

Malleable Environments and the Pursuit of Spatial Justice in the Bronx

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ABSTRACT

A design team in the Hunts Point neighborhood of the South Bronx used methodologies of performance and collaborative, location-based storytelling to contend with the effects of urban spatial injustice in the community. Ideation via a series of participatory performances led to creation of a mobile cinema application as the starting point for public, location-based cinema walks. The application accepts user-generated content, acting as a new form of generative monument to the neighborhood as it evolves. The project exemplifies how installing situated technologies for an embodied form of participation can help translate local concerns to outside audiences, in this case using a metaphorical, locative media platform to discuss the evolving nature of environmental discrimination, over-incarceration, and urban spatial justice in New York City.

Introduction

The recently shuttered Spofford Juvenile Detention Center, an imposing former youth incarceration facility that was the subject of many sobering detainee accounts, constitutes a physical, architectural, and psychological point of contention at the center of the Hunts Point neighborhood in the South Bronx, where residents seek change. Haunted by stories of neglect and abuse throughout its 54-year history, the center has remained in limbo since March 2011, while the municipal government considers how to structure a request for development proposals. The remainder of the residential areas in the neighborhood are broken up by large industrial lots housing waste management and food processing plants, which cause excessive noise and air pollution during the day and revert to dangerously abandoned areas at night.



Figure 1. Shandle Burton and Rita Jones at Memories of the Future Forum, May 2013. Photo © 2013 Melanie Crean.

Through a project entitled Memories of the Future (MotF), I worked in the capacity of artist, along with 16 local poets and community activists, to facilitate a series of participatory activities to discuss the past and potential future of the area. The group wrote spoken-word texts from the point of view of a particular location that had been the site of a significant event in their lives. The site-specific nature of the texts provided the impetus to design a mobile cinema application that allows participants to move through a location-based story told across space as well as time.



Each poetic video vignette is viewed in the location where it was based and filmed. Subtle visual effects in the videos alter the surroundings, helping viewers see locations from a new perspective.

The application is also participatory. It accepts text-based, user-generated content, or what the artist collective Blast Theory would more poetically refer to as Publicly Created Contributions [1]. The project will develop into what cartographer Dennis Wood would describe as a narrative atlas [2], using maps to convey the story of a localized area. As new stories are submitted, the platform will evolve as an alternative monument to the neighborhood, which will continue to develop as the physical Spofford building undergoes the process of deconstruction.

This paper outlines and contextualizes a series of strategies derived from performance, gaming, and collaborative, location-based storytelling that were utilized in the project as tools to facilitate the process of reimagining potential urban futures.

Background

Hunts Point is a neighborhood located on a peninsula in the South Bronx area of New York City, bounded by the Bruckner Expressway, Bronx River and East River. The average household income is \$16,000 per year, compared to the United States average of \$42,000 per year. The combination of low income with the high cost of living in the city results in particularly severe poverty [3]. The area's police precinct reports high levels of violent crime, prostitution, and illegal drug sales [4]. In addition, the asthma rate in Bronx County is three times higher than the national average, with one in five children suffering from the disease. Recent studies are exploring the relation of asthma to pollutants and particulate matter found in diesel exhaust fumes [5].

The Spofford Juvenile Center operated for 50 years in Hunts Point, developing a reputation for poor conditions that did little to positively affect the lives of its population. Detained children fall behind academically, and it is difficult for them to find employment after their release. The rate of recidivism is high: 47 percent of youth released from Department of Juvenile Justice custody return to detention within a year, and 76 percent of youth released from Office of Child and Family Services facilities return within three years [6]. The community is trapped in a cycle of poverty and violence.

Area residents, who feel a strong sense of pride in the changes they have brought to their community over the last two decades, nonetheless describe frustration with the cycle of incarceration, endemic crime, environmental injustice, and lack of security in their neighborhood.

Design Objectives

The goal of the Memories project was to bring together a core group of participants to design a creative, generative, participatory platform for the Hunts Point community to tell the story of its history and potential future, as a means to facilitate discussion and change. The project is an experiment in “creative place-making” to reconstruct the nature of a site by altering how it is perceived and thus experienced. As they shaped their narratives across the local landscape, the poets sought to rewrite the fabric of their surroundings, to begin to transcend elements in the built environment that they felt have shaped their lives.

