

Developing community through collective projects and activities: the benefits of using sociometry

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The world works best when people notice each other and when people notice each other noticing each other.
– Dr G. Max Clayton (personal communication, 1989)

In this article, I will let you know how Gap Filler creates ways for people to interact with others and their city, using examples of some of the Gap Filler projects I have been involved with over the past few years. I will focus on identifying the creative sociometric interventions that build relationships. This article will be of interest to practitioners working in community development, resilience building, arts participation or other community engagements.

Gap Filler

Gap Filler is a creative urban initiative that since 2010 has been working with new ideas, re-framing how people relate to their city and bringing participatory design processes to the Christchurch urban landscape, with the objective of involving people in the co-creation of their city. What I conceptualise as sociometric experimentation by Gap Filler in Otautahi | Christchurch and other places in Aotearoa | New Zealand and Australia has involved facilitating a wide range of temporary projects, events, activations, installations and amenities. Projects like the ones Gap Filler creates abound in post-earthquake Christchurch and seem to be more the result of a post-earthquake resurgence of citizen-initiated activities, and the organisations that support these activities, than from Government or local government sponsored structures.

I observe the work Gap Filler does creates opportunities for people to interact with each other and provides a social infrastructure that enables sociometric relationship building that would not otherwise have taken place. Creating opportunities for, what Max Clayton refers to in the quote above as, 'people noticing each other'. Sociometric observations of tele, status, role relationships and subsequent sociometric interventions have formed a vital part of this work.

Gap Filler begins with the idea of bringing something new into life by operating from principles such as, 'no repeats', experimenting for the sake of experimenting, and pushing things to the point of failing. During these processes, and as we observe and engage in what is happening in the community, we are fully engaged as participant observers. I see these observations as being of a sociometric nature and thinking of them sociometrically adds considerable value to the work.

Gap Filler's organisational values bring us together to work on projects that are of interest to us as employees. As a result, we have created an organisation where we are available to each other while co-creating projects. No one is limited by their organisational role and no one has to leave their personal selves at home. No one gets isolated or left to fend for themselves and we notice when things go wrong it is often because isolation is present.

Creative process

I notice we work best and most enjoyably when we simply do what is in front of us. Sometimes working out every detail gets in the way of our co-creative process. As illustrated by our project *Diversity* (more on Diversity later), our creative process goes something like this:

1. **This is what is in front of us.** Let's pay attention to the different cultural populations in Christchurch.
2. **These are our resources.** This is the cultural group who has the most energy for the project right now. We are able to develop a strong relationship with these people. We are motivated to work together.
3. **Who else do we need for this project and who is missing?** Who can benefit or contribute to the project by filming, making artefacts, creating an event etc.?
4. **Let's do this much and see what happens.** This might be experimentation within parameters to see what might happen or trying something out on ourselves before a public launch.
5. **OK, let's do some more.** Out of all of the other cultural groups who have approached us, who will challenge us to work at a greater depth or have a greater impact?
6. **We are deeply involved in this.** Let's put everything into this for a while and see what happens. Let's expand our range and look for more opportunities.

Later we might say, 'Let's think about what has happened and see what we can learn from it.' We need to observe and reflect on what we have been doing over a period of time to understand ourselves.

The place of Sociometry

Since I began working for Gap Filler I have learned a great deal about, and continue to experiment with, the application of sociometry to my work there. I have been active bringing my understanding of Morenian concepts, particularly sociometry, creativity and role theory to bear on the ongoing questions: Is what we are doing effective? What can we do next in the current context? and Who are we now? The answers to these questions give us guidance when we develop our projects. Some of these projects are described later in the article.

Public engagement

As we notice what people do and how they interact with each other in a particular context we adapt our projects thereby creating further opportunities for public engagement in the contexts the projects are created for. Gap Filler has been using standard sociological observation methods of clustering, interactions, flow through space and activities engaged in. Additional perceptions informed by sociometry allow us to observe the valency and tele of the role relationships and appreciate the effect of status and warm-up.

