglected aspect of civic life. Affect flows in public space, as it does in private lives, informing how we act into the public realm as embodied and emotional subjects."

In a recent research inquiry into the civic role of arts organisations, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation identified common characteristics and operating principles shared by arts organisations committed to a strong civic role, namely they are rooted in local needs; develop community agency and build capability and social capital; as well as championing artistic quality and diversity and provide challenge.[4] Such principles are shared by the artistic projects gathered here which work upon the public realm, modelling new civic acts of tolerance, of resolution, resistance and challenge.

This collection tracks starkly different approaches to addressing the inequities of the present – through direct action, through collaborative exchange and by modelling potential new behaviours or processes. In his study of Utopia, Richard Noble suggested that, 'for artworks to be utopian, they need to offer two things which seem to pull in rather different directions: on one hand a vision or intimation of a better place than the here and now we inhabit; and on the other some insight into what Ernst Bloch terms the "darkness, so near", the contradictions and limitations that drive our will to escape the here and now in the first place'.

Former Queens Museum Director, Laura Raicovich spoke, when spearheading a new vision for the museum in 2017, of the importance of the civic role cultural institutions play with reference to the museum's Immigrant Movement International, a community space in Queens that provides free educational, health and legal services. IM is a partnership between the museum and Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, who is interviewed by Gal-dem editor, Liv Little for the collection. Bruguera describes her notion of *arte util* (useful art) as art which is "the elaboration of a proposal that does not yet exist in the real world and because it is made with the hope and belief that something may be done better, even when the conditions for it to happen may not be there yet. Art is the space in which you behave as if conditions existed for making things you want to happen, happen, and as if everyone agreed with what we suggest, although it may not be like that yet:

art is living the future in the present. Art is also making people believe, although we know we may have not much more that the belief itself. Art is to start practicing the future."[5]

The approaches considered in this collection can be seen to embody this contradictory pull: between the dream of an ideal society and the circumstances of the world in which we live. Some, such as Tania Bruguera's Arte Util and the work of Futurefarmers here explored by Karolin Tampere, draw upon the aesthetic strategy of 'modelling', as a process through which ideals are tested as types of micro-utopia, whilst others are more assertively direct actions. This difference is often determined by the ways in which the artworks have emerged: some are the result of commissioning processes, outreach programmes or as part of larger-scale urban developments, others are self-initiated and/or the result of collective action.

A consideration of these provisional, unfolding set of works and movements reveals the potential of art in public to expose and respond to the encroachment of corporate interests on public space, to the diminishing opportunities for social cohesion and to the invisibility of the displaced and dispossessed in public life. The significant risk, however, as outlined in the recent discourse on 'artwashing' and critiques of the 'creative city'[6] is "the deliberate use of arts and culture to secure future profitable gain rather than social inclusion or commentary."

But what emerges from this collection is a more subtle set of arguments for the involvement of artists and artistic practices in the development of our cities through collaborative action, resistance, creative invention and by offering productive alternatives through the occupation of the centre to reassert the periphery. Futurefarmers' proposition for a public bakehouse in Oslo for example operates as the means by which radical approaches in food production enter the space of corporate urban redevelopment.

Rhodes must fall © Schalk van Zuydam

Alongside this utopic modelling of potential futures are the equally resonant issues of grappling with a city's contested past. It is worth remembering that Jeremy Deller's soldier performers disruption of the temporal limits of public space in Bristol last year also occurred in a centre promenade in Bristol overlooked by a statue of slave-owner Edward Colston – a site of consistent and increasingly urgent debate in a city built on the slave trade. Historian David Olusoga explores the implications of public monuments as sites of contested histories through the protest movement for the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town and the subsequent violent rallies which erupted around the confederate statue in Charlottesville this August.

The act of commemoration has always been closely aligned to strategies of storytelling, by which a particular history of the past is sanctioned by those in the present to bring about a particular future. As Boris Groys suggests, 'The future is ever newly planned – the permanent change of cultural trends and fashions makes any promise of a stable future for an artwork or a political project improbable. And the past is also permanently rewritten – names and

events appear, disappear, reappear, and disappear again. The present has ceased to be a point of transition from the past to the future, becoming instead a site of the permanent rewriting of both past and future – of constant proliferations of historical narratives beyond any individual grasp or control."

As Deller's significant work of art in the public realm indicated on 1 July 2016, the potential of art in the public realm is to assist us with rewriting and reimagining how we live together in the future, but essentially by revisiting the past with new eyes, lifted from our screens, to feel the materiality of being in the physical environment and to look the stranger in the eye.

