Healing Place: creative spatial interventions as catalysts for reconstructing community identity

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Abstract (150 words)

This paper investigates attempts to remediate, reclaim and transform community identity, using spatial and artistic interventions to ‘heal’ place. Contextually, this investigation aims to use ideas around the social transformation of space, exploring links between poverty and social exclusion and the spatial structure of the city, and evaluating current research on urban violence and post-conflict development.

My aim is to establish a set of criteria for using architecture in the process of 'healing place'. Having established a set of criteria for interventions, I then investigate and compare case examples where a spatial/cultural project has attempted to rebuild community identity, using the criteria to identify modes of practice, and analyse why and how these examples were successful. In conclusion I discuss where and when this type of intervention may be appropriate, and argue for the potential of specific, grassroots initiatives, and collaborative approaches, to inform current debates in theory and practice.
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Introduction

With increasing urbanization, cities show the scars of ongoing or recent conflict and violence, or spatially reflect exclusion and segregation. Development practice addresses the healing of places where conflict or violence has taken place, or is an ongoing problem, in a number of ways. Reconstruction projects usually focus on economic reconstruction and physical rebuilding, while reconciliation projects usually focus on social and legal issues. (Simpson, 1997; Winton, 2004).

This paper aims to investigate the possibilities for the role of artists and architects as ‘healers’ of community identity, through the communities' relationship with ‘place’. My premise is that there is a link between spatial structure and social structure. Community identity is revealed in the fabric of the city, and therefore creative spatial interventions can create new relationships and networks, which create a sense of belonging and a stronger communal identity.

I chose to focus on case examples in cities where exclusion, poverty and crime/violence affect particular societal groups using different starting points and modes of practice. At the core of the case examples is an initially unused or derelict place which is ‘healed’ by an intervention, brought back to life, reanimated. The transformation attracts networks, and initiates art projects or public art works to be carried out in the local area. It is my premise that through these tactics, community members build new relationships and new identities, engendering a process of healing that has ongoing effects on the people and the place.

Lost in Space: myths about ‘Place’ and ‘Space’ in urban theory

‘Space’ and place’ have a multiplicity of meanings. While exploring these theoretical territories from an architectural angle, one inevitably crosses into other literatures. There is evidence of a clear shift both in the nature of debates, and their relationship with other disciplines. (Leach, 1997) In the past ten years, architectural theory has indeed shown receptiveness to cross-cutting cultural theory, linking architecture with fields such as geography, anthropology and philosophy.

Recent research texts in architectural theory, such as *The Unknown City* (Borden et al, 2001), have investigated the meaning of space and specificity of place, combining architectural theory based on the spatial theories of Lefebvre, with anthropological and geographical theory, to explore concepts such as psychogeography. One of the reviewers of *The Unknown City* pointed out the emergent “new movement in urban studies”, one that offers an “anti-formalist, post-structuralist, even Situationist perspective for understanding the city” (ibid.).

The theory of psychogeography, our psychological response to and relationship with (mainly urban) space, evolved from the writings of the Situationists in the 1950s. The Situationists believed that “capitalism had turned all relationships transactional, and that life had been reduced to a spectacle” (Marshall, 2000). Their response was to create “Situations”

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1 *Psychogeography* was defined in 1955 by Guy Debord as the "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals."
which would “disrupt the ordinary and normal in order to jolt people out of their customary ways of thinking and acting” (ibid.). Their ideas recontextualise the importance of our surroundings from a functional or purely aesthetic experience to a more perceptual one. This reading influences and politicizes contemporary thinkers and practitioners in urban settings, to imagine and practice new tactics which “encourage a critique of daily life”. (Borden et al, 2001)

In *Tristes Topiques*, Levi-Strauss (1976, cited in Blundell-Jones, 1985) writes of how the Bororo tribe, once persuaded by the Salesian missionaries to abandon their traditional village plan,

soon lost any feeling for tradition; it was as if their social and religious systems…were too complex to exist without the pattern which was embodied in the plan of the village and of which their awareness was constantly being refreshed by everyday activities.

The current return to examining a phenomenological view of architecture and space, ie. “space as lived experience”, revisits Levi-Strauss's observations, territory also explored by writers such as Bachelard, Heidigger and Lefebvre, who seek to “reclaim an ontological dimension to the built environment.” (Leach, 1997) In another cross-cutting discourse, anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000) has used Heideggers’ theories to develop the idea of *taskscapes*, a term used to describe the different uses to which humans puts their environment, within a temporal context. Ingold uses *taskscapes* as an alternative to landscapes, in the context of rural/ethnographic lifestyles, but this idea could equally be applied to cities.

In ‘For Space’ (2005), the geographer Doreen Massey sets out to challenge the division between *place* as grounded and real and *space* as abstract and unreal. She points out the fundamental mobility of things and argues against sanctification of the local. Instead she argues for an understanding of the specificity of space, and for space as the dimension of multiplicity. In this context *place* is the moment of intersection between people, in space, and with space. It is these interdependent relationships between people and space that create a sense of belonging. Recent work by Massey and Rose (2003) defines public space as only existing when social interaction becomes active; when individuals have to negotiate social differences in order to engage with each other. Therefore, place is defined largely by relationships, not the spatial dimension.

I want to investigate how spatial interventions can *create* these intersections, can spark new symbiotic interdependencies between people and space, which create a sense of belonging, and build societal/community identity. Hamdi (2004) refers to this notion of blurred boundaries between community/place as “the soft city of dreams, expectations and hidden networks.”