Creative participation

Gap Filler speculates that deliberately designing ways for people to interact with each other in central Christchurch, and noticing how they do this, assists in the development of social infrastructure. This, in turn, enables social interaction leading to more active and engaged citizens. We see again and again how creative activity inspires and encourages creative responses. By acting to design interventions we are increasing the opportunities for the positive sociometry that naturally occurs when people get together in purposeful or recreational ways. Our project design incorporates collaborative relationships with familiar and unfamiliar partner individuals and organisations, involving them in such a way that there are many opportunities for their creative participation.

A resurgence

Gap Filler works closely with other placemaking organisations like Te Pūtahi and Greening the Rubble. Te Pūtahi, the Christchurch centre for architecture and city-making, is an exemplar of an organisation designing projects that engage people. Through their event, the Festival of Transitional Architecture (FESTA), begun in 2012, they have been responding to the challenges and opportunities of post-quake Christchurch. Greening the Rubble engage with community volunteers to create beautiful green spaces in otherwise arid demolition sites. For a while I was the secretary of the Trust Board for this citizen-initiated

organisation, I saw my role on their Board as a way of building sociometry.

The projects created by Gap Filler, Te Pūtahi, and Greening the Rubble, are designed to promote an encounter through their conception, design, planning and activation. None of these community driven projects could be seriously considered unless they were in some way an expression of the affected community and there is a call for people to engage in a cooperative and active participation in the project.

Noticing how Gap Filler's projects work to affect the sociometry has provided us with a means of working with the relationships and roles that different people have in their interaction with the project at particular times and places. When people take part in any encounter there are a number of roles present, some of which are visibly more active than others. Participants in the encounter can be differentiated through their status and relative contribution. Drawing attention to these differences deepens and strengthens these relationships and highlights where further effort is required.

Carefully designed projects open people up to opportunities for relationships of various strengths and valencies and there is potential for further relationships that are as yet unknown. These unknown relationships are those that are technically possible within the designed structure but have yet to be activated. Potential sociometric relationships are interesting to us because our desire is to understand the effect a particular project has on the wider community. Providing a mechanism that enables people to interact and engage, either (seemingly passively) by observing, or actively by verbal or physical communication, transforms unknown sociometric relationships into actual sociometric relationships of various strengths and valencies and of particular durations.

I will illustrate how these design principles and observations work in practice by telling you briefly about two projects, Super Street Arcade and Diversity, and then more in depth about our work in One Central.

Super Street Arcade

Super Street Arcade (SSA) was one of the first Gap Filler projects not in a privately owned vacant space. We wanted to provide a project in a publicly owned space and activate a street area that had a high pedestrian traffic count, but where people had no reason to pause. The experiment was to see if activities that usually happen in a private space, the living room, could be translated into a public space, the footpath. Super Street Arcade is designed to make it hard for one person to play. Two or more players are required and quite big groups can be involved

in the play, often with a big audience of family, friends and strangers. Games are designed to be of short duration encouraging a turnover of players and rapid swapping between the audience and players. Games using these design parameters were also developed by high school students through a project called Code Create, causing the students to think about how their game was affecting the player's interactivity.

Diverscity



Other Gap Filler projects, like Diverscity's Ping Pong (with the Canterbury Branch of the NZ Chinese Association) and Ayoayo (Nigerian Canterbury Association), encourage play and encounter in public spaces and raise people's awareness of cultural diversity. Observations of the sociometry around these have been very stimulating because they are very much in the public arena, a high traffic city street. We rigged up a time-lapse camera high on a light pole for the launch weekend of Ayoayo. The amount of data obtained was overwhelming and will take some time to analyse. The camera footage provided us with limited information, as there were no 'street-level sociometrists' to provide the deeper insight engaging people would have given us.

One Central

Just east of central Christchurch is an area of the city now branded the One Central Development that was previously the East Frame Anchor Project, or East Frame for short. Almost all of the buildings in the 14 hectare area, which is bordered by Lichfield, Armagh, Madras and Manchester streets, including the almost new and relatively undamaged buildings like Calendar Girls and the newly rebuilt Westende House,

were demolished as part of the Government's Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) Blueprint for the city. CERA, through the Blueprint, and under special powers granted under Government legislation, decided to concentrate the rebuilding of Christchurch more centrally and in so doing provide room for downtown residential living. CERA prevented any rebuilding by the previous owners in this part of the city and purchased all of the property. The area is well connected with cycling and walking paths and is close to the Bus Interchange and connects with Margaret Mahy Family Playground, the Avon River Precinct and the South Frame.

