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## *Sounds of the city*

Darren Tofts

Are you all done? All finished? All silent? Tingling words of anticipation. A crowd gathered in a suburban street waiting for the hammer to come down. A couple hanging on every word, caught in an intolerable warp in which time has stopped. The street where people lurk at auctions is a wonderfully compact image, one of the concepts that we live by, perhaps without even knowing it. This particular experience of our relationship to the street is an especially visceral and urgent instance of our deeply personal desire for home. The street is both a reality and a rhetorical figure of speech; at once the immediate here and now of being on the move along a particular street, as well as an instance of the expansive urban environment we call home.

William Gibson also used the figure of the street as both reality and metaphor in his *Neuromancer* trilogy of novels. While these works have become known for their futuristic portrayal of life in the age of cyberspace, of the mind jacked in to the data stream of networks, they are in their own way nostalgic for a particular idea of home and a way of living. Houses are a memory. Trees are also non-existent and but their likeness can be conjured as a holographic projection, a calming reminder that they did in fact once exist. Home in Gibson's imploded Chiba City is a kind of small box, rather like a coffin, that is nondescriptly stacked shelf-like with many others like it. There is nothing distinctive, singular or vaguely individual about this vision of home. But it is a lived reality for someone nonetheless, the place to go for safety and warmth, shelter, solitude. In Gibson's world people not only make do with what they have, but repurpose what is available and find new functions for it. "The street", he suggests, "finds its own uses for things". This is an aphorism that may well be applied to the work you see and hear before you. It imagines something very much at the heart of the cyberpunk ethic of street-savvy invention and nous. This process of world building implies attitudes towards urban planning, design, architecture, space, the stuff of the street. But it also presumes notions of identity, community and ultimately someone's picture of what home is, might or could be like. So step up to what is before you and jack in.

In public service parlance, “social housing” is a euphemism for affordable accommodation for people of limited means. It carries with it the civic idealism and beneficence of the housing “projects” of American cities like New York and Detroit begun in the 1930s as well as the more patronizing connotation of a key performance indicator for the Department of Housing (“well, they’ve got to live somewhere”). But more optimistically the idea of the project also evokes collective grass roots social action that is initiated, owned and mobilized by individuals who organically galvanize into community through such action. This is the resonant meaning suggested in the title of Sue McCauley’s and Keith Deverell’s *Housing Project*. *The Housing Project* is the third in a series of works that explores an urban ethnography, an engaged and informed portrait of how people live in and around big cities as self-contained and thriving communities. McCauley and Deverell are not the detached observers of social documentary or anthropology. They work with communities, earn their trust and seek to present insiders’ perspectives of urban living and social interaction. *Rear Window* (2009) offers a sympathetic but far from romanticized audiovisual portrait of the long and unforgiving toil of restaurant workers in and around Melbourne’s Chinatown. *The Hawker’s Song* (2010) is an eloquent and elegiac account of the disappearing culture of street singing by traders in Phnom Penh, as well as its remembrance by expatriate Cambodians in the Melbourne suburb of Springvale. Both works share with *The Housing Project* an ethic of community engagement and inclusiveness that is central to the artists’ aesthetic vision.

The voice is a crucial element in McCauley’s and Deverell’s work. Chris Knowles’ elegant immersive soundscape heightens the fundamental qualities of the human voice, generating an acoustic space that indelibly binds individuals into proximity with each other. The range and grain of the voice implies but also enables community. Accordingly the sampled sound of *The Housing Project* is granular, of the body and the world of lived experience. The enveloping sonic residues of the human voice, environmental and industrial sounds galvanize into inclusive atmospheres that place us *somewhere*. The physical act of triggering unexpected sounds by moving objects around a responsive table is suggestive at once of a board game and the balancing of different channels on a mixing desk. Once you have cottoned on to this effect, it is possible to play the installation as if it were a musical instrument, a responsive DIY kit for synthesizing the look and sound of cities, as well as an urban story generator in which you play the role of conductor, interviewer and neighbour.

In this the work intuitively exploits the contemporary Esperanto of interaction that has been hardwired into the psyche through the experience of a generation saturated with new media. In re-organizing individual landscape elements to create new environments, visitors to the work can listen to the stories and experiences gathered by the artists from workshops conducted with people from across the demographic spectrum. Amid the ruminations of designers, urban planners and architects you will hear the knowing worldliness of elderly citizens alongside the innocence of children, stories of hold ups and casual violence on the way home, of people who have no home, African refugee kids displaced as a result of civil war, as well as kids living in detention centres for whom home is a memory to keep them going inside.

There is something very intimate and real about the materiality of the work, with its solid wooden table and the exquisite, earthy ceramic models made by Ann Ferguson. And this materiality prompts an urgent, timely question to do with the way we experience our world in 2011— in the cyber age of social networking and the easy mobility of presence at a distance, what has become of our embodied experience of the urban environment? Once upon a time you visited a display home to check it out, to actually feel what it's like to be inside it, or queued up with a dozen eager beavers at an open for inspection for that “desirable” rat hole that, despite being across the road from the cemetery, is still walking distance to Brunetti's. With the advent of computer aided design and virtual reality modeling, you don't have to leave your desk to take a stroll through a potential dream home, changing the colour palette along the way with the inane chatter of a couple of key strokes. This convergence of real estate and the hyperreal prompted one wag to coin the term “virtual realty” to describe how disembodiment had become second nature by the mid 90s.

We have forgotten how much of our daily social experience is abstracted from the world of atoms, translated into the electro-magnetic field of bits and bytes. We press buttons and poke screens, blithely ignorant of how these slick abbreviations correspond to an outcome elsewhere that we never see. The artists elegantly observe of the work that it is “embedded in issues of tactility in an age where we are gradually losing our sense of touch”. It's hard to not touch, fondle and enjoy the pleasing solidity, mass and rough grittiness of Ferguson's ceramic buildings and trees. They put us back in touch with basic elements of the earth, of

clay and pigments, the fire and heat generated by a kiln. And in doing so they awaken us to other fundamental and immersive qualities of immediate experience.

Taken as a physical, designed and constructed object the installation uncannily resembles a building. Perhaps a high rise, kit-home or an environmentally blended dwelling Frank Lloyd Wright might have imagined. As a built environment or micro-ecology it brings to mind the speculative constructions of American architect Lebbeus Woods. Woods' architectural models for civic buildings and public housing in contested cities such as Berlin (before the wall went down), or liberated cities emerging from civil war like Zagreb, are not feasible in the world of reality. But interpreted as what he calls "freespaces" they open up dialogues about redefining social space in the aftermath of conflict. Space is for Woods a productive concept of becoming and accordingly there is no such thing as an empty space; "emptiness", he insists, "is just another word for freedom". Freespace is another way of thinking about the very idea of *thinking about* urban space, cities, home, streets, the local corner store. And the people we encounter along the way. It is all about potential, what might be possible. Bear this in mind as you watch kids and adults alike moving pieces around the playing surface of the table, discussing where things might best go in impromptu acts of community-building. Once we have recognized that any space anywhere within the urban grid is replete with potential for someone, then it is from this opportunity that everything else flows.

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