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Applied Scenographics: Designing the Conditions of Encounter

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ABSTRACT

This article develops the concept of Applied Scenographics as a practice of designing the conditions for encounter within public civic space. Through three iterative commissions in the London Borough of Havering, U.K, *The Rising Sun* (2022), *The People's Kitchen* (2023), and *World Kiosk* (2024–26), it argues that scenography, when oriented toward the emotional textures and everyday voices of a place, can operate as both method and medium: structuring how people gather, listen, and recognise one another, while generating situated knowledge through participation. Building on Rachel Hann's account of scenographics as that which orientates acts of worlding, and Tim Cresswell's understanding of place as produced through social relations and lived experience, the article proposes that design can introduce small ruptures in the social architectures of public space. Each iteration builds on the last, proposing Applied Scenographics as a cumulative civic practice concerned with redistributing narrative authority and opening provisional conditions in which place might be held, and imagined, differently.

'To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of the arts.'

Henry David Thoreau (1886) *Walden*

I return often to this line from Thoreau. For me, it exemplifies a practice of crafting everyday life, a return to the conscious awareness of what it means to live deliberately. Thoreau reminds us that the qualitative experience of the material world are ways through which we might attune and awaken to our place in the world. It is this crafting of experience, the careful orchestration of materials, atmosphere, and encounter, that has been the philosophical through-line of my practice since my work on mindful reception in immersive experience (Shearing 2017). To affect the quality of the day, in an artistic sense, is to design the conditions through which people might become more fully present within it.

The three projects I describe here, *The Rising Sun* (2022), *The People's Kitchen* (2023), and *World Kiosk* (2024–26), are iterations of my design practice, each extending and

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reorienting the last - an ongoing enquiry into how scenographic practice might not only produce public space, but invite us to become more fully present within it. By being more present we might be able to better question the structures at play within civic life. Across these works, I orient design toward the emotional textures and everyday voices of a place, rather than its planned and constructed built environment. This raises a fundamental question: how might design reconfigure our understanding and experience of place?

This enquiry unfolds through two interrelated strands. The first is a practice of interruption and invitation: using design to punctuate the flow of the everyday, opening provisional conditions for encounter, where public dialogue, collective care, and place-based imagining can emerge. Within this, a key question persists: what design conditions support meaningful encounters between different communities within shared civic spaces? Here, scenography operates not as set, but as a hosting mechanism, structuring how people gather, listen, and recognise one another.

The second strand positions design-led, immersive public artworks as forms of community-led research. These projects do not simply represent place; they generate situated knowledge through participation - knowledge that emerges when people pause, in the midst of ordinary public life, to reflect on their own journeys and their relationship to place. Local people become hosts, creating conditions for active conversation in and about the places they inhabit. In dialogue with other voices, participants often articulate things they rarely get to say: how they arrived somewhere, what a place means to them, how they belong or don't. Hearing other voices helps them think about themselves in ways that public life rarely permits. In this sense, design becomes both method and medium: an apparatus for sensing, collecting, and amplifying these lived realities.

Place, as Tim Cresswell reminds us, is never simply a container; it is a meaningful location produced through the interplay of material conditions, social relations, and lived experience (Cresswell 2014). These projects can therefore be understood not as works situated *within* place, but as interventions in its ongoing production - reshaping how place is felt, narrated and collectively imagined.

I begin, however, from my own situated understanding of place. I grew up in Romford, in the London Borough of Havering, outer east London, where the city meets Essex, urban meeting suburban, a borderland that has always held multiple and often contradictory identities simultaneously. Havering is one of London's greenest boroughs, shaped by parks, farmland, and the edge of the green belt: and yet it is also one of the fastest changing: demographically, economically, socially. Returning after twenty years away, I was struck by how much had shifted and the regular routines that remain. The sounds of the church bells from St Edward the Confessor Church, the hum of the market, the vivid tiles of the underpasses, these resurfaced as sensorial fragments, punctuating memories that did not present themselves as coherent narratives but as textures: light, sound, smell, and spatial forms. The borough I came back to was still shaped by the same tides of social class, migration, and belonging that had always been there, but now changing more rapidly than before, its contradictions more visible. As a designer I make work that responds to these complex emotional atmospheres, to the layered, often contradictory textures of place and the lives lived within it. The projects I describe here are all grounded in the specific ecology of Havering, but they reach toward something wider: an understanding of how place is produced through the interplay of materials, stories, and social relations, and of the role that scenography might play in intervening in that

production. Scenography here is embedded within the conditions of lived experience itself - shaping how environments are sensed, inhabited, and made meaningful. From this position, it carries a particular capacity to interrupt dominant social orders, surface hidden narratives, and shift perspective through the application of theatrical logics to everyday encounters.