There are two elements to the One Central Project; a commercial construction company, Fletcher Living, is designing and constructing approximately 900 dwellings to house up to 2000 people in townhouses and apartments. A government agency, Ōtākaro who owns the land on behalf of the Government, has developed a park and paved areas that form the third largest open space in central Christchurch. Called Rauora Park, this public space forms a 660m-long strip, a linear park of five city blocks that runs north-south through East Frame.

Superlot 9

As part of their contract with Central Government, Fletcher Living is asked to engage in 'place-making' and 'temporary use' activities so the One Central housing development does not become an idle wasteland for the next eight years. Gap Filler has entered into a contract with Fletcher Living to deliver some of these place-making and temporary use projects. At one end of One Central is the Margaret Mahy Family Playground, a \$28 million dollar children's playground. At the other end is Superlot 9, one of eleven Superlots in the area. Superlot 9 was the first area Gap Filler worked on. We designed a number of projects for the area to explore how the temporary activations can help foster long-term community outcomes and influence the values that evolve in residential development.

Good Spot

At Superlot 9 one of these projects is a 67-place Community Car Park that is changing people's experience of parking their cars in central Christchurch. Good Spot on Bedford is a community run car park that directly competes with the ubiquitous and reviled overseas owned Wilsons car park¹. 100% of profits from the Good Spot car park go into

¹ Christchurch Press. *Wilson Parking and the millions spent on parking misery* <https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/94833811/Wilson-Parking-and-the-millions-spent-on-parking-misery>

community projects within a 500-metre radius of the car park. Simple differences to the Wilsons car parking model are marked parking bays, allowing plenty of room to turn; the creation of usable pothole free paths; and at peak times, a parking attendant who welcomes regular and casual parkers, explains the site, and its community involvement, and gives discounts to car-poolers or 'people driving yellow minis'! Jono Kitt, who is community development worker at Linwood-based Te Whare Roimata, has been organising these attendants. He says his aim at Good Spot is 'to put a smile on people's faces as they rush to work'¹. People parking on site are often friendly and appreciative. Relating to a small local organisation rather than a multinational car parking conglomerate gives people more feeling of intimacy and connection. We have worked with Greening the Rubble to do some 'carscaping' (landscaping using a car) with an old Mitsubishi Celeste (see photo).

Gap Filler has since opened a second Good Spot, twice as big and much more colourful!

Youth Centre

Also on Superlot 9 are Kākano Cafe & Cookery School and a Youth Centre. The Youth Centre project includes: Giant Spray Cans where local street artists will be running workshops; a free bookable youth space for gatherings, meetings and events, which will double as the headquarters for two local youth organisations; a ping-pong table that has been relocated from Gap Filler's Diverscity project in City Mall; and, thanks to the Christchurch City Council, climbing rocks and a basketball half court. Gap Filler worked in a co-design process with youth organisations and the Council to ensure that young people now have a space in their city they can use and engage with.

Architectural Anthropology

Superlot 9 has been the subject intense scrutiny by Gap Filler's two interns Elin Sofía and Natasja, visiting Danish architectural anthropologists. They were interested in how people interact with each other and the site, and Gap Filler is continuing this observational work now that they have gone back to Denmark.

One Saturday evening I pulled the 10:00 pm observer slot. After dinner with friends my wife Sara accompanied me down to Superlot 9 so I could make the required observations and take notes about 'Stationary

¹ Christchurch Press. *Five days a week, from 7am, 'hippy' car park volunteer cheers commuters* <https://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/christchurch-life/107784135/Five-days-a-week-from-7am-hippy-car-park-volunteer-cheers-commuters>

Activity' and 'Flow'. It had been raining most of the week and my Friday 5:00 pm notes had been that most people were rushing to their cars and there was no recreational activity on site. By Saturday evening the sun had shone most of the afternoon, dissipating the week's gloom; the evening was overcast but warm. The city and particularly Superlot 9 was buzzing with people playing games and coming and going from the bars and restaurants in the area.

