

21ST CENTURY MAKERS AND MATERIALITIES

Proceedings of the 2nd Biennial

Research Through Design Conference | RTD 2015

Woods, M., and Maxwell, D. 2015. The Blue Plaque: Co-Creating Design Fictions in the Wild.
In: Proceedings of the 2nd Biennial Research Through Design Conference, 25-27 March 2015,
Cambridge, UK, Article 30. DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.1328000.





The Blue Plaque: Co-Creating Design Fictions in the Wild

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Abstract: Blue heritage plaques pepper the UK landscape expounding officially validated narratives celebrating past events, people, and buildings. This paper presents a novel method that draws on this specific cultural context to generate reflective, nano-stories, documenting them through populating a place and physical space. The guerrilla blue plaque method was designed to enable engagement, collaborative story development and exchange, initially as part of a wider UK arts and digital media festival and

developed further for RTD 2015. The authors' primary aim for the case study presented in this paper was to enable visitors to reflect on possible futures, in this instance the theme of future cities. This was achieved through co-creating shared stories via commemorative guerrilla versions of blue plaques. This paper explores the rationale for re-appropriating the blue plaques as critical design artefacts to help understand the future hopes, needs, and goals for individuals and communities. We position the method in relation to action research, co-design and design fictions. Finally, by considering early findings and subsequent adaptations, we present new adoptions of the method, and reflect on the role of the guerrilla blue plaque as a feedback mechanism for participatory design and citizen engagement.

Keywords: co-creation; storytelling; critical design; design fictions; future; reflection.





Rationale and Context

Research Challenge and Background

The use of artefacts as a transformational tool within design research has been growing in recent years, at the same time we have seen a proliferation of ‘social’ design practices such as co-design and participatory design (Bowen 2009). Together, the role of design artefacts and social design practices have been applied to address so called ‘big’ questions, and moreover to enable people to understand and contribute to the design of new services, technologies and products. These approaches have been applied in areas such as health and wellbeing, policy, planning and democracy.

This paper outlines research that was undertaken to engage people in a ‘City Fictions’ Festival; the aim was to provide a means for visitors to the Festival to reflect and articulate their thoughts about future ‘things-that-matter’. We wanted to investigate how stories could be used to connect across visitors’ values and support them to project those values into a future context. In order to do this we adopted the existing aesthetic of an easily recognised ‘everyday’ object (blue heritage plaques) to explore visitors’ reflections on the theme as well as the communication of latent, radical or paradigm-changing hopes, needs and goals.

Blue heritage plaques pepper the UK landscape expounding officially validated narratives celebrating past events, people, and buildings. They support concise, easily accessible stories of significant past (both recent and comparatively distant) achievements in the present. They ostensibly connect these stories with place and local heritage for communities and people of all ages and backgrounds. They also play a role in conservation; visibly augmenting and highlighting buildings and spaces with historic associations in order to preserve them for the future (English Heritage 2010). Examining artefacts such as blue plaques can promote an understanding of historical context and relevance, where such artefacts contain stories that trace the relationship between peoples, things, ideas and their environment.

By adopting the form and function and of English Heritage Blue Plaques and the stories they hold, as familiar and easily understood artefacts, we hypothesise that visitors are more easily inspired to imagine and commemorate future, critical questions, hopes, needs and goals. Envisaged and repackaged as design fictions – that is, design applied to provoke and prompt thought on fictitious, future scenarios – blue plaques can simultaneously engender reflection and create new understandings of present and future scenarios.

Related Work and Methods

Designing for future experiences of people, communities and cultures is a distinct practice where objects as artefacts are often combined with embodied, “experiential” and immersive activities and storytelling. Scott Smith talks of the significance of the ‘object as entry point, not as the terminal point’ (Smith 2012), while Bruner (1992) argued that stories help us construct historical, alternative and possible futures and help share imaginary futures.

The practice and adoption of objects as artefacts to examine the future is not new. Since Duchamp’s Fountain in 1917, the everyday object has been appropriated and reconceptualised to create new thought. Objects can often act as a prop, whether it is a hat, a sword or a chair, they provide a leap of imagination that helps bring to life alternative realities, including future scenarios.

