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## **PORTALS, PARALLEL REALITIES AND TRANSDISCIPLINARY PLACE PRACTICE**

I open portals to parallel universes and facilitate alternative realities. Bold words.

Perhaps.

But as you will see a little later, it's true.

This article is a portal to my place-based, transdisciplinary practice. In the first section, I argue that adopting a transdisciplinary stance, as I define it, is one way to find solutions to today's complex issues. Later, I provide examples of my practice, interweaving emerging technology, community development and creativity to support the spirit and spirits of place. Throughout this article, I take a personal, reflective and autoethnographic approach.

### THE COMPLEXITY OF PLACE NEEDS A COMPLEXITY OF APPROACH

The notion of place is complex. In most societies on Earth, humans interact in multiple locations (virtual and physical) at once. Routinely, people come together but don't engage with each other. Instead, each person is tethered to a mobile device and to the people and places to which that device serves as a portal.<sup>1</sup> Places today also face complex challenges: climate change, economic disparity, biodiversity loss and pandemics. Issues where it is difficult to fully grasp what is happening, let alone discover solutions.

In this context, I agree with Somerville, who argues that disciplinary and subject areas must be bridged to deal with the difficult and complex issues facing spaces and places.<sup>2</sup> She theorises that specific places are contact zones that "offer a material and metaphysical in-between space for the intersection of multiple and contested stories. This characteristic of place ... is especially significant in the relationship between indigenous, and other subjugated knowledges, and Western academic thought."<sup>3</sup>

Malpas believes that place is where temporality, subjectivity and objectivity, self and other come together.<sup>4</sup> I resonate with this and Stedman's argument that understanding the true complexity of place is a multidisciplinary exercise because place is a multidimensional concept that depends on meanings, which are based on experiences – and sense-making experiences vary from person to person.<sup>5</sup>

These views reflect my experiences engaging in colonised places where differing spiritual, cultural, historical, social and political realities converge. Sometimes I've found that the only thing that can be agreed upon is a love for the earth under people's feet.

My own practice is focused on supporting the spirit and spirits of place. Through my production company AwhiWorld, I generate pop-up community-based innovation labs and produce immersive and interactive installations using emerging technology to generate parallel realities in deactivated areas – often using mobile phones as portals to these other worlds (via augmented reality technology). My work is often simultaneously a spiritual and creative practice, a community capacity-building programme, a technological prototyping exercise, and also usually a form of economic and political intervention.

I aim to build individual, community and regional capacity to innovate on issues that matter by creating parallel realities of hope and possibility – moving past mindsets that are less useful. My passion is helping people connect to each other and the earth by sharing content innovatively while generating a sense of belonging, love and kindness for the planet. All of this work involves taking a multidimensional approach to understanding place and space – including building relationships with the spirit and spirits of a place as core stakeholders in the process.

## PLACING MYSELF

As a small child, I always *knew* that what I saw with my eyes was sometimes at odds with what I knew through other, less easily defined senses.

As I travelled up through the school system, I learned that it was best not to speak to others about my way of knowing. As the child of new migrants living in rural New Zealand in the 1970s, it was hard enough to fit in as it was.

But as time passed, I realised that fitting in came at a cost. I never felt as if I was a whole person, and I became anxious from the strain of fitting into other people's realities. I started my career in personal and organisational development and then moved to systemic consulting with larger communities and more complex issues. Working globally with various ethnic, geographic and institutional cultures eventually taught me that maintaining strict organisational, disciplinary and cultural boundaries generated and perpetuated nearly all the problems that I and my colleagues were hired to solve.

In the mid 2000s, I collaborated with the transdisciplinary collective Fo.am Brussels.<sup>6</sup> This opened up a world of multi-hyphenate humanity: scientist-artist-activist; business consultant-poet-technologist; psychotherapist-conceptual artist. During that time, I realised that I needed to stop trying to fit inside other people's boxes and fundamentally change how I worked in the world. So, I embraced being a transdisciplinary practitioner and started my PhD.

