

ST. BOTOLPH'S CIRCUS

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 280	Shoppers		Mersea B1025
 600	Shoppers 		

Churchill Gate

IN SEARCH OF *GENIUS LOCI*, SPIRIT OF PLACE

Genius loci has a slightly illusive ring to it. The fact that this Latin phrase is still used in many languages today implies not only its longevity, but that something might get lost in translation. *Genius loci*, ‘spirit of place’, tries to anchor the ethereal, or transcendent to location. Landscape historian John Brinckerhoff Jackson describes our changing understanding of the phrase:

It was believed [in Classical times] that a locality – a space or a structure or a whole community – derived much of its unique quality from the presence or guardianship of a supernatural spirit. The visitor and the inhabitants were always aware of that benign presence...¹

Genius loci makes an appropriate starting point for a series of art projects: the phrase has the openness that artists so often crave in commissions; its association with recent landscape and architectural theory² gives it a weighty relevance in the field. It is no wonder that Essex County Council (ECC) has used it as an umbrella title for a series of wide ranging commissions.

Genius Loci is an ambitious scheme with ten long-term projects that are linked to ECC’s major Capital Development schemes and the Essex Design Initiative.³ They include permanent integrated works within new school buildings in Billericay, Flich Green, Colchester and Epping; Park and Ride schemes in Chelmsford and Colchester; plans for the integration of art in regeneration plans in Basildon, Harlow and Jaywick; highway improvements and developments at Brentwood and Sadlers Farm.

1 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* (Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), p157.

2 Most notably in architect, historian and theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz’s *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980).

3 ECC’s key priority is to include artists as an integral part of design teams “providing an artistic dimension and enhancement of all building projects and environmental improvement schemes, public or private, within the County; the aim being to enhance the visual richness of buildings, roads, landscaping and ultimately, the image of Essex”.

These works are being developed and implemented over several years. They are embedded within specific design and built environment briefs. Therefore, a large part of the artists' interactions are with designers, architects, planners, engineers, contractors and that catch-all phrase 'stakeholders'. This provides a very real framework within which the commissioned artists work and negotiate ideas. The *genius loci* becomes linked to very specific architectural schemes and political agendas that all influence the artists' responses.

In addition to these long-term projects, there was an acknowledgement by the commissioners that a complementary programme of shorter, temporary works might illicit more immediate responses and interactions at a grass-roots level. The Open Space programme aimed to engage with a range of local individuals and groups in a more direct way.

The briefs for the four Open Space projects by Matt Cook, Gordon Flemons, Miranda Sharp, and the collaborative partnership Damien Robinson and Stuart Bowditch encouraged collaboration and engagement with residents in three of Essex's towns. Cook, Flemons and Sharp worked in Harlow, Colchester and Basildon respectively whilst Robinson and Bowditch worked across all three towns on a mobile project.



The briefs purposely didn't specify particular locations within the towns, allowing each artist time to respond in their own way to place. In practice, this meant most of their research began at ground level, on the street. Flemons notes "I spent a lot of time walking round Colchester, sitting and watching." He became fascinated with street patterns, how the two-dimensional maps of a place translate into everyday lives. He was also aware that Colchester, unlike the other two New Towns in the Open Space programme, has "a rabbit warren of lanes often with small market stalls in odd corners". He wanted to find a way in which he could extend his observations and map the physical

and social forces within these spaces. His project *Making Tracks – Performing Place* records individuals’ daily journeys to and from the centre of Colchester with hand held Global Positioning System (GPS) loggers. The work uses the site of Colchester as a performed place.⁴ Flemons explains

The actors in this performance are the inhabitants, or visitors, who play out their daily routines and chores in a specific place; the clients of the drop-in centre; the staff and students at the training centre. It is their journeys as they travel through the landscape in time and space that are the vectors that give rise to the three-dimensional form of a place, giving it shape and defining its boundaries. By tracking the movement of these actors it is possible to capture the daily performance and reveal the form of a community.

Flemons’ interest in the anthropologist Tim Ingold’s description of the line is not surprising: “Life on the spot surely cannot yield an experience of place, of being somewhere. To be a place, every somewhere must lie on one or several paths of movement to and from places elsewhere.”⁵

Flemons converts the logged data into small downloadable animations that can be viewed online and sent to mobile phones or other handheld devices. He transforms information from everyday routine into delicate three-dimensional forms that seem to have a life, or spirit of their own.

