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Place-making or place-faking?: the River and the City in *Canterbury Tales*

Abstract

This paper considers the way *Canterbury Tales* worked to restore a sense of place ruptured not only by earthquakes but also by National Corporate master planning. I will discuss the challenges of introducing the notion of performance as a political intervention via the Festival of Transitional Architecture (FESTA), which I initiated in 2011 to provide a critical engagement with the post-earthquake 'Transitional City'. Whereas the Luxcity event that launched the festival in 2012 was conceived from an architectural perspective not so interested in history, Free Theatre's *Canterbury Tales* was proposed as a performative investigation of the city that began with the people and the rituals that bring them together in this place.

I analyse these two approaches to re-occupy and re-imagine a broken city with a view to proposing new collaborative projects that interrupt a mindset rooted in the ideological fantasies of late neo-liberalism. I will discuss how this seemingly intractable mindset underlies the generic 'place-faking' of the government-imposed Blueprint and how *Canterbury Tales* offered a counter-balance to such plans by starting with the river that runs through the centre of the city. As the dominant physical feature that has drawn communities – both native and settler – to this particular place, its restoration as a vital public space called for in the 'Share an Idea' campaign, speaks to a community desire to confront current social and environmental challenges. By juxtaposing different Canterbury tales, bringing together the Pacific and the colonial, playing with them in a search for something new and distinct, we aimed to resist the turning of our community's attachment to the river (and city) into just another generic business park-style development. In this way, I will argue for performance as place-making intervention that helps realise the community-building focus called for by contemporary urban design critics.

*Whan that Aprille with shoures sote
The droughte of Marche hath perced to the rote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
And when the west wind too with its sweet breath
Has given life in every wood and field
To tender shoots; and when the stripling sun
Has run his half-course in Aries, the Ram
And when small birds are making melodies
That sleep all the night long with open eyes,
The people long to go on pilgrimages
And palmers to take ship to foreign shores,
And distant shrines, famous in different lands;
And most especially, from all the shires
Of England, to Canterbury they come,
The Holy Blessed Martyr there to seek,
Who gave his help to them when they were sick.*

Prologue, *Canterbury Tales*

I'm operating the head movements of a six-metre puppet made of recycled timber and found objects. Around me, a team of operators, five in all, manoeuvre individual body parts via a complex system of ropes and pulleys: arms and hands with fully articulated fingers, facial features (including widening eyes and moving eyebrows) and a torso that swivels 360 degrees. Known as The Scholar, the puppet comes to life first through breath, our collective breathing, which initiates movement that is at first slow and contemplative, as if this giant creation is coming to know himself for the first time, considering his own body and then the strange sights that surround him. Starting with a groan that matches the wooden movements, I start to give voice to this contemplation that grows out of synchronised breathing.

This is the beginning to Free Theatre's *Canterbury Tales* for the second ever Festival of Transitional Architecture (FESTA). Directed by Peter Falkenberg, the production took place in the broken heart of Christchurch city, Labour Weekend 2013. This paper considers the way *Canterbury Tales* worked to restore a sense of place ruptured not only by earthquakes but also by National Corporate master planning. From my point of view as the Producer of the event and as a performer

within it, I will discuss our attempts to challenge a seemingly intractable mindset that underlies the generic ‘place-faking’ of the government-imposed Blueprint. We worked to offer a counter-balance to such plans by starting with the river that runs through the centre of the city. Is it possible for us, as artists, to interrupt the product-oriented thinking in contemporary urban design and introduce a collaborative, process-oriented approach that engages the community in the search for a new city identity?

To start to answer this question, let me begin by elaborating further on the performance of the Scholar. The first words I utter as the Scholar are the opening lines of the Chaucer (above), delivered in the original middle English before moving to a modern English translation, and, finally, a paraphrasing of the prologue in the context of contemporary Christchurch. I explain to the crowds that have gathered in the Re:START carpark near the Bridge of Remembrance, that we are strangers come together, intent on travelling in concert to Canterbury Cathedral. That although we may not really like each other, far from it in some cases, we have been thrown together by our collective desire to act as pilgrims and must therefore make the best of it, perhaps by sharing with each other, stories to entertain, humour, inspire and provoke. Perhaps if we allow ourselves, I tell the crowd, we might learn something from one another on this journey to the heart of the city, a reawakening of community: a Canterbury Spring.

