

Me on the Map: A Case Study of Interactive Theatre and Public Participation

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1. Introduction

Me on the Map (MOTM) is a unique participatory show for classroom-sized groups of young people aged 6-15. Initially developed and produced by Newworld Theatre in Vancouver, through a commission from the Vancouver International Children's Festival, MOTM challenges participants to collectively solve the problem of how to best develop an actual lot of land that sits empty in their city. The MOTM experience guides participants through co-design activities that start in the classroom. The choice students make provide data that forms the foundation for the decisions made during the performance. The audience are asked to make choices using different decision-making styles. First, we ask participants to choose features based on their own personal preferences. Then we use an algorithm to analyze not only what the popular choices are, but how important each feature is to individuals in the group to assess what the fairest choice would be. Lastly, we introduce group values and the possibility of finding consensus and see how that affects the group's choice.

MOTM seeks to empower young people with the knowledge that the built environment of their cities and communities, within some realistic parameters is mutable and changeable – and that they can have input into those changes. Urban planning is the conceit for the game we play in the show, but the narrative focus is finding processes for making value-based decisions. MOTM also gives students practical, hands-on experience applying the foundation skills necessary for civic engagement: 1) listening to the points of view of others, 2) using anecdotal and empirical data to analyze different options, and 3) expressing opinions and beliefs to a group of peers. MOTM is unique because it integrates real world empty lots, urban planning, classrooms, teachers, online tools, data analysis and visualization, hands-on play, group decision-making and the timely grappling with the idea of, if you can't get everything you want, can you be satisfied and perhaps even happy getting some of what you want.

We consider the first iteration of MOTM at the Vancouver International Children's Festival very successful. After seeing the show, Vancouver Deputy Mayor Andrea Reimer posted on Facebook, "Completely blown away by *Me on the Map* and its power to engage younger audiences in collaborative planning" (May 25, 2015).

2. Theoretical background and Design Considerations

MOTM integrates a number of theoretical frameworks. First the show emanates from the tradition of participatory theatre (Butterwick, 2002; Sloman, 2011). In conventional theatre performances,

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audience members are expected to sit quietly and listen but theatre has often been used to actively address political and social problems, either as agitprop or as a way to engage in group problem-solving. The best-known example is Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (2000), wherein a facilitator (or "Joker") presents a scene with actors, then leads the audience through a process of stopping the scene to make different decisions and change the outcomes. MOTM borrows from Boal's use of a facilitator, but rather than presenting a story-based play, immediately engages the audiences in a shared initiative. The contribution of ideas and enthusiastic participation of the kids who attend *Me On The Map* is integral to the success of our show. The performer, an experienced facilitator, and theatrical performer guides the group through each storytelling point. We can attest to the idea that difficult subject matter is easily introduced and more understood when students are empowered by participation and disarmed by humour. Researchers at the University of Alberta along with Wong conducted a ten year research project on the use of participatory theatre for teaching sensitive topics. *Are We There Yet* is a participatory play for grade 9 students about sexual health and sexual decision-making. Through that process of working with playwright Jane Heather and director Jan Selman (both of UofA), Wong gained skills and approaches to engage audience members in authentic dialogue about difficult topics (Munro et al., 2007; Selman et al., 2007)

For a show to be truly participatory, issues of inclusivity need to be addressed. MOTM leveraged Derbyshire's previous work (2014) to question and challenge accessibility of material, interactions and concepts in the work. Inclusivity also appears in the show content as a criteria through which participants evaluate individual elements and the lot as a whole. Most traditional theatrical productions, and even some billed as participatory or interactive, keep the audience in a largely passive role. With MOTM, the participants make direct and noticeable impact on the outcome of the show.