When Sara and I arrived we were excited to see nine young men ranging from late teens to early twenties playing on the basketball half-court. Sara went off to Stranges Lane to do a follow-up for her research project 'Why aren't you Dancing' (Crane, 2016). I positioned myself on the street corner to make my observations to further our intern's work.

As I stood on the busy street corner along with the many people passing through, I warmed up as a sociometrist. I watched the emerging scene for some time, filling myself with the atmosphere being created, taking occasional notes and drawing flow paths with a red pen. As I tried to encompass the whole I found myself warming to particular things. I noticed the sociometry changing as: the young girl who had been sitting waiting joined the basketball game and was accepted; a group of four 16 or 17-year-old boys arrived with their own basketball and sat down at the edge of the bouldering area to watch the game; two young Polynesian women dressed in black arrived and fossicked for the ping pong bats and balls they knew were kept under the table, then began a game. I moved to another observation position and saw two men in their early 20s deeply involved in creating an artwork on two of the four 'Giant Spray Cans' behind the Youth Hub building.

My assessment was each of these four groups was aware of and accepting of the other groups. They weren't competitive or aggressive, simply getting on with having a good time in their own ways.

Near Sociometry

When I wrote my thesis 'Seize the Moment' (Gurnsey, 2014) I explored Moreno's concept of 'near sociometry'. Moreno encourages us to use near sociometric methods when a real sociometric test cannot be carried out. He refers to this as a 'sociometrically oriented observational method', which, with the aid of 'an observer sociogram...may give a rough picture of the situation. '. This is not an objective or scientific view of a system, only the intervention that is actively applied sociometry. Sociometry is uniquely applicable when observing quickly changing and dynamic interpersonal relationships; objective measurement isn't the aim. How the participant observers introduce themselves to the system and what

tele relationship is formed has an impact on the sociometric system that is co-created.

After I finished making my observations and notes I confirmed some of my near sociometric assessments by talking with the graffiti artists and the four young men. The graffiti artists turned out to be a Chilean man who only spoke Spanish, and his friend, a local man who spoke no Spanish. The local man was there to 'help with the work'. Gap Filler has been 'helping with the work' too. The phenomenal growth of graffiti and street art in Christchurch, fuelled by the availability of so many blank walls, has made Christchurch world-renowned for street art. Gap Filler's contribution has been huge and as others took up the challenge we looked for a new and relevant way to create a place for artistic expression. The Giant Sprays Cans were a direct result of this process.

The 4.5m high Cans were left over after the second edition of Christchurch's Street Art Festival, SPECTRUM in 2016. The Giant Spray Cans had been a creative response to the artistic momentum that has been underway in urban daily life and to the growing visibility of these artistic phenomena on the City's walls. Gap Filler saw an opportunity to reuse the Cans to enable established and emerging street artists to express themselves.

The two guys at work on Saturday night had a big vision. They had been there for hours, full and empty spray cans littered the ground. They had even cleaned up the tagging on the black tops of the Cans before they began work and were currently working on their second one. I commiserated with the difficulty of painting on a curved surface and was told the difficulty was matching the pattern when you got all the way around and only really experienced artists were trying to do this. Clever, inventive, creative and well organised, these two young men were taking full responsibility and ownership of the Cans and creating beautiful stimulating work.

I next talked to the teenagers sitting on a log by the bouldering rocks. They were waiting to be 'subbed in' to the basketball game. This explained to me how the young woman had earlier joined the group playing. These teenagers were younger and had arrived later than the current players, so had to wait their turn. As they waited they displayed no impatience. Three of them were from the West Coast and one was local. The local teenager had told the others about the half-court. They were at a Seventh Day Adventist convention and knew a couple of the guys already on the court. They had their own ball so would have created their own game if there hadn't already been one going.



I let them know I was from Gap Filler and they told me, 'This is a great place, cool things to do.' 'It's OK to be here.' 'Better than on the street, there's heap's of drunk people about.' 'There's plenty of light here.' There were lots of nods to this last statement. They were very open and friendly and liked the 'safe' environment Gap Filler had created - a well-lit space, close to a busy street with lots of foot traffic.

