Peace & Quiet

Sandra Wheeler: Co-director, Matter Architecture Practice
United States

ABSTRACT

Peace & Quiet, a temporary dialogue station installed in Times Square, New York City provided a tranquil place where veterans and civilians – two wide-ranging groups whose paths increasingly do not cross – could openly engage in conversation, share stories, leave notes, or just shake hands. Abstractly interpreted, these two structures were intertwined portals, bracketing the experiences of the vast majority of Americans only hear about in the news; events at the forefront of our national identity and economy, and yet often remote to those who do not, or dare not, enter these situations directly.

Rather than reiterate the construction strategies, publicity and programming of the project, which are well documented online, this review addresses the term ‘design activism’ and reflects on some of the actions and reactions encountered in the process of the station’s becoming. How do you practically design to activism? What are the resistances to it?

Robin Cembalest, writing in ARTNews, situated ‘this curious little structure’ as being in the spirit of relational aesthetics, the artistic strategy used to spark social interaction. While this expresses an interpretative stance within the discipline of art criticism, it was not the consciousness by which we entered into the idea. Peace & Quiet insistently stems from an architectural response to a specific urban space and set of parameters; we were first designing a place to shelter an identified need, and not as long-standing advocates for a specific cause, its designation as ‘public art’ certainly was due to it being presented by Times Square Alliance Public Art; however, the relative obscurity and recent emergence of the term ‘design activism’ possibly prevented it being categorised otherwise, and ‘architecture’ is both too grand and too staid for its diminutive size ‘Activist Art’, on the other hand, is often central to definitions and objectives of contemporary art conceived for public space.

(A)POLITICS

After Peace & Quiet was green-lighted for installation, our ‘kick-off’ meeting with the Times Square Alliance entailed each party carefully gauging the stance of the other: were the potential implications understood by the Alliance, and to what extent did we intend this to be an overt political statement of an express position or not? While the station was not ever conceived to be a centre for reflection on war’s deceased, Maya Lin’s powerful Vietnam memorial on Washington Mall was undoubtedly influential. Arguably regarded as the most moving invocation of war’s deceased, Maya Lin’s powerful Vietnam memorial on Washington Mall was undoubtedly influential. Arguably regarded as the most moving invocation of war’s deceased, Maya Lin’s powerful Vietnam memorial on Washington Mall was undoubtedly influential. Lin herself interpreted as resulting from an anti-war position. Lin herself interpreted as resulting from an anti-war position. Lin herself interpreted as resulting from an anti-war position. Lin herself interpreted as resulting from an anti-war position. Lin herself interpreted as resulting from an anti-war position. Lin herself interpreted as resulting from an anti-war position. Lin herself considered it to be thoroughly apolitical. As I did more research on monuments, I realized most carried larger, more general messages about a leader’s victory or accomplishments rather than the lives lost … I made a conscious decision not to do any specific research on the Vietnam War and the political turmoil surrounding it. I felt that the politics had eclipsed the veterans, their service, and their lives.

We hoped to achieve a similar elusive sensibility: the endeavour would be to connect individuals on a personal basis through the discipline of art criticism, it was not the consciousness by which we entered into the idea. Peace & Quiet insistently stems from an architectural response to a specific urban space and set of parameters; we were first designing a place to shelter an identified need, and not as long-standing advocates for a specific cause, its designation as ‘public art’ certainly was due to it being presented by Times Square Alliance Public Art; however, the relative obscurity and recent emergence of the term ‘design activism’ possibly prevented it being categorised otherwise, and ‘architecture’ is both too grand and too staid for its diminutive size ‘Activist Art’, on the other hand, is often central to definitions and objectives of contemporary art conceived for public space.

