

Rooms with A View
Disrupting and Developing Narratives of Community through Intergenerational Arts Practice

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First published in the United Kingdom in 2016 by:
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ISBN: 978-0-9538680-3-2

Very special thanks to Susan Langford and Sue Mayo who have engaged in many conversations throughout the research and writing of this report. Their attentive reading and generous dialogue has been invaluable in shaping aspects of the report.

Thanks to Sarah Dean and Stella Odunlami for supporting the production of the report.

To the readers of the report, Ali Campbell, Paul McAvinchey and Geoffrey Court, thank you.

All photos © Helen Jermyn for Magic Me
Back cover image: Map drawn by Amanda Mascarenhas, used for *Speak As You Find* costumes

Designer: Sian Rance and Emil Dacanay for D.R. ink
Printer: PWPFS

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ROOMS WITH A VIEW

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Dr Caoimhe McAvinchey

Visit magicme.co.uk/rooms for the *Speak As You Find* film
and audio recordings of local people's stories.

Magic Me is extremely grateful for the financial support of National Lottery through Arts Council England, which has made possible this research and report.

The Rooms With A View project was made possible by financial support from:

The National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund, the National Lottery through Arts Council England, London Borough of Tower Hamlets and Mulberry School for Girls

Thank you to our project partners and event hosts:

Bromley by Bow Centre, The Geffrye Museum of the Home, Mulberry School for Girls, Sutton House, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives and to Drama, Queen Mary University of London and Jules Dearing for in-kind technical support and rehearsal spaces.



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Part of
Magic Me's
**ROOMS
WITH A
VIEW**
Project

Rooms with A View: Phases of the Project



Research and Development January – December 2014

Project conceived by Sue Mayo and Raj Bhari. Research, development of partnerships and ideas, fundraising, planning and recruitment of first participant group.



Intergenerational Workshops January 2015 onwards

Younger and older people met weekly, exploring local archives, online resources and one another's experiences of living in East London. They learned interview and research techniques.



Public Drop-In Events March 2015

The intergenerational group ran four Open Day events to collect stories, memories and anecdotes from local people about their relationship with London. These were hosted by: Sutton House, Bromley by Bow Centre, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives and The Geffrye Museum of the Home.



Review, Reflection and Recruitment May – August 2015

Keeping in touch sessions with participants and drop-in sessions to recruit more. Workshops to devise scenes from stories gathered so far, audio recording, and training in Community Conversation techniques. Searching for a performance venue.



Devising, Rehearsing and Producing the Show *Speak As You Find*

September – November 2015

Afternoon and weekend rehearsals and workshops in design, sound, performing, front of house and hosting Community Conversations.



Speak As You Find

29 October – 1 November 2015

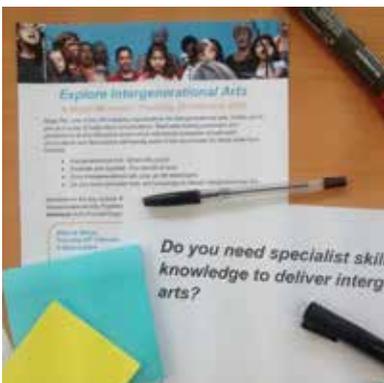
A public dress rehearsal and three performances for paying audiences.



Touring Exhibition and Website

December 2015 – March 2016

Creation of a portable interactive touring exhibition, designed to stimulate further conversation, complemented by special website pages, featuring audio-recordings.



Sharing the Learning

January 2015 – April 2016

Four Continuing Professional Development days for Magic Me artists. *Exploring Intergenerational Arts* event for artists, arts managers and others. Workshop on exercises used during the project for arts practitioners. Launch of research report by Dr Caoimhe McAvinchey. Dissemination of research at conference in New York with international scholars and artists engaged in community performance.

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Introduction

Introduction to *Rooms With A View*.

Smile and dial everyone! We have a target to reach. There's a borough to sell. Sell, sell, SELL!

The sound of different ring tones saturates the air. Across a dimly lit room draped with blue fabric, islands of people, estate agents, sit at tables talking animatedly into phones. A sea of curious audience jostle past, leaning in to overhear snippets of phone conversations proclaiming the particularities of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets: the abundance of markets that line the streets of Whitechapel; the epic views of Docklands and the skyscrapers of Canary Wharf, home of global corporations and the pulse of international banking; the proximity to the world-leading facilities of the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park; the internationally famed culinary delights of Brick Lane's curry houses.

Each of the estate agents is a woman wearing a garment – a shawl, a headdress, a scarf – made with matching fabric. The pattern reveals a brightly coloured hand-drawn map of Tower Hamlets and its arterial routes, landmarks, cultural institutions and facilities: Mile End Road, the Tower of London, Whitechapel Gallery, Victoria Park and the Royal London Hospital to name but a few. Those who look closely will see that none of the landmarks are in the right place: the fabric of the borough has been, literally, remade.

As the estate agent scene finishes the audience of sixty people are ushered into another large, high ceilinged room where a young woman, standing on a platform above the audience, invites us to participate in a quiz, How Tower Hamlets Are You? She goes through a list of questions, asking people to consider their relationship to people, places and events in the borough. Each category carries specific points, for example,

Born in Tower Hamlets = 20
Born in the London Hospital/Jewish Hospital = 10
Travels to work in Tower Hamlets = 1
Lives and works in Tower Hamlets = 30
Hipsters! Been to the Brick Lane Graffiti Tour = -5
Can you name a stop on the 15 bus route? = 3

The audience willingly enters into the spirit of the game: raising their hands in acknowledgement when they hear something that applies to them; conferring with other members of the audience about specific details; and keenly totting up their points on their fingers. The young woman, the master of ceremonies played with an officious flourish, reminds us that according to this particular points based system, some people are very Tower Hamlets. Others are not.

