Speculative Practices: Explorations, in understanding Placemaking in Transients contexts

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Abstract

"*The use of site-specific creative practice to explore the relationship between the body and how we deform and impact on the world around us in transient contexts.*"

This paper explores the use of the site-specific within the arts and design, to understand the relationship between the users of space, and the traces which they make during interactions within temporary occupation of spaces. Considering the potential use of such markers to facilitate spatial agency. Examining the use of 'Speculative Practices' (Auger, 2013), within the arts and architecture as a vehicle through which we might explore complexity within such spaces, and learn about the city through the body as the site of the making of place. Drawings on theories concerning The Phenomenology of place (Merleau-Ponty, 2002) together with, Tim Ingold's work concerning making as the embodiment of thought. (Ingold, 2013) Though the examination of artwork as a vehicle for spatial knowledge production.

KEYWORDS: site specificity, placemaking, embodiment of form, embodied agency, material interagency, haptic placemaking

Introduction

A few month's ago while attending a conference I was invited to observe, a rehearsal of "Dada Masilo's" New Ballet, on the studio floor. Coming from a design background in architecture, rooted in the solidity of place. One was interested in observing how a place is manifest within a movement piece such as a ballet. While the piece was a visceral experience viewed up close, and from below of interest were the spatial relationships between the dancer and the studio. Figure 1& 2 is a sketch of the dance recorded during the performance. Questioning the choreographer, after the piece asking her how she begins to craft such a complex movement piece? Her response highlighted the need to think about the production of space as it occurs through making rather than from a theoretical viewpoint.

"Well, you begin with the music, and then you move, adding movements one after another until an act is complete" (Masilo, 2017)

Figure 1 & 2 Stone-Johnson. B "The Dance" (2017).

Johannesburg is a city divided, by apartheid spatial planning. Despite the progressive agenda of integration in the Post-Apartheid South Africa. After more than two decades of Government intervention, the city of Johannesburg remains mostly divide, both by class and race. While top-down approaches have gone a long way to redress the legacy of apartheid socially and economically. They have had little impact of repairing the spatial legacy of apartheid or facilitating spatial agency in urban populations. In some cases, even serving to reinforce that legacy (Pieterse, 2009).

When architects think about cities, we often examine them from the air, as if the users are abstract elements devoid of thought or insight unable to articulate what they require from the spaces within which they dwell. Spaces created by such a view of urban inhabitants, often create habitats in which no human would wish to dwell. The creation of the 'non-place' as has been suggested by such theorist as Marc Ague, (1995, p 77) as a place Where people do not meet, place devoid of meaning, particularly within the context of transient spaces as represented by sidewalks, alleyways, pathways, roads and airports. The very space which proliferates within the urban fabric of Johannesburg.

Between, modernist and post-modernist theories of buildings and cities. Architects stopped designing cities for people and began to create cities for masses, for the millions rather than for the one. This move is understandable given the level of complexity, involved with our cities today with increasingly dense creolised cultures. Within Johannesburg, as we shift from cultural groups, embed in enclaves to new emergent cultures of African, European, Asian, fusions (Gulpa and Furgeson,1997, 12-17) The need to develop tools for navigating complexity, at work within urban public space, which response to contextual placemaking is becoming increasingly necessary. Here I propose the site-specific practices and cultural probing (Gaver et al., 1999) as a means to access such nuanced interagency.

Theoretical Model

While site specificity within the arts may be taken to mean several things, here the site

specificity refers to the context in which the project occurs, affecting and informing the output of the creative research. Thinking in this regard is more akin to the kind spatial agency, raised by Giddens.(Giddens, 1990) Furthered within the architectural discourse concerning design-build and community-based projects, proliferating with the western discourse currently. Kwon, in his reference to the site-specific questions the role if the site-specific as exclusive to the art.

Expanding on the notion of *"Site specificity as conceived as what art historian Rosalyn Deutsche has called an "urban-aesthetic" or "spatial-cultural" discourse, which combines "ideas about art, architecture, and urban design, on the one hand, with theories of the city, social space, and public space, on the other"* (Kwon, 2002: P2-P3).