Footnotes

[1] *Doreen Massey, 'Landscape as Provocation: Reflections on Moving Mountains', 2006 republished and downloadable at oro.open.ac.uk/7227/1/Journal_of_material_culture_pdf_version.pdf*

[2] *Richard Sennett, 'Quant: The Public Realm', available to read and download at www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/templates/general2*

[3] *See journalist Jack Shenker's recent article in The Guardian who characterised the threat of privatisation as the "insidious creep of pseudo-public space" where the control of 'acceptable behaviour' ranges from covert policing and surveillance to the less obvious 'planning-out' of free movement*

[4] *Gulbenkian Foundation, Rethinking Relationships, downloadable from civicroleartsinquiry.gulbenkian.org.uk*

[5] *Tania Bruguera, 'Reflexions on Arte Útil (Useful Art)', available to read or download at www.taniabruguera.com*

[6] *See Oli Mould, 'Why culture competitions and 'artwashing' drive urban inequality', Open Democracy, Sept 2017. Download at www.opendemocracy.net/uk/oli-mould/why-culture-competitions-and-artwashing-drive-urban-inequality and Alexander Nazaryan, 'The 'Artwashing' Of America: The Battle For The Soul Of Los Angeles Against Gentrification', read at www.newsweek.com/2017/06/02/los-angeles-gentrification-california-developers-art-galleries-la-art-scene-608558.html*

Discovering a Hybrid Public Realm through Ambient Storytelling and Play

Text by Jennifer Stein

Introduction

Digital ephemera weaves in and out of our everyday lives, shaping an emergent, often invisible public realm that exists at the intersection of physical and digital space created by growing networks and embedded technologies. We can choose to participate in, contribute to, and discover this hidden layer within the city through the smart mobile devices that many of us carry throughout the day. As emerging technologies become more personal, accessible, and globally pervasive, an ambient public realm of both individual and collective everyday experiences has emerged, which can be playful, storyful, social, and critically engaging. Hidden within these experiences are fictional characters in story worlds, social activists, or co-conspirators, all of whom largely remain strangers in the physical world, but are perhaps considered fellow citizens in the digital layer that exists in parallel to that of the physical.

In the hybrid space between the digital and physical worlds, augmented layers of reality are being colonised by networked public communities, artists, storytellers, and activists. This invisible public realm exists within what urban geographer Edward Soja called Thirdspace: 'a fully lived space, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual locus of structured individuality and collective experience and agency'. At the same time, these hybrid thirdspaces bear the significant influence of psychogeography and

the phenomenology of space and place, and the ethos of the avant-garde art movement from the 1950s to the 1970s. The international artists' group Fluxus described a desire to bring art to the masses, using chance to shape a viewer's experience in the city. Before Fluxus, the Situationist International used situations, happenings, and games to engage urban audiences in moments of art or cultural production. Following this earlier work, the reappropriation of urban space for experimentation, play, and moments of life has been a core experience design principle of many playful story worlds that exist between the digital and physical realm.

The mobile smartphone and other new technologies have given new life to many theories of quotidian space, as well as tenets of art movements that specifically engaged and challenged notions of the public realm. This chapter will trace the historical, social, spatial, and contextual aspects of the connection of people, networks, and ubiquitous and pervasive computing towards moments of wonder and exploration in urban spaces through ambient storytelling and play, using four case studies from Los Angeles and Tokyo.

New Technologies in the Public Realm

Over the past two decades, the emerging era of computing has revealed new ways of experiencing the world around us and accessing information within it. Computers and digital technologies have moved outside of our homes and offices and into our pockets and the spaces we traverse everyday, contextualising both our social interactions and physical locations through new forms of ambient storytelling and place-making. Networked and invisible computing in its present and most common form – the mobile smartphone – has fundamentally changed our experience of everyday life in the public realm. We negotiate both our private and public personas as we navigate urban space, in which personal, context-aware and location-based media and applications move ambiently between the centre and periphery of our attention.

The cultural assimilation of computing everywhere has further led to the field of 'urban computing', in which mobile and pervasive computing are considered specifically within the context of the city. With this, there has been a shift beyond the utilitarian underlying principles of ubiquitous computing towards more playful, collective, and enchanted experiences located within urban public space. These new personal technologies, embedded with Bluetooth, GPS, light sensors, accelerometers, near-field communication sensors, and processing power that can nearly match that of desktop computers, connect us to new hybrid spaces at the intersection of the physical and digital realms – ambiently – anytime and anywhere. This presents new opportunities to connect people more deeply to 'place' through participatory and embodied interactions with emergent forms of storytelling and play in urban spaces.