Born in Tower Hamlets=20

-In London Hosp/Jewish Hosp=10

Knows someone born in T.H=2

Studied in T.H=5

Works in education in T.H=5

Travels to work in T.H=1

Lives and works in T.H=30

Lived in T.H more than 10 years=30

Visited any T.H markets

-in the last week=5/month=4

Visited Tower Bridge=5

Driven over Tower Bridge=10

Hipsters! Been to the Brick Lane

Graffiti Tour=5

Eaten in T.H=5 (if it's Subway=3)

Can you name a stop on the
15 bus route?=3

-Name more stops=2 each

Can you name 3 tube stations
in T.H?=15



These are the opening scenes of *Speak As You Find*, an intergenerational community performance that invited its audience to experience a sense of double consciousness: of being immersed in a show that is both *in* and *about* the London Borough of Tower Hamlets in 2015. The performance was the culmination of a year long project, *Rooms With A View*, a collaborative enquiry with over 398 people fuelled by questions of place, shelter, belonging, dislocation, identity and community. The project was conceived by the artists Sue Mayo and Raj Bhari and produced by Magic Me, one of the UK's leading arts organisations specialising in intergenerational practice and work with older people. At the heart of this enquiry was a commitment to a participatory arts practice that supported an examination of dominant narratives of place, identity and community that overshadow the complex, layered and nuanced experience of people who have lived in Tower Hamlets.

This research report considers the process of the development of *Rooms With A View* whilst examining two key questions within this:

- How can intergenerational arts practices facilitate conversation about community with people who live in a particular place?
- What organisational tools and structures are needed to develop this work responsibly?

This research report will support artists, arts and community based organisations, commissioners and policy makers in having an enhanced understanding of the layers of labour required to realise this work and the skills, experiences and resource at play within them.

In the remainder of the introduction, I establish some of the contexts that informed the development of *Rooms With A View* before considering, in Part I, how specific intergenerational arts practices facilitated conversation about community within the project and, in Part II, the organisational tools and structures required to realise this work.

Tower Hamlets

The audience for *Speak as you Find* wound its way through the streets of Tower Hamlets, detailed in the fabric worn by the performers, on their way to The Centre, a community centre on the ground floor of a block of flats at the heart

of a new housing development. This is an area of visible transition. Just around the corner, St Clement's Hospital, a derelict nineteenth century workhouse and, subsequently, a psychiatric unit in the London Hospital, is being developed into 252 new homes.¹ It is just one of many developments being constructed behind the developers' hoardings lining Tower Hamlets' streets.² Figures for 2015 evidence the average property price as £470,779 – with most property sales being flats with an average price of £444,830 and terraced houses with an average sold price of £792,983.³ The 2015 National Land Registry figures for England and Wales show the national average cost of a property as £188,270.⁴

Tower Hamlets is one of thirty-two boroughs in London. It is in the East of the city, north of the River Thames, and the heart of the East End. Since the seventeenth century, waves of immigration informed the borough's history: Huguenot, Irish, Jewish and Bangladeshi. In the nineteenth century, London's booming population and the borough's proximity to the docks, ensured that the borough became home to people displaced from the inner city London slums. Poverty, overcrowding and disease were rife. The most recent *Indices of Deprivation (2010)* evidence that, despite significant investments in welfare over the twentieth century, widespread deprivation prevails, particularly in relation to children, older people, housing and income. Child poverty remains the highest in London, affecting 39% of local children. One in five households has an annual income of less than £15,000 and over half have an income of less than £30,000.⁵ The borough is ranked as the seventh most deprived local authority out of 326 in England.⁶

Throughout the twentieth century there were significant attempts to address the societal disadvantage that shaped people's daily experiences. Government regeneration strategies have invested heavily in both the idea and infrastructure for this: the Docklands development in the 1980s reshaped the physical and economic landscape around the Isle of Dogs and, in the 2000s, the preparations for the London 2012 Olympics saw the area around Stratford levelled then raised as an international example of sporting and cultural excellence. The gentrification of neighbouring borough, Hackney, has spilled across into Tower

-
- 1 This development is part of a Community Land Trust scheme which stipulates that new homes are priced to reflect the average mean salaries in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets rather than the market price.
 - 2 Between 2004-2013, over 20,000 new homes were built in Tower Hamlets and of these 8,000 were 'affordable'. The borough has the highest target for new home building across the capital with plans for 'almost 40,000 new homes and over 100,000 more residents' over the next decade, 'Tower Hamlets Community Plan 2015', p. 1. <<http://modgov.towerhamlets.gov.uk/documents/s64584/02%20Community%20Plan%20initial%20draft%20v4.pdf>> (accessed 19 January 2016).
 - 3 Right Move, 'House Prices in Tower Hamlets', <<http://www.rightmove.co.uk/house-prices-in-Tower-Hamlets.html>> (accessed 18.02.16).
 - 4 Land Registry, 'House Price Index, December 2015' <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/495364/December_HPI_2015.pdf> (accessed 18 February 2016).
 - 5 'Tower Hamlets Community Plan 2015', p. 7 <http://modgov.towerhamlets.gov.uk/documents/s64584/02%20Community%20Plan%20initial%20draft%20v4.pdf> (accessed 19 January 2016).
 - 6 Tower Hamlets Index Deprivation 2010, <<http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Statistics/Borough-data/Research-briefings/RB-Index-Deprivation-2010-2011-03.pdf>> (accessed 19 January 2016).

Hamlets where the rise of the hipsters – the young, affluent, middle-classes, who live and work in areas that were once considered no-go – is characterised by a proliferation of coffee-shops, upcycled furniture shops and pop-up galleries and restaurants. The recent furore over the opening of the Cereal Killers Café, a Brick Lane café selling over 120 kinds of cereal at prices between £2 - £5 a bowl, illustrates the tensions at play in a borough that is home to extraordinary wealth and crippling poverty.⁷

The opening scenes of *Speak As You Find* invite the audience to feel a sense of curious unsettledness and awareness. The first scene alerts us to how the landmarks of the borough are staged on the streets and in our collective imagination: these architectural and geographical 'assets' are the essence of one particular narrative of Tower Hamlets. However, the second scene disrupted this image, asking us to consider our relationship with this particular place, our sense of belonging or lack of belonging to it, through our individual experiences in and of the borough. The title of the performance encourages us – both participants and audience – to *Speak As You Find*. It is an explicit acknowledgment of how the perspective of an individual is informed by her or his experience and that what people find – what people speak of – may be divergent and contradictory. But implicit throughout the show, as the audience walk through spaces encountering characters voicing different perspectives on Tower Hamlets, on community, is an encouragement to *listen* to what each other has to say.