In today’s cities, societal structures of exclusion and segregation are spatially embedded; “occupation, segregation and exclusion on every level are conceptualized in streets and neighbourhoods, types of buildings, individual buildings and even parts of buildings.” (Zukin, 1996) Through the relatively recent concept of Space Syntax, poverty and social exclusion are linked with the spatial structure of the physical form of the city (Vaughan et al, 2005a). Space Syntax attempts to treat built environments as *systems* of space, trying to bring to light their underlying patterns and structure
(Hillier, 1998); for example Booths’ maps of Victorian London, with houses coloured according to income levels.
(Vaughan, 2005b)

Darkness on the Edge of town: Urban violence, Exclusion and Identity

In defining where ‘healing’ interventions may be appropriate, one can identify two main typologies of place. Firstly, post-conflict settings where a community has recently emerged from war or civil war/terrorism, (eg. Cape Town, South Africa, where one case example is set) and secondly, urban settings where there are ongoing issues of violence and insecurity. (eg. Detroit, USA, where another case example is set). In fact, Simpson (1997) argues that in many cases the differentiation of “post-conflict” is a false label. He cites the slide from political to criminal violence, and highlights the impact of mismanaged transitions from conflict. He argues that economic reconstruction needs to work in tandem with social reconstruction, to prevent a reoccurrence of violence.

Therefore, there will be similarities between these settings, for example insecurity, loss of identity, exclusion for some groups, inter-community conflict (Du Plessis, 1999). However, it is also important to recognize that there will be differences, for example issues of memorialization, and the need for large-scale reconstruction, in the case of post-conflict settings. While post-conflict settings in a sense offer up opportunities by their chaotic nature (Du Plessis, 1999), urban violence settings have entrenched problems which are difficult to intervene in. I want to contextualise both in a spatial framework, and examine how urbanization, through spatial structures, has entrenched exclusion and affected identity.

The growth of urbanization, first in ‘developed’ countries, and since the mid-20th century especially in ‘developing’ countries, has brought associated problems. Individuals migrating from rural areas or from other countries often end up in sink estates, slums and ghettos where poverty is ingrained in the very architecture. (Zukin, 1996; Vaughan, 2005b) While they may be escaping damaged physical settings and social structures, they have to negotiate complex new sets of societal and spatial rules. Forced removal, for example in South Africa under apartheid, created an instant influx of new residents occupying peri-urban extensions of the city, with no sense of belonging. The clearance of slum areas can lead to similar problems as social structures are lost in faceless estates. These are by no means new phenomena, as Booth’s work reveals (Vaughan, 2005b), but by tracing their history and outcomes, a familiar pattern emerges, of spatial exclusion and poverty contributing to societal breakdown and urban violence.

Definitions of violence extend to psychological hurt, material deprivation and symbolic disadvantage. (Moser, 2004) Exclusion and inequality can be seen as forms of “structural violence”, that is, “violence built into the structure of society, showing as unequal power and consequently unequal life changes.” This has been shown to relate significantly to “reactive violence”, that is, violence in reaction to violence. (Moser, 2004; Winton, 2004) While economic inequality is the primary measure of deprivation, inequality entrenched in the spatial structure of society can increase and contribute to the factors that cause reactive violence.
New estates, or informal settlements, both often built on the peripheries of a city, remove diversity: of uses and spaces, and of communities. This removes the possibility of interactions between different strata of city. Hillier (1988, cited in Vaughan, 2005b) states that the effect of modern housing estates on the segmentation of the poor from the life of the city is to create an exaggerated presence of locals, without “the leavening of strangers as found in ordinary streets”.

There is a compelling argument that space plays a crucial role in the construction of youth identities. (Miles, 2003) Young people growing up in state built sink estates may develop anti-social identities, carrying out violence against property. The mainly urban nature of violence against property can be explained in part by the ‘disorganization’ argument; that “urban dwellers are no longer effectively integrated into a community” (Gilbert and Gugler, 1992). Those growing up in informal self-created settlements/slum areas may for different reasons become part of criminal gangs, joining a pecking order of territorial control, and gaining an (albeit anti-social) spatial and social identity. These identities can be factors in violent and criminal behaviour, feelings of alienation, prostitution, terrorism, and gang/turf war. (Simpson, 1997; Winton, 2004) Awareness of the complexity of identity is vital when approaching these issues, as those causing violence may vandalise any spatial interventions they do not feel a sense of ownership for.

Healing Place: spatial interventions, public art and development practice

Approaches to tackling urban violence vary widely. Current practice includes Criminal justice and public health interventions, conflict transformation approaches, urban renewal, community security initiatives, and building of social capital. (Moser, 2004) Post-conflict development is a huge and complex field, but key initiatives include peace-building, reconstruction and reconciliation. (Junne, 2006b) Innovative interventions are a growth industry, with recent recognition of the need for more holistic approaches. (Moser, 2004) Visible transformations, which create new interactions, could have a role to play in breaking down the barriers of exclusion and inequality, building new identities, and therefore reducing violence.

In situations of urban violence and conflict, artists often look at the effects of the conflict both on the community and on the urban fabric, and respond to this with site specific works. (Burnham, 1998) Artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena suggests that public artists are “border crossers, cultural negotiators and community healers”. (Lacy, 1995) These processes are more likely to be defined as “public” or “community” art than as development practice, but they have crosscutting impacts on the social and spatial.

“Community” is a contested term, within art, architecture and development, which often leads to incorrect assumptions. (Till, 1998, Hamdi, 2004) While the “community architecture” movement of the 1960s-80s thought that spatial solutions could cure societies ills, current thinking debunks this myth. (Till, 1998; Blundell-Jones et al, 2005) Till argues that the former movements’ refusal to operate critically (i.e. to resist dominant social and economic structures) meant that in the long run they were part of the problem. He calls for an “architecture of the impure community”, explicitly linking architecture with the political, and the realities of social construction, “towards a transformative model” of practice.
One example of this is Junnes’ (2006a,b) theory of an ‘Architecture of Peace’, which could contribute to reconciliation after violent civil conflicts. He asks whether physical reconstruction can make “a broader contribution to peace, mutual understanding and recognition, to intensification of exchange, and to a common identification”. He recognises that by providing a support system in a community, through sensitive reconstruction, ‘bonding’ social capital (relationships within groups) can be a springboard to ‘bridging’ social capital (relationships between groups) (Junne, 2006b).