In 2009, artists Hollington and Kyprianou presented ‘Adams & Smith, auctioneers of late-capitalist period artefacts’ at Arnolfini, Bristol. The artwork was a fictitious auction room founded in 2034. Everyday objects (such as a pack of cigarettes, a double buggy, and a smoke detector) were presented for sale as 21st Century collectables with accompanying auctioneer’s notes, for example:

Lot no 1, Double Buggy Perambulator *‘This used, but well conserved double buggy perambulator is a wonderful reminder of the folly of unrestricted growth of the human population before the Last Depression.’*

This additional text re-contextualise the artefacts using narrative in a way that makes them and the cultural social and political thinking of today seem completely absurd when positioned from 15 to 20 years hence.

As we can see, storytelling is employed both consciously and unconsciously in many facets of art and design, and in fact throughout research processes. It is also important to recognise that stories always reflect and speak to the society they are told in, whether this is through reinforcing cultural values or attempting to subvert authoritarian figures (Zipes, 1983, Warner, 1994), and the blue plaques experiment was no exception.

Process and Practice

The guerrilla blue plaque method was designed to enable engagement and collaborative story development as part of a wider UK arts and digital media festival, namely Future Everything Festival in Manchester, March 2014. The opening two days were physically and conceptually centred on the construct of speculative future city set in 2018, enacted in buildings across NOMA, an area of Manchester set for redevelopment. This new ‘city’, dubbed ‘City Fictions’, was a large-scale set of design fictions as pop-up city ‘institutions’ and art installations “imagined through conjecture and curiosity”.



The aim of the 'Blue Plaques' was to enable festival visitors to reflect on the thematic City Fictions by actively participating in creating and shaping critical questions and responses, stories and values of possible futures. A key project motivation was to explore storytelling through the use of the everyday, familiar object, and here the culturally specific trope of the blue plaque enabled participation in a fictitious scenario.

To facilitate this, we developed a set of pre-designed blue plaques to commemorate real and imagined events, people, and values, which we placed across the site prior to the festival opening, situating them as appropriately as possible to relate to artworks (figure 1). In line with the connotations of blue plaques and to subvert the nature of single, authoritative stories (i.e. those chosen to be remembered for posterity by cultural institutions in the guise of blue heritage plaques), the research team adopted the personas of a heritage group, the City Fictions 'Tourism and Heritage Working Group'.

To further give support to the notion of an official 'working group', the authors set up a reception desk with a map of the overall festival site (figure 2).

Wilson's performance continuum (Wilson, 2006, p. 99) is useful as a framework for the blue plaque instantiation as described herein, and conceived of as a blended storytelling-performance, part role play,

part script, but critically: a) responsive to each set of 'tour visitors', b) opportunistic as regards conversations and engagements with artists en route, and c) emergent as tour evolved to take in additional blue plaques as created by 'tour visitors'. Wilson defines six parameters to distinguish between levels of performance and storytelling across conversation-cultural performance, low-high intensity, informal-formal, subconscious-conscious, low-high risk, low-high rewards, and given this context, it is clear the methods adopted here tend towards higher performance levels.

At City Fictions, blue plaque tours were run up to four times a day, each being up to 1 hr in length with 3-12 visitors in each group, the tours were led by one of the team members. To ensure some level of consistency an opening script was developed to set the scene and to introduce the working group concept to the visitors. This not only introduced our roles as guides but set the parameters for their engagement also. By taking part on the tour, and visibly wearing a tour sticker, visitors implicitly agreed to become 'associate members' of the working group, whereupon we gave explicit permission to design, create, and install their own plaque in the City Fictions space:

"Welcome to City Fictions. City Fictions is a city of our imagination. A city of our hopes and dreams. It is a place of experiment. Together we are questioning what our future and our future cities will be."



Figure 1. Examples of seeded plaques in situ.



Figure 2. The blue plaque reception desk showing site map with list of plaque names, and template and promotional materials.

We are the Tourism and Heritage Working Group. Thank you for agreeing to become Associate members of the Tourism and Heritage Working Group. Thank you for agreeing to take on the responsibility to help write the city's future history...

To help your work as Associate members, we – the Tourism and Heritage Working Group – will lead you on a Tour of the City. We will share what we know already about the city's history. But the city's history is being made right now, today and tomorrow.

So we will need you – in your role as Associate Members of the Tourism and Heritage Working Group – to think very carefully about whether what you see today should become part of the city's future history and heritage....