Magic Me

Since it was established in 1989, Magic Me has become a leader in developing innovative and ambitious intergenerational arts practices and work with older people. Based in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, its work is fuelled by a commitment to the local, engaging hundreds of partners in education, social care, health, culture and local government along with thousands of participants across the borough. Projects are lead by artists from different disciplines – from music to photography, poetry to mosaic making – creating spaces for people to meet and make work together. Some of this work is intimate in scale with little public visibility: *This Is My Life* (2007-2008) was a photography project in which Marysia Lachowicz worked for over a year in a residential care home with residents, their families and staff to support understanding about each individual resident's needs and preferences through the collaborative process of book making.⁸ Other projects involve a range of partners, have significant cultural profile and invite the public to be involved: *Weekend in Wiltons* (2011) was a collaboration with Duckie (a performance collective), Oaklands School,

7 Nadia Khomami and Josh Halliday, 'Shoreditch Cereal Killer Cafe targeted in anti-gentrification protests', *The Guardian*, 27 September 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/sep/27/shoreditch-cereal-cafe-targeted-by-anti-gentrification-protesters>> (accessed 21 January 2016).

8 Caoimhe McAvinchey, 'Coming of Age: Arts Practice With Older People In Private And Domestic Spaces', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre Research*, Volume 18.4 (2013), pp. 359-373.

Bethnal Green Academy and St Mary Magdalene Academy culminating in a weekend of performances in the world's oldest surviving music hall. More than sixty younger and older people performed alongside Duckie's artists in an event that featured giant puppets, sword swallowing and drag.⁹

Magic Me's programme of work is varied and responsive to the needs of its participants and partners. *Cocktails in Care Homes*, a programme of monthly parties in nine care homes across London supported by over two hundred volunteers, is a core strand of organisational activity. And, at the time of writing, Magic Me is developing *Artist Residencies in Care Homes (2016)*,¹⁰ a series of four residencies in Anchor care homes with distinctive and leading artists and arts organisations: Punchdrunk (an immersive theatre company who have garnered significant popular and critical acclaim for their site specific work),¹¹ Duckie,¹² Lois Weaver (a major international figure in feminist performance art and activism)¹³ and Upswing (a circus and aerial theatre company).¹⁴

Rooms With A View reflects Magic Me's commitment to find innovative and engaging structures to invite participants and project partners to investigate what it means to meet and make art together.

Intergenerational Practice

In the UK, the Beth Johnson Foundation initiated the Centre for Intergenerational Practice (CIP) in 2001. Until its closure in 2016, CIP was a major catalyst for research and advocacy of intergenerational work.¹⁵ CIP's definition is still used as a framework for practitioners and policy makers internationally,

Intergenerational practice aims to bring people together in purposeful, mutually beneficial activities which promote greater understanding and respect between generations and contributes to building more cohesive communities. Intergenerational practice is inclusive, building on the positive resources that the young and the old have to offer each other and those around them.¹⁶

9 Sue Mayo, *Detail and Daring: Research into the Art and Craft of Intergenerational Work* (London: Magic Me, 2012).

10 Magic Me, Artist Residencies, <<http://magicme.co.uk/artists-residencies/>> (accessed 12 January 2016).

11 Punchdrunk, <<http://punchdrunk.com>> (accessed 12 January 2016).

12 Duckie, <<http://www.duckie.co.uk>> (accessed 12 January 2016).

13 Split Britches, 'About Lois Weaver', <<https://splitbritches.wordpress.com/about/lois-weaver/>> (accessed 12 January 2016).

14 Upswing Circus and Aerial Theatre, <<http://upswing.org.uk>> (accessed 12 January 2016)

15 Many publications from the Centre for Intergenerational Practice are now held on the website for the European Map of Intergenerational Learning, <http://www.emil-network.eu/resources/> (accessed 12 January 2016).

16 Centre for Intergenerational Practice, <<http://www.centreforip.org.uk/default.aspx?page=23455>> (accessed 1 February 2009).

There are a number of social imperatives that are addressed directly through intergenerational practice:

Younger and older people are the two groups most affected by ageist attitudes and when we talk about abuse, poverty, lack of political voice and marginalisation these two groups are the most affected. [...] Changes in society have led to generations frequently becoming segregated from one another, this separation can lead to unrealistic and negative stereotypes, and a decrease in positive exchanges between them. Yet these separated generations do have resources of value to each other and furthermore share areas of concern.¹⁷

Social gerontologists Phillips, Ajrouch and Hillcoat-Nalletamby detail the impact of demographic changes, particularly increasing longevity and a decreasing birth rate, which mean,

the increased likelihood of several generations co-surviving and spending more time together than previously possible. This points to the potential for new forms of interaction as well as the issue of meeting the care needs of older family members. Other concerns about the potential volatility of generational relations – often referred to as the ‘generational equity debate’ stem from the economic implications that ageing populations may have on public sector spending, particularly with regard to health and social security needs. The crux of this debate is whether younger and older generations will have to ‘compete’ for increasing scarce public resources in order to fund their respective life course needs.¹⁸

The term intergenerational practice explicitly articulates approaches and structures through which which people of different ages encounter each other. Often intergenerational practices model a version of interaction where children and teenagers are in dialogue with people over sixty – reflecting a grandchild/grandparent dynamic. But other models of intergenerational practice offer alternative interactions, with groups of people from side-by-side generations (such as over 50s, with over 70s, example) or people who are from more than two generations.¹⁹

Though there is no single model of intergenerational practice or intergenerational arts practice, there are some underpinning principles that inform good practice. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), in one of the first surveys of this work, *Intergenerational Practice: A Review of the Literature* (2008), identifies principles including: a long-term approach;

17 Centre for Intergenerational Practice, ‘What is it’, <<http://www.centreforip.org.uk/about-us/what-is-it>> (accessed 7 January 2016).