Sara arrived back from Stranges Lane feeling a little despondent about the reception she received, which was very different from the previous time when she had managed to activate the whole of the laneway. She cheered up as she had some worthwhile conversations with the young people over a game of ping-pong.

As we drove away I glanced in the rear vision mirror and had to stop the car and walk back to the site. The four young guys waiting to be subbed in were standing on the top of one of the bouldering rocks with a passer-by taking their photo. A group of 14, four of them girls about 16, the rest boys ranging in age to their early 20s, had arrived and were on the footpath watching the game. Mostly, they seemed pretty positive towards the game players. They had their own ball, which they bounced a few times, so they may have been waiting for an opportunity to play rather than join the existing game. They all had skateboards and some of them took off, skating north up Manchester Street. .

Self-organised fun

This evening's and subsequent observations by myself and others lead me to believe this well-used site has been a potent intervention in the fabric of the city. In creating this project, Gap Filler had enabled an environment where it was safe for young men and women to come and

play on a Saturday night. The atmosphere I observed and investigated was one of cooperative autonomy and was completely self-organising. No-one was there telling these young people what and how to do things. Huge competition on the basketball court didn't translate into an aggressive competition between the sub-groups.

Relationships in the present

Our projects are most effective when people's relatedness is in the present, rather than them relating to past conflicted or disrupted relationships. Elements that encourage these types of current relationships involve enjoyment, surprise, challenge and opportunities for interaction.

Observations about proximity, the amount of time spent, the emotional intensity, and indications of intimacy and reciprocity displayed, gives us clues to the underlying sociometry. Higher levels of emotional intensity, intimacy and stronger indications of reciprocity are evidence of stronger sociometric links between people engaged. Weaker sociometry can be tentatively surmised from passers-by, observers and those engaged in a parallel activity to those engaged with the project.

We consider observers and passers-by to have variable involvement according to the length of time engaged, physical movements towards or away from the activity, and emotional intensity. Even though it is possibly weaker in valency, this sociometry has value as observers and by-standers warm up to their environment being of interest or providing excitement. The relationships formed from those more actively involved, to these observers and bystanders, can connect people to the most remote people in their social network. We work on the assumption that these types of relationships are "vital for broad heterogeneous network cohesion" (Granovetter, 1983), building social cohesion and consciousness.

Opportunities for building these sociometric connections abound in a well-designed project. Projects that involve playing a game with strangers who become friends in the moment, like Super Street Arcade or Ayoayo, or projects that are designed to blur public and private space, like dancing in public on the Dance-O-Mat, create an environment where there are reduced levels of commitment and risk, allowing individuals to experiment with a range of nuances of meaning, to feel a sense of belonging and place, or to find shared values with differing levels of emotional engagement and intimacy.

At Gap Filler our main focus has been to continue to take action and over the years we understand that we have raised the sociometric consciousness of our stressed and struggling communities. Numerical

measurement of outcomes are difficult to obtain, resource hungry, and can skew observations away from the informed observation of the most important measure of relationship, tele. Our evidence of success is reliant on sociometric and other observations, as described above. Moreno (1978) warns us an "...over-emphasis upon logical purity of definitions may be outright harmful and over-developed logical systems may produce a false sense of security and of scientific well-being which discourages and delays action practice" (p. 112) which Moreno says can stifle creativity. Gap Filler's philosophy of taking action bears fruit as we attempt to avoid the limitations an over-consideration of results and scientific veracity places on us.

Conclusion

Gap Filler's projects and activations have resulted in increased spontaneity, as people developed their sense of place in the public arena and a creative flow has been generated in individuals and groups. This creative flow can be internalised and can, therefore, be transferred to other areas of life and other relationships. Creativity is generative, assisting the social, as opposed to the structural building of our city, making it a more open, energetic and interesting place to be and live in. People living here are therefore more enabled and engaged in solving the complex social problems we, and all cities have to deal with.

The Gap Filler projects described have all been designed and taken place in specific settings in response to the particular circumstances in central Christchurch. I imagine there are opportunities for ways to engage sociometric principles to further develop communities in your own neighbourhood through projects and activities. I am keen to carry on collectively growing our practice wisdom in this area.

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