I use the term Applied Scenographics to describe a reorientation of the everyday, working within the rhythms, materials, and social textures of the places people already inhabit. The market, the high street, the community kitchen, the kiosk by the station. Places already charged with memory, meaning, and the accumulated weight of how people have lived in and through them. I am interested in what happens when design attends to these conditions rather; when scenography operates as a set of conditions for encounter -for the slow commingling of bodies, materials, voices, and place. The question that drives the work is not only what public space looks like, or how it feels, but how the design of everyday space might create small ruptures in the systems through which it operates. Places are shaped by symbolic features of monuments, statues, rights of way, voice, and via commercialisation and control - each one a sediment of decisions about who belongs and who moves through. Design, when it attends to these features rather than simply inheriting them, can introduce small ruptures: provisional conditions in which the assumed logic of a space is made briefly visible, and therefore briefly open to being held differently.

What I am interested in, across all these works, is how public space might be oriented differently, how people might encounter themselves and one another within it in ways that are not already scripted by the architectures of efficiency and exclusion. It is also a way of thinking about systems: whose voice is privileged, who is granted narrative authority, and how the design of space might question rather than reinforce the existing systems through which place and its people are represented. Scenography, approached this way, becomes something more than the design of an environment. It becomes the design of the conditions for encounter: an orchestration of materials, atmosphere, time and care.

Applied Scenographics draws on Rachel Hann's understanding of scenographics as that which 'orientates acts of worlding' (Hann2019) - the sensory, material, and relational cues that shape how environments are encountered - my practice extends this into a civic register. It operates through interventions in everyday life: materials, atmosphere, hosting, storytelling and the slow choreography of encounter. Its central concern is not spectacle but how design structures listening and redistributes narrative authority within the social architectures through which public life is negotiated.

The Rising Sun

From the outside, *The Rising Sun* looked somewhat like a pub (Fig. 1). That was the intention. Its exterior drew on the architectural language of Romford pubs, the Lamb, the Bull, the Golden Lion, borrowing the colours, patterns, and geometries of local architecture, including the tiled subways surrounding the marketplace, and folding them into the window designs (Fig. 2). The familiarity was an invitation. Step inside and the space transformed: quieter, lighter, more serene. Where the exterior promised the familiar sociability



Figure 1. The Rising Sun, Romford Market, July 2022. Photograph: Hannah Davis.



Figure 2. Tiles at the Como Street Underpass, used as reference for the windows. Photograph: Tom Joy.

of a pub, the interior offered something more reflective - a deliberate disruption of its own invitation, creating a pause within the bustle of Romford market.

The interior was a chapel-like quiet. Limewashed walls, reclaimed timber flooring, rows of simple wooden chairs. From beneath the floorboards, narrow shafts of light pushed upward through a thin haze. Twenty-four stained-glass windows, one for each hour of the day, were calibrated to follow the movement of the sun across the market (Fig 3). At 8am, a single beam cut through the space. By midday, prisms of colour were spilling across the floor. By late afternoon, the whole room turned golden amber. Place, like emotion, is not static or fully intelligible; it is carried, remembered, and continually re-formed. What Juhani Pallasmaa describes as an 'atmospheric sense' is something that exceeds objecthood and emerges instead as a complex relation of states of mind and matter (Pallasmaa 2019).

At the heart of the installation was an archive: over seventy voices gathered from across the borough. Market traders, community organisers, young parents, elders, new arrivals, people who had been here for decades. Their stories were edited into a spatial audio composition developed with composer James Bulley across 41 channels, woven together with field recordings of the church bells, market calls, the rumble of trains. Inside the space, you could look out through the glass onto the very market that had produced those stories. Past and present held together in the same frame.

The glass was cheap. Deliberately so. Single pane, slightly distorted, the kind found in pub snugs and corner windows. Looking out through it, the figures of the market became softened, slowed, tinted like early photographs. I wanted that distortion. I wanted the world to remain present but held at a slight remove, the way memory holds it.



Figure 3. The Rising Sun interior, showing the movement of light through the stained glass. Photograph: Hannah Davis.