18 Judith E. Phillips, Kristine J. Ajrouch and Sarah Hillcoat-Nalletamby, *Key Concepts in Social Gerontology* (Sage: Los Angeles, London 2010), p. 136.

19 Magic Me’s *Wisdom of All Ages* and *Stepping Out in Stepney* explicitly engaged with primary school children, university students, older people over 65 and a team of artists ranging in age from mid-20s to mid-50s.



staff with appropriate skills and training; preparation of participants; activities that focus on developing relationships between generations; activities that are shaped by participants and therefore meeting their needs; there are mutual benefits from the activities.²⁰

Academic research and evaluation into the social, educational, economic and health benefits of intergenerational practices in the fields of gerontology, health, social care and psychology evidence the significant benefits of good intergenerational practice for individuals and societies: a greater ability to build relationships with others; improved self-confidence due to developed social skills; enhanced health and wellbeing, due to a greater sense of self-worth and reduced sense of isolation; and community cohesion and resilience through the development of new networks and relationships between individuals and groups who would not ordinarily meet.²¹

Although many organisations may have been facilitating opportunities for people from different generations to spend time together over the years, the explicit articulation of work as intergenerational has grown over the past three decades. Philips, Ajrouch and Hillcoat-Nalletamby purport that

The increasing interest taken in intergenerational practice amongst gerontologists is undoubtedly linked to the significance given by the United Nations to the concept of 'a society for all ages', which became the slogan for the Second World Assembly on Ageing held in Madrid in 2002. Integral to this concept is the recognition that multigenerational relationships are important, as are principles of reciprocity and equity and that generations should invest in each other's mutual benefit.²²

Since the foundation of Generations United in 1986 – the first national agency in USA to promote, support and lobby for the importance of intergenerational

20 I. Springate et al, *Intergenerational Practice: A Review of the Literature* (LGA Research Report F/ SR (Slough: NFER, 2008), p. 5.

21 I. Springate et al., *Intergenerational Practice: A Review of the Literature* (LGA Research Report F/ SR262). (Slough: NFER, 2008), p.1

22 Judith E Phillips, Kristine J Ajrouch, Sarah Hillcoat-Nalletamby, *Key Concepts in Social Gerontology* (Sage: Los Angeles, London 2010), p. 137.

practices – commitment to this work has continued to build momentum internationally with networks operating at various levels of influence such as the London Intergenerational Network (LIN), Linking Generations Northern Ireland (LGNI) and the European Map of Intergenerational Learning (EMIL). Age-friendly programmes such as *Together Old and Young* (TOY), a European Lifelong Learning Programme investigating and piloting models of intergenerational community space, is just one recent example of cross-country governmental investment in the promotion of ‘social and economic solidarity’ between generations.²³

A growing evidence base about the potential positive impact of intergenerational practice has informed government strategy on a range of issues from education, community development and social care.²⁴ In the UK, the Intergenerational Fairness Forum, an all party parliamentary group, promotes ‘better understanding of the impact of policy on intergenerational relationships and the way in which policy affects people at different life stages.’²⁵ At an international level, when operational, the Centre for Intergenerational Practice (CIP) reflected global concerns, hosting the International Consortium for Intergenerational Programmes supporting new understandings about practice from a grassroots to policy level.²⁶

Magic Me’s approach to intergenerational practice

Within the broad spectrum of intergenerational practice that exists, Magic Me has a very specific understanding of what intergenerational *arts* practice can offer. Magic Me projects are not framed as reminiscence projects where young people are asking older people to recount their past experiences; they are not skills-sharing with younger or older people ‘teaching’ each other particular skills already held by the one of the groups. For Magic Me, intergenerational practice is not only about people of different generations being in the same place, at the same time: it is about how specific arts practices can invite and support an equity of participation for all, regardless of age, experience, physical skill and dexterity. It asks people to collaborate on a shared enquiry from the same point of entry. A recurring question that shapes this practice is, what makes it better to do this work *together*?

Projects share a commitment to the building of relationships between people in the group; exploring specific themes; developing skills; and sharing work. Sometimes the audience for Magic Me’s work may be a small gathering made up the participants’ family, friends and staff from a school or care home.

23 Toy Project Consortium, *Together Old & Young: A Review of the Literature on Intergenerational Learning Involving Young Children and Older People* (Leiden: The TOY Project, 2013), p. 4.

24 *The Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* is a useful resource for recent developments in research from a range of disciplinary perspectives (<http://jir.ucsur.pitt.edu>).

25 Intergenerational Fairness Forum, <http://www.centreforip.org.uk/england/intergenerational-futures-all-partyall-party-parliamentary-group> (accessed 20 January 2016).

26 Centre for Intergenerational Practice, <http://www.centreforip.org.uk> (accessed 20 January 2016).

At other times the work may have a much more open invitation, such as the general public travelling on the Number 205 bus, witnessing the mural and audio landscapes created as part of *View from the Top* (2012).²⁷

Magic Me and Research

Rather than commissioning research that bolsters an existing body of evidence detailing the social, health and economic benefits of intergenerational work, Magic Me is committed to developing new understandings about the role of the *arts* in intergenerational practice. This work attends to the artistic disciplinary skills and personal resources required by artists working in complex community contexts and considers the specific organisational capacities needed to develop this work rigorously. Documentation, evaluation, research and the dissemination of new understandings about intergenerational practice through publication, training and Continuing Professional Development is integral to Magic Me's work. Since the publication of *Sharing the Experience: How to Set Up and Run Arts Projects Linking Younger and Older People* (2001) by Susan Langford, Magic Me's founding director, and Sue Mayo, an artist who has collaborated with Magic Me across two decades, the organisation has commissioned a series of research reports that have made a significant contribution to new understandings about intergenerational practice. Over the past decade, Magic Me has pursued six areas of enquiry all sharing a core question: what else can we learn about and through intergenerational arts practice?

Getting Everybody Included: Report on a Magic Me Action Research Project Involving People with Dementia and Those Who Work with Them (Angela Cotter with F. Fraser, S. Langford, L. Rose and V. Ruddock, 2002) considered the complexities and challenges of working with people with dementia and the health care staff who work with them.