A third framework is the intersection of urban planning and happiness studies. For a long time, cities were designed for efficiency – to work well. This usually meant that “expert” planners decided what to build and where to put it. They made decisions to build more roads to avoid things like traffic jams. But it seemed like the more roads they built, the more cars were on the roads. And the more cars on the roads, the more roads needed to be built. It was an endless loop. And not very efficient. At the same time, researchers wanted to know what made people happy (Ballas, 2013; Montgomery, 2014) . If they knew this, could they build places that made even more people happy? They discovered two things that help bring happiness: 1) feeling connected to friends and family, and 2) freedom to make decisions and move around (Montgomery, 2013a and 2013b). The researchers also discovered that the more time people spent in their cars, the less happy they were. So the urban planners and the happiness researchers started working together because the way a city is designed affects the feelings of people who live there. One easy way to increase the happiness of city residents is to create public spaces that give people places to connect with others, but also let people make choices about where they go and what they do.

Finally, a key element was looking at decision-making techniques. Public engagement processes such as participatory integrated assessments, deliberative polls, and citizen assemblies have attempted to go beyond simple majority votes in complex decision making processes (see for example Fishkin, 2009; Salter et al., 2010; Woodford & Preston, 2013). Nonetheless, most planning processes still rely on either majority voting or an attempt to reach consensus. Both approaches have serious flaws and we wished to explore alternative modes of deliberation. We were able to do this through the design of the theatrical experience and through our use of Ethelo Decisions - an online tool specifically built for “ethical decisions”. The design of MOTM integrates the frameworks in an theatrical experience to

works like *Are We There Yet?*, a participatory show for grade 9 students about sexual decision-making (Munro et al., 2007; Selman et al., 2007) and applying the technique that kids absorb difficult material best when it is presented with humour and in a way that respects their innate intelligence and problem-solving skills. *Me On The Map* combines the aesthetics of participatory theatre with principles of game design, where shared goals and objectives galvanize collaboration and cooperation among the players.

We've been working on *Me On The Map* steadily since 2011. Our work to date includes two years of exploratory workshops with children aged 4-12. The focus of these interactions was to gain a better understanding of how kids experience the city. What do they think is important and why? Do they understand concepts of urban planning and how it affects residents? The answer to these questions is a resounding YES. The first workshop phase increased our respect for kids' perspectives, particularly in their combined use of imagination and practicality. The workshops also yielded what we call "The One Move Game" which has become central to *Me On The Map*.

In the One Move Game, participants each choose a feature or amenity and build a shoebox sized model. They then place that model on a grid-map outline on the floor. Once everyone has placed their models, each participant gets to make one change. We invented this game on our feet with a group at Charles Dickens Elementary in Vancouver. The engagement from the students shot through the roof. The individuals considering changes were visibly thinking hard, other student 'lobbyists' whispered suggestions and ideas, and each participant had a rational and persuasive reason for the change they made. The One Move Game became a touchstone for us as we continued to develop MOTM towards the premiere production at the Vancouver International Children's Festival in May 2015.

Working on *Me On The Map* over many years, we have been able to integrate the value of inclusivity into our work and process design. Some could say that development process has been complicated by Wong moving to Ottawa and having two kids since we've started (now aged 4 and 2 years), or Derbyshire moving to Toronto and back to Vancouver again, and now to Calgary. But the logistical challenges have taught us the value of designing a process that accommodates our needs as humans to elicit our best work as artists. In this way, Inclusive Design -- that is, responding to the very human needs of those present -- was integrated into the project from the start.

And finally, most importantly, we wanted to make the students do the hardest thing: to speak about their choices to their peers and listen to others' ideas. We believe this exchange -- expression and consideration of ideas -- is central to democratic process and good citizenship. The trick was to do this without making it feel like a school assignment. And we found that the trick to doing that, was to engage students so that they feel ownership and investment in the ideas they are advocating for. We also made sure to utilize different modes of sharing ideas during the show. Sometimes this was in speaking to the facilitator and other times, for the shyer kids this was in smaller groups where the facilitator listened in and then retried ideas to present to all the participants.

Iterative Design for MOTM

Phase One – Co-design Workshops

We held workshops in schools, a Design camp at the Roundhouse Community Centre in Vancouver and a making tent at the 2013 Vancouver International Children's festival. We gathered perspective

from kids on what they thought about civic engagement, urban planning and how to make sure every resident has some of what they need to be happy.