With one finger raised to the institution (yet always intensely studious), I danced across disciplines like they were minor bumps in the field, not 10-foot-high border fences. First, I blurred the lines between computer science and human geography, then integrated anthropology, education, indigenous studies and philosophy. I lived dangerously by invoking tricksters, asking them nicely to form the base of a manifesto of place practice. This transdisciplinary way of being existed to support the spirit (and spirits) of place by opening portals to parallel worlds using augmented reality mobile. I passed my viva with no amendments, and while my supervisors may never be the same, I didn't look back.

## MULTIDIMENSIONALITY AND THE ACADEMY

Except for my PhD, most of my creative practice has occurred outside the confines of academia. Much of my work has involved working at flaxroots level with mana whenua in Aotearoa (and indigenous peoples in other nations). Although my practice exists in a parallel knowledge system and culture, I feel a sense of ontological resonance with these groups that I do not find working in traditional academic settings.

Like me, Shahjahan considers the knowledge generated within academia as ontologically colonising and anthropocentric. In this reality, non-humans and other beings are subordinate or non-existent. He notes that dominant scientific theories do not accept arguments involving “people’s spiritual relationships to the universe, to the landscape, rocks, rivers, mountains and other things, seen and unseen.”<sup>7</sup> He also puts forward the idea of a multidimensional gaze that engages at different levels of consciousness to avoid two-dimensional thinking and mainstream triangulation.<sup>8</sup>

My perspective is similar to Zajonc’s, who sees higher education’s view of the world as partial and attempts to solve complex issues with only partial truth as problematic. For him (and I agree), “a diminished ontology is a powerful distorting lens that obscures the true multidimensional reality of our world, hiding the full scope of our humanity and the deeper complexity of our world.”<sup>9</sup> He sees real solutions (i.e., adequate to solving personal, societal and environmental problems) “only arising from an expanded ontology that embraces the richness of the universe.”<sup>10</sup>

## MULTI- VS TRANSDISCIPLINARY

The terms multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary are often interchangeable when writing about the study of place, but I see clear differences and have worked on many different projects which span these definitions. Multidisciplinary projects bring together people from different disciplines to study and engage with one concept, topic or issue – but, usually, participants keep within the boundaries of their respective disciplines.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast, interdisciplinary approaches involve cross-boundary synthesis, expanding disciplinary knowledge and transferring knowledge from one discipline to another.<sup>12</sup> Klein sees interdisciplinary research on a spectrum ranging from building bridges between disciplines to forming new disciplines.<sup>13</sup> Often it is a process where researchers meet and exchange knowledge from within their respective disciplinary practices and/or situations, where “the analytical frames of more than one discipline are employed by the researcher.”<sup>14</sup>

Like Petts et al., I describe transdisciplinary approaches as pushing beyond disciplinary boundaries, becoming something more than the sum of individual disciplinary parts.<sup>15</sup> According to Nicolescu, transdisciplinarity operates “between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all disciplines.”<sup>16</sup> Nicolescu is one of the few transdisciplinary theorists who openly discusses and promotes trans-religious and trans-cultural practices. For him, a transdisciplinary approach has a spiritual dimension.<sup>17</sup>

In my 30-year career, I began by developing people, organisations and places, assisting them to step through metaphoric portals (of mindset particularly) into alternative realities they envisioned for themselves. I did this in an interdisciplinary fashion (or within multidisciplinary teams), using techniques and tools drawn from psychology, sociology, progressive education, and participatory organisational and community development. Now, I engage in a transdisciplinary practice, often using the portal offered by mobile devices and computers to generate parallel worlds of possibility.

My version of transdisciplinarity is best described as multidimensional. I operate at the community level, practising outside academia, unconfined by disciplinary or faculty boundaries. I engage with theories of economics, aesthetics, theology and education and collaborate directly with beings and energies of the land, often using leading-edge technology. I do this without diminishing these entities by describing them as cultural constructions or narratives, or extracting them from my practice entirely by referring to my work in purely disciplinary terms (e.g., art, community development, transformative education). I have a progressive understanding of the spirit of place, where signals and code are as much part of local ecologies as freshwater insects, mycelium, disenfranchised youth, the spirit of a tree and corporate brands.

