



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

W A S H I N G T O N , D C

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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Dr. Michelle Hamilton,

The Hear, Here London Project has produced an extraordinary location-based installation that allows community members the ability to access through their mobile phones oral histories and community stories. These stories offer rich historical insights into the everyday landscape and built environment in SoHo, an ethnically diverse working-class community in London, Ontario. These stories feature first person accounts from Black Canadians, workers, immigrants, and other members of marginalized communities. They tell everyday stories of community life, schools, places of worship, markets, hospitals, and factories. The stories have concrete relevance to the places where they are accessed. Being present at the site where one listens to them gives new layers of meaning both to the oral history and the landscape and built environment where they are listened to. The ability to not only listen but to share stories, offers the project the ability to develop new histories that can be layered onto the sites that are already included in the project. This will facilitate new iterations of the project in the future.

Please find my full review attached.

Sincerely you

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Hear, Here London Site Review

April 26-27, 2019

Daniel Kerr

The Site Visit



Dozens of community members showed up at SoHo's Goodwill for the opening roll out and celebration of Hear, Here London on April 27, 2019.

I reviewed the Hear, Here London Project on April 26th and April 27th, 2019. The official roll-out date for the project was on the 27th. While there are stories in three communities, the large majority of the stories are situated in the SoHo community. During the site visit I had an opportunity to be on location for approximately 25 of the approximately 30 SoHo locations (47 stories total) and was able to listen to the stories from the remaining locations online. This review focuses only on the SoHo iteration of the project.

On April 27th, I had the opportunity to attend the roll-out celebration for the project and go on three thematic tours, which were led by one of the project directors, Ariel Beaujot, and two students in Western University's public history program. Both students led tours directly related to the stories that they had collected. During the tours and the celebration, I had the opportunity to talk to graduate students and public history faculty who had worked on the project as well as community members who had come out to the event.

The Neighborhood

I am no expert on SoHo, originally known as St. David's Ward, and am only describing the neighborhood based on two days of extensive walking through it and listening to the stories that are part of the Hear, Here project. What is clear is that SoHo is a historically working-class, diverse neighborhood. The neighborhood has social services for those experiencing poverty, labor union offices, a major brewery, the N'Amerind Friendship Centre, and

churches, stores, and restaurants that serve recent immigrants. It also includes vacant lots from factories that have been closed and demolished, an abandoned hospital and nursing school.

While the neighborhood seems solidly working-class, there is visual evidence at the fringes of efforts to gentrify the area. The very name SoHo, mimicking the New York City neighborhood, is certainly an invention of real estate developers hoping to upscale the neighborhood. The website soholondon.ca proclaims, “The SoHo (South of Horton) neighbourhood in London, Ontario is a great place to live!” It touts the area’s affordability, location, and access to ethnic foods. A recent CBC article that addresses London’s Housing crisis identifies SoHo as an area experiencing gentrification, increased housing prices, and dislocation.¹

Based on my conversations with the Hear, Here project directors, it is clear they are aware of this background context and that they are wary of contributing to the dislocation of the area’s current residents. It’s not so clear that project funders and the City of London share their same commitment. With that said, there are subtle design elements in the project that make it clear that the project is being directed toward current residents rather than people who do not have a familiarity with the area.

The Technology

The project is built on Amazon Connect, Amazon’s cloud-based contact center service and worked seamlessly as it was tested by dozens of people simultaneously on the project’s roll out day. The project directors worked with students in Western University’s public history program and a representative from Amazon to build a system that was easy to understand



On the open day tours, dozens of people called the number and listened to the stories simultaneously without any glitches.

for both those maintaining the system and those using the system. Users encounter street signs with a call-in number and a story number. When they call in, they are prompted to enter the story number, and then the stories associated with that number are played. The system recognizes callers and plays the stories in a different order for the same location if the caller calls a second time. Importantly, callers can also leave their own stories and contribute to the collection. If project curators deem the story relevant, it can be added to a location easily. While building the infrastructure of signs required a lengthy

process of working with the city, new stories can easily be added to existing signs. This capacity allows for future iterations of the project to develop. The actual costs of the

¹ See <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/london-ontario-affordable-housing-crisis-1.5147252>

Amazon Connect system are minimal, which facilitates the long-term sustainability of the project.