Phase Two – Prototype Testing

Several schools in Vancouver, Toronto, and Ottawa were chosen to participate in the classroom activities and to test prototypes of the show. Me On The Map requires that students have an understanding of Inclusive Design, units of measures in math, collective and ethical decision-making as well as some elements of urban planning and happiness studies. Our student and teacher co-designers in this phase helped us to identify what worked, what didn't and what we can do to make the Me On The Map a truly unique, engaging participatory theatre show. Thanks to students and teachers at East York Alternative Secondary (Toronto), Churchill Elementary's Gladiator Snails (Ottawa), Charles Dickens Elementary (Vancouver), and James Ardiel Elementary (Surrey).

Phase Three- First Production

Me On The Map premiered at the Vancouver International Children's Festival May 25-31, 2015. There were 10 school performances. Attendees were Grade 1-5 students and their teachers. In addition there were 4 performances that were open to the general public. Attendees at these shows were a mix of adults and children.

4. First Production - the Me on the Map Experience

A. In classroom activity

The Me on the Map experience for students begins with their engagement in the classroom before the show. Teachers receive a toolkit #REF and guide students through an in-class activity. In this activity, students redesign a public space in their city. Students complete this task as individuals. Students must complete a Ground Plan Drawing by drawing in the features they choose to place in their park and create a map Legend. Students are able to choose six features from a predetermined list of 20. See Figure 1 below for a list of features.

The activity introduces basic challenges of urban design and the recent connection of happiness researchers and urban planners (Montgomery, 2014). The activity is framed as a "mission to design a public space that will encourage happiness in the people who use it. You will create a design that repurposes an actual empty lot in Vancouver." (Derbyshire & Wong, 2015)

ATTRACTIONS			
 Playground	 Waterpark	 Zoo	 Amusement Park
GREEN SPACE			
 Forests	 Wetland	 Fruit Orchard	 Community Gardens
COMMUNITY SPACES			
 Outdoor Stage	 Community Centre	 Interfaith Chapel	 Library
SPORTS SPACE			
 Sports Field	 Skate Park	 Tennis Court	 Swimming Pool
SERVICES			
 Daycare	 Co-Op Housing	 Fire Station	 Hospital

Figure 2: Feature selections (Wong & Derbyshire, 2015)

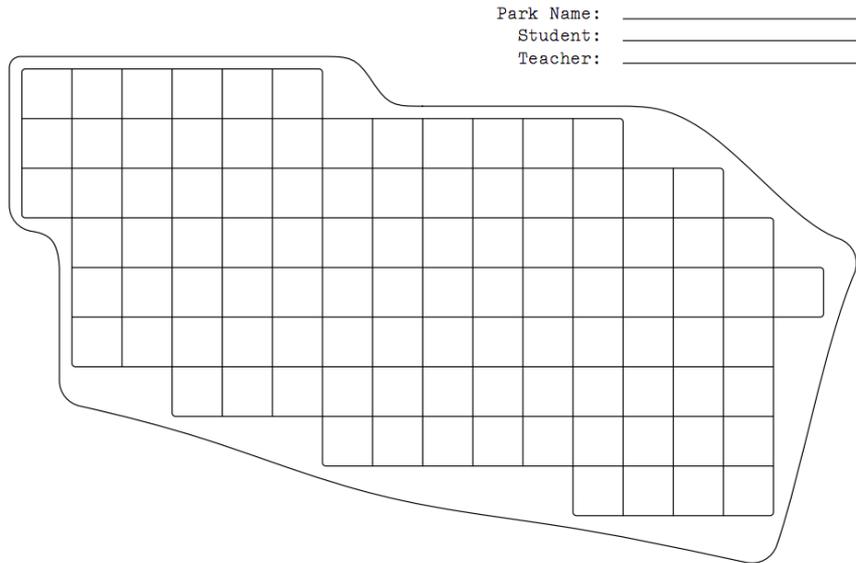


Figure 2: Empty map ready for populating with features (Wong & Derbyshire, 2015)

B. Building the database and generating the visualizations

Two weeks before seeing *Me On The Map*, the show Producer contacts the teachers and arranges to pick up copies of the Ground Plan Drawings and Legends completed by each class. The production team then uses the choices each student made to compile an individualized profile of each class's preferred features. This profile will be used during the show.