By weaving together ideas from public art practice, development practice and architectural theory we can create a theoretical context for ‘healing place’, and begin to imagine practical applications.

The aim of this paper is to test the case examples against the criteria and research questions established, to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions, draw conclusions which help understand best contexts for interventions, understand the key issues that arise through this type of practice, and draw any implications for current theory and practice.

In order to draw relevant material from the case examples, I have developed a series of research questions:

- What sort of architectural and aesthetic interventions can best be used to strengthen place and identity? (*genius loci*)
- What are optimal interventions that can best preserve the specificity of existing places? (*reappropriation of space*)
- How do these interventions alter interactions and create new opportunities? (*transactions*)
- Can a link be established between strategic spatial interventions and improved social or community relations? (*healing place*)

There are many different literatures which offer criteria for success, but the closest to my specific interest in healing place are Junne’s (2006a) list of ‘dimensions’ for an ‘architecture of peace’. As these are mainly architecturally based, I have adapted my criteria to make more explicit linkages between the social and spatial, and to fit them within a development practice framework. My premise is that without addressing these criteria, the project will not be, or may be only partially, successful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Junne’s criteria</th>
<th>My criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>functions of design</td>
<td>= creation of <em>transactions</em>; new networks, and interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>timing of construction</td>
<td>= temporality of project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>specific location, former use of site</td>
<td>= memorialization and cultural context – <em>genius loci</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>process of decision making</td>
<td>= participation, power and control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>construction method</td>
<td>= building skills, increasing social capital; connecting practitioners (those who plan and those who do)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>specific usage</td>
<td>= creating a safe space: for a ‘treatment period’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>symbolism of material, semiotics of aesthetics</td>
<td>= giving the place a new visual identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>symbolism of signage</td>
<td>= promoting a point of view, provoking attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“leaven in the community”-strangers on the streets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>fostering a sense of belonging and identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Table of criteria for ‘Healing Place’ interventions. By author, and using criteria from Junne, G (2006a)
In testing these ideas, it is vital to examine the possible pitfalls practitioners may encounter. As the problem with architecture and art is that so much of it is ‘value-free’ (Miles, 1997), if it is to be ‘value-added’ it needs to engage with critical debate and not just advocate solutions.

**Cure-all? or sticking plaster?**

In post-conflict situations, there are often more pressing issues of repairing housing and infrastructure, restoring the economy to rebuild livelihoods, and providing treatment to those in need. In these situations, a spatial/artistic intervention can have a ‘healing’ role as it can reinstate people’s sense of identity and belonging. (Hasic and Roberts, 1999) However, these interventions need to take place as part of holistic approach, not just as a ‘sticking plaster’. In Beirut, (until the recent Israeli bombardment), the reconstruction process was led by the private development company Solidere. They promoted the metaphor of ‘city as heart’, with the reconstruction as “some kind of surgical operation on a diseased body” (Charlesworth, 2002). While the downtown area was demolished and rebuilt, most of the rest of the city and the country was ignored, indeed the rebuilding program has “only accelerated historic tensions”. (Ibid.) Isolated improvements may just push problems elsewhere.

**Miracle healing: or hiding the reality of the problem?**

Another danger is promoting ‘miracle healing’, or believing that because the external appearance is improved, social realities are too. Beirut City centre has become “a stage set for tourists wanting to see the miracle of post-war Beirut”, an irony as there are still squatters in Southern Beirut, not far from the pastiche of the past of the new downtown. (Charlesworth, 2002). The demolition of the inner city fabric has lead to a development that is “devoid of memory, and a middle-eastern version of Canary Wharf” (Stewart, 1991 cited in Charlesworth, 2002). As Gingell (2000) writes in the British context, Canary Wharf and Docklands are similar examples of sentimental gentrification: a nostalgia for the past without encountering present realities, where “newcomers dwell imaginatively in that past they no longer live with”.

**Raw wounds: memories and appropriateness**

Negotiating the complexities of memory in a post-conflict situation needs delicacy. There is an increasing recognition of the role that art can play alongside architecture in transforming spaces of memory, but sensitivity must be used. The Constitutional Court in Johannesburg, South Africa, located on the site of the former Old Fort Prison Complex, held painful memories for many as a site of oppression, torture and humiliation. Through “We the People”, a public participation programme, facilitators conducted workshops in which ex-prisoners remembered the spaces and reclaimed the dignity that they lost in the Old Fort. (Constitution Hill website, 2006) In other places, inadequate memorialization processes have re-opened ‘raw wounds’, instead of healing. The controversial Eisenmann memorial in Berlin to Jewish victims of the Holocaust has generated opposition from Jewish groups, who say it is inappropriate, and that money would be better spent on upkeep of concentration camps, many of which are crumbling. (McCathie, 2003; Frontline website, 2005)
**Plastic surgery: good art or good works?**

Art for healing can encounter different challenges; as Raven (1993) discusses, art “created to cause a social change for the better…makes it neither politically effective nor good art.” There is a danger in describing ‘healing’ attempts as art, precisely because audiences and participants expectations may then be raised. The difficulty is to establish effective criteria for measuring success. Projects evaluated as art or architecture face different criteria to those evaluated as development practice.

**Treatment period: Sustainability and temporality**

The healing process is like a ‘treatment period’. It may only be needed or appropriate as a temporary intervention. It needs to be seen in context of the political environment of the time, the wider society, and a historical point of view. People can become entrenched in memory; spatial projects need to move them on, using a visual language which enables looking forward.

