

Postcards as Doorways

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“Tracing an imaginary line between a cluster of stars gave them an image and an identity. The stars threaded on that line were like events threaded on a narrative. Imagining the constellations did not of course change the stars, nor did it change the black emptiness that surrounds them. What it changed was the way people read the night sky.” (John Berger, 2005).

Introduction

This essay is about the use of a particular type of found or constructed object - the postcard - as a device to enable dialogue in groups that allows participants to connect together past, present and futures, to build new stories about the future, and to put themselves in the picture. The authors, who have collaborated in using postcards as a workshop device, come from different disciplines. Andrew is a futurist, Victoria works with narrative knowledge and storytelling. In both of our practices we have found that the use of postcards changes the nature and the meaning of the experience.

In this paper we explore this further, principally through discussing the role of postcards in a number of projects. This essay will draw on elements of theory, but it originated as a story about practice. In part, though, it is written as a response to the challenge offered up by Alex Soojung-Kim Pang (2010, p. 31), that “We need to pay attention to the role materials and spaces play in shaping collaboration and knowledge production”.

We end by trying to understand the particular role that postcards play in opening up different narratives, both of themselves as material objects in a workshop setting, and as a narrative agent. This is a story told through two devices, six illustrations, three strands of theory, and eight doorways. And as in all stories, there is the occasional aside.

The origins of our emerging postcard practices

The use of postcards as artefacts in a futures process was, like much innovation, the conjunction of chance and constraint: a client seeking a visual exercise to change the dynamics of a workshop, combined with a box of unsent postcards in an author's (Andrew's) home. In Victoria's case it started in 2003 with a client seeking to construct the brief for a new integrated healthy living centre participatively with doctors, nurses, volunteers, outreach workers and patients: how could we reorganise the power structures in the room and ground people's imagination of a future building in their own personal daily experience?

There is no precise workshop method: in practice it adapted to the specific requirements of the workshop. The approach has also shown itself to be fairly robust. Typically in the context of a futures workshop one would lay out 150 or so cards on a table, invite participants to form themselves into pairs or threes, then ask each group to select two, sometimes three, cards that express a story or a view about the particular future under scrutiny, and be willing, shortly afterwards, to tell that story to the other participants.

There are variations, but essentially this is it: a dialogue process that uses visual cues to open up different ways of seeing, of witnessing and conveying our own experience, and perhaps different types of insights, about the present and future. And more: a way of sharing fragments in such a way that small moments sometimes build to a larger and sometimes surprising narrative. In doing so, in our experience, they also create different types of narratives, different types of conversations, and a vivid body of language, image and material that can be incorporated directly into the next stages (whether this is an architectural competition brief, a set of scenarios, a future vision or new approaches to re-imagining professional practice.)

Why postcards? (Digression #1)

The postcard, both as an object in its own right, but also as a social object, has a number of distinctive characteristics. (Colton, Dove, Ward, Holtham, 2003, pp. 5-6).

- It is personal, but it is also shareable.
- It is light, compact, and highly portable.
- It is asynchronous, but interactive and annotatable
- It was designed to let people tell stories to each other.
- It is a slow medium, in that it offers opportunity for reflection, but a quick one, in that it invites brevity.
- It is a 'cool' medium in McLuhan's sense, in that it appears to engage just one sense (the eye) but in practice it becomes a warm medium, engaging memory, speech, and imagination.
- It is a simple form of multimedia.

Found postcards and constructed postcards

In our practice with postcards, we have used them in two separate but connected ways:

- found postcards used to disrupt, stimulate, provoke, and help people gain access to emotions, insights and thinking beyond easy reach
- constructed (or sometimes selected) postcards as a way of surfacing and connecting small private moments.

Postcards as found objects

Where the postcards that are used are “found objects” - meaning that they have been purchased, or picked up or received through the post - do the images on the cards matter? We suspect so, but haven’t been able to test this. In general the postcards in a workshop bag tend to have some resonance; they often have a history; they are sometimes capable of multiple meanings. They aren’t often conventional holiday “view” cards. Some were found in museums and art galleries; some sent to me (Andrew). There are some abstract images and a few cartoons. Some are advertisements.

The cards in the workshop bag change over time. Cards are removed and cards are added. But there is an important distinction: these are all cards that have been in public circulation for some reason at some point. They are not idealised images of a future that have been created for that specific purpose.

In general, perhaps because the postcards exercise tends to be used to open up perspectives at the start of a workshop, much of the way they have been used has been insufficiently documented. Some of the notes in this paper on processes using postcards are therefore impressionistic.

