Sticks, Ropes, Land: Confronting Colonial Practices in Public Space Design

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ABSTRACT

Common participatory design and community consultation practices often tokenize participants' input. This can limit the depth of information shared, lead to disconnected understandings of site, and perpetuate hierarchical structures between designers, planners and the communities they seek to serve. *Sticks, Ropes, Land* proposes alternative approaches for engaging with community stewards and groups who get marginalized in the design of public space. Through the development of practices that pair material-based methods of making with activities grounded in direct connections to place, *Sticks, Ropes, Land* puts forward approaches to participatory design that aim to question and problematize colonial structures in relation to public space design. This paper examines a series of three approaches that designers might consider towards the work of serving and supporting the agency and rights of place-based communities.

Author Keywords

place-based design; public space; decolonization; participatory design; community stewardship.

INTRODUCTION

Sticks, Ropes, Land is an iterative practice for generating hyper-local, community-led responses to public space design. The project attempts to dismantle tokenistic methods of community consultation in the fields of planning and design, whereby 'design experts' consult with local stakeholders in ways that are instrumentaliz-

ing or over-simplified [1, 3, 9]. Instead, *Sticks, Ropes, Land* investigates strategies that reposition place-based knowledge-holders, or "community stewards" into the role of highly qualified leaders with deep understandings of localized needs, and shifts designers into modes of active listening and "being led by".

A key focus of this project has been to recognize how the concept of public space is defined and upheld by colonial systems – both legal and cultural – and to reconsider this premise. By embedding values of reciprocity, care, and responsibility to the land into our design process, our intent is to serve place-based communities while co-developing alternative approaches to participatory public space design.

Summary of Process

In 2019, a series of participatory, public programming workshops hosted by a design research team engaged localized communities to use simple materials – string, rope, sticks, plants – to generate prototypical responses to existing public space sites. Each workshop generated new and highly site-specific responses to local conditions, social/environmental needs, and gaps in infrastructure, conveying deep and sophisticated place-based knowledge. This paper examines the emergence of these alternative approaches and considerations through three sequential stages:

1. *Story Sticks* was a set of cultural programming workshops that engaged 10-12 year old children in low-fidelity actions of making as a means to talk about themselves and their individual and collective relationship to land and the built environment;

2. *Reading and Walking* was a phase of embodied research that addressed the vast and deeply entrenched systems that define public space in relation to colonialism;

3. *Story Ropes* was a participatory process that integrated learnings from Reading and Walking and invited a group of place-based knowledge holders to lead a walk to 'sites of care or concern' in the urban core of Prince George, Canada.

Site Context
Prince George, British Columbia

This work focused on a set of place-based conditions and community needs particular to the urban core of Prince George, a city of 78 000 people located in north-western Canada. Prince George is the largest city in its region, and is located on the traditional territory of the Lheidli T'enneh, a subgroup of the Dakelh people. Lheidli T'enneh means "the People from the Confluence of the Rivers" [8]; Prince George is situated at the meeting point of the Nechako and Fraser Rivers. Many of the conditions of this site – including a history of colonialism, displacement and a boom of resource-extraction industries, a concentration of social services and populations accessing these services, and a polarizing of attitudes towards prioritizing economic development versus social-support infrastructure – are issues shared by many northern communities in Canada [2, 7].

It was through a network of relationships between academic institutions and community organizers in Vancouver and Prince George that this work took place; relationships that range from professional to personal. This situated collaboration explored the layered complexity of the designer's role in a community; navigating and attempting to trouble the hierarchies implicit in participatory design methods, urban-rural relations, academic versus local knowledges, and colonial systems of power.

Story Sticks

Story Sticks was the first iteration of a participatory, materially-based method for talking about public space. We sought to test an approach that could meaningfully give agency to children, an important stakeholder-group sometimes left out of planning processes. This goal was informed by our position that young people have an incredibly sophisticated and unique understanding of public space [19], although they may lack the language or tools to share this knowledge [15].

In partnership with a local gallery, and as part of their educational programming activities, we planned and facilitated two low-fidelity hands-on workshops with students from two central-area Prince George elementary schools. The intent of the workshops was to:

offer students through group discussions an introductory level conceptual understanding of public space, defining public space as "spaces you don't have to pay to enter, and spaces you can use without needing an invitation";

use intuitive making and material exploration as a means to help the students express their individual and collective stories and needs; and

consider collective interventions in the public realm using the walking sticks as proxy for the individual.

