

Resonant Threads: Materialising

Stories from the Community

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Abstract

Resonant Threads adopts collaborative techniques to create a series of crafted artefacts, which investigate how community voices can be incorporated into a multi-layered design practice. Creating social spaces for participants and designers to interact, express ideas and tell stories as part of the development process can facilitate a broad range of insights. This responds to issues around technology adoption and use that aim to focus on the processes and experiences of design rather than the products. As a result, user-centred designers are challenged to widen the context of their work, adopt inclusive methods and engage with participatory tools and techniques. This project proposes that initiating group and individual interactions in the early, discovery phase of an enquiry, can contribute to meaningful, dialogue and co-production.

To test this approach, the author has been working with a female group to capture shared memories of local community history. Electronic textiles and audio narratives were used as prompts within social encounters to encourage group discussion of memories and common themes from their past, such as childhood, freedom or change. The desire to cherish and preserve personal and collective narratives charged the anecdotes with significance, producing a rich archive. Digital craft practice creates opportunities to combine material production with digital technology, integrating novel functionality into objects. It is hoped that by mediating meaning and personal histories through objects, the practice can produce something of value and envision new experiences with expanded expressive properties.

This paper will describe the multi-layered aspect of the inquiry in more detail, the stories that emerged and the legacy it could provide through building tangible things that have a connection to the future as well as the past.

Introduction

Local community groups converge around shared interests, to build new skills and promote health and creativity. Resonant Threads was conceived as a participatory design-led project to implement co-creation methods and encourage the members of a specifically chosen group to explore shared histories, memories and stories of events in a place that had significance to them all.

A broad range of insights, opinions and life experiences were accessed by creating social spaces for participants to interact and converse, enabling them to share in the design process through dialogue and co-creative methods. The project aimed to visualise memories in tangible form, giving them a physical presence, applying craft methods to create a series of co-produced, personal artefacts.

The researcher investigated these ideas by working with the Penryn Women's Institute, an all-female group based in Penryn, Cornwall that has been meeting since 1929. This project facilitated members of the group to reveal personal and collective memories that have taken place over the last sixty years, to expose a past before the Internet, before the pervasive use of digital technology, to uncover stories, snippets of community history with a rich, resonant social history.

Reimagine your town – background to the project

Resonant Threads came out of the socially engaged, community project *Reimagine your town* conceived by artist Becalalis Brodskis, (Brodskis, 2016). This aimed to initiate discussion around the past, present and future of the town of Penryn in Cornwall. He facilitated community workshops and events that included storytelling and approaches to visualising and animating stories and memories using mixed media.

The researcher met the Penryn Women's Institute during the Reimagine project, whose members had been involved in creating a collection of knitted items to animate and visualise memories offered by their members. The oldest member, age 91, recalled:

"One early memory of special excitement at my young age took place during one of the periodic cattle runs. Cows arrived in railway cattle trucks at Penryn Station, which in those days was very large, with sidings allowing for shunting of wagons etc, large sheds and waiting rooms. The cattle, sometimes in large numbers, were driven through the town to Penryn Quay, where some were put aboard ships tied alongside the wharves, while others were delivered to farms thereabouts."

The link between her verbally described memory of an actual event to an object that had been created using a textile craft and rendered in physical form (see **Figure 1**) prompted the conception of Resonant Threads.



Figure 1 Knitted cows used to illustrate the memory

Multi-layered design practice

The approach to the project engaged a range of different techniques and methods to collect data in verbal and tangible forms. These methods ranged from collaborative techniques, interviews, archive creation and design prompts to reveal memories, prompt experiences or investigate making practices.

Themes around memory, loss, dislocation and life history were explored in co-present discussions and workshops. These spaces facilitated participants to reveal stories and engage in inter-subjective experiences around people, places and events and explore their personal and collective significance. The group holds expertise and insight into their own lives and communities that enables them to play an active role in contributing knowledge to the project. Elizabeth Sanders describes how people included in participatory design methods are “seen as the experts in understanding their own ways of living and working” (Sanders, 2013). Meaning arose from these exchanges, charging the anecdotes with a desire to preserve and cherish personal testimony and individual narratives.

Participatory design methods were successful in facilitating conversations and storytelling between participants and designers, developing trust and mutually beneficial relationships that would lead to more insightful, significant responses. As Jayne Wallace et al. outline, “The inquiry becomes a dialogical encounter in which designers and participants give to each other, rather than designers trying to extract information from participants.” (Wallace, 2013).