At the end of tour we will formally reconvene as the Tourism and Heritage Working Group so that each of you can make your decisions, write your plaque and then formally display it on our City Fiction walls.” [Extract from opening script]

The primary manifestation of the ‘Working Group’, however, was through leading performative tours that took in highlights of the pop-up city.

Whilst we recognise that “‘performance’ is a complex, cross-disciplinary, and “essentially contested concept” (Carlson, 2004, p. 1), the adoption by the authors of personas (i.e. city tour guides) was a useful analogy for visitors to understand both their and our roles within the tours.



Figure 3. ‘Tourists’ on the ‘Tourism and Heritage Working Group’ tour.

During the tour, the tour group were led by the guide, replete with official lollipop sign (see figure 3), taking in the artworks and given the opportunity to speak to artists. The existing blue plaques were indicated en route, these providing a context and overview for the artworks and City Fictions concept.

Upon returning to the 'Tourism and Heritage Working Group' reception desk, the visitors, as 'Associate Members' of the group, were invited to complete their own blue plaque for the site (figure 4). Visitors were encouraged to reflect on their own experience of the site, and consider what they would like to commemorate for the speculative city. Prior to completing blank laminated circular blue plaques, tourists were invited to test their plaque on printed, paper versions, using white marker pens. Once completed, visitors could chose to a) direct the working group on where they would like their plaque to be installed, b) install the plaque themselves, or c) undergo an 'official' unveiling ceremony, with the cutting of a red ribbon upon installation.

After each tour, the reception desk map was updated with numbered stickers and titles to indicate the locations of new plaques and as an overall archive.

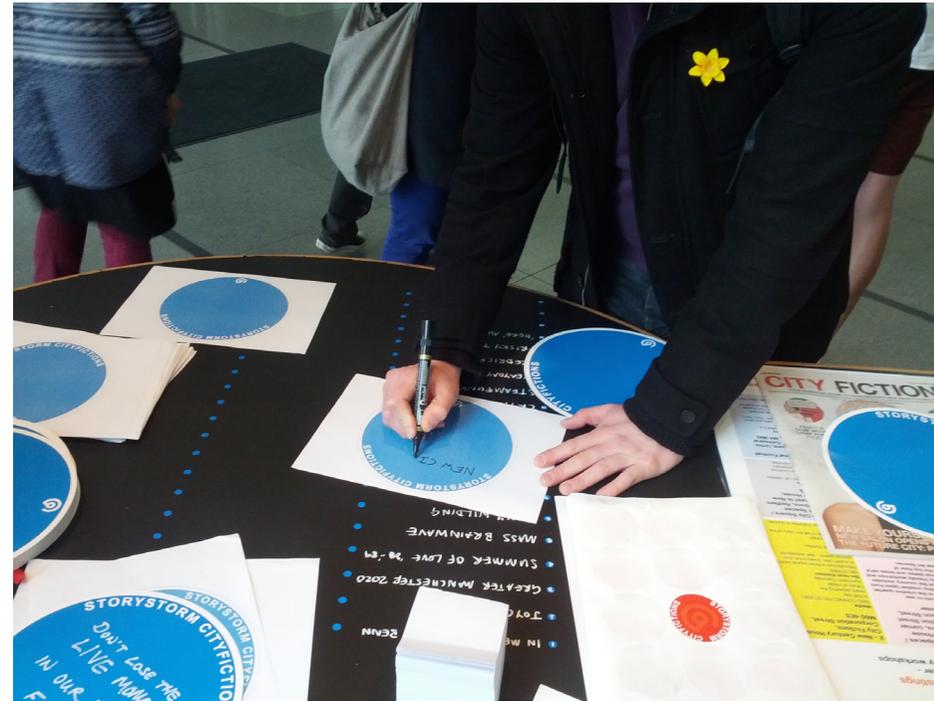


Figure 4. 'Associate Members' completing their plaques.

The guerrilla blue plaque method aimed to create a transaction, where the situated aesthetic and contextualised stories held by the design artefact, accompanied by 'expert' knowledge provided by the 'tour guides' was exchanged for the contribution of new blue plaques by 'visitors/ working groups'. Thus the 'everyday' object informed by performance and storytelling, co-design and design fiction forms a framework for research.