Our Generations (Kathryn Gilfoy and Caoimhe McAvinchey, 2009) documented and reflected on a programme of innovative intergenerational models (2006-2009) developed in response to the shifting demographic of Tower Hamlets and, in particular, the needs of isolated older people at home or in residential care.

Detail and Daring: The Art and Craft of Intergenerational Arts Practice (Sue Mayo, 2012) examined artistic form within intergenerational arts practice and how the public element of performance impacts on the ways in which artists work with participants. Two research questions framed the enquiry:

- How do different art forms enable the building of relationships in an intergenerational setting?

27 For more information about the core principles see Jan Stirling, *Report on a Programme of Continuing Professional Development and Good Practice* (London: Magic Me, 2006) p. 29.

- What is the impact on a creative project of a partnership that brings with it a high profile performance opportunity, in this case performing to a paying audience, alongside professional performers?

Wild, Wild Women: A Decade of Intergenerational Arts Practice at the Women's Library (Sue Mayo and Caoimhe McAvinchey, 2012), documented and examined a programme of ten annual projects, led by Sue Mayo, with Mulberry School for Girls and local older women. The projects took place at The Women's Library and were informed by the collection. The research asked:

- What are the characteristics of the artists' approach in The Women's Library projects?
- What are the possibilities offered through intergenerational arts practice in a library or heritage context?
- What is particular about working with women-only intergenerational groups?

A Sense of Place (2014). Significant interest in Magic Me's work in and with The Women's Library from museums, galleries and archives led to research and development of a training programme in intergenerational arts practice for artists and staff in cultural collections. Collaborating with a range of institutions including the British Museum, Horniman, National Archives and the Dulwich Picture Gallery, this project, funded by the AHRC Creativeworks programme, considered:

- What are the principles and practices of innovative intergenerational arts work in cultural collections contexts?
- What do they reveal about the skills and capacities required by artists and organisations that wish to develop this work?
- What is an appropriate model of training to support this work?

Rooms With A View (2016). At the heart of *Rooms With A View* is an invitation to participants to witness, question and contribute to narratives of community informed by their experience of life in Tower Hamlets. The key research questions that inform this research report are:

- How can intergenerational arts practices facilitate conversation about community with people who live in a particular place?
- What organisational tools and structures are needed to develop this work responsibly?

Research Methodology

I have been collaborating with Magic Me since 2007 and my research is situated within a wider understanding of its organisational practices in the interplay of arts, social care and community development concerns that shape its local landscape. The participants, artists and production team for *Rooms With A View* were enormously generous in allowing me access to each phase of the programme: initial conversations whilst the funding applications were

being prepared for Arts Council England and the Heritage Lottery Fund; the research phase with weekly sessions for the group of students from Mulberry School for Girls and local, older women; the open day sessions with the general public; the devising process; rehearsals and performances for *Speak as you Find*; and evaluation sessions with participants and the team. Interviews with the artistic and production team, along with detailed reflections on sessions by them, gave insight into the day-to-day detail of the project as well as the overall ambition for it. Materials generated by participants and audiences also inform my understandings. Throughout the project Magic Me ran four CPD days based on thematic, aesthetic and ethical concerns informing the project and these were invaluable opportunities to engage with the wider pool of Magic Me artists.

Previous reports have attended to the particularities of the participants' experiences of intergenerational projects and their voices, through interviews, have been very present. In this report, because the research has focused on structures and organisational skills, the insights of the artists and producers illustrate many particular points. The participants' voices are woven through the report in the form of moments from workshops, extracts of their work and images of their practice.

Part I: How can intergenerational arts practices facilitate conversation about community with people who live in a particular place?

This section examines the rationale for the *Rooms With A View* project before detailing the structures and processes that were required to realise it. It considers ideas of scale and detail – to the social, political and aesthetic ambitions for the project and how this was enabled through the labour, skill and expertise of people attending to specific aspects of it.

Chapter 1: *Rooms With A View*: Rationale and Structure for the Project

Rationale for *Rooms With A View*

Rooms With A View will explore the layered histories of East London, drawing on memories, oral histories, photographs, diaries and contemporary stories on the theme of protest or shelter. Our Associate Artist [Sue Mayo] will work alongside Raj Bhari, Director of Talk for a Change, a company experienced in tackling tough community issues. Using community conversations and other techniques, they help to reduce harmful local conflicts. During the research and development phase which begins the project, artists will gather stories from existing archives at the Bishopsgate Institute, Bancroft (local history) Library and *Spitalfields Life*, from regular Magic Me participants and local individuals specially recruited through outreach. Those wishing to perform will then work with artists to develop a piece [...] After the performance, the audience will gather together for tea and community conversations, reflecting on what they have seen and heard, and sharing their own stories and views.

We want to present high quality theatre, enable young and older people to meet and connect, explore how we use real people's stories and share how we can make the best quality work with community performers.²⁸

Magic Me's application to Arts Council England outlines aspects of the ambition for *Rooms With A View* with many layers of enquiry at play at the same time. The project is framed as an exploration of the history of Tower Hamlets through the accounts of people who live in it. It facilitates dialogue around ideas of home, belonging, shelter and community with people whose daily perspective of life in the borough is shaped by their life experiences informed by age, gender, culture and faith. Tower Hamlets is a borough shaped by the ways in which people who are different from one another – in age, class,

28 Magic Me, *Rooms With A View Application to Arts Council England*, June 2014, Magic Me archive, p. 5.

sexuality, culture or faith – negotiate and accommodate difference in a shared endeavour of living alongside one another. Sometimes this accommodation is reached through segregation rather than integration, with distinctive areas in the borough having been identified with particular communities of immigration within it – Wapping (Irish and Catholic), Stepney (Jewish), Brick Lane (Bangladeshi and Muslim).²⁹