Electronic textile prompts

An electronic textile piece called Touchplay served as a physical and digital prompt, to motivate recollections and dialogue from the group. It embedded sound clips from the previous residents of Penryn, taken from the Museum’s audio archive to initiate discussion. The group could pick up and move the embroidered fabric discs (Figure 2) around the surface to trigger the recordings in a playful manner that heightened curiosity and enjoyment and helped them easily experience the audio snippets through the textile interface. Touchplay generated dialogue between the researcher and group, in which all parties opened up to each other in a reciprocal act of giving. Textiles are familiar surfaces that communicate their physical attributes so participants instinctively understand how to approach, play and touch them.



Figure 2 Touchplay, electronic textile surface with embedded sound clips

The emotional quality of the voices, the retelling and significance of stories attached to past events, seemed to resonate with the group. The following example statement by one of the group refers to a sense of transformation in how objects are produced, “Course it’s a different story now because don’t matter where you go, you go in a shop to buy something which don’t want making”.

Stories and memories flowed freely from them, as they responded to one other, sharing and extending

recollections to construct their own narratives and perspectives on the past. Adapting Touchplay for use as a design prompt resulted in an empathetic connection between past and present as the group retold fragments of personal history reinforcing their meaning for the group as a collective whole.

Digital craft promotes experimentation as a critical aspect of the process to ensure that digital processes are not conducted in a systemic, rational manner. Instead material, informational, temporal and interactive forms should be subject to human agency, the creation of meaning and the primacy of human experience (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013).

Discussion and Interviews

Resonant Threads used group discussion and individual interviews to gather story data. The group was encouraged to share their recollections of Penryn and highlight noteworthy people, events and activities. Many members of the group seemed keen to focus on change, revealing activities, habits and practices that are receding from view as societies move away from the past, losing a sense of community and connection with one another. As one member of the group said, referring to community production and unity through cooperative making, “a little frock, well she had a neighbour that was handy to make up little bits, and I remember having one with voile in they days with little, you know you don’t see such pretty material like and I was over the moon ‘cos I was dressed up”.

The collective opinion was that Penryn is not changing for the better, that there was a community unity unique to previous ways of life that was of value and worth capturing, preserving and cherishing. As one member explained, “we don’t want to lose those memories”.

Materialising stories

The creation and archiving of the audio narratives aimed to preserve personal stories and connect them to shared testimony, placing value on individual voices within a collective, common culture. The audio archive would also add to an existing archive held at Penryn Museum as an historical record of a regional, Cornish social history. Listening to the voices of local people held in the archive using the regional, vernacular dialect had an emotional effect on the group, some of the voices being familiar to the group, while others were identified as no longer living. Sound was integrated into the work as a vehicle to transmit oral histories, activating the voices, memories and experiences of the group through interactive effects.

Following on from the group workshop, a subgroup of women volunteered to individually discuss their memories with me in more depth. About six members related more specific memories that they wanted to capture and share; here is a recollection from one group member.

“It’s a memory of the 50’s that I had as a child, and it was the women waiting for the Marigold bus, which delivered their baskets of hot food to their husbands working down at Falmouth docks. It was very long working days for the men then and nobody had cars, well hardly anybody had cars so the bus did a service where the women took a hot meal in baskets and went to the bus stop and put the baskets on the bus and they were delivered to the men in the docks and they had a hot meal midday”.

Alongside the audio archive, the researcher encouraged the group to make objects that reflected aspects of their stories, to depict and physically illustrate their memories through crafted means. The adoption of textile techniques was not universally endorsed, as not all members possessed the required skills. For a number of participants, the solution lay in partnering with each other. One person might contribute the recollection, while another would create an object to illustrate it. This multi-skilled, cooperative approach demonstrated an ability by the group members to work collectively to co-create and co-produce. It revealed the tacit bonds and inter-group communication between the members, and embeds these relations and mutual understanding in the work as a material manifestation of oral histories.



Figure 3 Yellow marigold bus, story from the 1950's

In addition to the audio account described above, this participant also contributed a hand-stitched picture, seen in **Figure 3**, that she created with her daughter. The embroidered object depicts her story through textile and stitch, revealing meaning and potency through crafted means specific to a place and time. The stitched image is not based on a kit or by following a pattern; it is an original image designed by the maker and represents an authentic response to constructing a narrative in tangible form. These alternate perspectives rely on craft processes to generate and reveal subjective realities and enable other less dominant voices to contribute to shaping history.