Figure 5. Plaques showing direct reference to artworks and festival themes.

Results

In this first instantiation of guerrilla blue plaques, i.e. as a form of expression for visitors, we had little idea of what to expect. Whilst the range of visitor completed plaques (21 in total) was varied, they can be considered in four broad categories: 1) Responding directly to artworks; 2) Obliquely referring to artworks and topical issues; 3) Values and aspirations; 4) Reflections of historical or personal events.

1. Responding Directly to Artworks

It was clear that some of the completed plaques related directly to immediate responses and reflections on both individual artworks and wider festival themes. For instance, the top two plaques in figure 5 relate to the theme of makeup and camouflage, which correlate to an artwork that used asymmetric make up and adornments to render the wearer unrecognisable by facial recognition software.

Similarly, the bottom right plaque in figure 5 regarding dietary history relates to the bio-kitchen installation at the festival, where 'mystery meat' was investigated along with gluten testing in common foodstuffs, often with surprising results.

Another example is that of the 'New City Square' plaque in figure 5, a commentary on the in-progress city parliament at the site, constructed during the festival itself.

2. Obliquely Referring to Artworks and Topical Issues

Several plaques were created that appeared to indirectly draw on themes from the festival and artworks, taking on board the idea of a new city, with the possibility of creating new rules and experimenting with democracy, community, and transactions. Figure 6 demonstrates some of these plaques; top right envisages the end of fiat currency and treasury-controlled finances; bottom right draws on the notion of open source and commons to designate land as free for farming or living (freeland).

In addition, plaques combined the ethos and concept of the city with contemporary or cultural issues. Figure 6 bottom left is a plaque that commemorates the 'discovery of a sustainable energy source that did not involve fracking' (fracking was a current news item at the time of the festival). Figure 6 top left suggests that New Zealand/UK TV series 'The Tribe', set in a post-apocalyptic world, might be the future, responding to the futuristic context of the festival.



Figure 6. Plaques showing current cultural references and oblique correlation with festival themes.



Figure 7. Plaques showing values and aspirations.

3. Values and Aspirations

In a possible correlation with some of the seeded plaques around values (e.g. 'Here one day soon/ it will be remembered that all humans are equal' positioned outside a sign for female/male/disabled toilets) and again a nod to the future nature of the pop-up city, several plaques were created that both admonished and provided warnings for the future.

They ranged from 'In memory of the present/ killed by the future/ sorely missed by no-one', to 'Don't lose the live moments/ in our digital futures' and 'Never try to predict the future or it will fight back' (see figure 7).

4. Reflections of historical or personal events

The final category in the visitor-created plaques centred on events and people, documenting festival events (figure 8 top right), past music gigs that took place in the building (figure 8 bottom), and strong female characters associated with Manchester (figure 8 top left).

It is worth noting that none of the authors of these three examples went on a 'Working Group' tour. Whilst we encouraged visitors to take part on a tour before completing a plaque we did not enforce this in any way.