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Figure 1: Siting and situation of Peace & Quiet in Times Square, New York. Drawings: MATTER
of stereotypes. In the absence of experience qualifying the degree to which a behaviour occurs, even those with ostensibly ‘advanced’ reporting, can be informative while also thoroughly forming a shell-shocked individual with simmering emotional volatility. Newspapers, military and civilian worlds. The fit with the objectives of veteran/military groups. The only thing off limits was politics. The key goal was to bridge the gap between veteran/civilian interactions developed to open channels of unfettered conversation around issues affecting both people, equal numbers veteran and civilian of all ages, came together for carefully facilitated social In early 2012, we identified a non-profit social justice organisation via an article in the New York Times, ‘Talking Out Loud About War, and Coming Home.’ Veteran-Civilian Dialogue™ (VCD) was an evening-long bi-monthly workshop held at the Intersections International storefront in New York and occasionally other cities. VCD was created and directed by two licensed practicing psychotherapists who are both veterans: Scott Thompson, a former army chaplain; and Lawrence (Larry) Winters, almost twenty years his senior, who had served in Vietnam. Roughly seventy people, equal numbers veteran and civilian of all ages, came together for carefully facilitated social interactions developed to open channels of unfettered conversation around issues affecting both groups. The only thing off limits was politics. The key goal was to bridge the gap between veteran/military and civilian worlds. The fit with the objectives of Peace & Quiet seemed perfect. Admittedly we were a bit apprehensive going to the first of these workshops – with misplaced fear of awkwardly facing a shell-shocked individual with simmering emotional volatility. Newspapers, even those with ostensibly ‘advanced’ reporting, can be informative while also thoroughly forming of stereotypes. In the absence of experience qualifying the degree to which a behaviour occurs, we found it impossible to evaluate the probability of encountering post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or even how adverse such an experience would be.11 We began to recognise the extent of our own presumptions about the military/veteran community and realised we were far less informed than we imagined ourselves to be. Swiftly debunked were assumptions that there was a largely dominant or unified political stance, reason for serving, demographic homogeneity, or singular response to the experience among veterans; or that there was a lack of critical reflection of their roles both as ostensible protectors of the country and uninvited guests in foreign lands. One of the most charged conversations was around the moral dilemma of being from a society that dictates ‘thou shalt not kill’, while having had a job requiring this fundamental ethic be put aside. As Paul Wasserman (Iraq war veteran and poet with a Masters in philosophy and comparative literature), put it during one of the dialogues – ‘That is the gap’. The prevalence of stereotyping among the civilians became stark as we shared the project with peers, who would often launch unbidden into what it must be like to work with military or veterans; we recognised their projections as views we also once incorrectly believed. Veterans, in turn, burdened by popular media profiling from movies (Rambo or Born on the Fourth of July) were often cited) were suspicious and reluctant to share stories with civilians, and often automatically deemed them incapable of comprehending the complexity of the veteran situation. The further Peace & Quiet was researched and developed, the more unlikely it seemed it could ever effectively function as bridging this perceptual divide. Mining this gap became acutely more necessary. MISSION (IMPOSSIBLE) Over several months we had many long, insightful, and deeply invaluable discussions with Larry and Scott to hone actions for the station from which we would develop its design. In this sense, the process differed from more common standards of design practice, whereby the client establishes the program as the brief for the architect’s design. As with many projects engaging social or economic themes, the role of the designer/architect was expanded to include initiating the programmatic brief and identifying the purpose for the design itself. Through this process, which was so eye opening, Peace & Quiet shifted from being referred to as a ‘Discharge’ Station to one of ‘Dialogue’. Our ‘clients’ asked probing questions, most likely to ascertain to what extent our intentions were genuine, but in answering we were forced to go beyond declaring the project as simply being a good idea. Why were we inspired to do it? What was our personal connection to the issue? Why did we believe it was important? What did we want them to do? Initially it seemed straightforward as dialogue was so successfully being realised through their VCD program, we would host dialogues

THE GAP

Identifying ‘a client’ to approach took some time. Many organisations for veterans were involved in advocacy with set and necessary agendas, or they did not strike us as having the right tone or even have any contact with US veterans, there would be no shortage of irony if a place for military/civilian dialogue was designed without this very dialogue being part of the process. Our lack of connection with this community was due in part to being from an urban environment in the northeastern part of the United States, which has the lowest enlistment rate in the country, the relatively isolated profile of the military domestically, and the metrics of the deployment since 2000. Conscription was abolished in the United States in 1973, and all conflict since that time has relied on an ostensibly all-voluntary force. Just one-half of 1% of Americans have served in uniform at any given time in the last decade; during the Vietnam era, 9.7% of the population (30% of those eligible) served in WW II, that figure was at 1.2%.4
to engage the public in a critical subject that is often avoided or viewed with apathy. However, issues of scalability, replicating an event tailored for a certain number of people to a different context, or managing potentially very private exposure in a public place did not present easy or agreed upon solutions.

