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OPEN SPACE

conversations on place, people and art



Essex County Council

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FOREWORD

The Open Space project celebrates the people of Essex through the eyes of five artists who have found very different ways of engaging with the community and, in the process, creating thought provoking and intriguing works of art. Matt Cook, Gordon Flemons, Miranda Sharp, Damien Robinson and Stuart Bowditch are all artists with a strong connection to Essex. They were commissioned by Essex County Council in the summer of 2008 to research, develop and produce a series of temporary artworks in Harlow, Basildon and Colchester over the following year. The programme was devised by Commissions East in collaboration with Essex County Council and the four projects were curated and coordinated by Jane Watt who, very ably, helped each of the artists to work to their individual strengths and steer their projects to successful conclusions.

Open Space is part of Essex County Council's wider 'Genius Loci' programme of public art which aims to enhance building projects and regeneration schemes around the county by appointing artists to work with design teams. The artist's input helps to bring out the distinctiveness and 'spirit of place' of each location through permanent work integrated with the construction project. Open Space was conceived as a foil to this permanent work, focusing on the community and producing temporary interventions which, while still linked to specific locations, would be independent of large scale projects.

The projects have directly involved over four hundred and fifty local individuals in the research and making of four new works that include performance, installation, sculpture, video, photography and digital animation. The artists have also worked with a range of established institutions, local community organisations and groups across Essex. The works have been viewed by audiences and passers by in twelve public locations throughout Essex, as well as on-line.

Jane Watt has pointed out that “each of the artists has been astounded by the generosity of time, knowledge and support that local individuals and groups have offered. There has been genuine interest, overwhelming enthusiasm and understanding of how art practices and products can provide platforms for exchange, lenses through which we can view our familiar environments in a new light, and conversations that challenge our current understanding of the world in which we live. The list of acknowledgements is testament to the artists’ perseverance in making work that truly embraces engagement with people place and art. Importantly it signals commitment from a range of people in Essex who are not just witness to, but part of the production and reception of art in the public realm.”

The Open Space programme was ambitious in scope. The requirement for the artists and curator to produce work which could exist independently in the public realm has meant that, to a large extent, they have had to create their own networks and contexts in which to present their work. This has been a great strength of the programme and facilitated genuine collaboration. This publication is intended as a lasting record of these temporary projects. The introductory essay by Jane Watt is followed by edited extracts from four interviews which she made with each of the artists and one of their collaborators. It demonstrates the particular role that artists can have in enriching the lives of the people they work with and offers a glimpse of the processes involved. It also celebrates the distinct ‘spirit of place’ of the Essex towns of Harlow, Colchester and Basildon.

Andrew Hunter

ST. BOTOLPH'S CIRCUS

| | | | |
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|  280 | Shoppers | | Mersea B1025 |
|  600 | Shoppers  | | |

Churchill Gate

IN SEARCH OF *GENIUS LOCI*, SPIRIT OF PLACE

Genius loci has a slightly illusive ring to it. The fact that this Latin phrase is still used in many languages today implies not only its longevity, but that something might get lost in translation. *Genius loci*, ‘spirit of place’, tries to anchor the ethereal, or transcendent to location. Landscape historian John Brinckerhoff Jackson describes our changing understanding of the phrase:

It was believed [in Classical times] that a locality – a space or a structure or a whole community – derived much of its unique quality from the presence or guardianship of a supernatural spirit. The visitor and the inhabitants were always aware of that benign presence...¹

Genius loci makes an appropriate starting point for a series of art projects: the phrase has the openness that artists so often crave in commissions; its association with recent landscape and architectural theory² gives it a weighty relevance in the field. It is no wonder that Essex County Council (ECC) has used it as an umbrella title for a series of wide ranging commissions.

Genius Loci is an ambitious scheme with ten long-term projects that are linked to ECC’s major Capital Development schemes and the Essex Design Initiative.³ They include permanent integrated works within new school buildings in Billericay, Flich Green, Colchester and Epping; Park and Ride schemes in Chelmsford and Colchester; plans for the integration of art in regeneration plans in Basildon, Harlow and Jaywick; highway improvements and developments at Brentwood and Sadlers Farm.

1 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* (Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), p157.

2 Most notably in architect, historian and theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz’s *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980).

3 ECC’s key priority is to include artists as an integral part of design teams “providing an artistic dimension and enhancement of all building projects and environmental improvement schemes, public or private, within the County; the aim being to enhance the visual richness of buildings, roads, landscaping and ultimately, the image of Essex”.