**Western medicine? Cultural contexts**

Careful reading of the cultural context is necessary if true representation is to take place. This is made more difficult by the multiplicities of cultural contexts which exist in cities: “no single view of public space and the art that occupies it will work in a metropolis of multiple perspectives.” (Baca, 1995) Detroit’s controversial sculpture ‘The Fist’, by the artist Robert Graham, “became the focus for a debate about appropriate methods of memorialization, and on a deeper level about racial ideology and racial tensions in urban America.” (Graves, 1992)

**Alternative therapy? Power and control of the process**

The issue of who controls the process of re/construction, of healing, in fact of memory, is a current debate in public art practice (Gingell, 2000; Miles, 1997). Gingell debates whether public art can be anything other than a “mask for commercial exploitation”, when artists are hired by private developers. Artists have the potential to challenge this, but must make a difficult choice about their complicity in projects. In Beirut, developers dictate projects, with complicit architects in their service, without any participatory process. (Charlesworth, 2002) Recent Beirut contemporary art has challenged this; artists collective Heartland have used the public domain to present their anti-propaganda, while other artists such as Lamia Joriege and Walid Raad make works that question who controls the domain of public space. (Wilson-Goldie, 2006) However, grassroots projects are often seen as too radical, which can make them difficult to sustain. (Landry, 2000)

**Healing Place: The Heidelberg Project reimagines the streetscape**

“Most big cities do have the same problems as Detroit, and in some cases they’re worse. But you come here, and you get the feeling that this, this is what the end of the road looks like.” (Herron, 2005)
In the past 60 years, Detroit has gone from being one of America’s economic success stories, a boomtown whose car industry brought thousands of immigrants to its streets, to an abandoned city of vacant lots, poverty, racism and joblessness. Since 1950, Detroit has lost nearly 500,000 people and hundreds of thousands of jobs. Over 10,000 houses lie uninhabited; over 60,000 lots lie empty; “whole sections of the city are eerily apocalyptic” (Sugrue, 1996). As Jerry Herron (2005) writes in “I’m so bad, I party in Detroit”, the city has become a mecca for derelictophiles, tourists seeking to be moved by the ultimate in wasted space. It has been termed “America’s first Third World City” (Chafets, 1990 cited in Oswalt, 2005)

Although problems of racism and segregation go back to the 1920s, they have been exacerbated by these trends, as the white middle class moved out to the suburbs, and the black former working class were left in what became inner city ghettos. “Residence in the inner city became a self perpetuating stigma.” (Sugrue, 1996) The completeness of segregation seemed almost a ‘natural’ occurrence, with many white observers viewing visible poverty and deterioration as signs of moral deficiency in the black population, rather than the result of structural economic inequalities. (Ibid.)

The correlation between spatial exclusion and the loss of community values and identity has lead to massive problems with crime, drug use and family breakdown. The city’s literal dividing line, the 8 mile stretch of road made famous by the rapper Eminem in the film 8 Mile (2002), keeps the safe white suburbs separate from the mainly black inner city ghettos notorious for guns and drugs, where youth identity is strongly associated with criminal activity. “What hope remains in the city comes from the continued efforts of city residents to resist the debilitating effects of poverty, racial tension and industrial decline.” (Sugrue, 1996)

As Tyree Guyton grew up in Heidelberg Street, Detroit, he witnessed the decay, family after family leaving in the face of rising poverty and crime, and abandoned houses becoming crack dens. “Since 1960 the Heidelberg area has lost 71.7% of it's housing stock. This averages out to 47 units per month over a forty-year period. If the pace of demolition that was maintained from 1970-2000 continues the last house in the Heidelberg area will be demolished during the spring of 2014.” (Heidelberg website, 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Housing Units</th>
<th>Vacant Housing Units</th>
<th>% Housing lost since last Census</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>2,521</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>12,669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>2,616</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>9396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>2,303</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>6847</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>1518</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>785</td>
<td>3795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>1069</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>2451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>741</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>1832</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total housing units lost since 1960 = 1,875

Figure 2: Table of Housing Loss in Heidelberg district, 1950-2000. (Heidelberg, 2005) Figures based on research conducted by Heidelberg
Rebuilding identity: healing a neighbourhood

After attending art school, in 1986, Guyton was inspired by his grandfather Sam Mackay, a house painter and ‘outsider artist’, to begin transforming first his own house and then others in the street with a combination of paint and assemblage, using found materials. (Figure 3) From the outset, his project provoked both strong positive and negative reactions. Art critics saw the power of his work as an “outsider artist” and he became a media sensation almost overnight. In the documentary film “Come Unto Me: The Faces of Tyree Guyton”, director Nicole Cattell was drawn to his work as “a bridge between African Americans in Detroit and white residents in the suburbs. Tyree was defying what the world would expect from an African-American man growing up in a blighted inner-city neighborhood.” (Manno, 2002)

Supporters saw his project as healing the local community, and representing a wider healing process of cultural intercommunication. Claims for success include: promoting cultural exchange and tolerance by attracting visitors from around the world (over 275,000 visitors annually- at one point, the third most visited attraction in the city); positively affecting children whose surroundings are infested with drugs, prostitution, gangs and crime; discouraging crime by developing a sense of community and ownership; and investing in the future by hosting art programs at a nearby school. (Heidelberg website, 2005)

Interestingly, several of the major successes listed involve engaging young people. Guyton sees working with local children as a vital part of his artwork, (Arens, 2005) (Figure 4) and this has brought with it added benefits, including a degree of protection for the project by the local community. In this sense it is also functioning as a means of tackling crime, as Guyton observes:

See that house over there? That was a crack house...After the first three police raids, it opened right up again. After the fourth raid we couldn't stand it anymore. So we went over and painted the place. Pink, blue, yellow, white and purple dots and squared all over it. (Figure 5) Up there on the roof we stuck a baby doll and that bright blue inner tube, and on the porch we put a doghouse with a watchdog inside...Now all day long people drive by and stop to stare at the place...Believe me, in front of an audience like that, nobody's going to sell crack out of that house anymore. (Heidelberg website, 2005)
An Art News writer commented, "Guyton's Heidelberg Project has attracted so much notice that some of the drug dealers and prostitutes using the vacant houses and lots in the area have been frightened off.” (Heidelberg website, 2005).

