

THE ART

of the Unintended

ENCOUNTER

Learning from The Happenstance
Venice + Scotland Fellowship Report

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As the internet becomes the pervading background to the way we live our lives, the public sphere is increasingly moving online. Our equivalent of the Greek Agora is the Twitter-sphere, the algorithms behind our Facebook feeds, in self-perpetuating, click-based feedback cement and define our bubble-like areas of interest. The anonymised advertising affinity categories developed for us by Google, like 'travellers' or 'fashionistas' or 'foodies', keep feeding us the same world of delights. In the city, the cultures that we inhabit become atomised, each age group and section of society has its part, its place, its night, its area of town, its activities.

In this setting, the idea of the public realm as a place of encountering difference is losing its meaning.

In many ways, finding our tribe, sharing an affinity with others, is an inherently human thing; especially in the big city where feeling a sense of belonging is so important. With a grounded identity, we are able to stand up straight and face the world.

However, there are two sorts of 'tribes' that

we can find, one is the grouping of similarity, the other is the umbrella of difference. An example of the first might be the yuppie, young professional group of university friends who go to the pub after work to share their experiences of high rent, gap year travels, the mundanity of their jobs and their latest recipe for quinoa salad. An example of the umbrella of difference would be the extended family group, the familial clan. These share one thing, being related, but beyond this, they can be highly various in age, character, job, interests, goals, etc. Often, your extended family, aren't the sort of people that you would readily take as friends, they are very different, usually surprisingly so, but you are obliged to encounter this difference and learn about other people as a result. By living in close proximity, granny and uncles and babes and hangers-on, certain kinds of encounters of significant difference occur, whereby the group becomes almost a microcosm of the world.

Clearly both tribes help us to be who we are, but the kinds of encounters of difference that the second sort of group encourages are precisely the sorts of interactions that are rare to find. These are encounters of the kind that do not point out the otherness of other



people and their differences, but rather ignore the superficial differences (age, how we dress, etc.) and instead see the shared humanness of other people, allowing us to relate to people and connect and see that these superficial differences are just that, superficial. These are the sorts of interactions that are needed to help us to live alongside each other peacefully and joyfully.

To this end, the most valuable thing that the Happenstance did was provide a place where certain kinds of highly unusual social interactions were possible.

There are a couple of examples that I have in mind:

First, is the Tai Chi class taking place amidst scores of children playing with water pistols and a huge inflatable ball. As this ball rolled in the background, participants from 8 to 80 were being led in calming Tai Chi, some had come for the class and some had just been in the garden and got involved, many of whom had never seen anything like it.

Second, and this happened on several occasions, where a large summer-school group of 7-9 year

olds arrived at the same time as a collection of twenty-somethings from the local squat were chilling with their musical instruments. The resulting moments were of a rare but really wonderful sort: singing together, four-person guitar playing, and discoveries about how to work a saxophone.

Maybe the Happenstance merely catalysed the sort of interactions that all public space has the potential to offer. But especially today, with the breaking down of extended families, and the increasingly transitory nature of our lives and geographic homes, the Happenstance is exactly the sort of space that we really need. Moreover, it has the potential to usurp the online as a place of a different and richer kind of public realm.

In short, it showed one way that some of this could be done. It was in no way perfect and had so many flaws, but these were also so tied up in the nature of the way the space came to be that it makes almost no sense to critique it in this way. So instead, I will show a little the qualities that it did have and how these made it into the kind of public space for encounter that as a society, we could learn from and do with a few more of.



1. DISCOVERY AND ARRIVAL

The way in which people found and arrived at the Happenstance was important to creating the atmosphere that it had. Discovery was the view down a long alley to a giant inflatable mouth hanging over a small doorway, through which there was sight of the tiniest glimpse of green. This did two main things, first, it self-selected: what kind of person sees an inflatable mouth at the bottom of a fifty metre alley and walks towards it? Somebody who is paying attention (it was easy to miss) and is also curious and adventurous, in short exactly the sort of person that you want in your garden to make it exciting. Secondly, the long walk through the alley was a form of preparation, a long arrival, time for the mind to wonder and imagine. And, like Alice's journey down the rabbit hole, the separation prepared you for leaving the world of the everyday and entering a space where different rules apply.

2. SURPRISE

The moment when a visitor looks nonchalantly round the corner of the door and then stops for a second in amazement at the strange sight: the lush greenery in the stone city, the strange colourful structure with children clambering over it perilously. Slowly and with a gasp, “What is this place?” they say sheepishly.

This initial encounter took people directly out of the everyday and into something very different and memorable. It is what Peter calls the ‘garden of epiphany’, there is a connection in that second, perhaps an idea or two, and we feel more awake and alive because we’re paying attention. When we are surprised, we are more willing to listen and absorb and engage with people, sometimes because it just feels like we’re meant to be there. Once we’re surprised once, other surprises can follow, we can even surprise ourselves as we fall into the runaway train feeling and it’s exhilarating.





3. PREDICTABILITY

Just as we love the moment of surprise, what brings us back is a certain predictability. “Last time I was there something odd and marvellous happened, perhaps if I go back something similarly extraordinary will be occurring.”

A meeting place acquires its status by the fact that we might be likely to meet people there, “maybe so-and-so will also be there this time, they were the previous two occasions, we get on well etc.”. Sometimes we need such an excuse to be in the company of others. Often we aren’t close enough to arrange a meeting specially, but a casual encounter is just the perfect level of lack of planning and also rewarding, there is no pressure because nothing was arranged.