These works are being developed and implemented over several years. They are embedded within specific design and built environment briefs. Therefore, a large part of the artists' interactions are with designers, architects, planners, engineers, contractors and that catch-all phrase 'stakeholders'. This provides a very real framework within which the commissioned artists work and negotiate ideas. The *genius loci* becomes linked to very specific architectural schemes and political agendas that all influence the artists' responses.

In addition to these long-term projects, there was an acknowledgement by the commissioners that a complementary programme of shorter, temporary works might illicit more immediate responses and interactions at a grass-roots level. The Open Space programme aimed to engage with a range of local individuals and groups in a more direct way.

The briefs for the four Open Space projects by Matt Cook, Gordon Flemons, Miranda Sharp, and the collaborative partnership Damien Robinson and Stuart Bowditch encouraged collaboration and engagement with residents in three of Essex's towns. Cook, Flemons and Sharp worked in Harlow, Colchester and Basildon respectively whilst Robinson and Bowditch worked across all three towns on a mobile project.



The briefs purposely didn't specify particular locations within the towns, allowing each artist time to respond in their own way to place. In practice, this meant most of their research began at ground level, on the street. Flemons notes "I spent a lot of time walking round Colchester, sitting and watching." He became fascinated with street patterns, how the two-dimensional maps of a place translate into everyday lives. He was also aware that Colchester, unlike the other two New Towns in the Open Space programme, has "a rabbit warren of lanes often with small market stalls in odd corners". He wanted to find a way in which he could extend his observations and map the physical

and social forces within these spaces. His project *Making Tracks – Performing Place* records individuals’ daily journeys to and from the centre of Colchester with hand held Global Positioning System (GPS) loggers. The work uses the site of Colchester as a performed place.⁴ Flemons explains

The actors in this performance are the inhabitants, or visitors, who play out their daily routines and chores in a specific place; the clients of the drop-in centre; the staff and students at the training centre. It is their journeys as they travel through the landscape in time and space that are the vectors that give rise to the three-dimensional form of a place, giving it shape and defining its boundaries. By tracking the movement of these actors it is possible to capture the daily performance and reveal the form of a community.

Flemons’ interest in the anthropologist Tim Ingold’s description of the line is not surprising: “Life on the spot surely cannot yield an experience of place, of being somewhere. To be a place, every somewhere must lie on one or several paths of movement to and from places elsewhere.”⁵

Flemons converts the logged data into small downloadable animations that can be viewed online and sent to mobile phones or other handheld devices. He transforms information from everyday routine into delicate three-dimensional forms that seem to have a life, or spirit of their own.

Matt Cook also used walking as a means to generate initial knowledge and ideas about Harlow. He used local architect Alastair Howe’s walking guide⁶ as his starting point that took him along residential streets, through underpasses and around the self-contained

4 This concept is one developed by Nick Kaye in *Site-Specific Art: performance, place and documentation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

5 Tim Ingold, *Lines, A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007), p2.

6 *Hidden Harlow – A series of walks exploring the new town* by Alastair Howe (2004) downloadable at http://www.visitharlow.com/what-to-see-and-do/architecture-history-and-heritage/view_21

communities that make up Harlow. Cook was drawn to these areas rather than the town centre.⁷ His walks allowed him to think about routes, actions and observations, parameters, boundaries, rules. His playful approach echoes the French writer and member of the Oulipo⁸ group Georges Perec who offers the following advice

Don't be too hasty in trying to find a definition of the town; it's far too big and there's every chance of getting it wrong [...]

What is the heart of a town? The soul of a town? [...] How do you get to know a town? How do you get to know your town?

Method: you must either give up talking of the town, about the town, or else force yourself to talk about it as simply as possible, familiarity. Get rid of all preconceived ideas. Stop thinking in ready-made terms, forget what the town planners and sociologists have said.⁹



Harlow New Town is renowned as an example of master planning. It was designed by one man: town planner and architect Frederick Gibberd. His presence is still respected and very much in evidence in Harlow through original architecture, societies and the Gibberd Garden on the edge of Harlow. Cook, as Perec suggests, did not become seduced by planning theory. He admired its legacy, but wanted to reflect and celebrate individuals' experiences of the residential areas. His portable performance game *Play Harlow!* brought a sense of play and discovery to the streets of Harlow. The players (local residents) set off on walks

7 The centre was already a site for one of the longer-term Genius Loci projects by Roman Vasseur 'Art and the New Town'.

8 Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle) was founded in 1960 by a group of mainly French speaking writers and mathematicians. They used they used restrictive rules and patterns as parameters in which to write creative texts, for example texts entirely constructed as a lipogram (a text which excludes one or more letters).