Each feature on the map is assigned ratings on a scale of 1-10 along dimensions of Happiness, Health, Inclusion, Spontaneity, and Connection. These dimensions were inspired by Montgomery's work in *The Happy City* were simplified for kids; happy, healthy, included, surprising and friendly. Different features have different value profiles. For example, an Amusement Park's rates high on values of Happiness but low on the value of inclusion as admission prices can deter low income families from attending. In this iteration, value ratings were assigned based on discussion among the production team. As described in more detail below, the ratings assigned and the dimensions used generated intense discussion during the shows and provide another avenue for discussion. We have already begun work at YPT in Toronto where the kids are rating the values of the features themselves.

This data retrieved from the classroom work is then loaded into a database for visualization and to tabulate the most popular choices. The data is also entered into Ethelo, an online collaborative decision making tool. The tool is designed to optimize multi-criteria decisions based on "fairness". Users select their preferred options along with weightings of how much they prefer each option. The Ethelo algorithm then sorts through the many permutations of options (in the MOTM case, 65,536!) to find the one that will be the most satisfactory to the most people. In the MOTM case, choices are entered on behalf of students using their maps to indicated choice and preference. For example, if a student chose to include 4 greenspace options (such as forest or garden) and no community amenities (such as interfaith centre or library), we infer they have a strong preference for green space and a weak preference for community amenities. Note that the students have not yet been told about the value assignment. That is part of the "reveal" of the show.

c. At the theatre

On entering the theatre, students are greeted by the Performer/Facilitator. Students retrieve their maps from an office mailroom type box as well as a card that says Designer and has a number 1-6 on it. This way the kids have their original work with them to compare with the other configurations that will be decided on during the show and a keepsake that not only designates them as a designer but tells them what smaller design group they will be a part of. The Performer shows how the students' maps have been used to gather data on what would be the most fair use of the public space for this group. The facilitator shows how each feature fits into one of five categories, and how we used their choices to weight the importance of each category to the group. This data was analyzed by a software algorithm that attempts to find the most satisfying solution for the greatest number of people. We reveal the six features that should make most people satisfied. The students move into smaller groups and decide where to put those features. The features are presented as stylized cardboard models and a map is collectively constructed on the floor.

At this point, the Facilitator introduces the concept that the choices we make in urban design can affect how the citizens of the city feel. Together we explore five values (inspired by Charles Montgomery's book) that contribute to happiness, like health, connection, and inclusivity. Each feature has been scored on these inherent values. We show the students radar charts that illustrate how the solution generated by the algorithm fulfill the values. More often than not, this choice did not match the values the students thought were most important. The Facilitator moderates a discussion to decide if some features can be swapped in to better reflect the group's values.

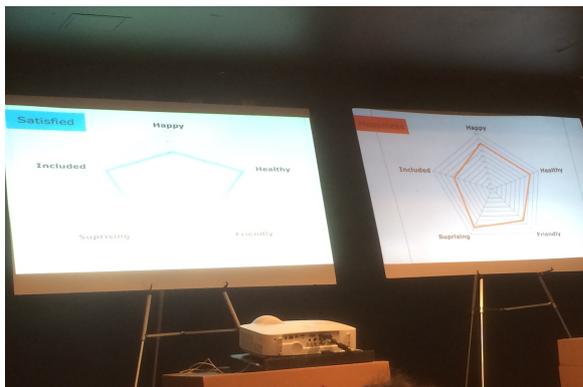


Figure 3: Comparing choices by value. Photograph courtesy of the authors



Figure 4: Values cards. Photograph courtesy of the authors.

The Facilitator introduces a possible development deal: a luxury highrise that would take up 30 of the 100 available units of space. The Facilitator guides the students through a process to collectively and ethically design the public space while accepting or rejecting this compromise. The students will use what they've learned to this point to inform their choices, defend values, and be continuously engaged with ideas of collaboration and including others opinions. If we can't have everything, what are we willing to strive for and/or settle for? The students have an assignment by the end of the performance. They can 1) reject the development proposal and stick with their Values Map, 2) accept the development proposal as is, or 3) accept the development proposal with amendments.