We invited the students to create a walking stick that would help them share their own stories and navigate public space. Using an assortment of ropes, tape, fabric, glue, moss, leaves and other natural materials, each student picked a walking stick and decorated it in response to open-ended prompts, some that lend themselves to tangible, physical outcomes (make a tool that will help you now), and others that prompted more abstract thinking (tell us about who you are, where you have been, and where you want to go).

Participatory Making to Build Agency, Connections

Our discussion of public space generated some good, if fairly predictable, responses. However, the instant students were given the prompt to choose a stick and begin working with materials was transformative. Students were highly engaged and enthusiastic to make things. As they began sharing the stories of their sticks, it became immediately clear that these bright young people had many thoughtful insights to offer, and that the sticks provided a way for them to express their ideas to the group.

Figure 1. *Story Sticks* resting outside a future park site in downtown Prince George. © Jean Chisholm

The sticks became expressive, unique stand-ins for these resourceful young people. By using materially-based making as a method of self-expression, the students were able to quickly make their stories physical and tangible [13]. We hope these walking sticks will help them navigate the world around them. We also hope these sticks will serve as physical reminders to better understand how the public realm – and those with power and resources to shape it – can (and should) serve these children and their community.

Questioning Our Understanding of Public Space

After reflecting on the students' stories and makings, a growing concern emerged among us, the designers and facilitators of this workshop: How can a learning environment foster knowledge exchange and reciprocity? How do we avoid tokenizing students' voices and perspectives? And how do we compel municipalities or other institutions of power to address the place-based rights of these students in a meaningful way, that doesn't perpetuate existing power dynamics? To move forward in answering these questions, we needed to interrogate our own understandings of public space design. Public space, and all its virtues, is still defined within a premise of private land ownership, part of a sweeping history of colonial dispossession [12]. Failures in participatory planning processes that cause tokenistic engagement or instrumentalizing further exacerbate these systemic issues [3].

Reading and Walking
Recognizing How Colonialism Defines Public Space

One of our core values as a research team has been to explore ways to increase agency for a broad range of perspectives in the design of public space, particularly the perspectives of those who are often marginalized by universalized approaches to participatory design [1]. These universalized approaches continue to perpetuate the hierarchies and dominant power structures of their Euro-centric origins, continuing colonial acts of epistemological displacement and erasure [1]. As a design team made up of three white, educated settler women, confronting the ways our own biases and privileges inform our understanding of public space and its ethics, nested within systems of white privilege and Euro-centric approaches to land use and urban design, emerged as a vitally important step toward enacting this value.

Turning our attention to the vast and deeply entrenched systems that define public space in relation to problematic land ownership structures, we examined ways to shift our own practices away from colonial understandings and values associated with land ownership, public space, and community engagement practices. Our intent was to broaden and reshape our own understandings of ethics and methods appropriate to designing for public space by learning from those who have been engaged with these questions much longer, and with more personal urgency, than we have. We identified that our work lacked substantive understanding of Indigenous perspectives in relation to designing for public space.

We structured our reading list around this deficit (refer to our extended reading list) and drew from our individual experiences engaging with and supporting Indigenous activist movements [20]. Our discussions were held while walking, talking and working in public space, a deliberate strategy to resist academic removal from the context for our work [6, 19]. Rather than sheltering ourselves from the environments we were talking about, we worked while inhabiting public space in an embodied way. Moving forward, we will seek opportunities to learn approaches of collective responsibility, reciprocity and care with the land [12], and explore processes and partnerships in Prince George that support the unsettling of colonial practices in relation to land and space. Placing consent and collaborative relationships at the foundation of our process forces us to ask "what can we offer?" and consider the ways we can be of service to the community (which may or may not include our design expertise). We also seek to shift away from the "problem-solving" tropes and extractive research methods often found within universalized design and participatory practices [3, 4]

Story Ropes

Building from the learnings of both *Story Sticks* and *Reading and Walking,* we tested a refined approach for collaborating with local community stewards, this time working with 13 adults in leading a group walk to 'sites of care or concern' in the urban core.

It was important for our team to spend a significant amount of time in Prince George with the community stewards. Our time together was spread out over a weekend, with many informal opportunities to gather amidst structured group activities. The size of our

group was intentionally small, to give adequate space to share everyone's stories and foster connections. Everyone within the group was well-acquainted with at least one other person, which helped create a comfortable and conversational space almost instantly. We recognize the exclusionary aspect of this particular social configuration, but we also believe these prior relationships created spaces for vulnerability and reciprocity, helping to flatten hierarchies within the group. If we had hosted the workshop with an open invitation to a much larger group, the research and objectives would begin to feel much more extractive, rather than grounded in building relationships with a community and a place [4].