Rather than views taken by, Kester's notion of the site-specific as political contestation. (2002, p3) The Architectural concept of 'site' by necessity remains primarily bounded by the problem of locality, in contradiction to the increasing mobility of urban populations. Thinkers on the African city, such as Simone (2004), Nuttal and Mbembe (2004) and others have increasingly begun to examine the notion of 'People as infrastructure.' in establishing methods for thinking about spaced produced within this context.

Here Speculative Practice (Auger, 2013), is used as a vehicle through which practitioners might explore complexity within such spaces, and learn about the city through embodied placemaking.

In this regard, borrowing from two theorists, who explore other ways to think about cities which move beyond, a theoretical approach, towards the notion of exploring such contexts, through considering the body as site. Further examining the interagency produced through, and the bodies interaction with the material world around it.

Though the act of making requires a cognisant interaction, in the form of designing, planning and making. There is a knowing which comes through the body rather than through the mind.

By way of example, anyone who has ever attempted to explain to someone how to cook a specific dish. Beyond the ingredients, and the order in which they are assembled. The question of knowing refers to the things one cannot explain, what should it feel and look like, what consistency and texture should be achieved before continuing to the next step. This kind of thing becomes nearly impossible to describe without the individual holding the spoon and feeling the texture, during the making. The urban practitioner needs to taste, smell and feel the texture of the context.

There are several elements should be considered regarding the question of placemaking within this context.

The first being a phenomenological understanding of placemaking. The notion that the material world is only knowable from the self, or the body, and that all our thinking about it is merely the expression of that knowledge. (Merleau-Ponty, 2002) Then to understand how users interact with spaces in transients we may only know about those interactions by, engaging with the users through the constructed form, to understand what the relation of the individual to the place may be. We may be able to comprehend the nature of such spaces from the self and continue to examine such interaction through the embodiment of from within place.

Which raises the question of how knowledge becomes embodied through making?

Over the last hundred years our cities rather than being the product of carefully made places, they have been the construction of applied theories. Leading to such non-places as previously discussed.

The problematic here concerns how material interagency is manifest through our haptic placemaking and how that could be harnessed towards the ends of the spatial-agency through site-specific creative practice.

The question here of whether arts and architecture practice somehow embodies the notion of place? Is explored by the anthropologist Tim Ingold in his work entitled 'Making'.(Ingold, 2013) Here in Ingold questions the use of the body as a means of thinking rather than thinking considering thinking to occur only through the mind. Thinking through making occurs through how we touch the world, how we feel in space. How we perceive and interact while creating, through all the sense, not merely the mind.

Here Foucault argument that "An experience is something you come out of changed, an experience is neither true or false: it is always a fiction, something constructed, which exists after it has been made, not before…" (Foucault,M & Trombadori. D 1991: p27) may be applied to our thinking about the embodiment of place.

Here the kinaesthetic hold's interest as we question the role of what it may mean to make a place in a decolonised city? Considering that the western ways of thinking about place, are from a theoretical perspective and the African ways of thinking about the place are through and with the body. (Gotz and Simone, 2003) Here the use of site-specific arts and designer built practice Is to allow one to think about a place without necessarily engaging with users verbally. What is attractive is how when one makes things, or places, with the body we create a third place, a place which is a synthesis of what our idea of the thing was, drawn imagined or modelled and its final made form. Though the following projects I wish to highlight how this third place is created, what one thinks the role of the arts might be within such a question and what that may mean for thinking through making rather than thinking about making in urban creative practices.

We know about the city only through the body, though the feel of the wind on our skin, through the sound of the car driving past, the twittering of birds, the background music of the place. We might determine only how it might be best to dwell in such places only by expending time within them, by exploring the creation of artworks within those locations, and by examining what forms and practices of art might be created within them. Through the exploration of place through artistic expression we might begin to understand how we might create architecture which moves beyond the theoretical.

Method

Tim Ingold, the social anthropologist, raises a notion he terms 'Way Finding' (2013: 25), a method of thinking by doing. Alternatively, rather as one proposes, of understanding the complexity of urban public space by acting or making. Consider, the use of design-build and temporary enactments could be a method through which one might gain a greater understanding of the complexities which exist within Johannesburg's urban spaces. Both within the urban fabric as well as in the social structure of the people who dwell and interact with it. Here one uses probative photo essays, conducted by urban drifting as the means to gain access to the form and agencies of haptic placemaking in the context.