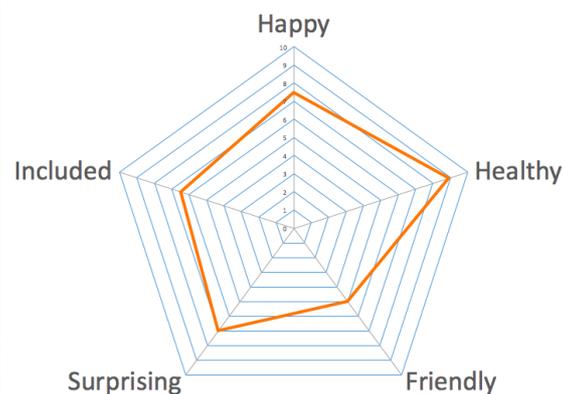
Note that the audience members attending public performances did not have the same pre-show, in-classroom preparation. Instead, we set up an activity tent outside the performance venue and suggested that audience members arrive 15-30 minutes prior to the performance start to complete the feature selection and map-making exercise. We couldn't process that data using the algorithm, so

instead we used the cumulative data selections generated by all the audience members (including school performances) who had attended up until that point.

Interestingly, the way we approached decision making had profound influence on the outcomes of the show. We started one public show with democracy (i.e. voting on the best choices) which triggered divisiveness and competitiveness. Two adult participants talked over everyone else - mirroring what often happens in public engagement activities. In addition, it was apparent that people couldn't just vote - they argued about the validity of other people's choices rather than listening to other people's votes. We found this validated the importance of our core questions around fairness - if we can't have everything we want, can we be satisfied or even happy getting some of what we want?

D. Post-show

Students are asked to submit, as a class, a final ground plan of their design, along with a letter to the Mayor explaining three reasons why they made the decision they did. Final designs are available on the Me On the Map website, which collects all the information from each show at the Vancouver International Children's Festival. Following the performance, students can go online to see the collective design made at the show, and see the designs other classes made at the show.



Figures 4 and 5: Final map and ratings from May 31st 2015, 3pm show. Images from Me on the Map <http://meonthemap.org/curious-citizen-designers-sun-31-3pm/>

5. Key learnings

Interacting with the schools

We found that teachers are very responsive to projects that engage with curriculum and create real-life applications of concepts they cover in the classroom. Students and teachers were especially responsive to our early prototypes where we asked students to construct model buildings using shoeboxes and craft supplies. This reinforced the need to include hands-on activities within MOTM. Students receive a lot of information through screens and opportunities to manipulate 3-D objects is appreciated and valued.

Value of prototyping and iterating the design

The design process of "prototyping" is very similar to the theatre process of "workshopping". In both cases, the objective is to test functionality in a controlled environment with the intended end-users. An iterative design approach affected the creative process by creating space for -- and in some ways,

expectation of -- failure. It is through these failures of "bugs" that we refined our concepts and delivery. For example, in an early prototype of the in-performance map building we used small toys and objects to represent the city's features. While working with students at East York Alternative, we found the recognizable objects were too distracting for students, who couldn't resist the desire to play. In response we created abstracted shapes and kept these in "kits" which we distributed to the audience only when needed.

Experiencing values

A key success of MOTM has been connecting emotion to issues in a way that is not possible through policy briefs and traditional forms of public engagement. It is in this way that theatre and games overlap. Both aim to influence the affective experience of the participant, both rely on the art of feeling. However, while games let participants experience feeling, games do not necessarily leave time to contemplate the choices and factors underlying those feelings. Theatre does this very well.

Our aim with MOTM is to intertwine the intellectual exercise of examining the communities values with the affective exercise of making choices that are supported or rejected by the group. This is the difference between MOTM and a public demonstration or presentation: we ask participants to root for particular choices. When the show is working at its best, participants passionately argue for or against specific features. By doing this, the implicit message to the participants is that our cities are places where not only all people are welcome (or should be) but are also places where all feelings are welcome. Seeing a classmate feel sad about the loss of something (or feeling that loss yourself) makes a very human connection between the built environment and how that environment affects individuals. MOTM brings together emotion and intellectual experiences, allowing participants to assess what is needed in the city, what is useful, what is desired, and how that makes the residents feel about living there. By integrating values into our discussion of the built environment, we are also introducing participants to specific values. For some students MOTM was a watershed moment for their understanding of values like inclusion and belonging, for example.