Postcards as made objects

Postcards as made or constructed objects are a device that Victoria uses with three particular intentions in working with clients to understand hidden narratives and construct new narratives:

Firstly, in the manner of the Situationist *derivé* or Mass Observation Directives, prompting people to witness the more mundane or hidden parts of their experiences, observations and emotions, to draw them to the surface, to make them visible, accessible and combinable so that the hidden, perhaps surprising, patterns and emphases of private experience become a collective resource. As the photographer Martin Parr (Parr and Parker, 2013) noted of the The Mass Observation project, “The directives were designed to make people think, and to photograph things they wouldn’t normally do.”

Secondly, to encourage people to value their own operational experiences and be able to connect these small, micro-narratives to the meta-narratives that are uncovered and then constructed. This has the effect of de-privileging professional knowledge quite successfully.

Thirdly, by pooling and patterning personal experience in this way, the materials and experiences can be incorporated into the product being constructed in a way that sustains and strengthens the relationship between past, present and future, and between individual and whole. A “red thread” runs through the work.

The gallery: Six postcards from our shared portfolio

Whitechapel Gallery innovation fund day 2008 (both authors)



Figure 1. “Debriefing the timeline” [Image: Sparknow]

The Bloomberg Commission: Goshka Macuga: *The Nature of the Beast* was the inaugural exhibition in re-opened Whitechapel Art Gallery in 2009. The exhibition was in the former library reading room. Macuga evoked the presentation of Picasso’s *Guernica*, paint still drying, on its European tour in 1939. A full size tapestry of the *Guernica*, commissioned by Rockefeller in 1955, woven by Jacqueline de la Baume Dürrbach, hung at one end of the gallery. A blue curtain and carpet echoed its normal hanging place in New York, outside the United Nations Security Council. A circular boardtable, with a glass top, and objects from the Whitechapel Gallery archive were in the centre of the room. For the year that the exhibition was up anyone could book the board table for a meeting, free of charge, with the one proviso that all public meetings be documented and the documents, recordings, images, ephemera and correspondence then be folded into the exhibition archive.

All these resonances were behind our choice of the Whitechapel as the place for the futures day that kicked off innovation fund projects for a research programme funded by the London Development Agency into the relationship between museums, libraries, archives and businesses in London (Sparknow, 2009).

We incorporated the blue carpet leading up to the *Guernica* into our workshop and on it we made a timeline, pieced together from postcards and images from

collections from participating museums, and postcards of key moments in cultural London, from the Festival of Britain (1953) on, together with post-its. Above the timeline we ran the history of cultural London, below the line were exhibits from individual museums and archives. In leaping forward to the future, we used postcards mixed with futures driver cards to format illustrated newspaper front pages of four future landscapes in which the museum of the future needed to play its role.

Postcards were used in a number of ways. Firstly, to illuminate and bring to life historic moments on the timeline (and also as substitutes for the actual artefacts which would have been too valuable to bring to a workshop like this). By bringing copies into the space and weaving them together, we created a sense of an extended psycho-geography and history of London culture. Our initial intention had been to start the timeline with the Festival of Britain, held around the same time as the Guernica tapestries were commissioned, but in practice participants went back hundreds of years, for example to the founding of guilds, so we stretched history back much further than we'd expected.

In working up the future headlines, the postcards offered a disruption and illustration of various futures. The drivers cards forced futures away from the constraints of people's imaginations, and then the selection of cards offered by Andrew Curry to illustrate those futures created wit and helped to generate an even greater sense of disruption.



Figure 2. "The Museum of the Future" [image Sparknow]

This combination of timelines, postcards, futures tools and techniques, and the reification of small personal moments into postcards that can be used to explore patterns has been carried forward recently by Victoria in a participatory process (working with David Gunn of Incidental) to help the Museum of London create a content masterplan as part of its strategy. In this version, we've used the idea to stretch understanding of the boundaries of London in space and time through personal, private experiences.

Henley KM Forum 2012 (Victoria)



Dear Victoria,

So here's the old iPod, now embedded in the wall by my veranda as a coffee holder. Very skinny little things iPods are now, but really you don't need one because you've got a Smartphone and an iPad. Everything is tiny and instant now, almost unbearably instant, but get used to cutting everything into tiny little chunks and keep everybody endlessly updated all the time. Instead of living my life, I tend to perform it and curate it. Make sure you get a membership to the London Library as soon as possible, and go and sneak off there and switch off everything to give yourself some breathing space. And get a grip on taking decent photos and doing good voice recordings as soon as possible. CURATE EVERYTHING.

Love from Victoria

Figure 3. "Postcard to my former self" [Image: Sparknow]

Here we played with how to create continuity and challenge in the Henley KM Forum experiences and membership (Corney, 2012).