Figure 4 Members of HASWA (Havering Asian Social and Welfare Association) explore questions of identity and place during a hosted event within The Rising Sun. Photograph: Hannah Davis.

The responses from visitors reflected something of this back. *As I sat down the first story immediately chimed with me and then I sat and felt immediately immersed and connected* - the space had done its work before the visitor had fully chosen to let it. Others found the encounter reorienting something larger: *I like how it went into [social] class and broke it down to its core* - a recognition that the work was not only personal but systemic, that the stories held in the room were shaped by forces and structures bigger than any individual life. And for some, the shift was geographical as much as emotional: *The Rising Sun opened my eyes and ears to the stories of the people who make up this place. The experience makes me feel closer to Romford.* To feel closer to a place through the voices of strangers - this is perhaps what the work was most quietly reaching for (Fig 4).

People came back, day after day. Because the light had moved. Because the atmosphere had shifted. Because they wanted to sit in it again, and to hear more, to find themselves in the stories of others they had not yet encountered.

The People's Kitchen

It was early March 2023 and cold. I had taken over a disused shop near Rainham station, in a part of Havering where the everyday textures of post-industrial life are very close to the surface. Commuters moving between trains and work, the café culture of necessity, the precariousness and resilience of a community that rarely gets to see itself reflected back.

The People's Kitchen was a soup kitchen: free, open, functioning. Romanian bread makers and a local chef named Ravi prepared fresh food daily. Large communal tables. Enamel bowls with grey rims. Cheap metal spoons. Brown paper napkins, unbleached.



Figure 5. The People's Kitchen, Rainham, 2023. Photograph: Hannah Davis

Spring onions in glass vases. The materials were humble, but arranged with care, the kind of care that signals that people matter, even when resources are scarce (Fig. 5).

The large windows were the key architectural decision. From the street, you could see in: the warmth, the tables, the gathering. From inside, you could see the world still moving outside. This transparency mattered (Fig. 6). The kitchen was not separate from Rainham life; it was embedded within it, held in dialogue with the everyday rhythms of the high street.

What made the work was the hosting. A team of trained hosts, practiced in active listening, in holding space without directing it, moved through the kitchen throughout the day (Fig. 7). They were not therapists and they were not facilitators in any formal sense. They were local people who had been trained to listen and to remain open. The conversations that opened across those tables were often unexpected: about longing, about what sustains us, about what we would do differently. Public places shape life chances and the ability to be an active member of society, as Erin Toolis argues; and who belongs in a place is always negotiated through stories and the symbolic features of the physical environment (Toolis 2017). *The People's Kitchen* made this visible.

At one event, in collaboration with the Rainham ROYALS youth centre, young people learned to cook a curry alongside a chef from Crem Kitchen, a local restaurant, before serving it to their parents and guardians. The provocation was simple: ask your parents what they want to be when they are older. The usual adult and child dynamic was inverted. The young people held the frame. The room shifted power (Fig. 8).

What *The People's Kitchen* made visible was a question about who public space ordinarily addresses, and who it quietly excludes. The design had done something deliberate:



Figure 6. Exterior view of The People's Kitchen. Photograph: Hannah Davis



Figure 7. Local host Madiha in conversation with a guest. The People's Kitchen. Photograph: Hannah Davis



Figure 8. Young people from Rainham ROYALS, learning to cook for their parents. Photograph: Hannah Davis.

lowered the threshold of entry. As Norma, the local area coordinator, put it: *you don't have to wear a certain mode of dress, you don't have to look a certain way, you don't have to be an artist ... you can just come along, have a chat, have some soup and just be.* This was not achieved through neutrality but through intention, what Norma further described as *an almost West End quality, but this emerged not through luxury, but through care, precision, and coherence.* The range of people who crossed the threshold reflected that: people who were unhoused alongside commuters returning from work - a plurality that rarely occupies the same civic space at the same time. What held them together was the recognition that, as one host observed, *everyone has their own story to tell, everyone has their own struggles* - a shared condition that the kitchen made legible, and the architecture of most public space does not.

World Kiosk

World Kiosk takes the previous ideas of a voice archive and hosting mobile. It is part intervention, part act of care, part pause in the day, familiar in form - a street kiosk - but with a refinement that signals something different (Fig. 9). Gentle lighting. A soundscape composed to ask questions, drifted from speakers on three sides. Tea, brewed slowly, in whatever flavour guest chose hibiscus rose, nettle, liquorice root, Madagascan chai. Hosts who greet you with patience (Fig. 10).