We also see this experience of values within the production team itself. MOTM has become a bridge between academia and practice -- the thinking and the doing. By introducing games and play, MOTM seeks to acknowledge the privilege education affords and to pass on ways of working through contentious issues that have previously been reserved for experts only. MOTM asks, "who's living with the consequences of urban planning decisions?" and seeks to invite those groups into dialogue to imagine a future that is different, one that could be better. This, to us, is one step towards creating interdependent communities powered by engaged citizens.

Art and public engagement

The use of arts in public engagement processes is not new (see for example Greene, 1995). However, the arts are often used in an instrumental fashion to achieve a specific objective or is very "light" in engagement, for example having participants contribute to a mural (Lee, 2015; Maggs, 2014; Moser, 2014). Using the arts in an intentional way to facilitate deliberation and values presented an interesting set of challenges for the production team. Our belief is that agency has to come out of emotional connection - both in terms of feeling and connecting that feeling to agency. We do this first by trying to connect agency to real world problem which can expand out authentic engagement through the arts by making the connection to real world space. An open question we are still exploring is - can you still use theatre techniques with real world parameters? A second part of our approach is the awareness that if our real intent is civic engagement, the last thing we want to do is put artifice on that. We have all experienced didactic arts-based programs that felt more like a lecture than an

engaging experience. Our goal is to promote civic engagement without losing sight of the power of the arts.

Connection with designers and artists

Artists work well with designers. Artists can ask of the designer - how does this tool/software advance and serve the needs of the story? Artists appreciate what designers know and how we can use digital tools in performance but don't get wowed by the new technology. In the case of MOTM, we deliberately kept the technology relatively simple. The technology in the show advances the story but does not distract from it. An additional reason for simplicity is that theatre artists are really good at working with limited budgets! We have found this may be helpful for future civic engagement projects where tightly constrained budgets are the norm.

Data as character

One of the core ideas for the show was the concept of "data as character". What would it look like if data was built right into the show both reflecting and influencing actions of the performance? In playwrighting we talk about how different characters are the "muscle" of the play at different times, how the choices of some characters are dependent and responsive to the actions of others. This is how the use of data functions in MOTM -- it should be considered by the audience and affect their choices. The use of data collection and scoring of the features, visual representation of choices in numerical, graphical and physical formats brought data into the centre of the production. By presenting this data to participants, the data sparked conversation and influenced decisions. At the same time, the data was updated live to reflect the impact of decisions made during the show. The use of Ethelo as an online collective decision making tool completed the circle of data use that impacted the flow of the show. We see much potential in expanding the use of data in future iterations of MOTM. In addition to collecting data on participant choices, we see much value in getting more detail on the participant experience including what happens to participants after the events. For example, there is a lot of value in getting kids engaged in this kind of process and thinking this way - "we are helping build the future of Vancouver!" Ideas along these lines could include pre & post workshop surveys, collecting and feeding back information to staff and council, inviting kids to council meeting to see presentation of their (collective) ideas and more.

Connection to policy and political process

One of the most interesting comments from a student participant was connected to his dissatisfaction with our value assignments for the Library feature. In his words, he felt that "libraries should be happier". This statement highlights an interesting connection of the show to the political process. The choice of dimensions used for scoring and the values assigned to each feature are not empirical choices with fixed values. Different people will have different ratings and opinions on what dimensions should be used for evaluation - these are political choices. That MOTM has prompted this reflection and critique from participants we see as a success of the process. For example, during one of the test shows in Toronto, the production team assumed that sports fields were very inclusive but were challenged by students who said that if parents did not have enough money to enroll them in the league and pay for uniforms, shoes, pads, etc. then you could they could not use the field. This proved a visceral demonstration of how values are subjective.