This account re-tells history from an alternative perspective that reconstructs a social history that might otherwise be inaccessible to us. It remembers domestic, everyday practices that hint at gender relations, labour practices and the organisation of society to make pertinent comparisons with our present. It elevates other voices that typically, may not have a platform to contribute towards writing or re-telling history and illustrates Giselle Byrnes notion that “we can *never* recreate the totality of the past – this is an actual impossibility – we can only work with those pieces that remain.” (Byrnes, 2012).

Crossmodal sensory experiences, touch and textiles

There has been renewed interest in constructing crossmodal sensory experiences, as distinct from textual and linguistic communication. Myrto Karanika defines crossmodal as “the integration of information gathered through different sensory modalities that results in our unified perceptual experience”. (Karanika, 2014). This approach places a value on the practices and processes that prioritise the sense of touch within a multi-sensorial frame. The crossmodal dimension operates in a sensory, immediate and reciprocal space with a continuity that links it to the everyday, (Karanika, 2014). Touch sensations and their somatic resonance suggest connection, to people, to objects and the relationships between them. The touch modality operates as a metaphor for that connection with one another, in its corporeal, physically nuanced, gestural nature.

Bristow explores how textiles are connected to the sensory modality of touch within non-discursive communication. She states: “crucial to the idea of the material object as a non-discursive language is the suppressed modality of touch, a sense that is implicit in textile” (Bristow, 2012).

The sense of touch generates insights that are compelling and difficult to refute through its direct, physical immediacy. The electronic textile prompts used in Resonant Threads demonstrates how touch can facilitate direct experiences and dialogue through the familiarity of soft, fabric surfaces and our inherent knowledge of how to manipulate them. Touch has an immediacy that connects it to the everyday, a power to reach us emotionally on a visceral level that is both obvious but also hidden or unacknowledged.

While much domestic, crafted handwork is marginalised and often dismissed as amateur and second rate, the

researcher believes it offers something of value. Crafted pieces act as social and cultural commentary on our lives that depict gender roles, fragmentation, social and personal change and history in an actual, tangible manner. These pieces foreground the reality of the ordinary and also, as Jo Turney states, transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, (Turney, 2004). The ordinary is elevated and recognised afresh, an exemplary mode of crossmodal perception, listening, touching and knowing about past practices.

The value of the textile surface can be assessed through the pieces created by the group members in **Figure 1 and 3**. Not only does the work exhibit a visual value through their narrative depiction, the value is also evident in the making of the work and the practices involved. Most of the women who participated in Resonant Threads had adopted skills they felt comfortable doing, particularly textile techniques: stitching, knitting and embroidery. This may reflect their demographic position as older women who were demonstrating an embodied knowledge of these practices, evidence of a comfort and ease with a strongly material approach to object creation and representation. Set against this backdrop, the material context of making, of crafting through textiles and thread bears witness not just to the past but also to the present in describing a set of values that the women had absorbed.

Summary and Reflections

This paper discusses how participatory and collaborative methods can enrich the early stages of a design-led project through engaging sensibilities in the design process that result from incorporating inclusive, nurturing relationships between group members and design researchers. Wallace et al. describe them as sensibilities arising in the design process that can lead to connection with others, capturing subjective experiences and developing opportunities for shared dialogue and storytelling as well as relationship building and bonds. (Wallace, 2013).

The digital craft practice proposed by this researcher includes methods of working with people, engaging them in the creation of the work and building opportunities for dialogue and social exchange. Involving people in conceptual and co-productive processes develops relationships and connections with people, which can emerge out of designing spaces for interaction. The methods explored in this paper elicit individual narratives prompted by constructing new kinds of interactions between people and contexts that might also include technology. Interaction can take different forms, as an aspect of social engagement as well as a product of working with digital materials and designing surfaces that embed digital capability. The role of the electronic textile as a design prompt helped frame the enquiry using a more open approach and enhanced the experience by connecting people across generations to learn from one another and access alternative narratives. Additionally, the electronic textile prototype intimated at the development of future systems that would function as soft, textile interfaces. Simonsen and Robertson discuss how interactions with prototypes, mockups and other tools can represent developing systems and future practices. (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013). The possibility for these systems to sustain engagement, enjoyment and curiosity through material means could enhance the experience by adding digital capability and stimulating multi-sensory modes of enquiry.

Community was enacted as the group brought the stories alive and activated sensibilities in the members that captured self and other through inter-subjective connection. These observations suggest an expanded vision of digital craft practice, as a set of practices that overlap and inform one another.

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