The concept of creative place-making has been described by artists such as Theaster Gates, concerning his Dorchester project in Chicago, and Rick Lowe in reference to his Project Row Houses in Houston. Place-making seeks to augment under-represented creative activity and

potential already present in a location. Projects are designed together with residents to create a sustainable commitment and enduring sense of place. The process builds on the distinctive aesthetics of a location, framing how these aspects would be of interest to those coming from without, and defining the area as unique from other locations [7]. The focus on augmenting and reframing a sense of place provided the impetus for the group's experimentation with context-aware platforms.

New practices of socially engaged art play with social relations as form, reframing the previous roles of author, collaborator, and audience into something that is relational and systems-based, rather than unidirectional and fixed [8]. Community is a word that is widely used in social, creative, and activist contexts. While it is assumed to have a singular connotation, it is often used to refer to a variety of constructions [9]. Here, I refer to the concept as three layers of an evolving system, roughly corresponding to the three levels of audience described by Krzysztof Wodiczko [10]. The first level of community can be defined in relation to practice, the core design group that is also the project's primary audience. The second is defined in relation to proximity, the residents of Hunts Point who helped model future scenarios for the area in the interactive performances and will contribute their stories to the application's narrative map. The third layer is the larger public, particularly New York City residents, who can best address issues of urban spatial injustice by working collectively.

Design Strategies

Communities, as described above, are not static. They continually evolve and, like all structures, they must continually build, un-build, and reconstruct themselves to remain structurally sound. To become a community of practice, the group would need to become what Jacques Rancière described as a "community of narrators and translators" [11], where participants act as experts, proposing a framework for modeling responses to their immediate community, as well as interlocutors, to translate and facilitate dialog about the issues with a larger public. The fact that none of the 16 participants had ever made art initially seemed daunting. The group's ad-hoc solution to this problem: have dinner and play games.

The psychiatrist Stuart Brown wrote that "play is nature's greatest tool for creating new neural networks and for reconciling cognitive difficulties. The abilities to make new patterns, find the unusual among the common, and spark curiosity and alert observation are all fostered by being in a state of play" [12]. Game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman describe the expanded notion of play to be "wobble room" for things to move and change within a larger, more restrictive structure [13].

Play was employed in this project to engage both of these spaces of possibility. The group began with a series of image-theater games adapted from those designed by Augusto Boal [14]. The games themselves often do not involve words. Instead, they use body poses and interactions that invoke processes of collaboration, decision-making, and power structures, leading to immediate outcomes. The first would be what the theater artist Bertolt Brecht described as the distancing effect, or "making strange, the process of making common issues appear uncommon as a prerequisite for understanding that they can be changed" [15]. Using a form of "interactive relabeling" [16], the mechanics of the games are mapped onto everyday actions to de-familiarize and interrogate the systems of power that inform those actions. The objective is to expose the concept of what is "normal" or "natural" to be an assumption that is learned, which can therefore be unlearned, reframing the process of change, however slow or difficult, as something that is possible.

The games were used to generate a series of texts that would begin to engage the local community in a dialog concerning their history. This was initially enacted through a Forum Theater play based on participants' stories of being remanded to the Spofford facility (Figure 1). Forums are another participatory theater format pioneered by Augusto Boal, where audience members are invited onstage to improvise possible solutions to problems that characters cannot solve. The participatory nature of the performance leads to a great deal of discussion between local residents and invited civic leaders, who also participate in the theatrical improvisation.

As a result of the Forum Theater experience, several of the project participants began to write spoken-word poetry. Through this process, elements in the local landscape that had shaped the experiences of those living there continually recurred. Detention facilities, ubiquitous waste management plants, industrial parks, and strip bars provide a backdrop not only for adversity, but also for intense creativity and the possibility for reinvention. The poets decided to write from the point of view of particular locations, speaking as interpreters, testifying on behalf of locations, bearing witness to events in the poets' lives that had taken place there.