I introduce the crowd to each of our fellow travellers who likewise have been slowly coming to life. Each is quite different from the other: The Knight is made of recycled bicycle parts welded together and is operated by a team of eight; the Wife of Bath is a giant six foot carnival float operated by a group of singing, dancing ‘wives’ as their ‘husbands’ push the float through the streets; the Merchant, inspired by the

wonderful creations of Bread and Puppet, has long, long arms animated by ten operators spreading out to consume all who come near – he is made of money; the Friars, six robed, big-headed men, are operated by three performers one of whom has the spine and head of the puppet extending from a back-pack while the other two operate an arm each. In all the puppets, there are uncanny snatches of the familiar: the lead friar looks and sounds much like Earthquake Recovery Minister Gerry Brownlee, while the merchant mutters phrases not unlike those uttered by Prime Minister John Key, and similarly, the Knight's reflections upon his surroundings echo Roger Sutton, the cycle-mad CEO of the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA), which is essentially directing the future of the city.

As the scholar, I'm channelling older colleagues at the University of Canterbury. Many of them are expatriate Englishmen who moved to a city that many said was not unlike the mother country – Christchurch was a project in place-faking by the original planners, complete with beautiful neo-gothic architecture. Stiff and wooden in movement and voice, the Scholar professes to finding the recent unsettling times somehow liberating; that those long-held (restrictive) fantasies of this other, better England have been shattered, and in the place of *knowing* there is now, truly, an invigorating sense of questioning (unknowing): What is this place? Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going? The Scholar points to the assembled musicians of Pacific Underground who have blessed the pilgrimage by placing a lei around his arm, and queries the structure they stand beside: a fale-inspired design, created by a team of students from the Architecture Department at Unitec (Auckland). The structure catches fragmented film images of Polynesian ritual that are projected onto its surface: dancing, storytelling and feasting. In the context of the container mall

known as Re:START this performance design offers another nascent idea of gathering and exchange, one that looks to the Pacific roots of this place.

The choice to begin with this Pacific-inspired environment in this context, can be read as a challenge to the Anglo socio-economic system that threatens to again engulf the inner city. The earthquakes interrupted the day-to-day flow of capitalism, which was replaced by a revival of communal concern and connectivity. This pointed the way to a new kind of city. Now a return to the orthodoxy of the neoliberal marketplace seems inevitable. The imposition of a generic rebuild Blueprint follows precisely Wendy Brown's observation of how the marketplace criteria ("costs, benefits and efficacy") of global capitalism merge corporate and state power in a process of "de-democratisation":

Having reduced the political substance of democracy to rubble, neoliberalism then snatches the term for its own purposes, with the consequence that "market democracy" – once a term of derision for right-wing governance by unregulated capital – is now an ordinary descriptor for a form that has precisely nothing to do with the people ruling themselves. (Brown 2011, 48)

Offering an intervention to this man-made disaster, the Scholar, sent the procession on its way. He encouraged an engagement with this distinct place that might interrupt the apparently irresistible return to the status-quo ante – all interruptions allow for alternative futures to emerge. The procession moved through the inner city, down Oxford Terrace beside the Avon, turning the corner at Worcester Bridge where a storm of sound, "a catastrophe" pushed all towards the Cathedral. Along the way, the procession of puppets commented upon and engaged with installations as stations fabricated by design students in collaboration with local artists.¹ Most importantly, the

¹ For a full list of collaborators, see: <http://www.freetheatre.org.nz/canterbury-tales.html>

performance gained meaning through the interactions that developed between the puppets and the audience so that the latter became participants/actors/creators of the event.²

By encouraging this interaction, we sought to create a collective, communal atmosphere. This developed over the course of the event and culminated in Cathedral Square. The square has undergone numerous redesigns over the years, which have all failed to overcome the alienation previous commercialisation projects have wrecked upon this important area at the city's heart.³ By way of an alternative, we presented a night market with hospitality. The increasing popularity of these kind of markets seem to respond to a contemporary desire for human interaction over the corporate abstraction of internet banking that we have become used to, where economic convenience has increasingly caused a sense of disconnection.