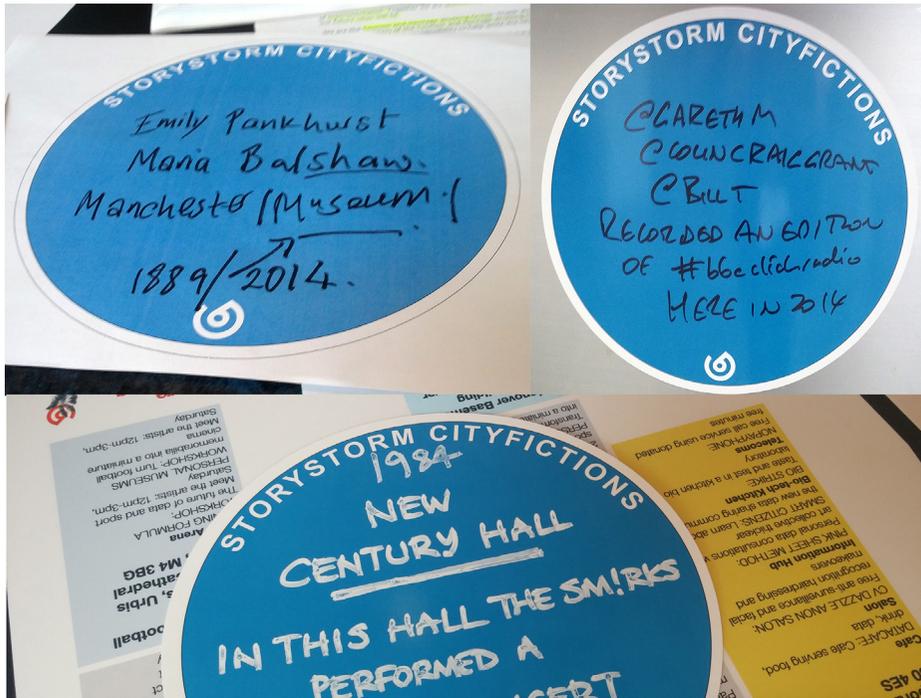


Figure 8. Plaques commemorating events and people.

Discussion

As the Results section demonstrates, the guerrilla blue plaques offered a feedback channel for the visitors and stakeholders to share and voice opinions and responses that would otherwise be unnoticed. Whilst some of the visitors on the guided tours hung back to explore the exhibits during the tour (e.g. the pop-up museum had a series of artefacts and installations), the vast majority of those that completed the tour also completed the (voluntary) activity of the plaque afterwards. The tours themselves had considerable value for participants as a way of navigating the site, providing insights to the exhibits and additional conversations with artists as a ‘safe’, non-threatening way-in to the theme and concepts. By the second day of the festival, visitors were seeking out the tours by word of mouth.

The performative framing of the ‘Tourism and Heritage Working Group’ allowed a freedom and brought a sense of playfulness to the experience, casting both tour guides and ‘tourists’ in known roles with clear expectations. The additional office of ‘associate members’ gave tour participants explicit permission to become their own authors, albeit anonymously, with ownership over positioning the plaque, and therefore active contributors to the festival experience and artworks. The production aesthetic also played an important role, situating the experience within a well-known heritage and authoritative framework, adopting a similar trademark blue hue, serif typeface, and circular format.



The co-creation approach was particularly effective when the chosen location for the plaque, and stories, values and ideals juxtaposed each other; for instance the current land and energy crisis and concerns around fracking, as evidenced in two of the plaques. Whilst some of the parameters for completing the plaques were intrinsic to the plaques themselves (i.e. physical space available to write on, and cultural expectations around blue plaques) the instructions for completing each plaque was open ended, and this is reflected in the overall series. As the completed plaques record, the subject was often related to the festival in some way, providing a nuanced set of reflections, not only more aesthetically pleasing and visible than traditional feedback forms, but carefully constructed and individually important.

The blue plaques as described in this paper are and were deliberately ‘low tech’, analogue experiences. Integrating digital components however is a potential new avenue to augment the experience, e.g. attaching meta data to each plaque, creating movable plaques with wearable sensors to track their location, or enabling version control so that content (e.g. future goals and hopes) might evolve or deliberately degrade over time.

To conclude, the blue plaques as described provide more than a critical design artefact – they offer a medium for documentation and for critical reflection. They subvert the recognised cultural norm and single authoritative voice of conventional heritage plaques, opening up rather than closing down ways of sharing and telling stories through objects.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank FUTURE EVERYTHING for hosting the project, and festival visitors for taking part in co-creating stories around the festival. STORYSTORM was funded by EPSRC CCN+.

All images used are authors’ own.

Exhibiting at Research Through Design

At RTD new co-created examples of STORYSTORM guerrilla blue plaques will be generated to foster discussion of the tangible artefacts approach. RTD ‘branded’ – location and conference specific plaques will be installed and embedded into the fabric of the RTD exhibition. These will be considered as follows: seeded plaques that 1) reflect the scope, values, themes or aspirations of the conference/exhibition; 2) reflect on the history/future of nearby buildings or spaces; 3) celebrate people, inventions and achievements real and/or imagined.

This will enable further empirical data gathering, active reflection and engagement on the affordances and design of the artefacts both as objects, and their realised and potential roles within the conference. We will convene a working group to help conference delegates create their own blank plaques for the conference. Participants will position their RTD plaques within the immediate exhibition and conference environs, including

the building, and the city. A digital map of the guerrilla plaque project will be created through Open Plaques as a means to allow interaction beyond the conference. We anticipate that this approach would also generate useful insights and reflections for the RTD conference archive.

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