There is a strong political, social and cultural imperative that underpins *Rooms With A View*. The project is a necessary invitation to publicly consider, debate and imagine what community means at a time when ideas of home, borders, belonging and civic responsibility are questioned through crises at local, national and international arena. In the UK, the current Conservative Government's politics of austerity – a response to the 2008 financial crisis where the UK Government tried to prevent the collapse of the British banking system with a £141 billion bail out – have had a particular impact on poorer citizens. Oxfam's report, *The True Cost of Austerity*, details the implication of this political stance:

Economic stagnation, the rising cost of living, cuts to social security and public services, falling incomes, and rising unemployment have combined to create a deeply damaging situation in which millions are struggling to make ends meet. Just one example among many is the unprecedented rise in the need for emergency food aid, with at least half a million people using food banks each year.³⁰

Unemployment, particularly, youth unemployment and long-term unemployment continue to rise. Cuts in public services have had an exponential impact on women and children and levels of inequality and poverty continue to rise.³¹ At a local level, government and the charitable and voluntary sector continue to negotiate rising need with diminished resource. In Tower Hamlets, the Fairness Commission's investigations reveal, 'there is arguably nowhere in the country where inequality is more pronounced.'³²

29 For more information see, Anne Kershen, *Strangers, Aliens and Asians: Huguenots, Jews and Bangladeshis in Spitalfields 1666-2000*, London: Routledge, 2013. This idea of the influence and accommodation of faith in the borough is physically realised in the shifting function of a building on the corner of Fournier Street and Brick Lane. It was originally built as a Huguenot church in the eighteenth century, became a Methodist chapel then a Jewish synagogue and is now the Brick Lane Great Mosque.

30 Oxfam, *The True Cost of Austerity*, 2015 <<https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/cs-true-cost-austerity-inequality-uk-120913-en.pdf>> (accessed 20 January 2016).

31 Fawcett Society, 'The Impact of Austerity on Women' (2013) <<http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/The-Impact-of-Austerity-on-Women-19th-March-2012.pdf>> (accessed 20 January 2016); Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development OECD, 'Crisis squeezes income and puts pressure on inequality and poverty' (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2013) <<http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/OECD2013-Inequality-and-Poverty-8p.pdf>> (accessed 20 January 2016).

32 Fairness Commission, 'Tower Hamlets: Time to Act, 2013', p. 3, <<http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/One-TH/Fairness-Commission-booklet.pdf>>; Giles Fraser, 'The wealth divide in Tower Hamlets is a violation of Britons' sense of fairness', *The Guardian*, 2nd November 2012 – <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2012/nov/02/vast-wealth-divide-tower-hamlets-fairness>> (accessed 20 January 2016).

Internationally, the Syrian refugee crisis has prompted a major humanitarian intervention. It is estimated that since the outbreak of civil war in 2011, over nine million Syrians have fled their homes in search of sanctuary. The Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute states that 6,500,000 Syrians are displaced within the country whilst over 3,000,000 have fled to neighbouring countries and 150,000 have declared asylum in Europe.³³ The rise of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and its threat of terrorist attacks internationally have fueled a public and political discourse of protectionism, distrust and contempt.

Sociologists argue that at times of uncertainty, fear and material need, societies demand security.³⁴ That need for security and stability is sometimes articulated through staunch, seemingly immovable positions in relation to territory and belonging: who is or isn't included. In such instances individuals who represent a social problem, a potential rupture in the social landscape, are often represented through stereotype – the benefit cheat, the immigrants who 'steal' jobs and homes. These individuals become a substitute for institutions, populations or specific social 'problems'. The language of exclusion, of vilification, is infused diatribe rather than genuine dialogue or debate.

Whilst Magic Me continually negotiates the politics of the borough's diversity across all areas of its work, *Rooms With A View* was its most explicit engagement with critiquing singular narratives of community. The project, initiated by Sue Mayo and Raj Bhari, was an artistic and activist intervention that sought to create public spaces for conversation, where the structures of robust intergenerational arts practice allowed for difficulty and discomfort as catalysts for understanding rather than fracture. Mayo and Bhari have extensive experience of working in complex community contexts and sites of conflict. Mayo worked on creative projects in Eltham, South East London in the years immediately after the racially motivated murder of Stephen Lawrence, when the police and judicial handling of the case led to a public inquiry that deemed the Metropolitan Police Service 'institutionally racist'.³⁵ During the Magic Me Women's Library projects, she supported a group of young, mainly Muslim women, and local older women from different cultural and faith backgrounds to negotiate their response to the London bombings in 2005. Raj Bhari works in conflict transformation and peacebuilding. He has been an advisor to the UK Government on the development of national community cohesion, conflict resolution and community engagement agendas. Recently, Bhari has been working on peacebuilding programmes in Syria and Libya with the Peaceful Change Initiative.³⁶

33 Migration Policy Centre, 'Migrant Crisis', <<http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/migrant-crisis/>> (accessed 20 January 2016).

34 Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, London: Allen Lane, 2012.

35 Mayo worked with young parents in Eltham for three years as part of the Charlton Athletic Race Equality Family Matters programme.

36 Peaceful Change Initiative <<http://www.peacefulchange.org>> (accessed 20 January 2016).

Together, Mayo and Bhari had been considering how their expertise in both intergenerational arts practice and community cohesion through dialogue work could make an intervention: to make work in and with communities that reached beyond ideas of celebration, to engage with narratives that act as undercurrents rather than the top-line. They asked: what invitation would encourage people who wouldn't ordinarily have the opportunity to meet to, together, interrogate single, super-narratives of the borough? What structures support the weaving of previously untold narratives into a tapestry of histories? How can these be shared with public audiences? How can the public be invited to enter into dialogue with them?

The Structure of *Rooms With A View*

In order to realise this ambition *Rooms With A View* required a robust super-structure with a series of carefully curated encounters within it. The framework for these encounters needed to be solid enough to hold a group of people whilst being elastic and accommodating enough to allow people to offer dissenting views without fear of recrimination. The political, ethical and aesthetic considerations of the programme were constantly under consideration.

In order to address the very particular aspects of intergenerational arts practices that facilitated dialogue in, with and about community, I will introduce the overall structure of *Rooms with View* before attending to four specific moments that illustrates these strategies in action.