The back end works seamlessly as dozens of people called in the number simultaneously and listened to stories on their phones during the opening day roll out of the project. I did not encounter a single person who had difficulty accessing the stories or hearing the stories through their phones. There were a few older community members who did not have a phone, however, they gathered around other tour goers and listened to the stories using speaker phones. Everyone seemed very content and no one expressed any frustrations with the stories.

When I walked around the neighborhood on my own, I navigated from sign to sign using the website map. It was a bit like a treasure hunt trying to find the signs, and when I finally encountered them, I listened to the stories using the website rather than calling the number. Doing so was a bit clunky as I had to reload the map after listening to each story. I had the same frustration when I listened to the stories on the website that I had not been able to see on the ground. With that said, the stories are clearly intended to be heard on location and not while sitting at your computer at home. The impact of the stories was significantly greater being present in the actual location.

The difficulty navigating through the website map or listening to the stories through the website is, I believe, ultimately a good thing. These stories should be encountered while walking, waiting for a bus, going to church or the store, or getting off from work. These are very local and spatially situated stories that are meant for people who have connections to the spaces that they are about. Any efforts to make it easier for outsiders to navigate the streets and listen to the stories would orient the project's primary audience away from the area's current residents who know those streets well. Given the very real threat of gentrification and dislocation the neighborhood faces, ease of access for outsiders would be highly problematic.

The page on the website to solicit stories could benefit from one small change. The question, "How does your story change the way we see your neighborhood?" requires people to embrace a certain degree of hubris that they might not feel comfortable with. Frequently, people at the margins and women in particular may actually need to be coaxed into acknowledging that their stories are important. Furthermore, there is some vagueness in who the "we" refers to. I would eliminate that question from the website. The intent behind the question is a good one. It invites people to not only tell their story, but to interpret it, and I think it is worth finding a place for concrete questions that solicit interpretations of stories. I would reword it and ask it during an oral history interview towards the end. "How do you think hearing this story might impact the way your neighbors think of their community?"

The Signs



The sign for Story 19 is perfectly placed, as listeners can see the memorial for the London Soap Company while Chris Andreae tells a story about the fire that destroyed the mill and his role in creating the memorial.

the Canada Bread factory, running to get things done amidst the whirl of mixers, as listener views the abandoned lot where the bakery once stood. Marilyn Austin remembers sunbathing on the roof of her dormitory with her fellow nursing students while the listener views the building, which is imminently about to get demolished.



This sign next to the N'Amerind Friendship Centre faces out towards Horton St.

In spite of my failure to follow the instructions of the signs (remember I used the website to listen to audio when I was on my own), they are clear, very well designed, and for the most part well positioned. The signs are a critical piece of the project as they establish the ideal vantage point to hear the associated stories from. The impact of hearing the story of a Black Canadian who ran away from enslavement while standing outside her house (or a house that rested in the same spot) is truly transformational. Many of the stories are about places that no longer exist or that are on the verge of demolition. Jim Pyne describes working at

In a few cases the sign placement needs to be fixed. The sign next to the N'Amerind Friendship Centre can only be read while standing on Horton Street, which is very busy. All the signs need to be pedestrian friendly since these stories are not designed to be heard from moving cars. Furthermore, they can easily be missed if they are pointed away from the sidewalk. I could not find the sign for Carol Mason Taylor's story even after spending fifteen minutes looking for it next to and inside the Goodwill parking lot.

The Brochures

The brochures are attractive and accessible. The graphic on how to use Hear, Here would have been very helpful for me when I was on my own. It takes work if you are an outsider to the area to encounter the signs using these maps. Given the context of gentrification and the threat of displacement, privileging area residents is a good thing. As I understand it, the



Stores such as the Big Bee would be great places to have the brochures available.

brochures, however, will be available primarily at locations outside of the neighborhood. I would strongly encourage working with area shopkeepers to make them accessible to the people who live in SoHo.

The Research

One of the less visible impacts of *Hear, Here London* is on the Public History Program at Western University. The graduate students in Western University's did a significant amount of work for the project. Each student developed a theme, recorded interviews, and made selections from those interviews that they pitched for the project. The project offered the students an opportunity to work with community members on a collaborative project that has a real-world life. These students have built something that will be an integral part of their portfolio.