At the 2012 KM Forum we invited people to write two postcards, one from their 2012 self to their 2002 self and one from their 2020 self to their 2012 self. In each case the card told their other self something about the changes in knowledge work over that decade.

A related experimental use from the Ark KM conference in 2003 was repeated in 2013. In 2003, a picture of a small space (a lighthouse keeper's hut) was on one side of the card, with interviewer questions about knowledge spaces in grey text lightly inscribed on the reverse. The combination of picture and prompts, and the chance for both researcher and researched to sit together in this temporary space changed the nature of the stories being shared, and the way they were shared and recorded.

Kentish Town Health Centre 2003 (Victoria)



Figures 4 and 5. "Canteen bricolage" [Image: Sparknow]

Postcards were constructed by participants from pictures they'd taken on disposable cameras (it was 2003) and then plastered in clusters over the walls of the refectory in the existing health centre. This had four identifiable effects.

Firstly, by having the cameras and witnessing their environments, people were more inclined to notice micro moments that might otherwise have passed them by, and to value their own operational experience more. Secondly, as none of them had

got round to making postcards before the event, there was a democratising beginning to the workshop where everyone, whatever their seniority in the power structures, was sitting together with Pritt sticks and pens and paper making postcards. Thirdly, the papering over of the walls of the refectory had the accidental but useful side-effect of appropriating the room for a democratic session, where normally it was the space for the most senior professionals in the room, the doctors. It created neutral territory in everyone was equal.

Finally, it illuminated hidden patterns of experience and concerns, and broke down the walls of the health centre by taking integrated healthcare work to the location of personal experience.

Unusually, the impact can be precisely traced: a one day workshop with about 40 participants led to an architectural competition, the selection of an architect and construction of a Stirling award winning health centre. Dr McGregor, who commissioned the original day in 2003, still uses constructed postcards from that day to tell the story of how the health centre was made and can point to individual images and clusters which translated into particular aspects of the health centre - toilets, reception, safety. (Ward, 2012)

The Future of Civil Society (Andrew)



Figures 6. “The Good Society” [Image: The Futures Company]

The project on the future of civil society in Britain and Ireland was commissioned by Carnegie UK's Civil Society and Democracy programme (Carnegie UK, 2007). The geography, which seems odd to modern eyes, was a

legacy of the Carnegie endowment: the project used a drivers-based approach as a platform for the development of a set of scenarios, developed through Causal Layered Analysis [CLA] (Inayatullah, 1998).

The project used a framing device for civil society taken from the work of Michael Edwards (2004), which talks about three aspects to civil society: civil society as associational life; civil society as the arena for public deliberation; and civil society as the good society. In the initial workshops, held in each of the five jurisdictions (England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) we used a postcard session to bring each of these to life with the participants.

In the example above, taken from a “good society” board constructed by participants, there are some familiar stories. Food is part of the good life, and so is the life of the street, the city air that makes us free. But the good life is also something that people fight and die for (top left and bottom right), and - enmeshed in both those images - it is also something that people can disagree about, violently. My citizen justice is your neighbourhood vigilante. One of the features of postcard conversations is that the stories can become specific and granular. The picture of the jazz musicians could be read, at first glance, as a platitudinous comment about the role of music or racial tolerance. But the card is of Charlie Parker playing bebop: also a reminder that the search for the good society can have a high price for the individuals who take risks in its pursuit, even in peacetime.

It is hard to convey the experience of a postcard-based discussion without having been present in the room, but perhaps a further example from the same project will help.

An image was selected of Muhammad Ali’s first heavyweight championship fight after publicly announcing his conversion to Islam, and his change of name from Cassius Clay. It was an example of civil society’s role as a public arena. At an immediate level, the visual connection between the arena of the boxing ring and the civil society arena is obvious enough.

But, evidently, this is an image that has its own layers, and those layers offer further insight into the meaning of civil society. This was not any boxing match, but an ideologically charged event in which Ali had aligned himself explicitly with the radical civil rights activism represented by the black separatist group Nation of Islam. Malcolm X, a former mentor, had been assassinated shortly before the fight. Liston, on the other hand, was associated with the Mob, and had once been sardonically described by a sportswriter as “the big Negro we pay to keep sassy Negroes in line” (Kempton, 2013/1964). Liston was cheered by the crowd as he entered the ring, Ali booed (Elsen, 2012).