Making as a Means for Conversation

Our first evening together was spent eating dinner and rope making. Similar to *Story Sticks*, we offered the group a series of prompts - Where are you from? Where have you felt really welcome or comfortable? What is something/somewhere/someone you are concerned about? - and invited them to use simple materials - ropes, string, leaves and twigs - to create a section of rope. These methods of making are built both *through* and *for* dialogue [5, 10], and are intended to be low-pressure, with clear communication that there is no expectation to create a specific outcome, use a known method, or generate something monumental, memorable or even precise.

We consciously sought ways to reduce the implicit hierarchy between facilitator and participant, and instead approached the workshop as a space we could all collectively contribute to and build. By participating in the workshop ourselves and actively *being led by* our collaborators, we hoped to trouble the role of authority within these spaces, finding spaces of greater epistemic and social equality [13, 4].

After we had eaten and reached a point of completion with rope making, we gathered in a circle to share the stories behind our ropes. For some of us, the ropes represented places and experiences; for others, they were based on aesthetic preferences. We shared stories about our past, our current practices, and changes we hoped to see in the future, showing deep care for loved ones, community, and environments. The openness and willingness of the group helped create a space where many felt safe to be vulnerable, to share worries and concerns with one another.

Sites of Care and Concern

The next morning, each member of the group was invited to pick a site of interest, care or concern to take the group, forming a 13-part walk throughout downtown Prince George. Together, we visited sites of creativity (galleries, public art), care (social services and harm reduction centres), unseen potential (locked campus buildings, poorly considered parks), history (Indigenous memorials), and grassroots efforts (shuttered arts centres, sites of protest).

The struggles of displacement, homelessness, cultural homogenization, and ecological decimation in cities are common to urban centres around the world. The social and environmental injustices that contribute to these conditions are also entrenched in conventional approaches to designing for public space [11]. These values manifest in things like defensive architecture (rocks embedded in concrete to prevent resting or sleeping), remote surveillance of the public realm, periodic removal of encampments or temporary shelters, scraping and scrubbing of thriving local eco-systems to make space for 'dead soil' and perilous greenhouse-raised plants [17]. As a group, walking through the community, placing our story ropes within these sites of concern and care, we were able to root these broad struggles to place and to our own lived experiences. We were able to witness and consider some of the layers of complexity specific to downtown Prince George.

Figure 2. Placing *Story Ropes* in sites of care and concern in downtown Prince George. © Charlotte Falk

Community stewards came to know each other through this practice [5]. Through *Story Ropes*, we saw the initiation of new and impactful relationships between those working in arts and culture; social service; education and planning/municipal government. By making space for connection through activities

such as *Story Ropes*, these stewards can advocate and empathize on behalf of their own communities [4]. Through this process, the impact was expanded well beyond the scope of what we, as designers, can provide [18].

CONCLUSION

Sticks, Ropes, Land prototypes approaches that allow for a broad range of perspectives to meaningfully contribute to public space design, particularly for those who are typically marginalized through universalized participatory design processes. Confronting how our own biases and privileges inform our understanding of public space emerged as a vitally important aspect of this work.

Universalized participatory design processes tend to leave out or tokenize individuals who often hold highly relevant place-based knowledge, and individuals who also have the most at stake in the manifestation of public space design. Through activities like *Story Sticks* and *Story Ropes*, contributions of place-based knowledge can deeply enrich the effectiveness and efficiency of a design-research process [9]; a story shared by a local individual about seasonal weather, localized cultural habits or invisible history might take a non-local planner ages to discover.

Reciprocal relationships are something we feel should be the foundation of our work in public spaces, using processes that support designing and caring *with* a community, rather than *for* a community. Caring *for* creates a separation between the caregiver and the care-receiver, leading to extractive research and paternalistic relationships; caring *with* demands an understanding of context and our role within it, recognizing that we are *part of* the community, place, and land we act in [16, 4]. Creating these conditions not just for knowledge-transfer, but for human empathy, is critical.

A kind of place-based accountability disappears when designers and those making design decisions are removed from the place and the people they are intending to serve [3, 18]. Our processes must be rooted in "the hard work of being present," face-to-face and place-based interactions that are capable of building trust, accountability, empathy, and willingness to be with each other and work together on collective actions of care or concern [18]. Our methods explore how collaborative relationships between locals and design experts can be supported and generative. Empathy and shared understandings are pollinated between locals and design experts, inviting a pluralistic understanding of a place. Through these explorations, we aim to develop responsible methods to support and participate in public space design, rooted in reciprocity and place-based practices.

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