A Public History student leads a tour that features her interviews and explores the industrial past of SoHo.

In my interviews, the students were enthusiastic about the project, but they also expressed frustrations with the difficulties they faced finding community storytellers. I would argue that this element of the project was a significant learning experience as they gained a greater understanding of the difficulties of doing community-based projects. I had an opportunity to go on two student led tours and it was clear the students had a well-earned sense of pride in the work that they had done.

The tours made evident the specific imprint each student made on the project through the themes they chose to explore and the people they interviewed. At the same time, on my self-guided tour I had no idea how much

of the research was done by graduate students. The project had a clear thematic coherence and felt like a whole.

The polished finished product is a testament to the strength of the program. Each graduate student learned how to work in a team and together they built a meaningful historical intervention that will have an impact on the SoHo community long after they have graduated. For the project to be successful moving forward, it will need a dedicated research assistant that can continue to coordinate the work of the graduate students in the program.

The Stories

The center of the project is the first-hand accounts of people who have lived in the SoHo neighborhood. Listening to these accounts on location literally transforms the way I perceived the things I was looking at. A stretch of grass turns out to be the former location of the bustling Canada Bread Company. The story makes evident how important industry was and continues to be in the area. A non-descript house is the same house where a woman made a new life in Canada after she had escaped enslavement in the United States. As we listen to the story of a wedding, we learn that the First Church of the Nazarene used to be a Jewish temple.

The stories, less than two minutes each, are of a particular memory. There is no background context offered for the stories and they address a broad spectrum of working-class life from childhood play, school, work, shopping, drinking, and worship. The stories include first-hand accounts from the 1800s that are read by voice actors to stories told in the voice of the storyteller themselves about things that have happened in the last decade. While hearing the stories in the voices of the storytellers has greater affective impact, the stories told by voice actors are critically important part of the project. Without them, we would not know that SoHo served an important role for immigrants as far back as the 1840s. Furthermore, the stories allow for the inclusion of materials from oral histories conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s where the audio quality was too poor to include the original sound. Collectively the stories offer a powerful argument that gives value to the neighborhood's working-class past as a place of refuge, survival, and most importantly community. While not explicit, the project makes the case for sustain and preserving the community for its current working-class residents.

Moving Forward

One of the most powerful aspects of the project is that it allows for collection of new stories and the layering of these stories on each site. While the project stands on its own as it now is, there are ample opportunities to continue to work on the project. The current iteration of stories demonstrate that the project has developed significant relationships in the community, however, the very presence of the project will allow these relationships to deepen. Wouldn't it be great to hear a story of a recent immigrant discussing her transition to living in SoHo next to that of the formerly enslaved woman's narrative? We hear the



Harold Westhead remembers working in the plant from the 1930s through the 1960s. Wouldn't it be great to hear a story from a worker in the plant today?

retired worker's description of working in the Labatt's bottling plant, with its embedded sense of nostalgia and critique of the workers today. Here a current worker could offer an alternative insight that might challenge the critique and give value to the experience of people who work in the plant. Or maybe we could hear a story of a wedding in the First Church of the Nazarene after hearing of the Jewish wedding in the same building year's earlier. I believe the signs will allow the project to deepen in rich ways that give further value to the experiences of the current residents of the community.



Michael Biderman remembers his experiences as a child at the B'Nai Moses Ben Judah Synagogue. Here a story about the N'Amerind Friendship Centre, now housed in the former synagogue, would add a layer of complexity to the listener's understanding

I love the simplicity of the project and its commitment to listening. I fully support the design decisions that have privileged local residents over outsiders. I also believe that the design decision not to provide historic photos but to have listeners immerse themselves instead in the visual landscape surrounding them is one that needs to be sustained. I have no doubt that there will be substantial pressures to complicate the structure, add new elements, and transform the core dynamic of the project. I advise you to resist those pressures and instead focus on building new stories and layers and

possibly adding new signs and neighborhoods all within the framework that has guided this project so well.

In a world where the visual is so heavily privileged, Hear, Here asks us to listen carefully to the stories of others. Through this attentive listening, our perception of the world around us is transformed.