In effect, the selection of the postcard introduced all of these stories into the room, together with their associated emotions. The “arena” of the boxing ring became an arena in which public deliberation was highly charged. Explicit and implicit notions of the role of civil society in creating change were revealed through the choice of image by participants. The combination of the card and the dialogue it opened up, created new perspectives for discussion. Because they are visual, perhaps, the cards connect our ideas about the future - our litanies, perhaps - more directly and more immediately with the worldviews and the metaphors that connect them.

Environmental futures 2100 (Andrew)

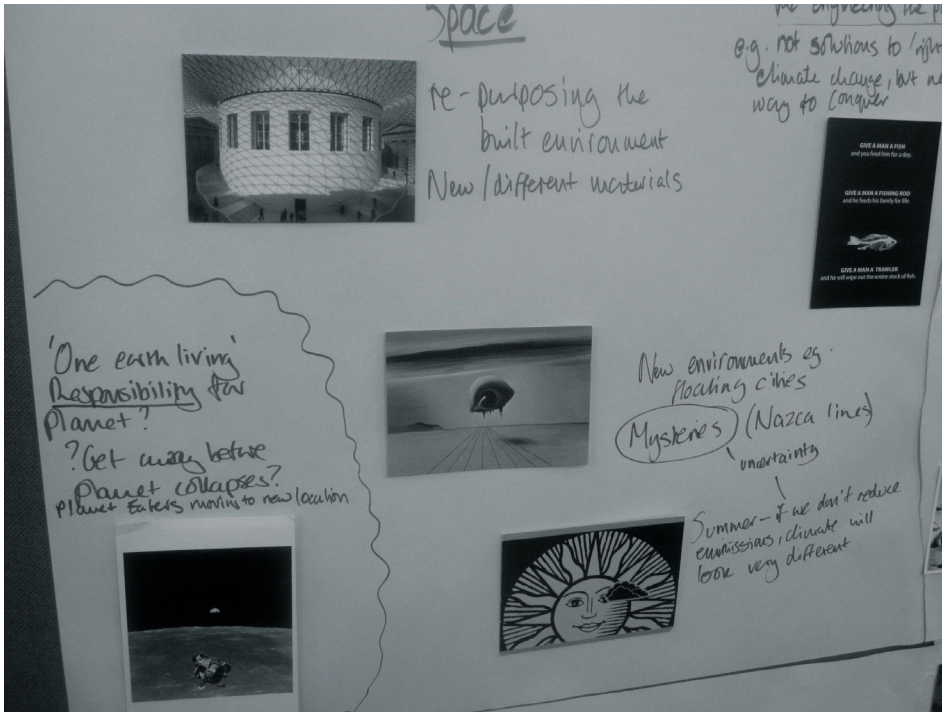


Figure 7. “Visualising 2100” [Image: The Futures Company]

The Environment Agency wanted to develop some possible worlds of 2100 to understand long-term water infrastructure requirements (Environment Agency, 2010). The scenario building workshop - which inevitably involved some complex methods - opened with a timeline looking back to help imagine a century’s worth of change, and with a postcard session to help open up thinking about some of the differences between 2010 and 2100.

Some of the output is seen in the picture above. The cards point to resource pressures on the planet, the impacts of climate change, the emergence of new materials, and the likelihood that some people might respond to environmental pressures by developing completely new living environments, such as floating cities or moving off the planet and into space.

Association of Professional Futurists, Virtual Gathering (Andrew and Victoria)

There is not an image for this last stop in the gallery, as it is a note of a virtual workshop where the limitations of technology meant that people had to use numbers to describe their selections from a virtual deck of postcards. Clearly some of the materiality of the work is lost in such a conversation, although the descriptions can be richer. But even in a virtual workshop, the use of the postcard images stops the discussion from drifting to the abstract, and helps the participants to make new connections through the stories that emerge from the images.

Postcards in history (digression #2)

The postcard is a product of the second half of the 19th century. The first acknowledged (plain) postcard was approved by the Austro-Hungarian government in 1869. Over the next 35 years, many improvements were made, including the introduction of the “divided back” in 1902, which enabled both text and address to be on the same side, freeing the other side for an image.

Like many innovations it required a combination of social and economic change, technological development, and institutional innovation to flourish: cheap printing, cheap postage, a mass literate population, and consumers who were sufficiently affluent to be able to travel, at least a little. Across Europe, legislation ensured universal primary schooling. In the UK, the legislation in 1870 that was required to permit the sending of plain postcards just predates the 1872 Education Act. The Universal Postal Union agreed a standard postcard size in the 1870s, and during the 1890s coloured photographic postcards became mainstream across Europe and the United States as printing techniques evolved rapidly and the costs of production fell.