Matt Cook also used walking as a means to generate initial knowledge and ideas about Harlow. He used local architect Alastair Howe’s walking guide⁶ as his starting point that took him along residential streets, through underpasses and around the self-contained

4 This concept is one developed by Nick Kaye in *Site-Specific Art: performance, place and documentation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

5 Tim Ingold, *Lines, A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007), p2.

6 *Hidden Harlow – A series of walks exploring the new town* by Alastair Howe (2004) downloadable at http://www.visitharlow.com/what-to-see-and-do/architecture-history-and-heritage/view_21

communities that make up Harlow. Cook was drawn to these areas rather than the town centre.⁷ His walks allowed him to think about routes, actions and observations, parameters, boundaries, rules. His playful approach echoes the French writer and member of the Oulipo⁸ group Georges Perec who offers the following advice

Don't be too hasty in trying to find a definition of the town; it's far too big and there's every chance of getting it wrong [...]

What is the heart of a town? The soul of a town? [...] How do you get to know a town? How do you get to know your town?

Method: you must either give up talking of the town, about the town, or else force yourself to talk about it as simply as possible, familiarity. Get rid of all preconceived ideas. Stop thinking in ready-made terms, forget what the town planners and sociologists have said.⁹



Harlow New Town is renowned as an example of master planning. It was designed by one man: town planner and architect Frederick Gibberd. His presence is still respected and very much in evidence in Harlow through original architecture, societies and the Gibberd Garden on the edge of Harlow. Cook, as Perec suggests, did not become seduced by planning theory. He admired its legacy, but wanted to reflect and celebrate individuals' experiences of the residential areas. His portable performance game *Play Harlow!* brought a sense of play and discovery to the streets of Harlow. The players (local residents) set off on walks

7 The centre was already a site for one of the longer-term Genius Loci projects by Roman Vasseur 'Art and the New Town'.

8 Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle) was founded in 1960 by a group of mainly French speaking writers and mathematicians. They used they used restrictive rules and patterns as parameters in which to write creative texts, for example texts entirely constructed as a lipogram (a text which excludes one or more letters).

9 Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. and ed. by John Sturrock, (London: Penguin), pp61-62. *Espèces d'espace* [Species of Spaces] was first published in French by Editions Galilée, 1974.

around the town from a central point where a large portable board with Harlow images and maps is located. Passers by were encouraged to talk about their own experiences of walking in Harlow, and groups were given walking routes that highlight Harlow's often hidden, forgotten situations and cut-throughs. Cook's construction of the gameboard echoes his past weird and wonderful constructions made out of clockwork and electronic components, toys and card-board in works such as *Unaffected Alterations* (2007) at the Foundling Museum and *Mumbling Trains* (2006) at Swansea Waterfront Museum.

Contemporaries of Percey, the Situationist International, a Paris-based, radical art group, talked of the *dérive*, or drifting, which they used as a method of experimental walking. Cook practised this method in his initial research and explains: "the walker is drawn by the attractions of the terrain rather than the need to get somewhere. During a *dérive* a walker is said to be drawn emotionally by his/her environment, and therefore stops making decisions as to the direction in which to travel." Cook's tapping into the emotional rather than the practical allows him to discover new meanderings that perhaps only an outsider can experience.

Miranda Sharp who is familiar with two other Essex towns through her recent works *Requiem for Harlow* (2004) and *Waiting Room* (2006-) in Colchester, began her research in Basildon by walking, observing, and also allowing her emotional responses to surface.¹⁰ "I immediately went into an investigative role. I used a starting point similar to previous work that looked at our emotional attachment to place, the nature of place and its relationship to public and private space."