We also found ourselves - quite by chance - drawn into the real world of urban planning and the policy process. Unbeknownst to the production team when planning the show, the City of Vancouver and the Province of BC had been evaluating the vacant lot we have been using as a site for the new St. Paul's Hospital (Fayerman, 2015). This was announced in a press conference as the show opened. At

the same time, the City of Vancouver launched the False Creek Flats (the neighbourhood in which our park is set) development consultation starting the same day as the show (City of Vancouver, 2015). Moving forward, we wish to explore how MOTM can more explicitly connect with the policy development process.

This may take the form of installing engagement processes "in place" which brings in participants beyond the usual suspects that may attend public meetings. In this case the Children's Festival on Granville Island and in the future community centres, seniors centres, shopping malls and other locations that are outside the normal venues. We have learned from early work with Young People's Theatre in Toronto that MOTM is not only city specific but also neighbourhood specific. For example, the neighbourhood of Regent Park in Toronto is experiencing rapid gentrification. The City is pulling down big public housing towers, residents are being moved out and told they can come back but there is a lot of uncertainty in the community as to what will happen next. Students are already immersed in a 'vertical culture' so will have a very different experience from students in a rural community. We see this a rich area for future exploration.

Value of kid-led processes

Our final, and perhaps most exciting, observation is the power of power of kids bringing adults to the show. At the start of the show, we made agreements the process would be kid-led. The adults easily people picked that up first from a place of amusement "OK we'll let the kids lead" then to a deepened the engagement. Kids occupy a unique space between the practical and the imaginary. In that space all values seem possible for them - for example, course everything has to be inclusive - they don't question that. This ability to deal with real parameters with a sprinkling of utopian ideas freed up adults to look at things in a different way. At the end of the public shows there was a lot of hope expressed by the adults largely, we feel, as a result of the kid-led process.

6. Areas of future work/research

We need to keep working on Me On The Map. It isn't finished yet. The production we mounted at the Vancouver Kids Fest was a good start, but as so often happens when in a production process for a new work, we made decisions on the fly to accommodate the production timeline. We want to assess the project in its entirety to ensure that we are making the strongest choices. We think this piece can be great and have real impact in young people's lives.

Our ambition for Me On The Map is to create a tourable participatory show that can move nationally and internationally. To do that, we need to look at each of the individual threads we use to weave together a cohesive experience for participants:

- The process for choosing a real-life empty lot in each community. What are the considerations for smaller urban centres? Rural communities?
- How do we consider the real challenges faced by most cities: gentrification and the displacement of urban populations (often marginalized) in favour of construction of higher value properties and the more affluent citizens they attract?
- The process for choosing the menu of Features that students will choose from when they begin to design the space. How do we generate the menu in collaboration with residents of the tour cities so that the choices are relevant to them?

- The process for determining the Values that are important to the tour cities and how each Feature scores on those Values. How do we ensure that the Values are relevant to the students and the Features scored in a way that makes sense to the participants?
- The back-end data entry and decision-making algorithm. Are we best using the functionality of the decision-making software? Are we designing a data analysis process that is time efficient?
- The Teacher's Kit and pre-show activity we send to the schools. How do we ensure that the general public who attend are getting a comparable experience without the same preparation?
- The performance itself. Are we maximizing the strengths of live theatre and theatrical storytelling?
- The integration of data gathered from the audience members. How can the revelation of the data drive the narrative forward and increase the stakes for the participant?
- Can we adapt the theatrical container and process to question preferences and values in other urban planning contexts; Floor plans, building plans, transportation, public spaces etc.
- The post-show assignment. What is the legacy for Me On The Map? How can we build connection and exchange between the audiences in the different cities we tour to?
- How we connect real world developers and government decision makers to this theatrical experiment in civic engagement?

We are excited about all of these open questions. MOTM is, with its multiple levels of engagement and participation, integration of technologies before, during and after the performance, and the objective to be accessible and inclusive of all residents in the city, Me On The Map is a flexible platform for exploration and engagement. We look forward to future opportunities and exploring collaborations with partners in Vancouver, Reykjavik, Bristol starting with our partnership with Young People's Theatre in Toronto for the 2017/2018 season.

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