The poetic vignettes constitute the central content of the location-aware mobile application, forming a narrative arc across the neighborhood, beginning with the Hunts Point train station and a view of the past and ending at the Bronx River with a view towards the future. Building a story line according to variables of character, conflict, narrative progression, space and time required an experimental approach to provide an audience moving through a landscape with different perspectives on the reality that they find themselves in. Kjeldskov and Paay describe five types of mobile narrative constructions: Treasure Hunts, linear stories such as *Uncle Roy All Around You* [17] that are experienced in sequence following a particular path; Jigsaw Puzzles, non-linear stories where users have to determine how the pieces fit together to create a meaningful whole; Dominos, self-contained stories where each segment is loosely connected to the next through key wording; Scrabble, where many small story fragments can be combined in a number of ways to create a personalized whole; and Collecting Butterflies, story composites such as *Rider Spoke* [18] that are related to location but not to each other [19]. The Memories mobile narrative could be considered as a hybrid between the Jigsaw Puzzle structure, encouraging exploration of space and synthesis of content, and the Treasure Hunt structure, providing some control over the narrative arc.

Each spoken-word piece was performed on location (Figure 2) and geo-located in a mobile application for iOS and Android created with Cordova, an open-source web-app engine, to minimize resources that would be required to develop in both native codes. Recent improvements with Javascript speed and flexibility allowed for a smoother, native-app-like user experience. Rather than relying on Javascript mobile engines that might slow down overall performance, the app was developed with a front-end template engine (Handlebars) to inject and automatically render each page. The database is handled in the cloud using Parse and its API to synchronously pull information and render via Leaflet, an open-source



Figure 2. James Peach, still from performance video, July 2013. Compositing: Enrique Maitland. Photo © 2013 Melanie Crean.

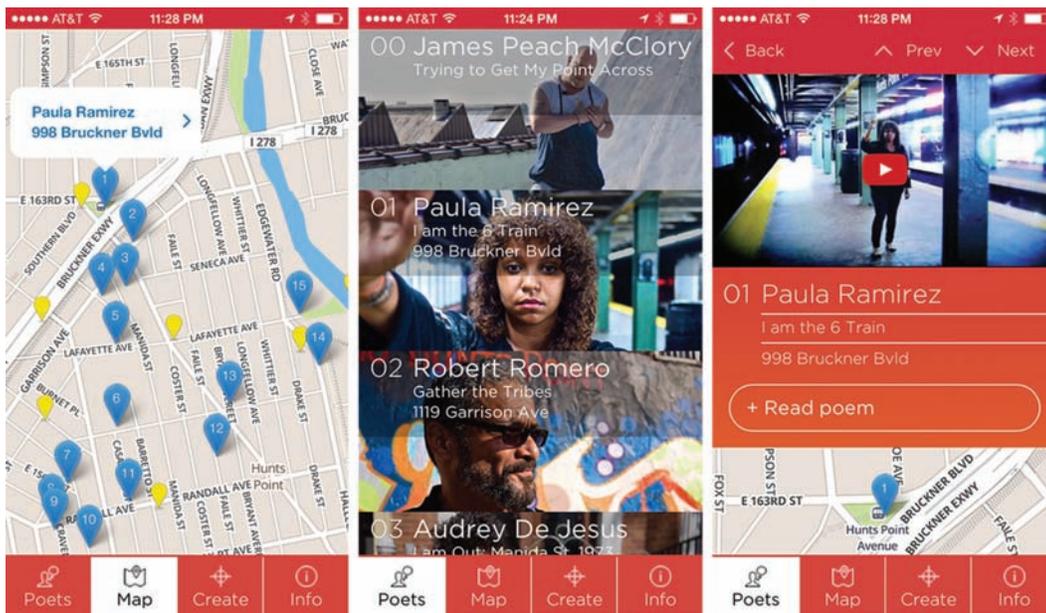


Figure 3. Memories of the Future mobile app screens. Developers: Apon Palanuwech, Dimitri Stancioff, Jane Friedhoff.

mapping engine. The app uses cloud services such as Parse to maintain and moderate future content, and YouTube to determine and deliver video at screen resolutions appropriate to each mobile device.

The project's user interface is fluid and minimal (Figure 3), facilitating ease of use through space. There are two principle means of navigation (Figure 4). The first is through a map interface for those on location in Hunts Point, showing the user's location in relation to each story node, each leading to text and video of the related performance. The second means of navigation is through a list format for those not on location. A third mode allows for creation of user-generated content, allowing participants to geo-locate and submit their own poetry, adding their own new nodes to the map.