**Defining identity: reappropriating visual culture**

The power of Guyton’s work has been held to alleviate the ‘visual pollution’ of Detroit: “Our neighborhoods, our towns, our cities can inspire or depress us. The Heidelberg Project confronts the issue of visual literacy and pollution directly.” (Austin, 2005) The project also acts as an intermediary to bring outside money into the community, thereby directly addressing the issues of poverty and crime in the area. Guyton has provided a ‘way in’ for wealthy donors to help the urban poor, in a similar way to which the District Six Museum has provided a route for international donors to contribute to rebuilding the new South Africa.

As well as social and artistic recognition, Guyton’s work has been recognised in academic circles in the US as an example of the way Kongo visual culture survived American slavery. (Hall, 1993) His work certainly references African American slave culture; in his installation “Soles of the Most High”, (Figure 6) for which he threw hundreds of pairs of shoes into the branches of a tree, he is drawing on a story of his grandfather Sam Mackey, that when black slaves were lynched, “you couldn’t see the people, but you could see the soles of their shoes” (Moffat and Nasar, 2004).

Another visual reference to slave culture is to the bottle trees of the Southern states. Jackson (1990) noted how the tree sculptures in The Polka-Dot Tree resembled “the 'bottle trees' of the Southeastern United States in which artists of African-American heritage adorn living trees with bottles, vessels, and other objects to invoke the dead and ask protection for the living.” Jackson also compares Guyton’s visual style to jazz: “(he) frequently combines polka-dots and stripes and uses unexpected color combinations to create a visual syncopation” similar to “the musical improvisations of jazz.” Beardsley (1995) compares Guyton’s visual elements to the “familiar devices of African American yard shows”. He sees Guyton’s work as ‘cultural self-affirmation’, resisting a cultural mainstream which excludes marginalized groups.

However, not all Detroit citizens like Guyton’s work. Some neighbours in Heidelberg, and Detroit councillors, complained bitterly about the impact of the project on their property values, leading to several of the works being demolished in 1991 (Guyton later rebuilt them). In academic circles a debate has also raged over the true qualities of the work, and whether it can be seen as ‘art’, despite its social or political intentions.

**Outsider Art or Social Activism? Making Transactions in the Art World**

In “Public Art Goes Kitsch”, Hall (1993) analyses recent public art in Detroit, including Guyton’s interventions, in the contextual framework of postmodernism. He claims that “the new public art may simply have evolved into a panstylistic form of kitsch”, in which systems of imitation “displace meanings and transform syntaxes”; or in other words, create
bogus ‘art’ in order to get a message across. This idea of transference comes from our dominant visual culture, he argues, in which ideas, strategies and technologies are constantly being appropriated and put to different purposes than the one for which it was created. In Guyton’s case, Hall (1993) critiques his work as replicating a form of assemblage now at least half a century old...In its orthodoxy, his expression is neutralized both by internal flaccidity and by the external social forces determined to exploit its familiarity and malleability. ...A stroll down Heidelberg Street (despite the rawness of Detroit’s East Side) recalls a stroll down the main street of Disneyland. Guyton, like Disney, delights, entertains and beguiles with his fantasy facades.

While Hall recognises Guyton’s triumphs as a social/political activist, he determines that artistically Guyton is doomed; his work bearing “the mark of kitsch”. In the same volume, Raven (1993) discusses the dichotomy between the intention of art to create change, and the subsequent value of the artwork created. Perhaps it is not possible to objectively critique a project such as Guyton’s as “public art”; as an urban intervention, it is a success. In 2004, the project was awarded an EDRA Places Award, an award set up by the journal *Places* and the Environmental Design Research Association that recognizes excellence in environmental design research and practice today, and highlights the relationships between people and places-based research and design. The *Places* jury remarked on the ‘provocation’ the project has engendered, and also how the artist brings another kind of definition to place, “changing the perception of that place to the outside”. (Moffat and Nasar, 2004)

Because artists don’t set out to produce solutions, they can provoke discussion over what sort of regeneration a place can aspire to. (Vaughan Williams, 2005) While Guyton did not set out regenerate Detroit, his works have provoked an ongoing dialogue that changes over time, creating new interactions, for example by bringing art critics to downtown Detroit. This in itself culturally enriches and offers up new opportunities for the area and the city. Although a temporary change, it is a transition which engenders healing, by providing a space for encounter.

Whether the Heidelberg project is or isn’t great art, it has brought thousands to the unvisited streets of Detroit, sparked debate in art journals, and begun the process of giving the young people in one of Americas most deprived and excluded communities a sense of identity and pride, (Figure 7) an identity which rather than promoting drugs, guns and ‘bling’, promotes social gains, movement, and mobility. As Beardsley (1999) writes, “Call me a Pollyanna, but if art is valuable at least in part as the inspiration for communication across the frontiers of class and race, then Guyton’s work is fabulously successful.” That the spatial implications of Guyton’s work are so to step back across the dividing line, the 8 mile road of separation, suggests a need for different evaluative strategies to determine value and quality in the context of art in public.

Figure 7: Number House (1995), partly designed to help kids learn their numbers. Heidelberg project archive.
In 1950, the National Party Government, in pursuit of its policy of *Apartheid* in South Africa, passed the ‘Group Areas Act’. This made it possible for them to legally force residents of racially mixed communities out of those areas into new, racially segregated districts. (Figure 8) (Western, 1981; Bohlin, 1998) District Six, an area of some 3700 buildings on approximately 104 hectares of central Cape Town with a multi-ethnic community, thriving businesses, and a strong cultural scene, was one of the first areas to be fragmented and devastated. 55,000-65,000 residents were ordered to move out, some to hastily erected shacks on the edge of town, some into council type housing, and whole streets were flattened. By the 1980s very little was left of the area; only a few incongruous public buildings were still standing. District Six was not the only area subject to this treatment, but became the most high profile because it was the largest and most publicly visible area close to the city centre. And the housing was demolished, but not redeveloped, whereas in most other areas it was either bought up by private developers and improved for whites or developed as business premises (Bohlin, 1998).