Places are wondrous sites, filled with magic, myth, dirt and dereliction. I envision an inclusive spirit of place that embraces ontologies where sites are alive with sentient, multidimensional energies and beings which co-exist with signals, codes and artificial intelligences. In my transdisciplinary projects, the spirit of place is encountered and supported spiritually and technologically. This understanding of the spirit of place leads to an emerging place practice that is political, social and spiritual. And inherently personal.

## PROJECT EXAMPLES

So here are some examples of my projects.

The first, “Place” (2013),<sup>18</sup> was a case study for my PhD. It involved a significant amount of research and practice on one particular site: Te Kōiwi Park in Papakura. The site was a wahi tapu (sacred) site with substantial cultural history and mana attached to it. With the support of mana whenua and a neighbouring

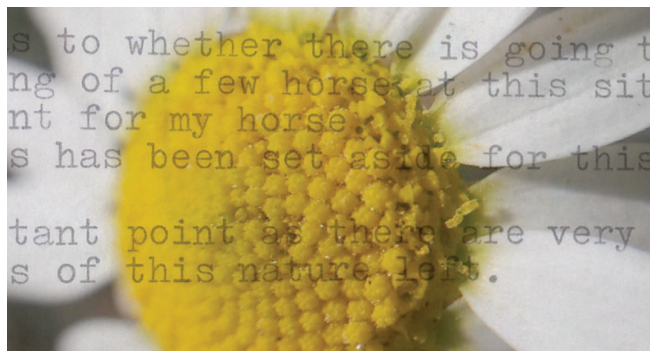


Figure 1. Still image from “Place” exhibition showing mixed visuals. Photograph: Maggie Buxton.

marae, I set out to know the place in as many ways as possible. I undertook archival research at several research centres and oral history interviews with local residents and significant figures associated with the site. In addition, I was supported by various departments within AUT to study the soil, micro-organisms, and even my own brain-wave patterns, as I connected with the site. Psychics walked with me while they channelled spirits, drone pilots worked with me to map the location visually, and I also engaged in significant photography, sound and videography processes.

Once most of the data was collected, I live-mixed the material using a visual mixing (VJ) programme on the site, editing it into seven small videos of multi-layered material gathered from seven points around the area. This material was then geo-located back onto the site and could be retrieved using a mobile phone application. It was also available via a monitor at a local gallery.

Many of those who participated gathered together at the exhibition launch. A discussion was then had between the knowledge systems represented by those individuals – cultural, scientific, personal history, and so on. It was a fascinating experience engaging with the many histories and memories that intersected the site. It remains a favourite project, as the end result formed a bridge between my PhD and the practice I have now, and my connection to the spirits of that site felt deeply fulfilling.

“Place Stories Matariki” (2015) <sup>19</sup> was a geo-locative, augmented reality sound experience supporting economic development, diversity, digital literacy and the spirit of places and spaces in Papakura in South Auckland. Thanks to a Creative New Zealand grant, I commissioned site-specific sound works by local Māori poets, mana whenua, experimental audio artists, feminist punk collectives, Tokelauan songstresses and korowai weavers.



Figure 2. “Place Stories Matariki” gallery experience.  
Photograph: Maggie Buxton.

These songs, poems and sound creations were matched to specific locations around the town chosen by the artists or matched by myself. A bespoke geo-locative mobile app allowed sound works to be placed at particular GPS points around the town, accessed via a digital way-finding system. Audience members downloaded the app, put on headphones and followed the live map until they could hear distant sounds. Then, by positioning themselves visually and by ear, they would find themselves in the middle of seven immersive sound portals, re-experiencing an alleyway, derelict building or downtrodden back corner with new ears and eyes.

Augmented reality functionality meant that the sounds visually floated in space and could be found in the distance in three dimensions or via a classic two-dimensional town map. In addition, a companion exhibition in a local gallery allowed those without a higher spec device to experience the sounds. Augmented reality visual triggers acted as portals to play various sound contributions as the tethered device was held over each in turn.