Drifting

The research began using probative walking in the context over a period, recording material indigencies through photography and sketch drawings focused on placemaking in transients within the greater urban context of non-places in the city of Johannesburg. The initial visual research considers the question of what it means to be here. Beginning at home and asking how we touch the space in which we dwell the most, and moves outwards to include the city. Asking how one touches the city, through observing what marks and traces are left on the streets, parks and sidewalks, as users drift through them.

These photo essays are, presented in a short, 'film' of flickering still images. Intended to give the viewer the impression of the spaces as the city is perceived by the researcher. Entitled, "An Anatomy of Restlessness" After Chatwin. (et al., 1997) The 'film', can be viewed as a series of images asking the question: What is the place, in the shifting landscape of the city of Johannesburg and by extension what form of placemaking occurring within the temporary spatial occupation.

The second phase of the project draws on individual elements observed in the first step and begins to unpack and explore the relationships between the traces left on the city by the body, as seen through the 'film'.

The place markers, identified through the 'film are: marking on walls, carrying and stacking stones, moving and making objects, desire lines and pathways, and detritus.

Each expression of placemaking through the embodied action is then explored through transitory actions and site-specific artworks. Through the production of small interventions, looking at the four elements identified as place markers in the context. Wall, the use of the vertical plane to register a place. Floor, use of the horizontal plan to register a place. Object, production and creation of objects within the space, mobility and line examination of pathways and movement roots and how these are marked, or registered by the user. Here the body is the site itself, rather than the place in which the object or event occurs.

Speculative placemaking in Mural introduction

The project takes place, within the background of a long-running project within an inner city neighbourhood over the course of several months as part of a broader ongoing initiative which had been running since 2014.

The project was conceived through a probative inquiry into forms of place marking occurring within the neighbourhood. One observed several forms of haptic agencies. The most commonly occurring through constructed from and marking of the vertical plane. Patterns and forms were extracted out of this to form the basis for the first mural.

The first series of enquiries is entitled "Writing on walls", attempts to explores how place, may be expressed through the production of work on a wall, by observing existing the relationship between the body and the wall as embodied placemaking. Each piece is conceptualised, as an intended iterative processed, considering aspects of the how the body may relate to the wall through material interagency.

The proposed concept was to use the walls of the alleyways as a patina of old and new work, to create a new space though occupation.

Speculative mural iteration one

Volunteers, passers-by on neighbouring streets. Painted over graffiti at the entrance to the alley, as an initial statement of intent. The site was selected based on the level of degradation and need for intervention on behalf of the adjoining neighbours. The aim was to complete the work, of each action using limited resources, to allow for each action to form part of the patina over several months, through juxtaposing new works, and to existing, textures and patterns in the space.

Volunteers discussed which patterns were most interesting to them and how to incorporate them into a mural, facilitated by the researcher. The group selected fences as a motif, to keep with the adage, 'good fences make good neighbors' as a symbol for connecting the community, a vital intention of the project.
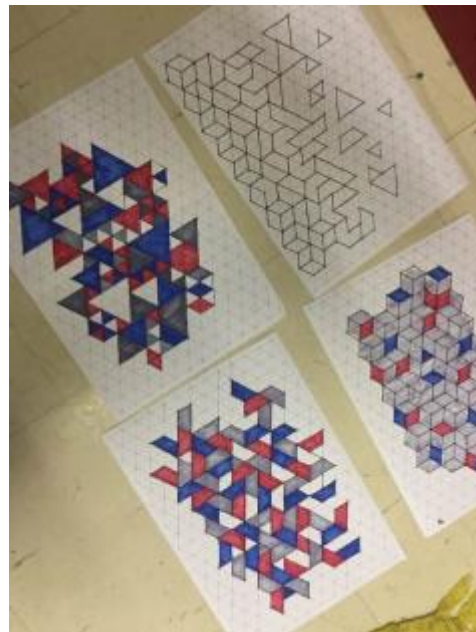
Using masking tape to map out the diamond grid, we masked out various patterns with the differing thickness of the tape enabling the unskilled helpers to join in the creative work.