Meanwhile, residents were moved out to Cape Flats area, where they were dispersed, and encountered violence and insecurity (which remain to this day). The Coloured people\(^2\), who had a strong identification with D6 as ‘place of origin’, had lost a symbol of their identity, one which had associations going back 7 generations to the emancipation of the slaves. The “sacred space” of the city centre had become a white place. (Western, 1981) Pre-*Apartheid*, Western notes the interesting symmetry between the social and spatial structures: the continuum of pigmentation matched the continuum of extensive areas of residential mixing; “one is one’s address”. When areas became ‘whites only’, those who could, became legally speaking, “white”.

The campaign to reinstate the land began soon after the first removals, and culminated in a conference in 1989 with academics, activists and artists, which lead to the decision to form the District Six Museum Foundation (Minty, 2006). This body’s aim was to keep the memory of District Six alive, as well as to honour all those who had been affected by forced removals. After the fall of *Apartheid* in 1994, the Foundation worked with former residents and artists to create a temporary exhibition in a number of sites around the city; one of these, in a former Methodist church in the old District Six site, became what is now the permanent District Six museum (Figure 9), as a volunteer force of former residents refused to let the exhibition close. 10 years on, it is an award winning community museum. (Eager, 2005)

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\(^2\)This is the term used for a certain ethnic group of people of mixed descent, in Southern Africa
Preserving Kanala: the genius loci of District six

“You can take the people out of the heart of District Six, but you’ll never take District Six out of the heart of the people” (resident, quoted in Western, 1981)

The level of artistic, academic and community interest generated by the District Six Museum and other initiatives is reflective of the perceived symbolic importance of the site in South Africa today. District Six has always been a place in which, and over which, struggles have been fought: “fights which have ploughed deep furrows into the South African landscape, and from which have grown cultural and social practices…clearly the use to which District Six, in all its aspects, is to be put is of significance far beyond its size.”(Mostert, 1992 cited in Layne, 1997)

This idea of place as mirror, of place as sign, has lead to what some perceive as the ‘mythologizing’ of the true nature of the district. While former residents like Roderick Sauls (Le Grange, 1996) recall that “All the religions were there. They all shared something”, and former resident Vincent Kolbe claims: “the rainbow nation? District Six lived it!”(Eager, 2005), these views present “simplifications of or selections of more complex histories”(Eager, 2005). What is certain is that the District had a wide cross section of race, class and religion, became known for its cosmopolitan culture, and as a hotbed of political activism. These factors combined to give District Six its nickname kanaladorp, derived from the Malay word kanala, meaning sharing or generosity- “to help one another”. (Western, 1981; Eager, 2005) (Figure 10)

The idea of kanala could be equated with what has been termed genius loci: the spirit of the place. Thompson (2003) argues that for landscape architects, the values of character, local distinctiveness and ecosystem are the most resonant. He proposes that genius loci “might be the keystone that can lock trivalent design together”- trivalent design being the three overlapping fields of value: the aesthetic, the social and the environmental. Since this strongly echoes with the idea of healing place, I want to examine how effectively the District Six initiatives preserve the kanala, or genius loci, of District Six.

Spatially, the district was a successful example of “Urban Place”, where “the street was the place of work, of buying and selling, the place of interacting and meeting, and the stage set of civic and cultural ceremonies.”(Le Grange, 1996) The grid layout of the streets created a “fine grained city structure” with a “choice of pedestrian routes”. (Figure 11) The streets combined domestic and public life, and became a playground where children would interact. In effect the spatial layout provided endless opportunities for interaction, encouraging mixing between the...
diverse occupants and users. The spatial approach was also crucial to the success of the Museum: it appropriated a former site of resistance (the building was previously used as a meeting place for banned Anti-

\textit{Apartheid} meetings); and it was positioned at a strategic interface between District Six and the city centre. (Bohlin, 1998)

In 1997, the artist Kevin Brand curated the first District Six Public Sculpture festival, on the site of the former District. Brand brought together artists, museum staff, and former residents, to work on collaborative projects using memories of the former district. (Soudien and Meyer 1997) The festival appeared as over 90 works of sculpture and installation spread around the site, ranging from large scale to small scale, from conceptual to figurative works. (Figure 12)

As a temporary project, it … successfully engaged with the effect of \textit{Apartheid} planning on communities and with the memory of people and place. It the process, it raised again the complex questions around the history of Cape Town and the effects of forced removals on all people in the city- Black and White. (Minty, 2006)

In taking on this role, the Sculpture festival fitted an established precedent; since the 1970s, artists and community groups had been using cultural projects and dialogue to challenge the government and build resistance: “the use of culture as a form of social activism was promoted heavily”. (Minty, 2006) Spatial projects began to emerge; communities began building ‘peoples parks’ in townships. The roots of culture as a tool of resistance could be traced further back to traditions created by Coloured residents of District Six to find meaning and build community, such as the Coon Carnival (Minty, 2006; Western, 1981). This parallels with the Heidelberg Project, which uses symbols of slave oppression to recapture and reclaim identity.

Therefore, the use of public art, including performance, fits the cultural context of the place, and preserves the \textit{kanala} by using tools which ex-residents could engage with. Roderick Sauls piece, \textit{Moettie My Vi’giette} (Don’t forget me) paid tribute to the symbolism of the banning of the Coon Carnival from District Six. (Figure 13) Pieces of the work, blown by the winds and creating violent sounds, “added to the pathos” (Soudien and Meyer 1997) experienced by former residents visiting the festival. By daring to recolonise the site, the artists works could interact with the true environment of the place, the \textit{kanala}, whereas inside a gallery they would have been static pieces, temporally and environmentally dislocated from the site.
Preserving the specific: how can temporal interventions reappropriate permanent places?