9 Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. and ed. by John Sturrock, (London: Penguin), pp61-62. *Espèces d'espace* [Species of Spaces] was first published in French by Editions Galilée, 1974.

around the town from a central point where a large portable board with Harlow images and maps is located. Passers by were encouraged to talk about their own experiences of walking in Harlow, and groups were given walking routes that highlight Harlow's often hidden, forgotten situations and cut-throughs. Cook's construction of the gameboard echoes his past weird and wonderful constructions made out of clockwork and electronic components, toys and card-board in works such as *Unaffected Alterations* (2007) at the Foundling Museum and *Mumbling Trains* (2006) at Swansea Waterfront Museum.

Contemporaries of Percey, the Situationist International, a Paris-based, radical art group, talked of the *dérive*, or drifting, which they used as a method of experimental walking. Cook practised this method in his initial research and explains: "the walker is drawn by the attractions of the terrain rather than the need to get somewhere. During a *dérive* a walker is said to be drawn emotionally by his/her environment, and therefore stops making decisions as to the direction in which to travel." Cook's tapping into the emotional rather than the practical allows him to discover new meanderings that perhaps only an outsider can experience.

Miranda Sharp who is familiar with two other Essex towns through her recent works *Requiem for Harlow* (2004) and *Waiting Room* (2006-) in Colchester, began her research in Basildon by walking, observing, and also allowing her emotional responses to surface.¹⁰ "I immediately went into an investigative role. I used a starting point similar to previous work that looked at our emotional attachment to place, the nature of place and its relationship to public and private space."

Sharp wanted to find a conduit to set up a series of personal exchanges between herself and individuals in Basildon in order to learn more about their experiences and perception of Basildon's *genius loci*. She noticed that the majority of women in Basildon had perfectly manicured nails. Could the intimate act of giving someone a manicure, taking their hands

¹⁰ Sharp grew up in Billericay, a neighbouring village of Basildon, and so she came to this project with vivid memories of Basildon from her childhood; learning to swim in the swimming pool and shopping in the market.



within hers on a professional level, create a structure for her work *I love Basildon*? The artist undertook professional training and became a qualified nail technician. She then developed and set up her 1950s style mobile nail stall on the Laindon Estate, and later in Basildon Market. The manicures were not the work, they were the hook, the starting point for a conversation, the collection point for a number of personal stories on Basildon life. Sharp's process and work is

listener-centred.¹¹ Her emphasis is on the social interaction and perception of place rather than the physical. As geographer Doreen Massey points out

The social spaces through which we live do not only consist of physical things: of bricks and mortar, streets and bridges, mountains and sea-shore, and of what we make of these things. They consist also of those less tangible spaces we construct out of social interaction. The intimate social relations of the kitchen and the interactions from there to the backyard.¹²

Sharp's resulting work has the transitory, ethereal elements of live performance. What is left after the events are the memories and residues of those exchanges. Her piece embodies the illusive quality of spirit of place. The documentation of her live public work, her observations through video, still image and written accounts attempt what Rosalyn Deutsch calls making the invisible, visible.¹³ The translation into a lasting tangible element produces another part of the work that lives on after the exchanges cease. It is the bricks and mortar that hint at the social relations, the spirit of the work, as well as the spirit of place of Basildon.

11 Suzi Gablik, 'Connected Aesthetics: Art after Individualism', p82 in Suzanne Lacy (ed.), *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1995), pp74-87.

12 Doreen Massey, 'Space-time and the politics of location', p49 in Alan Read (ed.), *Architecturally Speaking: Practices of Art, Architecture and the Everyday* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp49-62.

13 Rosalyn Deutsch discussed how "working with the public makes the invisible, visible" in her presentation at the symposium *Making Public* at Tate Modern, London 2005.

Damien Robinson and Stuart Bowditch were selected to undertake the fourth, more mobile and virtual project that evokes, or captures, spirit of place across Essex. Robinson and Bowditch (each individual artists in their own right) have collaborated before using sound and vibration to create multi-sensory installations. For their work *Vibe³* they collected sounds from the three towns. They collected sounds from local individuals' suggestions and personal archives, the Essex Sound and Video Archive, as well as field recordings of everyday sounds across the county.