Figure 3. Stone-Johnson.B, 'Process.' (2017)

The colour compositions where directed by the researcher, with input from the team as we painted, maintaining an even colour balance throughout the composition. The team additionally gave input on what patterns to use and how to paint in various motifs. The scotch pattern; Triangles with alternating colours; for example, is a typical pattern used among the youth, in the area, commonly reflected in fencing patterns.

Because the work used an adaptive approach, the finished product ended up with a Ndebele feel. Which was not intended, however, was culturally appropriate given the ethnic background of the team of actors. The incorporation of neighbourhood patterning allowed the work to be reflective of the suburb.
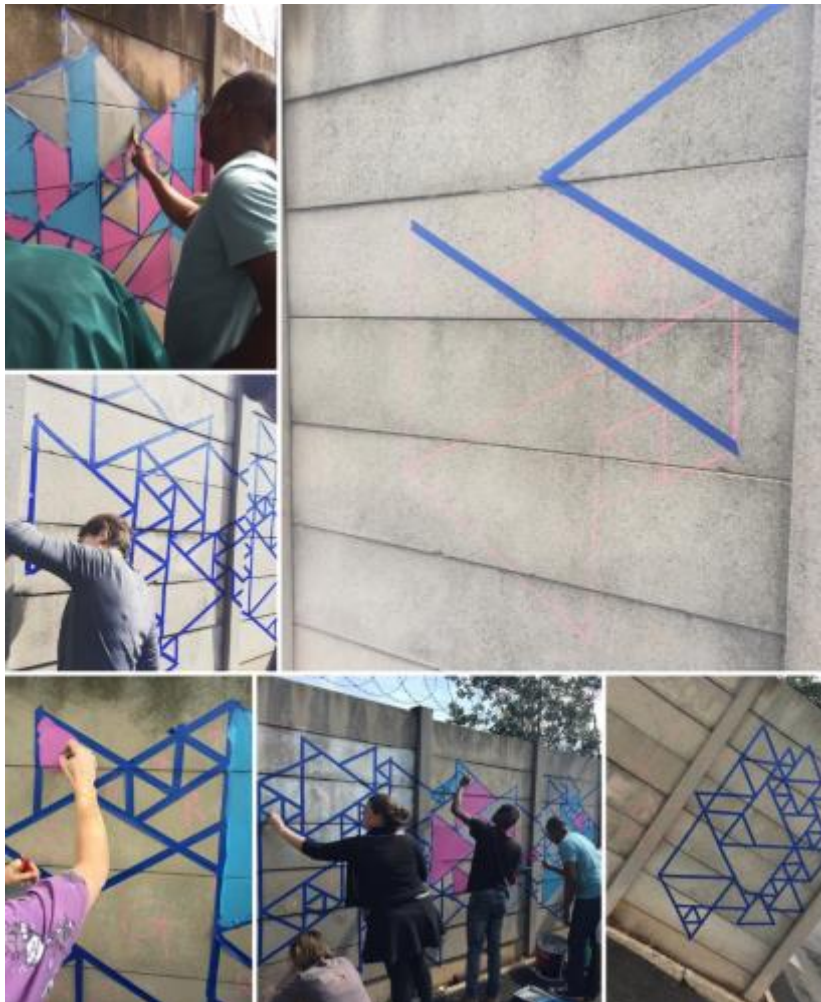

Figure 4. Stone-Johnson.B (2017) Derivative Pattern Grid.

Speculative Mural iteration two

The use of an equilateral triangles grid to create a derivative pattern for a mural.

The second proposal the community forum requested a geometric pattern for the artwork. One suggested the model used to create the work be something more derivative, that the community could execute efficiently. An 'algorithmic' process was designed by myself, as a method to work with a base grid on a long wall and enable the equilateral triangle base system to be executed on the length of the wall with minimal difficulty.