For many, a successful dialogue could only be achieved through something akin to the slow unpeeling of an onion, with participants reaching a moment of inner catharsis or revelation, where each person was introduced to something unknown about the other, and through this exchange could better recognise and situate themselves. While the dialogues had been constructed as a supportive outreach program defined as being distinct from therapy sessions, they could not be disassociated from a concept of mutual healing. Veterans and civilians each needed something from each other to complete that process. This begged the question of how one could be ‘healed’ if they, particularly civilians, did not consider themselves ‘sick’ in the first place.

Several people we consulted declared conversational intimacy would be impossible without an extended and controlled build up. As such the experiential sequence of the station had to be highly scripted if it were to work at all. Many veterans (later we noticed they were all from the Vietnam era) disagreed with the premise of ‘exposing’ this discussion in such an open forum. For this generation, so condemned or cast aside by history’s placement of that war, conversations of this nature were only possible in established safe houses, far from public view. At times it seemed there was an underlying accusation of being ‘carpet-baggers’ for sensationalist reasons, making a sideshow out of a sensitive subject we did not own.

Conversely, others at Intersections International saw an opportunity for marketing on a scale they’d never had, leading to ideas being floated that were logistically and fiscally out of reach. Suggestions included station activity streamed to neighbouring billboards (this would have involved negotiations for global advertising’s most expensive space) in conjunction with national broadcast; or banks of touch screens connected to social media, allowing anyone anywhere to participate in negotiations for global advertising’s most expensive space! (in conjunction with national broadcast; this would have involved negotiations for global advertising’s most expensive space) in conjunction with national broadcast; or banks of touch screens connected to social media, allowing anyone anywhere to participate in negotiations for global advertising’s most expensive space! (in conjunction with national broadcast; or banks of touch screens connected to social media, allowing anyone anywhere to participate in negotiations for global advertising’s most expensive space! (in conjunction with national broadcast; or banks of touch screens connected to social media, allowing anyone anywhere to participate in negotiations for global advertising’s most expensive space! (in conjunction with national broadcast; or banks of touch screens connected to social media, allowing anyone anywhere to participate in negotiations for global advertising’s most expensive space! (in conjunction with national broadcast; or banks of touch screens connected to social media, allowing anyone anywhere to participate in negotiations for global advertising’s most expensive space! (in conjunction with national broadcast; or banks of touch screens connected to social media, allowing anyone anywhere to participate in negotiations for global advertising’s most expensive space! (in conjunction with national broadcast; or banks of touch screens connected to social media, allowing anyone anywhere to participate in negotiations for global advertising’s most expensive space! (in conjunction with national broadcast; or banks of touch screens connected to social media, allowing anyone anywhere to participate in negotiations for global advertising’s most expensive space! (in conjunction with national broadcast; or banks of touch screens connected to social media, allowing anyone anywhere to participate in negotiations for global advertising’s most expensive space! (in conjunction with national broadcast; or banks of touch screens connected to social media, allowing anyone anywhere to participate in negotiations for global advertising’s most expensive space! (in conjunction with national broadcast; or banks of touch screens connected to social media, allowing anyone anywhere to participate in negotiations for global advertising’s most expensive "space!"

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Figure 2: Study models of the station in development.

Photograph: MATTER

Figure 3: Flow studies of circulation, based on scripted dialogue events.