The platform was, first and foremost, an artistic response to the theme of Matariki: connecting people to the stars through signal and code. It was also designed to promote a greater degree of awareness of the diversity within the town, connecting people across diverse cultures and genres. And the work was a form of economic promotion of Papakura as a place of innovation and high-quality creative and cultural work.

I loved this project, as it used my different skills across several disciplines and brought disparate participants together within the platform. I also enjoyed the public promotion of the inherent spiritual quality of the work, changing the energy of those sites through attention and appreciation and the lovingly created vibrations of the sound works themselves.

In another augmented reality project, “Awahi Creatures Papakura”<sup>20</sup> (2015), I worked with my partner, new media artist Kim Newall, to create the app and facilitate workshops with local youth. Magical creatures were placed, using augmented reality visual triggers, in and around Papakura township. They were discovered by solving clues in an extensive treasure hunt that ‘showed off’ some of the town’s unique (or unsung) places.

This project, a partnership with the local business association, highlighted the range of businesses in Papakura and encouraged people to travel to the community from other suburbs and view the town with new eyes. In addition, the work supported digital literacy with those who downloaded the app and engaged with the creatures via workshops. The treasure hunt supported historical education (in collaboration with the local museum) and encouraged



Figure 3. “Awahi Creatures Papakura.” Image of creature scouting for food, taken via augmented reality app. Photograph: Maggie Buxton.

people to work together to answer clues and discover where the creatures were lurking. Finally, the beings themselves found ways to inhabit the most unloved of locations, bringing positive energy and kindness to sites that needed it (via graffiti and rubbish cleanup during the hunt). Several strange synchronicities occurred during this project, making it feel at times that the creatures were managing the work instead of us.

Other augmented reality projects have involved rest-home residents, who incorporated their creative crafts<sup>21</sup> and primary school students,<sup>22</sup> who created magical walks to share the unique places of their playground with new children and their families. But it isn't all about creating parallel realities via the portal of mobile apps.

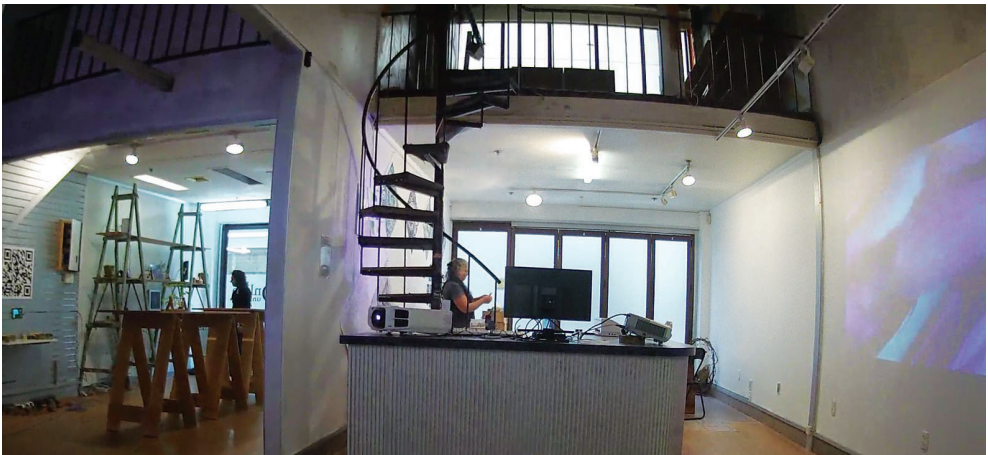
"AwhiTower"<sup>23</sup> (2018) was located in a derelict 100-year-old water tower at the Nathan Homestead in Manurewa, South Auckland. The century-old tower had fallen into disrepair and needed love and attention. Working in collaboration with council staff, we attended to the physical, social and spiritual aspects of the location to bring it back to life.

The area around the tower was cleared, and a bright new path was created to the structure. AwhiWorld then turned the historic building into an interdimensional sound-transmitting device, triggered by the audience moving through the surrounding bush.