Sharp wanted to find a conduit to set up a series of personal exchanges between herself and individuals in Basildon in order to learn more about their experiences and perception of Basildon's *genius loci*. She noticed that the majority of women in Basildon had perfectly manicured nails. Could the intimate act of giving someone a manicure, taking their hands

¹⁰ Sharp grew up in Billericay, a neighbouring village of Basildon, and so she came to this project with vivid memories of Basildon from her childhood; learning to swim in the swimming pool and shopping in the market.



within hers on a professional level, create a structure for her work *I love Basildon*? The artist undertook professional training and became a qualified nail technician. She then developed and set up her 1950s style mobile nail stall on the Laindon Estate, and later in Basildon Market. The manicures were not the work, they were the hook, the starting point for a conversation, the collection point for a number of personal stories on Basildon life. Sharp's process and work is

listener-centred.¹¹ Her emphasis is on the social interaction and perception of place rather than the physical. As geographer Doreen Massey points out

The social spaces through which we live do not only consist of physical things: of bricks and mortar, streets and bridges, mountains and sea-shore, and of what we make of these things. They consist also of those less tangible spaces we construct out of social interaction. The intimate social relations of the kitchen and the interactions from there to the backyard.¹²

Sharp's resulting work has the transitory, ethereal elements of live performance. What is left after the events are the memories and residues of those exchanges. Her piece embodies the illusive quality of spirit of place. The documentation of her live public work, her observations through video, still image and written accounts attempt what Rosalyn Deutsch calls making the invisible, visible.¹³ The translation into a lasting tangible element produces another part of the work that lives on after the exchanges cease. It is the bricks and mortar that hint at the social relations, the spirit of the work, as well as the spirit of place of Basildon.

11 Suzi Gablik, 'Connected Aesthetics: Art after Individualism', p82 in Suzanne Lacy (ed.), *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1995), pp74-87.

12 Doreen Massey, 'Space-time and the politics of location', p49 in Alan Read (ed.), *Architecturally Speaking: Practices of Art, Architecture and the Everyday* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp49-62.

13 Rosalyn Deutsch discussed how "working with the public makes the invisible, visible" in her presentation at the symposium *Making Public* at Tate Modern, London 2005.

Damien Robinson and Stuart Bowditch were selected to undertake the fourth, more mobile and virtual project that evokes, or captures, spirit of place across Essex. Robinson and Bowditch (each individual artists in their own right) have collaborated before using sound and vibration to create multi-sensory installations. For their work *Vibe³* they collected sounds from the three towns. They collected sounds from local individuals' suggestions and personal archives, the Essex Sound and Video Archive, as well as field recordings of everyday sounds across the county.

The collected sounds have been edited by Robinson and Bowditch and programmed to play online and in a specially designed mobile cube with a flat panel speaker that makes the



structure resonate in a similar way to a stringed instrument. Robinson describes this as 'feelsound', "It enables people to experience a recorded sound tangibly, becoming more real and personally experienced than if they just experienced playback. Being deaf, feelsound is a high priority to me."

This vivid way of encountering particular experiences of a place gave the visitors to *Vibe³* in Harlow, Basildon and Colchester a new perception of place through contemporary sounds, but also sounds gathered from Essex Sound and Video Archive. In this way, Robinson and Bowditch's work allows us to directly experience aspects of particular places from the present and the past. Bowditch remarks that

I have been collecting sounds and making recordings for over ten years. These sounds are a large part of my memory of individual places and when I listen to them I can be transported back there instantly. Quite often removing these sounds from where they originated makes them more potent and you become aware of how layered a tapestry of sounds can exist in any one place.

Robinson adds:

Each location has its own sound characteristics – some are shared twenty-first century phenomena (such as traffic) – but you can explore and tease out others which are more hidden, or overlooked, or which have been lost in time. The experience of recording in St. Martin’s bell tower in Basildon – which rocks like a ship when the bells are rung – was fantastic; six of the bells come from a Colchester church demolished in 1955, so you experience sounds once heard forty miles away and fifty years ago.

Each of the Open Space projects demands a physical engagement by their own unique audience-collaborators, whether it is travelling to and from work in Colchester, having a conversation in Basildon, walking through the streets of Harlow, or feeling the vibration of church bells ringing. The physical sensations of these activities are not the whole sum of the experience of place, but rather a triggering mechanism to tap into a spirit of place that is unique to each individual. These projects do not attempt to give a general reading, rather they show the complex personal testimonies of experiences that go beyond words, pictures and sounds, and make the places in which we live so wonderfully unpindownable.

Jane Watt