



Sensory Design: Making sense of tensions, plurality and paradox in a culturally contested heritage site

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Abstract

My PhD focuses on the redesign of Montsalvat's visitor and service experience. Montsalvat is, "*historically, technically, architecturally, aesthetically, socially and spiritually significant*", (Willingham, 2010); however, visitors are unable to access its rich histories. The site is transitioning from an Artists Colony to an Arts Centre, it is a 'culturally contested heritage site' (Silverman, 2011).

In 2019, I began research with the community and '*walked backwards into the future*' (Rameka, 2016). I dug up histories (Lindqvist, 1979) and translated them to sensory probes to 'come to terms' with the site, then used them in interviews and sensory walking research (Pink, 2007; O'Neil & Roberts 2020). I conducted authentic, '*bottom-up*' participatory research (UN-Habitat, 2016) that was inclusive of all voices, to validated stories with the community. Together we transformed a messy, fractured-oral history into legible formats (Sandino, 2006). Artists profile posters created strong engagement across the community and became visible bridges into commonly understood pasts.

Archives are split, relationships are frayed and knowledge is lost. Analysing the community via Nardi & O'Day's '*Information Ecologies*' framework, helped me understand that establishing Montsalvat as a limited public company in 2007, was pivotal to today's **tension**. This

structure introduced a **plurality** of lens that have resulted in clashes over cultural practice, shared values and social meaning. The dissonance dislocates the ‘*ecology*’ (Nardi & O’Day, 1999) from Montsalvat’s cultural heritage, and **paradoxically** renders it unsustainable. Sensory design has supported a sensitive inquiry into a contested service landscape. It has encouraged empathy, openness, safety and trust at a time when **tension**, **plurality** and **paradox** were rife.

Keywords: sensory design research, contested cultural heritage site, embedded design research, information ecologies

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