Using audio 'exciters' (an emerging technology that allows surfaces and objects to project sound), the tower came alive with whispered sounds gathered from the local community, woven together with images from the site (current and historical) that were manipulated into audio. As a result, the tower became a conduit connecting different parts of the Manurewa community, embracing, transmitting and amplifying love as the site's spirit regenerated.



Figures 4 -7 above and next page: PlantLab 22 Te Tai Tokerau | Northland installation/creative innovation lab. Photographs: Maggie Buxton.





“PlantLab 22: Te Tai Tokerau”<sup>24</sup> (2022) was a different example of a transdisciplinary project. One of several pop-up labs I have initiated and facilitated in Whangarei’s CBD, it was part innovation lab, part pop-up installation, part independent research hub and part post-COVID CBD regeneration.

PlantLab involved a cohort of cross-disciplinary practitioners collaborating to build their respective practices while working on solutions to intractable issues (like climate change). All those involved had rich identities (e.g., scientist-artists, poets, creative technologists). Forms of research included traditional scientific and creative experiments, poetry, ceramics, creative tech hacking, meditation, videography and sketching – among many others.

The nine-month project began with workshops, meetings and a symposium (conducted virtually to support COVID-19 isolation and geographic dispersion). The project then took a physical form in an empty retail shop in an arcade within the Whangarei CBD. The location was filled with resident practitioners and daily guests working together on a wide range of projects, most of which were open to participation by the public. These included turning plant memories into soap and then into glitch art; visualising proteins via projection and 3D printing; prototyping plant sensors; creating short-form narrative, poetry and a divination system via randomised sampling; and performing vegetables and pot plants using technology that converts signal into sound.

During PlantLab the former retail space was activated for the first time in several years. One of the members was placed into employment, others generated ideas for future works and businesses, and all developed skills, knowledge and wider networks as a result. The project, therefore, had some longer-term economic and creative outcomes, and the space continues to be occupied by our organisation until a permanent leaseholder can be found.

## REFLECTION ON PRACTICE

All of these projects (and many others) have some commonalities. They usually have diverse stakeholders and aim to generate many positive outcomes. At the very least, the project sites have arguably been left in a more positive state than when the project began (physically, atmospherically and economically via leasing or foot traffic).

In nearly all cases, some form of digital creative technology is used as a tool within a spiritual approach that positions the spirit and spirits of place as the central focus of the work. In addition, the related concepts of portals and parallel universes are always significant themes – either metaphorical (in background project planning) or, more centrally, as promoted content for the project. For example, in Awhi Creatures the bugs are described as arriving via a portal to generate new possibilities. In Awhi Tower, the structure is a portal that connects its location with a slightly more distant township and amplifies loving energy to heal the land through sound.

## FINAL NOTE

In a world where signals, code and data are embedded into the fabric of society, it’s challenging to declare firm boundaries around the concepts of discipline, reality, truth, being and the notion of *place*. Places are complex, as are the issues surrounding them and the solutions needed to support them going forward.

In this context, I have argued for working in place inclusively and provided examples from my self-identified, transdisciplinary practice. All of my projects facilitate different ways of thinking and being in the specific areas where they are centred.

My practice is one way of addressing some of the challenges places face. Of course, there are many others. But for me, the complex multidimensional nature of places means that new ways of working are needed – particularly ways that engage with stakeholders that are not human, and relevant in an age of rapidly changing technologies. For me, it's about opening portals to a parallel reality, a new point of view. Resetting how people feel and engage with places, their home, their region and the planet itself. I believe that only by changing the way people look at the world will innovative solutions emerge to solve some of the complex challenges facing our world today.

**Maggie Buxton** is a transdisciplinary practitioner, educator, writer and consultant with an extensive track record in place-based interarts practice and particular expertise (including a PhD) focused on emerging technologies and the spirit of place. For detailed information, see [www.maggiebuxton.com](http://www.maggiebuxton.com) or her creative innovation company site, <https://awhiworld.com/>.

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