The following section presents an overview of each of the six phases of work in *Rooms With A View*. It identifies time-frame, key aims and specific actions required to realise them: it captures the ground work that enabled the project to happen.

January – December 2014

Phase 1: Research and Development of the project

What are the imperatives for this project?

What structures, collaborations, resources and skills are necessary to support it?

Planning

- Mayo and Bhari engaged in research and development to articulate the ideas underpinning *Rooms With A View* and submitted a project proposal to Magic Me.
- Fundraising. Charlotte O'Dair (Programme Director, Magic Me), Susan Langford (Director, Magic Me), Mayo and Bhari prepared applications for Arts Council England (ACE) and Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). Funding was confirmed by ACE and the HLF in Autumn 2014.
- Further/Development of partnerships: Bishopsgate Institute, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, Geffrye Museum of the Home, Sutton House, Bromley by Bow Centre and Mulberry School for Girls.

- Recruitment of participants and staff (project manager, sound designer, designer)
- Training around working with narrative and archival materials about local history at Bishopsgate Institute.
- Research into life narratives at Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives provided some sources for the group to consider.

January – April 2015.

Phase 2: Research with participants and the public around narratives of East London life.

What invitations will engage a range of people from different generational and cultural backgrounds in a shared consideration of life in Tower Hamlets?

What structures of intergenerational arts practice will support both the development of the group and their skills in engaging with existing oral histories/accounts of the borough?

Participants: priorities included developing the group; developing skills in working with archival material; developing skills in participatory arts practices through:

- Weekly sessions after school on a Wednesday afternoon at the Tower Hamlets Local History Library for the group made up, at this time, of young women from Mulberry School for Girls and local older women, most of whom were already known to Magic Me because of their ongoing engagement with projects;
- Open Days. The group prepared to host four Open Days on Saturdays in February and March 2015. These drop-in sessions were open to the general public in four different sites – Geffrye Museum of the Home, Bromley by Bow Centre, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives (popularly known as the Bancroft Library) and the National Trust property, Sutton House. The group curated a series of opportunities to support the general public's consideration of their relationship with London.
- Easter Holiday Sessions: There were two and a half days of intensive devising with the group in response to some of the materials they had gathered and recorded during the first phase of the workshops and open days. During this session, the participants met Dan Scott, the sound designer, and Amanda Mascarenhas, the designer.

Staffing – priorities included building a team to support both the aesthetic and social aspects of the project:

- The appointment of a production manager, designer, sound artist and pastoral support to engage with the older participants.
- Raj Bhari's work with Talk for a Change took him to Libya extensively during the Spring of 2015. He stepped back from co-leading the project and Tas Emiabata, an actor and theatre maker with considerable experience of working with young people, was appointed. Raj continued to support the project through Community Conversation training and on-going dialogue with the artists.

May – August 2015

Phase 3: Reflection on the project to date and planning for the next phase.

What themes and stories are emerging through the process?

How can additional participants be recruited and integrated into the process?

What additional support is needed to enhance participants' understanding of how to support multiple and contradictory narratives?

- Keeping-in touch sessions with the students and some older participants at Mulberry School for Girls. The *How Tower Hamlets are You?* game was developed during one of these sessions.
- 3 x open drop-in sessions to extend recruitment beyond the original group at Christchurch Primary School.
- Three days of devising and Community Conversation training for *Rooms With A View* participants and artists.
- Audio recording of narratives from local people about their experiences of community.³⁷
- The search for a venue for the show continued after the original venue falls through due to limits of accessibility and organisational infrastructure.

September – November 2015

Phase 4: Devising, Rehearsing and Producing the Show, *Speak as you Find*

How can participants be supported in developing their skills in specific areas of production?

What level of support is needed to attend to a large group with distinctly different roles, timetables and needs within it?

How can a site-specific live performance event be shaped in such a way as to invite an audience to participate in it rather than attend it?

- There was a distinctive shift in the rhythm of the project at this point: there were sessions each Wednesday afternoon; on a number of Saturdays in September and October; and an intensive production week schedule during the school's half term culminated in a public dress rehearsal and shows over four days (29th October – 1st November 2015).
- During the first Saturday session in September all of the participants had the opportunity to explore each of the production areas: design, sound, performing, front of house and hosting of Community Conversations. Participants then chose a pathway that had its own particular schedule of meetings. The rhythm of the project was now very different for individuals depending on their choice.

³⁷ These audio recordings from the project have been submitted to the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

- Recruitment of volunteers and table hosts for performances.
- Marketing of show and setting up of box office systems.
- Monthly production meetings.
- Evaluation meetings with all of the participants; with Magic Me staff team; with artistic and production team.

December 2015 – March 2016

Phase 5: Exhibition preparation and tour

How can the materials developed through Rooms With A View be shared with a wider audience?

- The *Rooms With A View* tour aimed to bring both the idea of the community conversation and some of the materials generated through the project to a wider public audience through an exhibition of materials in a range of community venues.
- Negotiation of tour with partners including the Bromley by Bow Centre, Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives and The Ideas Store Crisp Street.
- Preparation of materials including exhibition banners each one of which offers two views of the same theme, as well as dedicated section of the Magic Me website featuring aspects of the exhibition including audio-recording and images of the model boxes of perspectives of community that were part of *Speak as you Find* < <http://magicme.co.uk/rooms-with-a-view-exhibition/>>.

January 2015 – April 2016

Phase 6: Continuing Professional Development and Research

There were four strands of enquiry that informed the programme of CPD days:

- Community conversations: How can we deal with conflict within a group and facilitate difficult conversations? Led by Raj Bhari of Talk for a Change, (27th May 2015)
- Making art with community groups: How can we prepare people and work with them to achieve the best possible outcome? Led by Sue Mayo, Magic Me Associate Artist, (19th September 2015).
- How might we engage with the stories offered by people? What are the ethics of this? How can we honour these narratives through art making? Led by Dr Caoimhe McAvinchey, Senior Lecturer in Drama, Theatre and Performance, Queen Mary, University of London, (15th January 2016)
- How can Magic Me artists respond creatively to often quite restricted spaces? Led by Punchdrunk (4th February 2016)

This structure reveals the overall arc of activity over two years building up to the site-specific performance *Speak as you Find*. Within this there are

phases attending to specific areas of work: recruitment, group development, skills development, research into narratives, devising, production preparation, production, evaluation. The artistic team could hope but not assume that participants from sessions at the beginning of the project in January 2015 would be able or interested in committing to each phase of it. The arts practices therefore offered at each stage of the project had to be open enough to welcome new participants and offer consistency and challenge to support core participants.