The collected sounds have been edited by Robinson and Bowditch and programmed to play online and in a specially designed mobile cube with a flat panel speaker that makes the



structure resonate in a similar way to a stringed instrument. Robinson describes this as 'feelsound', "It enables people to experience a recorded sound tangibly, becoming more real and personally experienced than if they just experienced playback. Being deaf, feelsound is a high priority to me."

This vivid way of encountering particular experiences of a place gave the visitors to *Vibe³* in Harlow, Basildon and Colchester a new perception of place through contemporary sounds, but also sounds gathered from Essex Sound and Video Archive. In this way, Robinson and Bowditch's work allows us to directly experience aspects of particular places from the present and the past. Bowditch remarks that

I have been collecting sounds and making recordings for over ten years. These sounds are a large part of my memory of individual places and when I listen to them I can be transported back there instantly. Quite often removing these sounds from where they originated makes them more potent and you become aware of how layered a tapestry of sounds can exist in any one place.

Robinson adds:

Each location has its own sound characteristics – some are shared twenty-first century phenomena (such as traffic) – but you can explore and tease out others which are more hidden, or overlooked, or which have been lost in time. The experience of recording in St. Martin’s bell tower in Basildon – which rocks like a ship when the bells are rung – was fantastic; six of the bells come from a Colchester church demolished in 1955, so you experience sounds once heard forty miles away and fifty years ago.

Each of the Open Space projects demands a physical engagement by their own unique audience-collaborators, whether it is travelling to and from work in Colchester, having a conversation in Basildon, walking through the streets of Harlow, or feeling the vibration of church bells ringing. The physical sensations of these activities are not the whole sum of the experience of place, but rather a triggering mechanism to tap into a spirit of place that is unique to each individual. These projects do not attempt to give a general reading, rather they show the complex personal testimonies of experiences that go beyond words, pictures and sounds, and make the places in which we live so wonderfully unpindownable.

Jane Watt





MAKING TRACKS – PERFORMING PLACE

Gordon Flemons in conversation with Jane Ostler, Arts Development Officer at Level Best Arts Café, Dacon Trust, Colchester

Gordon Flemons: For me ‘spirit of place’ is about the interaction between people who live or work in an environment. That was the core of *Making Tracks – Performing Place*. The work explores the spatial nature of the theatre of the everyday, how our routine lives give rise to a spatial form; a space for and of society. So when I began working in Colchester I specifically



wanted to involve communities that met and did something in the centre of the town. Four communities became involved: The Lion Walk Activity Centre for over fifties; the Level Best Arts Café (where in actual fact I’ve had the most contact and done the most work); the United Reformed Church right in the centre of the shopping centre (which is an interesting place for a church); and the last group was the Castle Church. All these groups have a role in the

community. They’re not merely people who come in to the centre. They interact with the community, they are part of the community where they’re placed.

Jane Ostler: As far as I know, here at the Level Best Art Café we are one of the only places that offers art services training for people with learning disabilities, or special needs, in a real gallery setting. We operate in a town centre location and we have a visible presence in the community. It’s a place where people come and work and serve the local community. There’s a range of people who work here, some of them are artistic, others aren’t, some can cook, some can’t; but all get involved in the process and business of running this Art Café.