Drawings: MATTER

Above left

Above right

COMMUNICABLE FORM

While schematic renditions and models had been produced for fundraising and approvals before we initiated programming collaboration, we chose to not present or develop them further while we jointly explored what the station needed to do and communicate. There were some given site parameters – it could not exceed 200 ft (61 m) or be more than ten feet (three metres) high. It had to be deployed and fully installed in less than twelve hours, and be able to withstand a stampede. A few of the early gestures – the conceptual signifiers – we would retain: the shallow pitched roof, simultaneously channeling the icon of ‘house/home’ and the field tent, and an interior that significantly dampened any exterior sound (Figure 2).

As the experience brief developed, we felt it became more immutable and unaccommodating – in a sense unwittingly imagining a passive (and captive) audience instead of activating citizens. We insisted, correctly or not, that meaningful exchange could be attained even if the encounter was fleeting, unexpected, and left open-ended – which was most likely to be the case in Times Square. Drawing in a larger crowd would require offering several ways to enter into ‘dialogue’ as we were aware that any sense of inflexibility or feeling pressured without choice, coupled with the associated fear of the subject, could potentially deter many people. Much time was devoted to exercises ‘choreographing’ visitor movement, which were intended to occasion unscripted and genuine interaction (Figure 3). While in retrospect these exercises seem somewhat absurd, they were invaluable as sketches for imagining likely engagement by people as they moved in and around the structure.

This effectively shut down exposure to information that may challenge or encourage one to rethink one’s beliefs. This was counter to what we were hoping to achieve; the station needed to remain a strictly analogue, physically present experience – even if documentation and outreach would be shared via contemporary social media. It would absorb ‘the risk’ of unscripted, and as such unpredicted, exchange between strangers. Looking back this now is seemingly obvious, yet it was not readily identified until it began to slip away.
Within any population only a relatively small percentage can be relied on to enter an enclosed room and engage in conversation with strangers; the majority if the exterior of the station was an attractor could be prompted to stop, read, and contribute if they saw others doing so; and a smaller number were likely to watch from afar, disinclined to leave any trace.15 Candy Chang’s deceptively simple Before I Die installation, realised in downtown Brooklyn in late 2011 not far from our office, was stunning in how it captured this desired range of interaction.16 Her strategy of using words as a motivator yet at an architectural scale was a synthesis of one of the VCDs existing outreach projects ‘Your word for war (or peace) is...’ and the urban singing of Peace & Quiet.

The station’s exterior would have function as an attraction screen of sorts from afar, signifying its purpose, and causing people to stop. It would also be a surface for registering dialogue through pinned notes answering to a well-crafted probe. There would be two doors, one at either end, suggesting more than one path in, but also more than one escape route out: the station was a room, but also a passage. Inside there would be an informal arrangement of round tables and chairs, a carpet to absorb sound and an acoustic pin board along one wall if more privacy was desired. Semi-sheer curtains could be drawn over the clear transoms and doors.

STATION

Ultimately, to remain true to the project as it had been conceived, we had to broaden the veteran community outreach by working with more than one collaborator: each hosting the station on varying days and each bridging the veteran-civilian gap through different portals. The Pat Tillman Foundation, an organisation with its local scholarship recipients host conversations and be available to answer any question thrown at them (‘Ever wonder what it’s like to sleep in a hole in the Iraq Desert?’).17 Artillery officer and founder of Socialgence, moderated intimate panel product, painted with aluminium coating typically used to deflect solar rays on roofs. Its gleaming, strangely textured surface subtly reflected the changing glow from surrounding electronic billboards, a small faceted jewel appearing suddenly overnight (Figures 5, 6, 7).

To cover the costs of construction many vendors willingly donated or discounted materials and furnishings. Station hosts provided some support, and there was a small grant from the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs. Regardless of the lack of funds, there was a strong commitment to move forward. Interestingly enough, Peace & Quiet’s Kickstarter crowd sourced fundraising campaign, while successful in reaching its goal, did not gain viral momentum. This surprised us a little given the sheer number of veterans in the United States, and the universal support and appreciation Peace & Quiet received whenever it was presented. We wondered if its name, initially deemed as being a descriptive counterpart to Times Square’s din, was what failed to resonate – that it was interpreted as a politically leftist anti-war, anti-veteran statement. That the timing of our campaign coincided with federal elections – always a bona fide circus in American politics with no shortage of partisan fundraising – and the flooding of New York City probably didn’t help.18