With these devices, as curator and scholar Christiane Paul observes, we have begun to see "new platforms for cultural production providing an interface through which users can participate in networked public projects and enabling the formation of ad hoc communities". Sociotechnical platforms and networked digital technologies have provided tools for meaning-making and for creating agency in the public realm, providing a new materiality for designing pervasive media experiences, and for presenting new ways of authoring space and discovering place through story and play.

Ambient Storytelling and Playful Interactions in the City: Case Studies

Artists, storytellers, and game designers have designed an array of experiences that highlight how urban computing and mobile smartphones can reactivate the urban public realm by remapping our relationship to spaces through storytelling and ludic experiences; collectively and individually, actively and passively. These kinds of experiences are often ambient and contextual, relying on the affordances of the urban form or space – i.e., dense urban space, social space, and public space – whilst relying on the invisible

networks that buzz with digital information. This notion of the ambient as a space for storytelling references the Situationist International and constructed situations within 'ambiances' or surrounding, and has been further theorised by architect and scholar Malcolm McCullough as an 'ambient commons'. He elaborates on this through his 'Twelve ways of understanding the ambient'[1] a few of which are particularly relevant to a discussion of ambient storytelling and playful interactions in the public realm:

"That which surrounds but does not distract…"
"An emergent effect of embodied interaction design…"
"An environment replete with non-things…"
"Intrinsic (environmental) information, enlivened by mediation…"
"A continuum of awareness and an awareness of continuum…"

Ambient stories and ludic experiences within the city have taken shape in a number of ways over the past decade, in which each approach tries to reveal enchanted spaces, contested spaces, and spaces of shared consequence in different, context specific ways. These forms include: platforms for collectively authoring spaces, such as spatial annotation projects; location-based and location-specific mobile ambient storytelling; location-based mobile games; augmented reality experiences; and social location tagging/sharing, all of which blur the lines between the digital and physical public realms by engaging city dwellers with a persistent layer of ambient information.

The projects below highlight different ways in which new technologies have engaged city dwellers in two very different cities – Los Angeles and Tokyo – in an emerging hybrid public realm that relies on playful ambient experiences. Each project asks: "How have emerging technologies reconnected us to urban space through storytelling, or transported us to different places? Where and when do we play, and with whom?" Much of this work focuses on playful social experiences, and points towards how we now encounter others, often strangers, in the ambient public realm. Each project, in its own way, produces the appearance of magical or enchanted experiences

specific to the urban cultural form of each city, enabled by technology but not for technology's sake. These experiences incorporate encounters with digital fictional characters, physically located strangers searching for digital artefacts, and characters that blur the lines between real and the digital. In each project, though, the goal is to use the physical city as the backdrop for digital stories and play to emerge, and be experienced through, the use of new technologies.

Mogi (Tokyo, Japan 2003):

Mogi[2] is one of the earliest examples of location-based mobile gaming, which used the physical city form of Tokyo as a social, digital game board for a collection- and item-exchange game. By using early location awareness and mapping technology, *Mogi* encouraged players to actively move through the city, often finding new routes to and from home or work to collect new digital artefacts that would appear on their mobile phone map, while also inspiring social interactions and teamwork with nearby players. Players could collect digital artefacts when they were within 400 metres of them in the physical world, communicate with other players with a built-in chat client when proximate to another player, and could form teams and trade digital artefacts with others.

Mogi was considered an environmental game, rather than just a location-based game, in that the objects in the digital world corresponded to contextual physical locations, and often temporally. Certain objects like animals or flowers could only be found near city parks, and only at certain times of day. Other objects would appear on the map with the explicit purpose of bringing two players together, encouraging serendipitous meetings in the real world while playing within the digital *Mogi* world. *Mogi* demonstrated a key moment in nascent thinking about hybrid physical and digital experiences in the public realm, and specifically in Tokyo, due to its dense urban fabric and its advanced Keitai, or Japanese mobile, culture.