Initially, one created the grid on the computer printed it out and worked over that by hand. Trying various patterns, generated from hexagonal and triangular based grids, discarding those that would be too difficult to execute on the 12-meter long wall proposed. A total of eighteen iterations emerged. These were whittled down to four, from which one asked the comity to the selected their preferred option, they decided on two options, and we went ahead with one, for this project with the intention of using the second for another project. Using a three-equilateral triangle system, each triangle fitting snugly into the previous triangle with a series of folds figure 5. These cut from cardboard for stencils.

Figure 5. Stone-Johnson.B (2017) Derivative Pattern Grid Making

The second portion of the algorithm was to include a colour rule. No two colours where to touch, parallel to one another. The paint was donated colour where grey, pink and blue, the walls colour forming a fourth colour point.

Stenciling began with the researcher chalking the pattern and then used painters tape to mask out area to be painted and then allocated colours according to the system. However, we had numerous volunteers for this action. The pattern production was quickly overrun, by those painting. Some of the community members took over taping, and another took over the colour allocation. Since the algorithmic method was straightforward, it was easy to hand over the tasks, while the pattern continued to be marked out the pattern ahead of the painting team. The team also organised themselves by colour with two painters per swatch. Work ended when the tape stopped adhering to the wall, due to the resin from an overhead tree.

What was notable about the system, while the pattern was partially able to be planned, the proposed mural and the outworking differed significantly. Each new execution of the pattern would vary as each outworked mural would alter depending on who was

executing the work, due to planning the process rather than the work, allowed the additional iteration to form between imagined work and the executed reality and intersection of form. Based specifically on the makers, and directors and the painters.

While there was one designer and orchestrator, the derivative occurring due to multiple players allows for output which was not controllable. Moreover, spoke to the moment of the creation of the work. Reflecting in many ways the conversation held on the days and the personality of the actors involved in the work.

The product thus becomes the sum of a critically considered design approach and imagined parameters kept in mind during the design process. Moreover, the automatic body response to the site (wall). As well as the cumulative individual interaction with the work.

Figure 2. Stone-Johnson.B (2017) Derivative Pattern Grid Finished Piece

The work thus became a product of both the cognitive planning process and the result of the bodies unconscious forming of the work through the relationship between the stencil, the body and the wall.
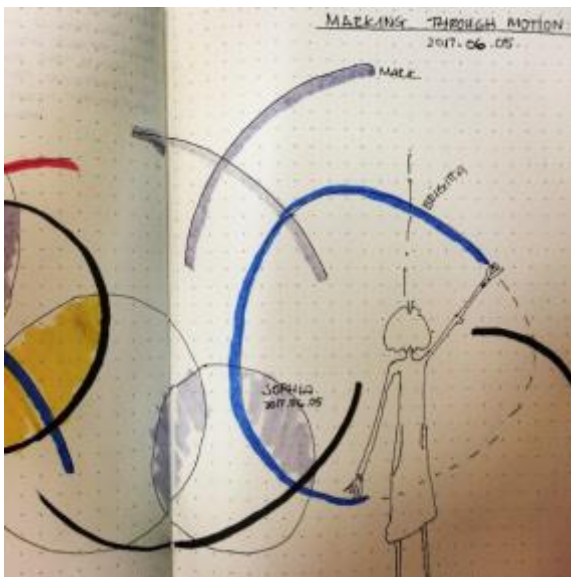
Figure 3. The body and the wall. Mark making and movement. Stone-Johnson.B (2017) Sketchbook August 2016.

Speculative Mural iteration three

Following on from observations within the earlier exploration a third action sought to explore the relationship between the body and wall as were demonstrated in the second iteration.

When the body encounters the wall, a place is created. Through mark making, we connect ourselves to the place in which we have dwelt, either

permanently or temporarily.

The proposed action explored the relationship between the hand, the body and the wall. Trough the making of the form directly related to the scale of the maker.

Each attendee was given a piece of chalk and asked to inscribe the arch of his or her arm onto the wall. The chalk was taped over and painted; some were complete circles, others arch, or refecting embodied movements.

The site was selected based on the need to address, a particularly problematic wall in the neighbourhood. The space adjacent a newly installed, football pitch which the city workers had been unable to complete cleaning, subsequently had become vandalised.