The District Six Museum and its outreach projects have further similarities to the Heidelberg Project. Both use art and culture to draw in visitors, are run by locals or former locals, have a strong educational ethos, and impact strongly on outsider’s views of the city. But while The Heidelberg Project was mainly initiated by one person, the Museum was the result of a collaboration between many people, giving it a formality and strength which has allowed the Foundation to achieve not only its short term goals but also longer term aim of enabling former residents to return to live in the district.

The exhibits in the Museum itself include a display of street signs rescued from the now destroyed streets, a map (figure 14) which was created by former residents with artists, as well as photographs and displays showing what life was like in the District. The museum, which has a growing Oral history archive and many texts of memories on display, giving visitors are given an insight into what it was like to live under Apartheid, and how its legacies continue to affect people’s lives.

The challenge facing the District Six Foundation, as families begin to return to the area, is how to use this strong sense of collection and exploration of memory in the context of the permanent site, the ‘Return’ of the former residents. A memorialisation exercise has been examined and proposals have been made to set aside space for a ‘Memory Park’ as well as sites of public gathering. In developing these sites and creating physical memorials, “the District Six sculpture project would become an important project to revisit.” (Minty, 2006) The project was progressive in artists involving community members in the formation and creation of the art works, and in the art works themselves, which were a far cry from the monumental Apartheid-era realist sculptures, and bore familiarity with contemporary public art in the UK, Europe and USA.

The difficulty facing the designers, planners and artists of this new precinct lies in forming a new language, one which contains elements of history, but finds new ways to talk to the residents, many of whose children and grandchildren will not remember the places they refer to. The danger of slipping into expected forms of public art, and architecture, which will lose their relevance after only one generation, is coupled with the need for artists in the new South Africa to make a deliberate statement of intent in their work. As Bohlin (1998) recognizes, political contestation lies at heart of construction of notions of belonging.

It seems that the challenge now for the Museum, that of how to professionalize and ensure sustainability while not losing their connection with the community (Eager, 2005), is echoed by the problems facing the use of, and identity of the physical space. A project that started as a temporary installation, now a permanent display, and offered the opportunity to create a series of permanent memorials and public art works, is at a fragile point in its journey. It could be the very temporary nature of the works created for the sculpture festival that made them so powerful, as memory itself is
temporal. Is there an effective way these ideas can be translated into permanent works, without losing their meaning and power?

**Symbolic healing: collaborations to reclaim place**

“To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul” (Simone Weil, in Bedford and Murinik, 1997)

The deserted site of the former district can be seen both negatively, as a giant wound, and positively, as a symbol of Apartheid’s ultimate futility and inefficiency. (Figure 15) The site is known as “salted earth”: a reference to the emotion carried in the land, and the protests which made it impossible to sell. (Bohlin, 1998; Bedford and Murinik, 1997) Bastea (2004) suggests that “going back to a place of the past may be the best way we have to take ourselves back in time.” By remembering, the former residents can begin the process of healing. “Few places have better credentials as a healing symbol for a new and reconciled South Africa.” (Jeppie and Soudien, 1990, cited in Bohlin, 1998)

The Sculpture project healed in several ways. It “provided spaces within which to grieve and to find strength and solace”: for example, architect Jos Thorne, created Ba Gua, a place for rest and contemplation. (Figure 16) (Bedford and Murinik, 1997). It reclaimed the “salted earth”: Andrew Porters swings brought children’s laughter back, symbolising the triumph of human spirit. By creating new interactions, a new identity for the place was being born. The artists were in a sense recreating the interactions that Apartheid destroyed. Through participation, a sense of protection over the site was instigated, which will be vital in successfully reinstating it to residents. For example, Trull and Perolds’ Timeline enlisted help from homeless, who once having been drawn into the process, took personal interest in protecting those works from vandalism.

The District Six Museum’s participatory approach and interactive exhibitions have made the District Six community (both imagined and real, past and present) visible. While engagement is limited in one sense, exclusive to those who ‘belong’ to the former territory, it is also inclusive: it offers a “forum for healing” for all who suffered under Apartheid (including the perpetrators). Vicarious memories present the possibility for transmission of feelings of belonging, so others identify with a certain group. (Bohlin, 1998) These vicarious memories extend beyond the borders of the city to become a symbol of the possibility of equality and justice, of healing, for the nation and the world.
Conclusion

The examples described successfully used an existing aesthetic of social activism to establish their visual presence, and used architectural and artistic interventions to strengthen the identity of the place. The interventions have directly celebrated an authentic cultural heritage, which further builds community identity. However, a strong precedent of the use of culture and art as a form of social activism highlights the challenge of developing a visual language which has relevance for future generations. Therefore, to interpret a strong cultural context as a good starting point for building community identity may be a red herring; it can also hold practitioners back from originality and authenticity in their work.

Using culture as social activism can also lead to work being critiqued as lacking a serious artistic dimension and therefore losing status. (Burnham, 1998) Guyton has faced criticism of his artwork, and been labelled an ‘outsider’ or ‘community' artist. This shows the difficulties faced by artists (and architects) attempting socially engaged projects, as they face critics still informed by modernist ideals of ‘pure’ art. (Gablik, 1991)

The question of sustainability is a difficult one. In order to sustain their spatial presence, projects must establish funding and support, often from sources outside the community. In doing so, they provoke claims of ‘selling out’ and ‘professionalizing’, thereby losing their connection to the community who helped establish them in the first place, or adding new types of responsibility. On the other hand, if they remain entrenched at grass-roots level, they can face problems in getting recognition and sustaining funding. (Landry, 2000) I would argue that these projects must remain socially active in order to remain spatially present, as it is the actions (and interactions) that create the place. (Massey and Rose, 2003; Ingold, 2000)

We tend to want to see spatial interventions as permanent, but perhaps instead should see them as a temporal aesthetic, referencing the Situationist's idea of ‘situations which disrupt the ordinary' (Marshall, 2002). As Minty (2005) writes, “many art works have specific resonance only in time…passing interventions speak to the time in which they are made. Even when erased, especially when documented or written about, the debate they spark continues.” Spatial interventions can only be seen as part of a process of healing, not as a permanent solution to problems.

