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The Armature – The Happenstance

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Our participation in The Happenstance project provided a perfect opportunity to apply techniques of engagement and participation in a very different and unique kind of context. A context that was literally foreign, a context (a biennale) that was inherently transient and a context that was unfamiliar in terms of culture, economics and issues. Much of our previous work had been based on an empathic and generative mode of practice that involved working directly with grassroots organisations to enact strategic community led change over a number of years. Over ten years of working with marginalised communities in a predominately Scottish context had created an attitude towards the engagement of people and place that was, through its application, a critique of increasingly normalised modes of community engagement. Rather than a stakeholder driven top-down application of consultants armed with toolkits, games to play and charrettes to participate in, our interest lay in how the ideas and agency of the grassroots could be provided with an immediate outlet whereby the desires and capacity of local people could be developed and tested through an immediate engagement in and of place at a variety of scales.

The design of the armature was intended to test ideas about the role of design in facilitating that distinct form of agency within public space – the project asks what constitutes successful public space and how can we enact design that suggests possibility and opportunity rather than dictate and instruct behaviour. As an idea, this is about the provision and application of frameworks, literal and metaphorical, that people can operate within. The idea that things are suggested and left unfinished therefore prompting curiosity, reaction, engagement and participation. Within the context of Venice our intention was to provide a meaningful resource to local Venetian people rather than concentrate on delivering a static ‘exhibition’ aimed at the Biennale audience. A resource in the form of place, but also a resource in the form of people. As a result, a formerly under used and difficult to access football pitch in a private green space became a unique public space that has been utilised by local families and Venetian organisations in multiple ways.

The armature and its 66 deckchairs created a space for cinema/performance, a space for play and a space for making along with the 'tools' and material with which to occupy and interpret those spaces. The armature also acted as a route to provide sanctuary and connectivity between other areas within the gardens of Palazzo Zenobio. The armature hosted film screenings, a music festival, community meetings, activist groups, local schools, and every day was visited by local families seeking a place to be active, explorative and playful. The project became a freespace in every sense of the word and provided something meaningful and useful to local people within the context of a Biennale that is usually more concerned with engaging a much wider community or architects, academics and tourists.

The visual language is heavily inspired by Venice. It is a meaningful response to the physical, spatial and existing activity of the site and to a vernacular application of temporary structures in Venice: the altane, sets, and colours used during carnival, the passerelle; (walkways that are brought out during the flooding). The solution to avoid transporting heavy materials to provide ballast was found by

filling trays underneath the board walk with water. This worked beautifully not only in terms of a practical solution but was also very fitting in terms of Venice's relationship with water. The structure was built from timber and simple methods of assembly to permit participation in its construction and to encourage replication and adaption. From the outset people engaged with the structure in a multitude of ways; they touched it, climbed it, cycled through it, sat on it, swung off it, sang from it etc. As a resource it quickly became precious but as an object it was always intended to be quite the opposite.

The key to the successful application of the armature was the collaborative relationship between Baxendale and the lead artists and curators WAVEparticle. They 'anti-curated' a team of artists and architects from Scotland to act as the spark that would ignite the activity within the space and structure that was created in the garden of Palazzo Zenobio. The Happenstance did not just 'illustrate' a Freesapce but created one. This collaboration proves the need for place to be supported by programme if it's use is to be guaranteed, supported and successful. The lessons that can be learned from this project should be to encourage a less deterministic form of community engagement and consultation, to spend less time (and money) on consultants relentlessly asking questions in pursuit of an impossible consensus and concentrate on the immediate needs of the here and now. Most community consultation appears to be obsessed with digging up the past or speculating on the future.

The Armature demonstrates the benefit of creating curiosity through positive, productive and generous action. Physical actions like the armature and performative ones like those enacted by our team of artists. Creating curiosity invites people to ask questions of you, which then starts a conversation that is organic and premised on an equal exchange. Relentlessly test and prototype and establish activity that is social, cultural and economic. Do this at the smallest scale and with the least amount of resources possible. Quite often the issues that are facing people and place are blindingly obvious, you can see them, hear them, feel them; they don't need to be identified and analysed through an exhaustive process of consultation and engagement, they just need to be addressed.

Architecture and spatial design is not in itself ever going to improve a condition; they need to be elements that sit within and alongside the design of, activity, economy, legislation, education.

Our experience suggests that three things people need from their environment (physical and social) are choice, opportunity and support. Any intervention in the lives of people and place that aims to create some form of progressive, positive and sustainable change should be considering how those interventions create more choice, greater opportunities and provide a support mechanism for people to take risks, try things out, fail, succeed, fail again, grow, develop improve...