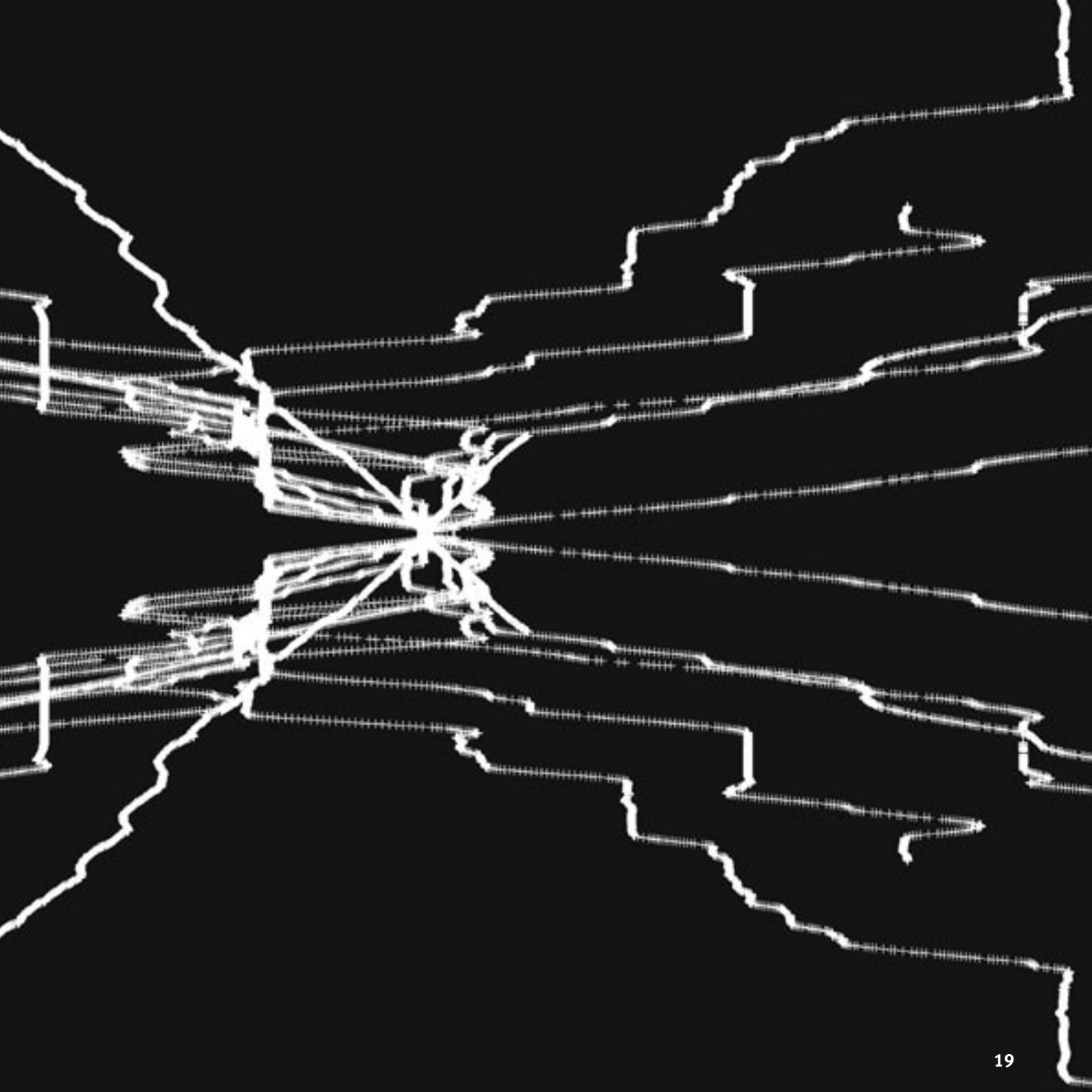
GF: I was looking to develop an exchange with these groups. So for instance with the Lion Walk Activity Centre I gave a talk on my art practice for their Friday afternoon session, which then led on to talk about my project. In return they became personally involved in the project.

Here at the Level Best Art Café I did some workshops in return for their participation in the project. So it was a two way process.

JO: Each Art Café trainee worked with their personal assistant and Gordon to remember their own journeys recalling special features of their journeys from home into the café. These were made into drawings. They were very idiosyncratic and interesting, and gave me a new perspective of where the trainees had come from. One person would drive past a field where a dog always came to the gate, she drew a beautiful spotty dog. There were horses, sheep, a lot of country things like that. Music was very important, people listening to the radio on the way here. They drew significant buildings, showing the colours of buildings.

GF: I like the way that these were snapshots of scenes that trainees had passed on the way. The maps that they drew brought these snapshots together. They had a sort of animated film quality to them, which I hadn't anticipated. So this activity and the subsequent workshops that came out of it, helped people to think about the journey. It gave the main part of my project more of a context and more meaning when I asked participants to carry a GPS tracking device to track the lines of their journeys.

It's interesting that the different communities have different shapes reflecting their journeys. Most of the people from the Activity Centre live quite locally and come short distances by bus. Their journeys are slower and very different in nature to the longer car journeys to the Café in which people are coming in on faster roads. So you get a very different shape. I plot the distance against time so the time and speed of the journey changes the form that's created. Local residents taking a long time give a taller shape compared to residents coming in at speed from big distances along fast roads. I think the tracks emphasize the characteristics of Colchester's street plan. If you look at the detail in my computer animated models you can see they mirror the fact that the centre of Colchester is a maze of little streets and busy markets, then around that you've got clogged traffic and one way systems. And then outside that again you've got really quite a good network of faster roads. Each of these zones gives a different experience of place and the sense of interaction between people, physical space and time.





