

TEMPORARY LOCATION: THE FAMILIAR AND THE STRANGE

Caer Llan was a temporary location for the participants in the CLT. One of the aims of the research was to focus on 'temporariness' in the performance of place, assessing how this might have transferable uses. 'Place' is more commonly associated with permanent inhabitation; Caer Llan was briefly adopted. An interest in the performance of place in temporary locations predated the CLT and has two strands of origin. These influenced the intention and realisation of the performance project at Caer Llan.

Firstly, in previous research (Mackey, 2002), I reflected on the particular emotional impact on undergraduates of a theatre performance project at the Minack Theatre in Cornwall. I suggested that a temporary emplacement might be one reason for such attachment and that: 'there is perhaps a need for permanent waystations, accessible oases, special places that can offer us known, fixed, stable points in the midst of the "non-places"' (p.22). Part of the rationale for the CLT was to interrogate this further. How valid was this perception? I found the idea of waystations intriguing, as transience, mobility, nomadism, instability and even atopia have become noted symptoms of contemporary living. This is framed usefully by Casey:

In fearing that 'the earth is becoming uninhabitable' – a virtually universal lament – we are fearing that the earth will no longer provide adequate places in which to live. The incessant motion of postmodern life in late-capitalist societies at once echoes and exacerbates this fear. Rushing from place to place, we rarely linger long enough in one particular place to savor its unique qualities and its local history. We pay a heavy price for capitalizing on our basic animal mobility. The price is the loss of places that can serve as lasting scenes of experience and reflection and memory. (Casey, 1993: xii/xiii)

If places are being 'lost', as Casey suggests, and we do not dwell such that we 'savour' our everyday, can we experience, reflect within and remember particular *non-quotidian* waystations, instead? *Might* such places of note be needed as moments of memory and attention in our biographies? Nora suggested in 1989 that we create 'sites of memory' because there are no longer 'real environments of memory'; he attributes this lack to the 'acceleration of history' (1989: 7). These sites of memory are needed because we no longer have the time for spontaneous memory, he argues. So, 'we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally' (12). We need 'commemorative vigilance' (*ibid*) or history will sweep away our memories. Can performance help establish such places of pause? By performing places that are outside our everyday, does this encourage 'commemorative vigilance' of place as pause, as markers, as special, as sites of intensive memories? What would be value of this? The CLT was an opportunity to practically engage with these questions in a location that had already become a resonant memory for many of the participants. Indeed, it was this affection for the site, developed in 2000, that partially hailed the project; here was an opportunity to experiment with performance as a mode of constructing place in temporary locations.

Secondly, working as an applied theatre academic and practitioner in London, undergraduate and postgraduate students undertake projects and placements with a range of groups who are displaced, living in new and often temporary locations. In first researching performance and place, it emerged swiftly that ideas arising out of performance of and in temporary locations might be transferable. Such a process could well have uses in applied theatre work

performing place: the Caer Llan trilogy

when drama facilitators work with displaced or transient communities. Developing a process of performing place through a detailed and closely analysed case study may yield structures and strategies for drama when it is used as a method of engaging non-autochthonous groups or individuals in their locality. There are embryonic examples of such work taking place. London Bubble's *My Home* (2006) was an indoor promenade work, performed by actors in four different houses across London to small audiences. Verbatim performances told stories of the houses' inhabitants, migrants from Somalia, Poland, Kurdistan and Vietnam, 'uncovering memories, exploring emotions and ultimately highlighting how London has continued to develop as a rich and culturally diverse place, full of people whose varied experiences add to the fabric of the city.' (E-mail, Jennie Clarke, London Bubble's Marketing Officer, 9.3.06.) Here, actors translated the impact of place on those in their not-yet-permanent location. In 2005, MA student and freelance practitioner Alia Al Zonghi worked with a group of disenfranchised Palestinian refugees, recently arrived in this country, temporarily located in a disused hospital in London. The group performed a national dance within the hospital in an attempt to turn the space into 'place' through performance.



Here, there was a bizarre meshing of a 'home' art form interpolated into the disused, abandoned ward, forcing it into life by its new inhabitants. The meshing of site and art led to fascinating juxtapositions such as bed lights acting as an evocation of theatrical stage lighting, delimiters of individual space, non-human observers and aesthetic, angular framing to the dancing. Ironically, the refugees were moved on, displaced again, before Al Zonghi could move the project to a further stage.

This was an example of potentially exciting work with the group themselves performing a temporary location. Work such as this and *My Home* may benefit from a further range of strategies and structures that are rooted in detailed praxis on spatial performance. Part of the intention behind the CLT was to offer such detailed praxis.

Making the strange familiar and the familiar strange

Subtling this section 'the familiar and the strange' summarises the equivocation of performing in temporary places that has interested me. Performing in temporary locations is about making the strange familiar of course but it can also be about making the apparently – or perhaps superficially – familiar, strange.

Here, I deconstruct just one aspect of this here to exemplify my point.