Another overlooked aspect is the presence of familiar strangers in our lives, faces which we pass and know and so reassure us but we don’t need to talk to. In a city like Venice, there is more of this neighbourly feel anyway, but thinking about ways to bring these kinds of encounters back into the anonymous metropolis life is something that the Happenstance offers a way into.

4. DISORDER / LACK OF RULES / YOU CAN BREAK THE RULES

In the garden, another form of order seems to exist, the rules of normal situations are broken. It's much easier to talk to a stranger and discover things you never knew. Because you expect the unexpected, you look for it and it therefore occurs.

The artwork does not need to be left pristine, it can be touched, climbed on, dented, smelt, added to. Children can run wilder, and use power drills, etc. By changing some of the usual rules of life, we feel like more can be changed and a certain awe at the possibility occurs, also a certain freedom.



5. ORDER

'Art lives through rules and dies with freedom' - Leonardo Da Vinci. Just as artistic improvisations rest on rules and conventions and techniques of representation, so it is with the Happenstance. Firstly, breaking rules only makes sense if there are rules to break, boundaries to test. Secondly, the line between beautiful, edgy haphazardness and chaos is a slim one, and it is because under the first there is still a great deal of order hidden.

At a superficial level, within the Happenstance, it appeared as though anything could happen and indeed would, the structure appeared to be cobbled together in a playful temporary manner. But in fact underlying the project was hours and hours of organization and planning on the part of the team, who jumped through all the administrative hoops and found the funding to allow the project to exist. The structure was the result of very careful design by Baxendale (see points 10 and 11), and coordinated down to the level of the coloured shapes being the same

as the shapes used by Neil McGuire in the font created for the branding.

At the level of safety, there is also a level of order that allows people to feel comfortable in the space, and to feel comfortable having their children running around. That order relies on the unwritten rules of operation that govern society and the ways that we interact with goodwill towards each other. People are made confident by the reassurance that if anything was to go wrong, Peter acted as a sort of benevolent dictator and would be able to throw somebody out at the drop of the hat, as was required on one occasion.





6. EVERYTHING IS FREE

This ties into both points above about a different set of rules. Normal rules do not apply, but still there is a level of goodwill of interaction that rests on the social order.

In this way, the medium of exchange is convivial, it is based on what can I give, rather than what can I gain. If you offer me a favour, something free, my thought is what can I give in return. If you offer me something and get me to pay for it, then I am left thinking did I get my money's worth? What will I get out of this? Using money is the end of the line, nobody owes anything anymore. Whereas with giving and exchange, the line keeps going and more opportunities keep appearing.

Having said this, at the end of the day, the world's means of exchange is money and it is needed to operate such a space. In the case of the Happenstance, the bottom line was that certain people were working very hard and they were the ones who just kept on giving, from their own time and pocket, which is not sustainable and was perhaps only made possible by the very temporary nature of the project.

Entrance is free?

Yes

Can we bring our picnic?

Yes.

My daughter can use this drill?

Yes.

Can I paint something?

Yes.

Can I organise a folk dancing event here next week?

Yes.

Will it be free?

Yes.

Can I use your speakers?

Yes *Would you like an ice cream?*

Yes!

7. CONTINUITY

There is a sense on the part of the community that it is only worth engaging with a project if it really has the potential to be transformative and permanent. If it will just disappear as quickly as it came then it is hardly worth beginning. In the case of the Happenstance, there was a certain energy and effort driven into the potential for elongating the project and making it more permanent than the initial five weeks. This manifested itself in organising open meetings and a feast with the intention of gathering together the community who might be able to make this happen.

Regardless of whether this actually followed through or not, the energy that was given off was one that had the potential to become permanent if enough people engaged with it. Which in turn, caused people to engage with it.





8. TEMPORARINESS

This contradicts the above, and is curious, but perhaps knowing that the space was a fleeting opportunity gave a sense of urgency to people being involved, holding their events and availing of the resources sooner rather than later.

Furthermore, there was a certain extreme level of energy thrown into the project by the organisers which would only have been possible knowing that there was a time-limit to their involvement and a way out.



9. RESOURCES

The Happenstance possessed certain things that couldn't be found otherwise easily, or at least not all in one place and not for free. These were things which had either a universal or a specific appeal and thus attracted different groups, allowing for the curious moments of encounter.

These included: Green space (of very short supply in Venice), projector, deck-chairs, tools, wood, paint, giant inflatables, exhibition space, speakers, stage, games, a kitchen (sometimes), electricity, energetic children entertainers etc.

The precise resources that the Happenstance had are of less importance for the reproducibility of the project than the mere fact that they were free and hard to find otherwise in the city.



10. ENCLOSURE / SPATIAL DEFINITION

There were clear boundaries and edges to the site with walls, a sphere of control, a territory in which the special rules apply. Within this space, children could run around without going too far and parents could relax.

Importantly, the space was also subdivided into different areas using the semi-enclosure of the armature, the shade and vegetation. These gave more precise worlds within the larger world for different activities.



11. ENDLESS ARCHITECTURAL SUGGESTION

The design of the armature was carefully created using dimensions and shapes which appeal to being used in a huge variety of ways. It doesn't force you to do anything with it, but by merely offering endless suggestion, it was able to catalyse a great deal of activity.

Closing Thoughts:

The Happenstance is best seen as the start of a conversation, an idea along the way to meet some of the needs we have as people. The huge appeal that it had to visitors is a testament to the fact that it very much met a real need that we have today. The challenge going forward is how to develop and further this style of intervention in other places.



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