I LOVE BASILDON

Miranda Sharp in conversation with local resident and mother Caz Smith Laindon, Basildon

Miranda Sharp: The spirit of Basildon is quite a hard thing to pin down. *I love Basildon* was about discovering what the place means to people. For me it was an investigation. I was aware that I wasn't part of the community, I was from the outside, but I wanted to get as close as I could. So I approached it almost like a sociological investigation. I wanted to meet with people on their terms, to get beyond the stereotypes of Basildon and look at what it is that makes a place tick, the spirit of place.

Caz Smith: I first came across Miranda and her *I love Basildon* project when I was down here in the Laindon Shopping Precinct doing my shopping. I saw the neon sign 'I love Basildon' in the Sue Ryder shop and I thought "what's that about?" Then I saw some people having their nails done. I went in to have a look, then came back outside, and then went back in again.

MS: You were sussing us out.

CS: Exactly.

MS: I think quite a few people took the first couple weeks to check us out. On the third week that we were there a lot more people came back.

CS: I went in and asked how long I'd have to wait to have my nails done. Miranda said to come back in ten minutes. I went back and had my nails done and we started talking, and it developed from there. We started having a chat and I talked about where I live and about Basildon, how I've been here all my life. My mum and dad and all my family come from here. I talked about how my kids started school down here. I love it here, especially Laindon.

There's always something happening. If you get on with people I think you're all right. It's quite a close community. You do get little groups of people. People stick together.



MS: After I had a conversation with individuals about their experiences of Basildon, I asked each of them to write down what Basildon meant to them. The book was like a log book, in the format of a register. I had about a hundred entries. Caz's entry "Where all my family and friends are" summed up many of the conversations and feelings about the place

– it was about close ties with people. Most of the people who were involved in the project didn't just come to get their nails done – although that was perhaps what first attracted them – they wanted to talk about their experience of Basildon. It was about friendship, bonding and community.

When I started this project, I knew that I wanted to get quite close to people in the community. I knew I couldn't just be a stranger asking people questions, there needed to be some kind of exchange. I needed to give something back. And what surprised me was how close I became with people, particularly with Caz. We did have a shared kind of 'moment' didn't we? We were talking about our children and we both shared our experiences of loss. We both ended up shedding a tear. Do you think you would have had that conversation in, say, a hairdressers?

CS: No way. I could see that I could talk to you as soon as I met you. I don't let my feelings out so easily even to someone like a counsellor or doctor. But I did straightaway with Miranda. So I felt secure.

MS: What really struck me about this project was that quite quickly, I think once people had sussed me out, they were very honest with me about their experiences, and opened up to me.

CS: Yes, they become more outspoken.

MS: I really wanted to include a portrait of each of the individuals because I wanted to somehow represent a moment, or aspect of the exchange that I'd had with that person. Hopefully the portraits showed that we'd had some intimacy. But I think that it was quite a big deal that people did allow me to take their portraits. Normally people are a bit more reticent, or suspicious. I think if I'd asked to take a photograph at the beginning there would have been a different reaction.

CS: I'd have said no. It's only because I got chatting to you.



MS: I think the exchanges that I had, were a key part of the work. But I always felt that the specific content of those conversations would be private. Even in the documentation film I haven't used anything that was really personal, because I think that's just between me and the person. It still feels really important that's private. But what I was interested in was in creating an environment, or situation in which something that is normally considered quite private can take place in public.

I was amazed that people didn't say immediately "oh no thank you" or "I'm not interested in that." Everyone knew it was an art project, but they didn't question that, or were put off by that. They accepted it and took part in the experience.

CS: It made a difference to have something different like that in Laindon. We've never had something like that before here in the precinct – and I'm down there every day!



PLAY HARLOW!

Matt Cook in conversation with Alastair Howe, architect, Harlow

Matt Cook: Walking was a central part of this project, in the research phase – getting to know Harlow – and in the work itself. I’m interested in the way that you can respond on an emotional level to a place, how your emotions might change when you’re walking. So how you feel when you go from somewhere which is quite open to somewhere which is quite enclosed, or feels quite claustrophobic.