There were other, late-breaking pressures. As the date of installation approached – November 11, Veterans Day, and in the
shadow of yet another much-publicised American mass public shooting event – a previously unexpressed nervousness about the project and its potential to cause controversy began to emerge. The Times Square Alliance, which was supporting the project through permitting logistics, security, and media outreach, asked for a pre-determined outcome for the station. Instead of being an event open to the random passerby, security required participation in dialogues be via web-based sign-up for pre-reserved time with locked-down scripts for moderation in place; pinning notes was eliminated from the exterior; so that no user-generated comments would be visible to a passing public; and ‘Rules of Engagement’ had to be prepared and posted, clearly spelling out the allowable nature of the conversations. It was requested we arrange for professional trauma specialists to be on hand to assist anyone in need; installation dates were cut back from eleven to six days, inclusive of only one weekend day. While we were able to push back on some of the suggestions, most we had to accept.

It was fascinating to watch a project selected and, to date, championed exactly for its promise to spark open civic discussion in a public square – the agora fulfilled in every sense of the word – being hastily required to adopt measures limiting its accessibility and discouraging spontaneous engagement. The underlying reasons for the precautions were understandable – the liability if something did actually happen on NYC publicly operated land – but they also underscored why this particular conversation was so necessary. The gap between veteran and civilian worlds was such that the majority of civilians regarded any venture into this unknown territory with fear, and this only serves to perpetuate the problem.

As described in ARTnews: ‘Peace & Quiet, despite its chaotic location, created a safe space too … The site achieved that certain alchemy, so elusive and potentially life-changing that makes taboos dissolve. Once the audience accepted the station as a transformative setting the personal could
replace the political and words and thoughts could flow that had been blocked before. On the last day of the station we painted a navy blue rectangle on one of the station’s facades and took the notes outside, as originally intended. It more than tripled active involvement, and no one got hurt. Mainstream network media began to take notice, and then the next day the station was gone.

RETURN

In June 2014 we were contacted by the Center for the Art of Performance (CAP) at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). They were interested in reinstalling Peace & Quiet as a collaborative effort in conjunction with their presentation of BASETRACK Live, a theatrical performance piece that tells the impact of war on veterans and those close to them ‘without representing the characters as either heroes or victims...just ordinary people fundamentally changed by the extraordinary experience of fighting a war’. UCLA CAP would develop and host the programming and manage the construction. This opportune re-examination of Peace & Quiet as a replicable model, where we would design its structure and provide guidelines for the express tone and nature for dialogues, but others would inhabit those parameters to make it their own.

The artist Brian Haloran joined us in the studio during one of the programming discussions we had with Meryl Friedman, CAP’s Director of Education & Special Initiatives. In his evaluation, while Times Square was a key generator of the concept of the project, it also almost guaranteed its impossibility as an interior garnering mass participation. The impracticality with its immediate context was almost too great for many people to reconcile; the pace was too quick for anyone to linger long enough to slow into the zone of opening themselves up. Hence the challenge of reaching an inner sanctum of true dialogue possibly rendered Peace & Quiet a symbolic act rather than any kind of functional activism.

As designers and architects we are trained to anticipate a set of uses and then provide the form or place to enable those uses to take place. But we can only anticipate, plan for an unfolding of circumstances and give the work over to whatever is the will. Peace & Quiet Los Angeles was installed from October 6 through 10, 2014 on Royce Quad, UCLA’s oldest and most symbolic intersection. Its volumetric form was unchanged but the panelised acoustic shell which in Times Square had isolated interior from out, was replaced by two layers of woven silver fabric that produced a gauzy translucent screen, defining place and providing refuge from the blistering sun. The upper halves of the walls were pin boards mounted below the fabric. There were no doors, just open portals.

On the inside was mounted a timeline exhibition of correspondence, documenting the evolving form of letters home from the First World War to the present. People could sit, talk, or write letters to service people stationed overseas, which would be delivered. Or leave a note. On the exterior there appeared each day a different question added in large type, with new pre-printed cards to respond. After less than one week all the boards were completely covered.