The exploration of the six sites at a preliminary stage of CL1 was a method of re-engaging the core research group with areas of Caer Llan. The activity was designed to: elicit subjective impressions of the sites; somatically engage the participants in the materiality of a cross-section of the Caer Llan territory; begin the process of thinking about the sites as places to be performed; encourage participants to construct their relationship with the place

in an altered ontological mode. It was intended to engender 'action', to investigate what the environment 'afforded' us, as Ingold might frame it:

I believe that our immediate perception of the environment is in terms of what it affords for the pursuit of the action in which we are currently engaged. ... Such direct perception of the environment is a mode of engagement with the world, not a mode of construction of it. (Ingold, 1992: 44)

From this example of the visitor as an explorer seeking affordances, I shall focus on just one point. (It is relevant to this point that the majority of the core research group were *re*-visiting the site.)

The process of exploration in CL1 provoked a range of responses to the sites as participants engaged with the newly experienced materiality and aesthetics of the sites (see [Exploring](#)). What was particularly interesting was how this emphasised the *lack* of detail that had been noted by the majority of the core research group when they had used Caer Llan as a tour-base in 2000.



Preparation visit for CL1, 2002.



Site 1 piece, CL1, 2002

Ingold suggests, above, that we perceive the environment for 'the pursuit of the action in which we are currently engaged'. This was amply borne out by the re-viewing of the sundial/barbecue terrace. Most of the group (including myself) had not 'noticed' the extensive ground pattern of a human sundial in 2000, despite spending at least one evening of barbecue leisure on the terrace. This was all the more remarkable as the chairs at the barbecue evening had been set in a large circle around the perimeter of the space,

in such a position that much of the central area was uncovered. The inner discs and most of the dull-red 'pointer' could have been seen easily.

Now that the site was perceived through a different mode of engagement, however, other relevant detail became visible and different action was pursued. (The performance on this site in CL1 used the sundial as its premise. Previously known as 'the barbecue terrace', this area of Caer Llan was dubbed 'the sundial terrace' for the following three years, a verbal confirmation of its more recent affordance.) Theorists on place have paid attention to the differences *between* places and how they might materially change. Rose states, for example, what we now take for granted: '[Places] differ from one another in that each is a specific set of interrelationships between environmental, economic, social, political and cultural processes' (1993: 41). Escobar suggests that our sense of place alters as the *environment* changes. He refers to the deterioration of landscapes through activities such as mining and the impact it has upon the inhabitants (2001: 149). Yet what becomes more interesting arising from the Caer Llan example is how the *same* place *differs* to the *same* people when *different* modes of engagement are adopted. Using that site as a particular area of an inhabited, everyday activity, the site had an appropriate focus and affordance - barbecues. As visitor-explorers, the site and 'its specific set of interrelationships' changed significantly. Not only was the site read more creatively but completely different material matter was registered. In closely analysing this impact of approaching the site through a different mode of engagement, *the instability and unpredictability of a single, bounded, located 'place'* becomes prominent. Although the users were the same people, the constructed reality of this micro-place substantially altered (name, function, observed materiality).

Certain complex shadings of the performance of place can be identified through an analysis of this explorer mode of engagement (within, perhaps, the broader discursive register of 'visitor') in a temporary location. For example, different modes of engagement afford different perceptions of the *same* site, and 'place' seems entirely dependent on the form and focus of inhabitation; 'place' is unstable and unpredictable, therefore, as revisiting a place does not necessarily lead to being re-emplaced. What we *thought* of as familiar was made strange by these explorations. In [Dominic Interview](#) Louise articulates something of this. She talks of the attention to detail in a Brechtian manner of making something strange; you become familiar with a place, but not in the way you are familiar with your home. As 'explorers', people's understanding of, and response to, Caer Llan was substantially altered. This place was not, however, a place of permanence, as Perce, for example, would desire: 'I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted; places that might be points of reference, of departure, of origin' (Perce, 1997: 90). In contrast, performance in temporary place is evidenced here as one where place and the memories of that place are deeply *unstable*, moving and changing. The dialectic that was provoked by engaging with place as a visitor to Caer Llan - leading to a suggested instability of place - echoes how place is being interpreted now by some. It is closer to Massey's 'meeting' place, where place is progressive; it is not static but a process (1997). Place is constructed according to the meanings afforded by the particular mode of engagement.

If this is so, then engaging with temporary places becomes normative. Not only could we argue that contemporary society is increasingly peripatetic and that when we engage with place it is as a meeting place or as a space that comprises a 'simultaneity of stories-so-far' (Massey, 2005: 9), we can also argue that place shapeshifts according to its affordances and events and that we cannot ever regard place as stable or unchanging as a result. Performing temporary place might then become tautological: place *is* temporary.

Here, I have deconstructed one aspect of the CLT that might impact on how we think about temporary places and their performance. This particular line of thought developed from how the (apparently) familiar is made strange. There were many instances, of course, where the strange was made familiar, where unknown parts of Caer Llan were made familiar through intensive exploration and performance practice. This is evident in, for example, [Exploring, Early responses, Site 3/Wasteland](#) (the third section – Oliff's tour).