Alastair Howe: I wrote *Hidden Harlow* – a series of walks exploring the new town in 2004 for Architecture Week. Harlow was made for walking. There are a whole series of pathways and linkages through from area to area, which is all part of the original design concept of the place. It was great to find these little linkages that lead to the claustrophobic-type situations that Matt’s referring to. As you walk, a view opens up or closes off, there are architectural details in porches and eaves that you wouldn’t perhaps notice if they weren’t pointed out. So my walks of Harlow were just a way of trying to describe that to people.

MC: The main objective in the Play Harlow! walks was to go for a walk without any reason other than going for a walk. I wanted to open out the views Alastair talks about, mine weren’t focused so much on architectural detail, but the wider environment. That obviously has to do with town planning where you come round a corner and there’ll be a tower framed in front of you. So, I’m trying to encourage people to look at their environment. I think in both Alastair’s and my walks we’re encouraging people to notice elements of their space that they wouldn’t usually

explore. I'm trying encourage to people to take a detour from their usual walk so they're not always walking the same way, and that they look at things on the way.

AH: There is, I suppose, a social element to it as well in that if you don't know Harlow, there are preconceptions from the outside that it can be seen as a rough town, with graffiti all over



the place, that it's fairly urban – no cows anywhere. There are some pretty strong prejudices about what is good and bad in urban architecture. New town housing tends to get lumped in with council housing generally and often that has a very negative stereotype. Yet you can wander around these walks and you can, hopefully, realise that there is a simplicity in the overall concept and the detail of some of this housing

that makes it work as a set piece of town design. You also find a lot of well tended gardens with plants, nice lawns, open village green type spaces, and there is remarkably little graffiti, so your view might well be transformed.

MC: In one of my walks that takes you through the Bishopsfield area you can see that there is a really strong feeling of community and the way the housing area is designed promotes community. People there often talked about the garages being built completely away from the houses, so that residents have to walk a little way to get from their house to their car. This means that you are more likely to bump into your neighbours every day and you get to know people who you live near. It wasn't just a pure design idea, it actually works and the design is still lived through the residents today.

AH: In my view Harlow is quite special, and that special nature comes from its overall planning concept. Some people have a big problem with that and think that you can't possibly put something down that's been planned from the outset and actually make it function as a town. And yet I think there's a huge amount of value to be learned from this place. I wouldn't say it works perfectly because really it doesn't, but, equally, I wouldn't say that you've got to obliterate it and start again. I put the quality of the integration of the built

areas into the landscape down to the town planner Frederick Gibberd actually having come here and spent six weeks just wandering around the area. He walked the area to pick up on the views and sort of see the sketches of important views, vistas, valuable bits of landscape, which got integrated into the plan.

MC: Yes, he didn't move any trees and kept the old roads that connected the villages, keeping those as cycle tracks, because of that now the town has a really amazing cycle network that I used to ride my sculpture trailer on the way to the *Play Harlow!* events in The Stow, Staple Tye and for the Harlow Town Show.

AH: I don't think that anybody else did that in any of the other new towns. Those six weeks were very important. I think attention to walking is what really sort of gives this place its particular qualities.



VIBE³

Damien Robinson and Stuart Bowditch in conversation with Martin Astell, archivist at Essex Sound and Video Archive, Chelmsford

Damien Robinson: *Vibe³* is a mix of things. Physically it's a sculpture and installation, a portable archive in its own right. It's also a way of interacting with people and bringing together recordings we make, and recordings people give us.

Stuart and I wanted to explore the way that sound works through vibration. This is important to me, because I'm deaf and I feel sounds through touching objects and picking up the resonance. I've done a lot of research around NXT technology which is a sophisticated type of speaker that heightens the experience of feeling sound, or feelsound. So we're connecting feelsound, how that works for myself as someone who's deaf, or how it works for somebody who can hear. Sound can be quite visceral, it's around you. It's not for me, and I wanted to find a way of letting people understand that if you don't capture it it's gone. So here you do experience sound in a different way.

Stuart Bowditch: There are three different strands of recordings. Over a year we made recordings of everyday sounds as we explored the three Essex towns Harlow, Colchester and Basildon. We were really keen to involve local people who could take part in this as they're the people who live and work in the three towns, their experience is very different from our more limited one. We did get some great donations. Nigel Chapman donated a rare record made in 1969 of the Colchester Choral Society singing. Then a man in Basildon recorded his heart on an ECG monitor at Basildon Hospital and he uploaded it via the Open Space website. The third type of recording was material from the Essex Sound and Video Archive which is such a great resource.