However, perhaps the greatest difficulty in challenging the economic orthodoxy underlying contemporary urban design is entrenched views regarding architecture. Specifically, critics of *Canterbury Tales* complained that there wasn't enough 'architecture' for a festival with the word architecture in the title, suggesting an onus on built structures. When I conceived of the festival in 2011, it was with a view to challenging this notion, and tapping into a thriving contemporary conversation regarding temporary or 'flexible' architecture as a means of challenging urban decay and regenerating a sense of place and public space in alienating urban

² Ironically, while organizing *Canterbury Tales* members of Free Theatre who are also closely connected with the Theatre and Film Studies Department at Canterbury University were confronted with another, ultimately successful, attempt by university management to destroy the department. See: <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/opinion/perspective/9410811/Creative-thinkers-engage-with-real-world-problems>. It has been argued that such attacks reflect a neoliberal agenda (in keeping with Naomi Klein's 'shock-doctrine') within New Zealand universities, which has emerged with particular vehemence in the post-quake environment at Canterbury University. See: Jessica Johnston, Cornelia Sears and Leonard Wilcox, 'Neoliberalism Unshaken: A Report from the Disaster Zone', *Excursions*, 3, 1 (2012).

³ The cathedral itself signifies the potency of 'place' with arguments for the retention of this marker of local identity creating unusual bedfellows that include Anglicans and a significant number of supporters that identify as atheist.

environments.⁴ Robert Kronenburg, for example, cites Heidegger's famous essay 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking' to argue that movable, temporary architecture can be just as significant as permanent architecture in creating a sense of place in contemporary society:

In Heidegger's example, a bridge (which he uses rather than a building in order to define the act of creation as a rite of passage) is not a place; it only brings place into existence. 'The place did not exist before the bridge... Thus, the bridge is not a place in itself but it is only from the bridge that the place originates'. Heidegger's belief is that places are brought into existence by something more than the act of building. (Kronenburg 2007, 12)

Kronenburg references Japanese and Australian Aboriginal examples of place-making (respectively: 'binding' spaces with rope, fabric and paper and travelling along a route detailed in an oral story) to suggest: "These circumstances show that a place is not necessarily achieved by the creation of a permanent building and that movable and temporary artefacts and situations can be equally significant" (2007, 13). In a similar way, we proposed to begin again with the situations and rituals that bring people together in this place.

Of course, ritual is at the heart of performance studies, and I felt that such a perspective – seeing the city (and architecture) as performance – might add something to the extraordinary conversations taking place in Christchurch, where 80% of the built environment of the inner city has been destroyed by a combination of disasters, natural and man-made. Victor Turner defines the four phases of 'social drama' as "breach, crisis, redress, and *either* reintegration *or* recognition of schism" and says

⁴ The project began life as a new event proposed for the Arts Circus in May 2011 – see: <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/opinion/perspective/5804313/Munich-yields-concept-for-Christchurch-Arts-Circus>. In development, the event took on different names and configurations – e.g. Festival of Temporary Architecture; Festival of Sustainable Architecture – before developing as the Festival of Transitional Architecture (FESTA). See: www.festa.org.nz

“social dramas occur within groups bounded by shared values and interests of persons and having a real or alleged common history” (Turner 69). I felt that an event aiming to provide an open-ended inquiry into the process of city-making – exacerbated by the *recognition of schism* in the Christchurch experience – would offer a fresh, and possibly unifying perspective to the various and animated conversations taking place in the city.⁵

The first iteration of the FESTA in 2012 centred on a major event called *Luxcity*. Conceived by an architectural academic from the University of Auckland, Uwe Rieger, *Luxcity* built on events that he had developed in Auckland, which worked with installations designed by students. He transposed the idea into the extraordinary environment of inner city Christchurch with teams of students from New Zealand architectural schools developing sixteen large-scale projects that lit up the ruins – light being the key design component. Local artists and hospitality businesses provided entertainment and refreshment adjacent to the installations. On the one hand, the numbers that showed up to *Luxcity* (over 20,000) illustrated that an event like FESTA could tap into the extraordinary community desire to engage with the city, which had until recently been red-zoned. A number of the installations were wonderfully compelling, some managing to integrate the businesses or performances to create an intriguing interactive environment.