Tracking Agama (Los Angeles, 2005)

Tracking Agama[3] is an early example of location-based mobile storytelling set in downtown Los Angeles, which used fictional characters and non-linear narrative to guide participants through an alternate experience of the city. Designed before the smartphone era, the project used a combination of SMS messaging, voice calls/voice messaging, and blog entries, to cleverly usurp the need for GPS while creating a sense of location-specificity. Tracking Agama led its participants on a narrative-based exploration of Los Angeles, in pursuit of a fabled (and fictional) urban researcher, 'Agama'. Participants were invited to use a bit of detective work to hack into Agama's voice messaging/note-keeping system, whilst receiving SMS messages and calls from Agama and his assistant/arch enemy.

Based on five public spaces spread across Los Angeles, many of which were points of public art or cultural significance, participants were directed to a starting location after discovering a mysterious blog post from an LA urban researcher. At Agama's last known location, Union Station, participants first had to find a code embedded in a sculpture, and, after texting in the code to Agama, were led to the next location. Each location in downtown Los Angeles led to another code embedded in the urban fabric, asking participants to look more closely at the city around them, and perhaps to see things they might otherwise not notice. Along the way, they were able to hack into Agama's research voice memos, when they discovered signs of an increasingly agitated and paranoid Agama.

CityStory (Los Angeles and Tokyo, 2008)

Using Italo Calvino's novel Invisible Cities as the jumping-off point for this storytelling experience, *CityStory*[4] invited participants to look more closely at their cities, and make visible the invisible city elements described in Calvino's cities. Though mediated through a mobile smartphone, *CityStory* was fairly low tech, relying on the social

media platform Twitter, and a participant's mobile cameraphone, to engage citizens in crowd-sourced, playful acts of ambient storytelling. *CityStory* specifically focused on participants in Los Angeles and Tokyo, creating a juxtaposition of imagery between two large world cities and highlighting a cinematic poetics of hybrid digital/physical space.

Over the course of 14 days, participants received a text prompt via Twitter at a random time each day based on one of Calvino's city descriptions, and were asked to submit 5–30 seconds of mobile video in support of to visually represent elements of the city described in the tweet. For example, when receiving and reading the *CityStory* tweet "…the way your gaze runs over patterns following one another as in a musical score where a note can be altered or displaced",[5] participants were encouraged to stop for a moment, look around, and reflect on the literary text as a way to reimagine it within their own city forms. The videos were captured, tagged with keywords, and uploaded to a website by participants for each of the 14 city texts over 14 days, providing a cinematic display of imagery that demonstrated a thoughtfulness and attention paid to urban space, if only for a fleeting moment in one's journey through the city. By envisioning Calvino's Invisible Cities through the lens of one's own city, a connection was made between a fictional world and the physical world in real time and real space.

Keitai Mizu (Tokyo, 2013)

Keitai Mizu ('mobile water') specifically addresses the potential for mobile phone-mediated public art in the urban realm. Designed to address environmental awareness in Tokyo, this "mobile treasure hunt for art"[6] made participants aware of the rivers of Tokyo that had been forced underground by aggressive city development. Located in Jingu-dori Park, a parklette in Shibuya, a number of artists were commissioned to create water-based creatures from found objects, both real and imaginary, that may be native to the rivers. With light storytelling and gameplay designed into the experience, participants

searched the park for the distributed pieces of art and were asked to photograph and submit only the images they thought were native creatures to Twitter (@keitaimizu) and Instagram (keitaimizu).

Keitai Mizu was part of a larger public art project, entitled Shibuya: Underground Streams. This public art project invited "audiences to reconsider how local places are shaped by the urban waterscape" through "a series of interventions through video projections, soundscapes, sculpture and a mobile treasure-hunt."[7] The use of the mobile phone, though only loosely related to the overall experience of capturing art established an important context for participation and collaboration by creating a playful layer to the exploration of the "submerged narratives of the rivers" in the city whilst making participants more aware of the changing environment around and below them.

Conclusion: Our Augmented Futures

The case studies above, which specifically focus on ambient storytelling and play in Los Angeles and Tokyo, are by no means comprehensive and might even seem a bit dated now. But each project shows a progression of ideas, over the past decade, about how new technologies can be used to connect people with cities for both personal and collective engagement. These examples are also meant to show how cultural specificity impacts the kinds of projects created and the themes that arise in different cities, in different parts of the world, and how each city can offer unique experiences based on the form of the city itself.

Looking to the near future, there is a growing shift towards projects that engage people collectively in public space, using mobile devices for augmented reality experiences. These augmented realities present a new emerging platform for ambient storytelling and play, ones that provide a visual glimpse into the otherwise invisible, digital public realm that exists throughout the physical space of everyday life.