Martin Astell: At the Archive we've got an enormous amount of oral history recording, interviews with people about their lives, their memories, experiences and reminiscences. And that might be about the particular place where they live or about the area of work that they've worked in. We've got a large number of radio recordings, particularly from BBC Essex, as well as the new community stations that have been set up recently. Then we've got lots of folk music, dialect recordings, recordings of lectures and talks and events.

SB: An important part of our project was that we wanted to donate all the sounds that we collected back into the archive, to add to it, and create more longevity for the project. We wanted to give this temporary project some kind of permanence. There has been an exchange between ourselves and Martin, but there has also been an exchange with us and people in the street, or people that we bumped into who then invited us to make recordings of where they live or something that they're doing. This has translated into 14 hours of recording.

DR: People have been enormously helpful and supportive, and that is often overlooked in this dog-eat-dog society. I think working with the Archive helped to open up and confirm this relationship with different individuals. When we spoke to people about their records that have been lying around that they don't think are important, we said "What you have, what you've kept hold of, is something very important for Essex and we really appreciate it". This reinforces the connection that people have with the area. For example the bell-ringers that we visited in Basildon go and practise every week. There may be no one around to listen to them, but they still go and practise every week. When we approached them we said "We're interested in what you're doing and would like to capture this sound so that other people in the future can connect with what you're doing". That approach created a connection and allowed more of an engagement with what we're doing. I'm sure it works for Martin in the same way with the Archive.

MA: Yes I think it's really important for us at the Archive. One aspect of the Archive is bringing things in to the record office so that they can be preserved, but the other is allowing people to have access to them, to use them. So I'm really keen that people use our material

whether it's using the actual artifacts, making something of them, or just being inspired by the Archive. This project has the other benefit in that the recordings that Damien and Stuart have collected are going to come back to us, so it becomes a more circular process.

I was particularly interested in Stuart's ideas of soundscapes, of just recording the world, stuff happening. Some recordings are simply taken going into a shop, like Debenhams, and just walking around. Not interacting with people, just recording the sounds that are



happening. That's something which we don't have examples of in the Archive. Some people might say "Why on earth are you recording that, it's really boring, nothing happens". But in fifty years' time the experience of going into a shop will be completely different to what it is now. It's the idea of mundane detail that isn't recorded in other types of records. Big events in history are recorded, but the actual everyday stuff isn't. The detail of noise, like the beeping of a supermarket self-serve checkout is part of our lives now, it wasn't part of it twenty years ago and probably won't be in twenty years' time. I think the value of those types of recordings will increase as time goes on and I'm very pleased to be receiving those.

SB: Going back to what Damien was saying that if someone's just got something lying around, or it's just part of their everyday life, they don't see it as anything special, it's just there. The place where they live, places where they go to, they're just there. But to somebody else they may have interest in it and draw attention to it.

It's interesting that people do have preconceptions about a place. I always try to have no opinion where anywhere is going to be like, and to just go there on the train, get off and walk about. It's hard to quantify the spirit of a place because it's made up of so many things,

so many different levels and factors. But after you've walked around for a while on different days, you start to build up not so much a picture, more a feeling. Of course, each of the towns is very different, but I did realise that it's quite hard to express this feeling just through having two senses, sound and touch. But there were noticeable differences – the sound mix for Harlow ended up being quite quiet, the recorded sounds were much quieter. There's a lot of green space in between different areas in Harlow. Colchester was actually quite noisy, and there were more donations by people that gave us noisy things, like people singing and the sounds of the Clock Museum.

MA: Most of the content of the Sound Archive has to do with people remembering. There's all sorts of issues around people's memory of places and events, things get left out and put in. But this project is about the place now. Spirit of place is a very difficult thing to capture, but I think one of the keys to this project was people being able to submit their own content, things that are important to them about the place of where they live. People who have more experience of living in a variety of places will be able to see that place in the context of the other places.

DR: It is difficult to capture the spirit of place because it's multi-faceted. It's ephemeral. It's something you almost see out of the corner of your eye, and when you look at it, it's not there any more. So you have to see it by not looking too hard. I think we tried to reflect that in the way the programming of sounds for the Vibe³ installation incorporated random spontaneous sequences. That was our experience of engaging with people and place.



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