On the other hand, the placement of the installations was incidental to the social or cultural history of the environment, focussing more on urban space in terms of scale and dynamic. It was in fact the audience that brought with them a sense of place. Through attempting to recreate the place together, remembering what had stood

⁵ See also *Festival Architecture* where architectural historians Sarah Bonnemaïson and Christine Macy refer to Turner and Mikhail Bakhtin to introduce a study of different examples of historical festival architecture: "equally ancient, and equally significant (as pyramids, temples, etc.) to the history of architecture were the temporary structures erected for religious rites in the ancient world..."

in the now empty spaces, the audience gave the event meaning as a performance. Many of the students, particularly those from out of town, were taken aback by this response and many commented that it had given them an inkling of what had happened here, and a different perspective on what cities are about in terms of memory and desire.

Canterbury Tales was designed to take the successful elements of *Luxcity* – particularly where the architectural and the artistic integrated in dialogue – and introduce this notion of place into the core of the event. By developing a procession of large puppets and masked performers, Falkenberg proposed we take inspiration from Chaucer’s tales: a group of pilgrims travelling from site to site through the city and telling different tales, traditional, contemporary and futuristic. In this way, the experience had at the centre a community of people and the rituals of story-telling around which an urban environment was created. The proposal was received well by our architecture colleagues, Rieger making the argument that a central procession would attract audiences.⁶ He made frequent comparisons to the spectacles of Royale Deluxe and its extraordinary *The Sultan’s Elephant*, which was performed in European cities during the 2000s.

However, while spectacle was indeed important for *Canterbury Tales*, the spectacles of Royale Deluxe toured European cities without necessarily engaging with the history of any one particular place. That is, *The Sultan’s Elephant* was conceived more as a generic story (a fairy-tale) that could take place anywhere. *Canterbury Tales*, on the other hand, was designed to engage with Christchurch at this particular time. For this reason, we resisted a counter proposal from our architectural colleagues

⁶ The proposal was for Free Theatre to collaborate with the organisers of *Luxcity*, Studio Christchurch, a new initiative that worked between tertiary schools in architecture to create Christchurch-based projects. The founders and principals of Studio Christchurch were Rieger and Camia Young. See: <http://studiochristchurch.co.nz/>

that would have seen the event take place over three days and involve the procession moving around the proposed ‘Green Frame’ that in the Blueprint frames the new inner city. Besides being logistically a nightmare to organise (let alone fund), the notion of taking the government imposed Frame as a given – a project that had controversially looked to build over recognised places (even demolishing much loved heritage buildings) – worked against the rationale for proposing *Canterbury Tales* in the first place. We wanted to create a counterbalance to the economic rationale of projects such as The Frame, which had been designed as a way to inflate the value of inner city properties that the government were looking to acquire under the CER Act.

In other words, our architectural colleagues wanted to emulate the Blueprint designers – who themselves were channelling the original colonial planners of Christchurch – in viewing the city as a tabula rasa. Referring to the city as simply a “construction site”, and deterring students from considering the history of particular sites, our colleagues expressed a neo-colonial desire to impose fantasies that denied the very real sense of identity that existed in this place. Whereas we wanted to create something open-ended, process-oriented, it seemed our colleagues translated this as symptomatic of trauma: a post-disaster nostalgia for an imagined past now lost. What they proposed instead was to replace what they saw as sentimentality with expert knowledge that could help imagine and build a new 21st century city for us. But as such an approach dismisses local history and experience this can only further alienate the community. What is needed is an exchange between the local and the international that provides alternatives in the making of the city – a sense that we are building it together. Place is not an abstract notion for local residents. It is to the detriment of the city that this has been ignored as a second wave of missionaries have descended on

the city with a zealous intent to find willing Fridays to help fulfil Christ-like Crusoe fantasies.