The wildly successful *Pokémon Go*, and its predecessor Ingress[8], has demonstrated global engagement based on a shared mobile platform that is fundamentally rooted in discovery of public art and cultural landmarks. Though *Pokémon Go* might attribute much of its success to the existing Nintendo/*Pokémon* property on which it is based, the use of the smartphone camera to 'see' the invisible digital layer atop physical, public space points to new expectations for how we will engage with technologies in the public realm in the years to come.

In 2010, the artist collective Manifest. AR designed and released a mobile augmented reality application called *We AR in MOMA*[9], which placed a virtual and digital layer of art viewable through the mobile phone application within the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York. Manifest. AR designed this app – which was not commissioned or sanctioned by MOMA – to challenge the notion of what art is, which works of art get to hang or stand within the physical space of a museum, and to play with the concept of public or community-created art existing within private space through a digital layer viewable only through a mobile device.

Since earlier experiments to subvert the art world, the use of augmented reality and other emerging interactive technologies have become more widely used for public artworks. Most recently, artist Ivan Toth Depeña created Lapse (2016), an augmented reality art installation in Miami, which he describes as a "decoder or magnifying glass that reveals hidden gems throughout the built environment".[10] In one of the six components of *Lapse* called '*The Visions*', Depeña created a set of publicly visible murals that serve as augmented reality markers that are readable by a mobile device to access another layer of art, presenting both physical and digital access to the art, while also serving as a signpost for the hidden digital layer. Similarly, Re+Public's No Ad (2011) acted as an ad-blocker during one's subway commute by recognising "subway advertisements, block[ing] them out, and [replacing] them with curated digital art"[11] through an augmented reality mobile application.

Early mobile and location-based projects encouraged and challenged citizens to see, hear, and experience public space though the new contextual and mediated lenses of personal technologies. The rise of augmented and virtual reality technologies will continue to challenge our existing notions of public and private space and reshape our near-future experiences of the city. With projects like *We AR the MOMA*, *Lapse*, and *No Ad*, there is an increasing element of subversion – and inequity – made apparent through works of public art that exist without being explicitly visible, and only then made visible through the availability of a technological viewing device. These often playfully subversive projects nonetheless raise important questions about the role new technologies will play in the commissioning of public art projects that require access to mobile devices, and therefore, who has access to this emerging 'digital public realm' within the physical spaces of the city. With this, it is ever more important to bear in mind – as artists, curators, city leaders, citizens – the negotiations we must make as participants in both the physical and digital public realm.

Footnotes

¹ *In Malcolm McCullough's Ambient Commons, p. 12, figure 1.2*

² *Mogi was designed in 2004 by French game design company Newt Games*

³ *Designed and implemented at University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts by Ruston, S., Stein, J., Newman, B., Carter, W., Furmanski, T. & Millican, T. (2004-2005)*

⁴ *Designed and implemented by the Mobile and Environmental Media Lab at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, in collaboration with Keio University's Design Media program*

⁵ *The City of Zora, from 'Cities & Memory', in Invisible Cities*

⁶ *Designed by Spatial Dialogues and Boat People Association. Artists include Larissa Hjorth, Ryuta Nakajima, Simon Perry, Kate Rohde, Kate Shaw, Fleur Summers, Masato Takasaka, Toshi Tomita and Yasuko Toyoshima*

⁷ *www.spatialdialogues.net/tokyo/keitaimizu/*

⁸ *nytimes.com/2016/06/09/technology/want-to-capture-a-pokemon-look-behind-that-tree.html*

⁹ *sndrv.nl/moma/*

¹⁰ *artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-this-augmented-reality-app-reveals-art-in-public-spaces*

¹¹ *creators.vice.com/en_uk/article/3d5bg3/this-augmented-reality-app-blocks-advertisements-with-digital-art*

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Previously, Claire Doherty was the founding Director of Situations. Over the past decade, Situations emerged as one of the UK's most innovative and pioneering public art producers, commissioning and producing temporary and long-term public arts projects, creating public art strategies and visions for city-wide initiatives and leading publishing and research initiatives to improve the conditions for, and skills to produce, new forms of public art worldwide. Claire has developed an international reputation as a leading thinker in new approaches to public art policy and planning, and is dedicated to engaging those for whom the arts might have seemed irrelevant or inaccessible through transformative art and cultural experiences; advocating for the social value of the arts, and finding ways to catalyse positive change in specific places.

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