- How do you serve?
- A hero is...
- When do you feel protected?
- What’s the bravest thing you’ve ever done?
- What does peace look like?

Credits: Peace & Quiet, Times Square

MATTER project team, design and construction
Sandra Wheeler and Alfred Zollinger, co-directors, Chelsea Criewaull, John Brandes, Christopher Malley, Samuel Walton, Jessica Barnhouse, Danae Coleman, Teresa Cecco, Luke Edlin, Sarah Learner, Robert Miller, Emily Mat, Sukiyo Toyama

Sixteen hero
StoryCorps Military Voices Initiative, Pat Tillman Foundation and Tillman Military Scholars, Code of Support Foundation, Socialgence, Brian Fernandez-Haloran, Scott Thompson

Structural engineer
Hage Engineering PC

Sixteen graphics and identity
Voilabrenner: Michael Brenner, Nate Vo

Selected metal fabrication
Indianapolis Fabrications

Programming advisors
Scott Thompson, Laurence Winters
2. The photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt’s iconic image of the sailor spontaneously kissing the nurse, taken on VJ day, cemented Times Square’s association with the victory parade. Informal marches typically start in Union Square and wind to Times Square, such as those in protest of the Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown shootings.
3. As of September 15, 2014 almost 7,000 US personnel have been killed, and over 12,000 have been wounding in action. “Casualty Status,” U.S. Department of Defense, accessed September 15, 2014, http://www.defense.gov/news/casualty.pdf
4. As of April 14, 2014 there have been at the very least 17,400 violent civilian deaths as a result of the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan: “Civilians Killed and Wounded: Costs of War, last modified May 2014,” http://costsofwar.org/articles/civilians-killed-and-wounded.
6. In a report published by the Pew Center more than three quarters of civilian adults aged 50 or older had an immediate family member who served or serves in the military; for many this took place before the end of conscription in 1973. Only 57% of civilians aged 30 to 49 could make that claim, and that figure dropped to one-third for those aged 18 to 29.
8. For a timeline/blog of Peace & Quiet, from its pre-fabrication for Times Square through reinterpretation in Los Angeles, see https://www.facebook.com/PeaceandQuietTimesSquare.
13. In April 2012, Scott Thompson resigned from intersections International to pursue VCD work independently. He is currently Director of the Veterans Mental Health Coalition of New York City Larry Winters is Senior Psychologist and Director of Veterans Treatment at Four Winds Hospital. They are continuing to facilitate and develop the Veteran-Civilian Dialogue to accompany ‘Stories We Carry’ dialogues hosted by Scott Thompson, and StoryCorps MVI was sourced as the complimentary programming to accompany ‘Stories We Carry’ in other cities where it was performed.
14. In a coincidental looping of connections at a security planning meeting with everyone involved in the project present, one of the station hosts – a veteran and business degree scholar – was to assess the risk of a potentially inflammatory situation, to which he graciously and graciously replied “I think it’s very good we’re thinking about these concerns, but I’m not too worried about it… I don’t believe it is likely to happen, and as combat veterans we have experience with fairly intense situations.” The request for on-site trauma specialists was dropped.
16. In a report on the actual incidence of combat related PTSD depending on how it is defined. One of our program collaborators placed the percentage among post-9/11 veterans at slightly less than 20%, with 2-5% showing any outward affect. This seems supported by articles on the subject.
18. As one young veteran new working towards a graduate degree, told us “by the age of the internet, if my least of us knew what we’re in for when we signed up, and yet a lot of people assume I served because I was a poor boy who didn’t know any better or it was my only way to escape where I was.”
20. Approximate values for this were seen as analogous to typical visitor metrics for public exhibitions. MATTER designed approximately 10-15% of people are ten minute rushers and will only read the introductory panel and stop at eye-catching moments. Most (75-85%) are the 30-40 minute visitors reading major text panels and looking at all the material. The most rare (5%) is the three-hour visitor who will read every single label. These fall roughly into the same curve as described in Diffusion of Innovations theory the social science theory describing how new ideas, product, or practice will be adopted by a given culture.