It was with a view to trying to articulate the drive behind the original proposal that I argued that the river was central to the whole event. The river that flows through the city is the central physical feature around which communities have established a place to live, both tangata whenua and European settler – originally named Ōtākaro before the English colonists renamed it Avon. The fact that the river was so present in the ‘Share an Idea’ discussions, and then bumped up the list above (as an alibi to?) the convention centre in the Blueprint, showed its pulling power.⁷ Its importance could be related not only to historical connection – which revolves around a basic relationship with nature and in terms of community-formation in this place – but also, in a contemporary context, it spoke to a community desire to change (transition) from the socio-economic models of the past and re-invigorate a greater (and necessary) relationship with our natural environment, and each other. I would argue strongly that the primary reason for the impasse we find ourselves in (humanity in general) is that we have lost our sense of place (physical, social, political). We have tried to impose static and generic models from elsewhere to our immediate urban environments; thus losing what makes cities exciting and unique – the flow and movement of people through the streets, interacting. For this the river is the perfect metaphor.

By juxtaposing different Canterbury tales, bringing together the Pacific and the colonial, playing with them in a search for something new and distinct, we aimed to resist the turning of our community’s attachment to the river (and city) into just another generic business park-style development. For this is exactly what had been proposed by the government appointed urban planners, who seemed intent on

⁷ The original list of anchor projects released by the Government placed the river development at number six. A new convention centre was originally listed as the number one project.

pursuing an exercise in place-faking complete with an expensive arts trail. The river was therefore the exact place to stage an intervention as its development heralded a wider process of place-faking that would deny community participation in the creation of our city. In this way, our argument was for performance as place-making intervention to help realise the community-building focus called for by contemporary urban design critics.⁸

However rather than seeing this as a chance to challenge the current process, our architectural colleagues argued that within the Blueprint process, the river park was a done deal and that our energy would be better spent proposing ideas for The Frame; to work, that is, both literally and figuratively within the scaffold of neoliberal orthodoxy. Our resistance to this new project, led to a parting of the ways – it was clear that our partners could only conceive of a performative inquiry of the city as relating to installations that we would animate through a series of scenes and skits – for example, it was suggested we improvise a performance on “life and death” apropos the proposed health precinct. We went on to find further collaborators to help realise the project but similar problems continued to emerge with some of the architectural schools, which resisted the invitation to begin a conversation with local artists. They preferred to see the artists come into the process once the designs had been established. The hoped for dialogic exchange was therefore not as developed as we would have liked but there were some notable exceptions that encourage hope for future collaborations.

Perhaps the clash between performance and architecture points to a more fundamental clash between fantasy and reality, or at least from the perception of the realists who see us as dreamers and storytellers. Or from our point of view, the

⁸ This has been repeated by numerous urban design specialists and commentators that have visited the city, including: David Yencken (Melbourne), Alex Washburn (New York), David Sims (Copenhagen), Massimo Santanicchia (Reykjavik), Marcus Westbury (Newcastle).

generic fantasies of the people in power are the ones that we have to try and change. As we don't have the power, what is left to us, maybe, is to still look for a dialogue with businesspeople and politicians through performance. Through this dialogue in performance we can, together, continue to create alternative experiences that suggest that other ways of thinking and living are possible.

“In vain, great-hearted Kublai, shall I attempt to describe Zaira, city of high bastions. I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways, and the degree of the arcades' curve, and what kind of zinc scales cover the roofs; but I already know this would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past: the height of the lamppost and the distance from the ground of a hanged usurper's swaying feet; the line strung from the lamppost to the railing opposite and the festoons that decorate the course of the queen's nuptial procession; the height of that railing and the leap of the adulterer who climbed over it at dawn; the tilt of a guttering and a cat's progress along it as he slips into the same window; the firing range of a gunboat which has suddenly appeared beyond the cape and the bomb that destroys the guttering; the rips in the fish net and the three old men seated on the dock mending nets and telling each other for the hundredth time the story of the gunboat usurper, who some say was the queen's illegitimate son, abandoned in his swaddling clothes there on the dock.

As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands. A description of Zaira as it is today should contain all Zaira's past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antenna of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.”

From *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino

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