Krzysztof Wodiczko, writing about designs that could facilitate dialog in new urban contexts, described the benefits of creating a "thing in between," a neutral zone or object that would help facilitate dialogue amongst "strangers" from different social groups who possess different amounts of political power [20]. The MotF application can be viewed individually, promoting a more reflective experience, or as the type of mediating platform Wodiczko describes, as part of a guided, public, location-based cinema walk, led by project participants who possess agency over their surroundings. During public walks, the application would be used as a platform for discussion to critically debate issues of spatial justice, the effects of correction facilities on local communities, and potential changes to the Hunts Point neighborhood.

Artists such as Rafael Lozano-Hemmer have used the term anti-monument to describe a work created from within a community to acknowledge its own accomplishments and foster pride, as opposed to more imposing structures that were historically executed from without to foster fear and fidelity, such as the traditional conquering hero on horseback [21]. The application's archive of content will evolve as the public continues to submit poetic testimonials, creating a narrative landscape or generative topology that will result in a new form of collectively constructed monument.

Experiencing the participants' stories and performances, as embodied and contextualized by

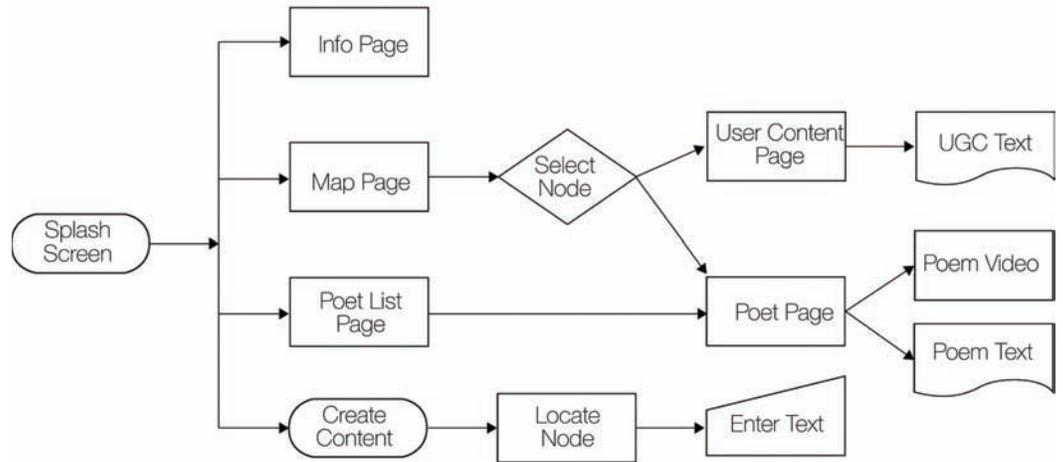


Figure 4. Memories of the Future, mobile application flow diagram.

walking through the neighborhood that inspired them, facilitated by situated technologies, constitutes a new form of spectatorship, allowing a new way of experiencing how meaning can be made through the project’s content, context, and structure. The mechanics involved in the project are all meant to question the passive reception of imagery in our increasingly privatized public spaces, re-framing the city as a read-write platform, and empowering its inhabitants to critically engage with what is written there.

Conclusions

When a community deals with complex issues of empowerment and change, it is often necessary to resist the urge to oversimplify concerns to simple cause-and-effect relationships that can be unilaterally solved, which often results in reductive, linear thinking that does not appreciate the systemic nature of many social issues. To change a system, it is often advantageous to reframe it, to find leverage points to access power, where a small shift in one variable can lead to a big shift in the entire structure [22]. To facilitate agency in places where it was previously lacking, and to help minimize large discrepancies of power that allowed the issue to exist in the first place, it is beneficial to co-design a neutral third space for dialog between affected communities and outsiders. Participation, performance, and play are effective methods to help strengthen communities and negotiate contested spaces, while the design of generative tools allows the interface between spaces to evolve and adapt over time.

J.L. Austin described speech acts as language that could accomplish something beyond simply asserting it. To articulate such expression is not just to say something, but to execute a certain type of performative action [23]. In practice, to do so, one need not only speak, but also be heard. As such, the artwork of Memories of the Future lies both in its process, bringing together a core group of practitioners with agency to generate a narrative that reframes their surroundings, and in its locative media application, through which they can re-engage with surrounding communities through a context-aware platform. The outcomes of the project demonstrate how situated technologies can leverage mobility and spatial practice to generate discussion as a tool for social change and reconciliation.

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