As the park, is often frequented by children on weekends, participants were young. Some actors did not quite understand the requested action and required some assistance. Additionally, to cover the graffiti, some of the children were lifted, to reach the higher areas of the wall partially negating the purpose of the work.

Figure 4.Stone-Johnson.B (2017) 'Mural Production Process'

While the action of the body, made by the adults were more precise, in comparison to marks made by the children engaging on the project. Engaging adult participants throughout the action would have been better suited to a larger scale wall while adult participants would have been better suited for the project. As adults tend to be of a similar size the work, may have become somewhat uniform had there only been adult participants.

The chalk outlines made by the participants were taped over and painted inside. The process deviated significantly from the planned work. The piece ultimately still reflected the acts of the participants on the day.

Figure 5. Stone-Johnson.B (2017) 'Final Work produced'

Conclusions

The hypothesis proposed within the work that haptic place making infers spatial agency. That as such embodied placemaking would allow community members to gain spatial agency and have the potential to allow the designer to infer agency and use those exiting catalysts within proposed projects, probative methods of knowing places where useful, where reinforced by active participation.

The probative visual essay conducted within the neighbourhood suggested that while there was a need for intervention of a material nature. The existing means of placemaking occurring within the neighbourhood are mostly vertical regarding additive making and assembly of space. Unmaking as presentative of the desire to express dissatisfaction with

the spatial agency occurs predominantly on the ground plane. Other forms of placemaking, suggested within the more extensive probative inquiry. Initially anticipated were mostly absent from this neighbourhood.

What the first iteration, attempted to achieve was to use, existing material interagency and pattern making, as a form of placemaking, within the mural through mimicking existing spatial pattern making. While the work was somewhat successful, as the production reflected the context wall, it failed to enable any tangible form of agency within the neighbourhood participant actors.

Of the three works, the third iteration appears to have been the last successful. Although the most direct approach to the notion of embodied placemaking through marking. There have been several requests to complete the work or redo the work, by community members.

After the third titration, the group has been requested to repeat the algorithmic pattern and have undertaken several smaller murals within the service lanes.

Figure 6. Stone-Johnson.B (2017), Aditional murals produced.

The failure of the third form of mural seems to indicate that while the action is vital to the agency. The Aesthetic quality of embodied placemaking is critical to spatial agency enacted in such ways. Contrary to the suggestion that placemaking and connection to place, occurs during any embodied action.

Residents appear to have a desire to act, spatially but only in ways which are perceived to be aesthetically pleasing, to those communities. However what is perceived as aesthetically pleasing may be, community-specific even in apparently identical urban fabrics.

For any spatial intervention to be perceived as, belonging to the community, it is critical that spatial practitioners, create frameworks which allow ordinary citizens to create embodied spaces within urban fabrics, which is not seen as merely copying from the existing fabric, but actively participate in constructing new interventions.

The role of the urban practitioner here is to find means endemic to the communities within which the practice, which will allow residents to become spatial actors.

Painting within this context seems to have been the best means to facilitate a transfer of agency. However, the more extensive probative work indicates that different communities

will have different indicators of the haptic agency. Each project should be treated as site-specific. Blanket repetition of spatial actions will have varying degrees of success. Specific to existing haptic agencies present within neighbourhoods.

What is highlighted within the work is that by comparison to previous projects temporary projects? The ability of the community to take ownership of their urban space appears to have increased more through the material interagency than through the temporary projects. Seen through a significant uptick in the smaller groups initiating their projects, to solve their street-level problems. Over the course of the five years, the Alley Activation project has run, we have seen very few projects initiated by residents in and of their volition. However, within the last year since beginning the mural project, we have seen community member initiate projects within three separate service lanes, as well as a community-based clean up the initiative of a much more substantial piece of urban land which had fallen into disrepair.

While the project is well suited to the exploration of the relationship between the body and the place in which the work occurs, the output suggestions that for the work to be of use as methods for understanding place making within in the context concerning spatial agency. Additional layers of research would have to be conducted to facilitate an understanding of the role such actions play in creating a spatial agency for the participants.

Acknowledgements

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