World Kiosk carries an archive of over 500 stories gathered over more than a decade, combining the deep research I have conducted in many places, from markets, community rooms and social groups. As the project travels, the archive grows. Each new location adds



Figure 9. World Kiosk, on tour, Green Street, Upton Park, London 2024. Photograph: Hannah Davis.



Figure 10. World Kiosk, visitor engaging with lead host Danni Ebanks-Ingram. Photograph: Hannah Davis.

its own textures: its languages, dialects, experiences of arrival and belonging and endurance. The stories do not resolve into a single account. They accumulate, sit alongside one another, remain in motion.

In Green Street in East London, British Sign Language users became hosts in their own right, not interpreters, but holders of the conversation. In Billingham, Northeast England, the Refugee Futures Group did not simply contribute stories they become hosts; they welcomed others into the work, shaping who felt invited in. Each iteration is authored through the relations it produces. Hosting becomes a designed act.

The musical composition that could be heard from the kiosk sits at around 52 beats per minute, slower than an average resting heart rate. The intention is bodily: to invite a gentle deceleration, to create a different temporality within the everyday. You do not have to stay long. You might return. You might dip in and out. The work does not demand to be completed. It offers itself as a pause in public space (Fig. 11)

Across its iterations, *World Kiosk* produced a consistent pattern in its visitors: a reorientation toward the people and places they already inhabit. *Meeting Farrah and her sign language interpreter made my day... it made me reflect on what I could be doing to better include those in my community who are deaf or otherwise disabled.* The work was prompting visitors not only to receive the stories of others but to interrogate their own assumptions about who public space is designed for, and how we might better meet together in public space. Hosts felt this too: *I have connected with people of the community so much more through this project in the past two days than I have in my whole life living here.* Temporary scenographic interventions speed-up place attachment. These were not simply moments of warmth; they were small ruptures in the social architecture of the everyday. As James Jackson, Director of Havering Changing and commissioning partner on the project observed, the kiosk offered *two communities in Havering the chance to reimagine the potential of their public spaces... celebrating and sharing untold stories from people in their own voices.* Whose voices are held in an archive, and whose are absent from it, is itself a design decision and one the kiosk kept returning to. The archive travels with the kiosk, it is deliberately provisional, a living, evolving record, one that resists the authority that permanence implies. The fragmented archive does not form a consensus. The voices and people sit in proximity. From that proximity, something emerges (Fig. 12).

The Conditions for Encounter

What I am interested in, across all of these works, is not what public space looks like, but what it feels like, how it might be oriented differently, how people might encounter themselves and one another within it in ways that are not already scripted by the architectures of efficiency and exclusion. It is also a way of thinking about systems: whose voice is privileged, who is granted narrative authority, and how the design of space might question rather than reinforce the existing systems through which place and its people are represented. Scenography, approached this way, becomes something more than the design of an environment. It becomes the design of the conditions for encounter: an orchestration of materials, atmosphere, time, care and critique of social structures.

The production of public space is never complete. It is made and remade through every exchange, every sitting down at a table together, every voice held in an archive,



Figure 11. World Kiosk, visitor reads local edition of newspaper and drinks tea. Photograph: Hannah Davis.



Figure 12. Visitors listen to the archive through headphones outside Highfields Tower, Havering. Photograph: Hannah Davis

every slow cup of tea in the cold. To affect the quality of the day, not through spectacle, but through attention, through the careful arrangement of the conditions under which people might meet, this remains, for me, the practice. These are the materials I work with. They are the scale at which people actually live.

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Notes on Contributor

David Shearing is Senior Lecturer in Design-led Experience and Placemaking at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, where he is a member of the Centre for Performance, Technology and Equity. An artist and academic specialising in immersive multimedia environments and place-based cultural practice, he leads the public art studio Variable Matter, whose award-winning practice research include *The Weather Machine* (2015), *New Beginning* (2023) and *Meet Me by the Fountain* (2026). He co-developed the London Borough of Havering's Cultural Strategy: *A Good Life 2025-28* and is a director of Havering London, a cultural placemaking organisation. His publications include *Scenographic Landscapes* (2014), *Felt Dramaturgies of Light* (2023) and the co-edited *Performance Research* issue *On Mountains* (2019).

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