The picture postcard inaugurated the “golden era” of the postcard in the early 20th century. Connor (2000) notes:

“Almost everyone bought and sent cards compulsively at the peak of the postcard craze in 1903. ... Postcards were a rapid and amusing means of communication, and with six or seven postal deliveries a day in cities, people could make an appointment with certainty for later that same day. Small talk, gossip, holiday messages, and even romances were pursued on cards. Albums filled with cards provided entertainment for family and friends. Local photographers recorded accidents and events, and stage artists used cards to publicize their shows.” (Colton et al., 2003)

It was, notes James Fenton, “a chapter in the history of self-presentation, as defined through a given technology” (2004, p. 13). And part of that self-presentation lay in the brevity that a postcard afforded. The confined space for the message allowed people to stay in touch, frequently and briefly, without the stern formalities of 19th century letter writing, as Tom Phillips (2000, p. 13) reminds us in his essay in *The Postcard Century*.

“One reason for the growing popularity of the postcard was the small demand it placed on the writer in an age when schooling, for most people, was over at the age of fourteen. ... [A]lmost everyone could manage a few words on a card.”

Three notes on theory

Almost everyone can manage a few words about a card. More formally, the use of postcards in the workshop context opens up the possibility of new narratives by drawing together three strands of theory.

The first, following Susan Leigh Star and James Griesemer, is that because they are both abstract and malleable they are able to take on the properties of ‘boundary objects’, defined as “objects which both inhabit several interacting social worlds and satisfy the informational requirements of each” (Turner, 2006, p. 72). Through this, in turn, they create ‘narrative trading zones’. A “trading zone,” from

the work of Peter Galison (1997, p.783), is a space in which representatives of multiple disciplines come together to work and to establish contact languages for the purposes of collaboration. A narrative trading zone, by extension, is a space in which people from different academic backgrounds and disciplines are able to come together and create shared stories, in this case, about a shared future.

The second is about the role of the objects. There are some familiar tropes about innovation buried in this practice: the cards represent a constraint (a story must be told using the cards as a framework, the cards limit the amount of information that can be shared) and they also represent a possibility (they open up the innovative spaces created through conjunction, combination and juxtaposition). They are the cut-up and they are also the cut. If narrative is about space, place, and time, the role of postcards is to disrupt the familiar stories we otherwise tell ourselves.

Third, there is the role of the postcards themselves in the workshop, remaining in the room as the 'paper space' develops and other artefacts are added to the mix. The postcards that are shared at the start of the workshop become a record of those initial conversations and a stimulus for later conversations. As Alex Pang reminds us, "Ideas are embodied in materials." The cards in effect put the history of the group into the room while also acting as a record of their ideas – their anticipation – of the future.

Eight doors opening

Without making overblown claims, we also see from the use of postcards in the workshop setting the same democratising effects that the postcard once created in social communications. They enable a way to create a shared language and a shared context, and one that can be made material in the room through display. Looking back at our practices, we see eight ways in which the use of postcards has opened different doors, and - for the purpose of this essay, with the benefit of hindsight, framed as a new narrative - have given each of these a one-word label:

1. timelines: as a way to construct layered timelines that connect past, present and future and link personal and organisational timelines to the meta-narrative
2. to push beyond the frames in the room and break open closed spaces and mental models.
3. to use the physical action of touch - selection, writing, arranging, recombining - and the anchoring of personal experiences or insights in a physical object consisting of an image and a few words (in the first person) to keep people grounded, connected with their feelings.
4. combination allows fluid new juxtapositions, and multiple possibilities from combining and recombining materials, and so stretches imagination
5. pictures always have multiple layers of meaning, and we live in an increasingly visual era. When a postcard is selected, intentionally or unintentionally, consciously or unconsciously, those additional layers also add a patina to the story that is being told.
6. postcards de-privilege senior voices in the room, strip away authority and equalise the value of professional and operational experiences.
7. having a postcard as a vehicle through which to communicate provides safety, neutrality and provides a means for difficult truths to be conveyed, or personal offerings to be risked with reduced vulnerability - they contain. They can also

- create a temporary intimate space in which to have a dialogue.
8. they can change the tempo, allowing the reorganisation of time and space in a way that slows down or speeds up, or change the direction of travel, allowing for radial enquiry, rather than linear.

In his book *Another Way of Telling*, co-written with the photographer Jean Mohr, John Berger (1982, p. 285) writes that “[N]either teller nor listener is at the centre of the story: they are at its periphery. Those whom the story is about are at the centre. It is between their actions and attributes and reactions that the unstated connections are being made.” Postcards, finally, used as a workshop practice, create an expectation that everyone - for at least some part of the day - becomes the teller, making or re-making the unstated connections that, together, let us change the way we see the sky.

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