Urban violence can be traced partly to spatial exclusion, and these projects have, intentionally or not, addressed this to some degree. By involving local community members in the process of creation, places are more likely to be protected. Furthermore, through engaging young people, these projects encourage alternative, more positive youth identities, to young people who otherwise may get involved in crime. (Simpson, 1997; Winton, 2004).

Changing a physical space, through the mechanism of labour, skills, presence, and participation, enabled people to establish ‘social transactions’; new partnerships and interactions which went on to impact the community and continue the process of ‘healing’. ‘Network Governance’(Turnbull, 2002, cited in Hamdi, 2004), defined as mutual engagement based on participation and social entrepreneurship, releases ‘social energy’, that is a desire to serve the community or a
commitment to common interests. “This energy enables local people to develop skills, self-confidence, business experience and employability”. (Edwards, 2001 cited in Hamdi, 2004)

Through attracting different users, and visitors, these projects bring investment into an area, increasing its value and building community worth. Through making visual statements, the projects attract new sorts of ‘strangers to the streets’ providing possibilities for new interactions and for existing community members to spread their horizons (Hillier, 1988 cited in Vaughan, 2005b). The visual statements are often provocative, encouraging debate and putting the place ‘on the map’, giving it an importance which translates to social and economic benefits. Those who maintain involvement with the project develop new skills, increasing social capital, and becoming part of a “community of practice”. (Capra, 2002)

These projects work in an underground economy, exchanging ‘gifts’ of time, presence, skills, and participation, which have no commodity value. (Beardsley, 1995) This avoids the dilemma of artists “becoming handmaidens to service economy” (King, 1996). The value of these projects, in working outside conventional commissioning structures, is that they can take independent stances, and be provocative. The District Six Sculptures are “offerings rather than dogmas” (Bedford and Murinik, 1997), and many used found materials. Guyton recycles found materials to create his installations. This conscious anti-consumerism suggests a connection with an ecological imperative. (Gablik, 1991)

While this type of intervention must work in tandem with other interventions (Simpson, 1997), it is vital as part of a holistic approach to conflict resolution and prevention. Key criteria which must be examined include issues of temporality, power/control, participation, cultural contexts and memorialization to name a few. For site-specific projects, understanding concepts like genius loci enables the practitioner to better reflect community identity.

Reasons for failure can include lack of relevance to a cultural context; there are contexts where it will not be possible to even consider or match the criteria. Where basic infrastructure is dangerous, it would be difficult to create a safe place. Where there is a strong resentment of ‘outsiders’, a ‘stranger in the streets’ may be unwelcome. In some societies, visual approaches may not be relevant. In others, memories may be too raw and painful to work with. Architects tend to want to use spatial approaches and artists to use visual ones, but there may be contexts where they need to take on different roles, as observers, facilitators, documenters.

We can also speculate the most likely arenas for success: for example, in post-conflict situations where there is strong community motivation to rebuild and explore memory and identity; or in settings where a community feels spatially excluded and ignored. These interventions are not restricted to practice in developing, or developed countries; in fact, they break down such divisions of definition, and encourage debates as part of post-colonial urban theory. (Robinson, 2006)

The significance of the grassroots/artist-initiated approach of the case studies, together with analysis by Gingell (2000), Cotterell (2005), Powell (2006), and Charlesworth (2002) among others, implies that these interventions are successful because they are not imposed by developers, but work outside the dominant political and commercial hierarchy, and are
therefore free to challenge. This resonates with the ‘emergence’ debate (Hamdi, 2004); and the call for *homebru*; locally generated imaginations about how to improve the city (Pieterse, 2006; Robinson, 2006). Tactics used in countries in transition from violence could inform debates in the developed world, potentially transforming debates on participation and urban development in urban and architectural theory. (Blundell-Jones et al, 2005; Borden et al, 2001)

Despite good intentions, most architects do not have the freedom of artists to work outside conventional systems, and yet “architecture…produces concrete images of what the physical environment could be like if the structure of society were different.” (De Carlo, 2005) How can architects become “angels with dirty faces” (Till, 1998) opening up dialogues between user and architect, between the fantasy and the real, so that building and using become part of same process? Petrescu (2005) suggests that architects need to become “mediators not masters”, taking on a role as “urban curator” (Bunschoten, 2004) between clients, institutions, and users. But this implies a removal into the realm of theory, a realm that often discards the politics of the everyday. Success in these examples was built on knowledge of local specificities, and hands-on production of interventions. The practitioners could be seen as ‘cosmopolitan localists’, who “cherish a particular place, yet at the same time know about the relativity of all places.” (Sachs, 1999, Manzini, 2005, Bello, 2005) Therefore, I suggest that we need ‘angels who get their hands dirty’. In order to heal place, architects need to *know* place, and to physically *produce* place.

Existing literature on healing place tends to focus on specifics within disciplines. There is a growing awareness amongst practitioners of the need for collaboration and cross-fertilization. (Murray, 2005; Gablik, 1991) With the recent recognition of the need for more holistic approaches in tackling urban violence (Moser, 2004), we need fora, both in education and professional practice, which are multi-disciplinary - artists and geographers, sociologists and architects - to (re-) define values, and develop new modes of thinking and practice.
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Graffiti on Reform St, District Six. Photo by Jan Greshoff. (Le Grange, 1996)