In the following chapter I will consider examples from different phases of the project that give access to the ways in which Magic Me invited participants and the public to engage in this conversation. These are framed by the question that shaped the overall critical enquiry and momentum of the project: How can intergenerational arts practices facilitate conversation about community with people who live in a particular place?



Chapter 2: Rooms With A View: Access to Practice

Community Conversations

'It's good to talk' is the slogan of the twentieth century, which put its faith in self-expression, sharing information and trying to be understood. But talking does not necessarily change one's own or other people's feelings or ideas. I believe that the twentieth century needs new ambition, to develop *not* talk but conversation, which does change people. Real conversation catches fire. It involves more than sending and receiving information. [...] The kind of conversation I'm interested in is one which you start with a willingness to emerge a slightly different person. It is always an experiment, whose results are never guaranteed. It involves risk. It's an adventure in which we agree to cook the world together and make it taste less bitter.³⁸

Humans have already changed the world several times by changing the way they have had conversations. There have been conversational revolutions which have been as important as wars and riots and famine. When problems have appeared insoluble, when life has seemed to be meaningless, when governments have been powerless, people have sometimes found a way out by changing the subject of their conversation, or the way they talked, or the persons they talked to. In the past that gave us the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, modernity and postmodernity. Now it's time for the New Conversation.³⁹

Theodore Zeldin is a philosopher whose work is an ongoing enquiry into the emotions in everyday life. His call to conversation is a call to action – to imagine what decidedly unsure people may discover together when they enter into an open enquiry. This provocation may be seen in the work of a number of artist led interventions that have evolved in the past two decades. Improbable's *Devoted and Disgruntled* is a public forum based on Open Space Technology that encourages people with shared interests to identify and address the detail of their concerns through conversation.⁴⁰ Lois Weaver's Public Address Systems are a series of performative structures, including the Long Table and Porch Sitting, that invite people to collaborate in reflecting and imagining new understandings rather than presenting information.⁴¹ When Magic Me developed a programme of work, led by Sue Mayo, with younger and older women at The Women's Library for ten years, Mayo initiated a Tea Party, a place and space where the project participants hosted conversations with the public,

38 Theodor Zeldin, *Conversation: How Talk Can Change Your Life* (London: The Harvill Press, 1998), pp. 1-3.

39 Theodor Zeldin, *Conversation: How Talk Can Change Your Life* (London: The Harvill Press, 1998), p. 7.

40 *Devoted and Disgruntled*, <<http://www.devotedanddisgruntled.com>>.

41 Lois Weaver Public Address Systems, <<http://publicaddresssystems.org/about/>>.

catalysed by the themes of the performance.⁴² For Sue Mayo and Raj Bhari, conversation and dialogue work were integral to *Rooms With A View*. Bhari is a director of Talk For a Change where the idea of Community Conversation, a methodology developed by Newham Conflict and Change, is core to its work.

Community Conversations – Training Sessions

Raj hosted three training sessions within *Rooms With A View*, one for the wider pool of Magic Me artists (May 2015), one for the participants and project artists (July 2015) and another for table hosts for *Speak as you Find* (October 2015). Central to any idea of dialogue is listening, actively listening and hearing what others are saying even if it is at odds with what you believe or experience.

Below, some key exercises of the training are illustrated by reflections on the intergenerational group training:

Exercise 1: Fact and Feelings Listening Exercise⁴³

In groups of three, each person talked about a time when they have felt conflict whilst the other two people listened: one person focused on the facts of the account, the other on the feelings. The central idea of this was to encourage people to reflect on their process of listening in everyday life. Tas Emiabata details this unfolding realisation:

In threes, we were each asked to recount an event that happened in our lives that had caused some kind of conflict. One person in the group would register the feelings the speaker was communicating and the other member would register the events of the story. We would then have an opportunity to feed this back to the speaker. Each person within the group would rotate and have the opportunity to speak of their conflict, communicate the feelings or the narrative. Raj made it very clear at the beginning that there was no obligation to share an event that made any of the participants feel vulnerable or that they didn't want to share.⁴⁴

Raj identified three zones of listening: zone one, active listening, when people are engaged with what is being said; zone two, reflective listening where a person is listening but then reflects and relates this back to themselves and

42 See Sue Mayo and Caoimhe McAvinchey, *Wild, Wild Women: Ten Years of Intergenerational Arts Practice at The Women's Library in Collaboration with Mulberry School for Girls and Local Older Women* (London: Magic Me, 2013), pp. 52-53, 108-110.

43 The Facts and Feelings exercise was developed by Leap Confronting Conflict. This and other exercises that support the negotiating of conflict can be found in Fiona Macbeth and Nic Fine, *Playing with Fire: Training for Those Working with Young People in Conflict*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2011.

44 Tas Emiabata, 'Reflections from *Rooms With A View* practical day: Led by Raj Bhari, 2nd August 2015' (personal notes).

their experiences ('I know how you feel, this happened to me too'); and zone three, not listening.⁴⁵

Exercise 2: Drawing by listening

In this exercise people worked in pairs, sitting back to back. Raj held up a drawing of a boat, seagull and sun. One person in the pair looked at the picture and described what they saw. The other person drew what they heard. Tas Emiabata's account reveals some of the issues that this exercise prompted within the group,

The exercise [...] was particularly interesting. It clearly demonstrated how difficult it can be sometimes to listen effectively; to not make assumptions; and simply being open to what your partner is describing. The exercise resulted in a number of interpretations on the picture of a boat and the conversations that followed afterwards clearly pointed how difficult it can be sometimes to listen effectively; to not make assumptions and how simple distractions, not being fully open and present with your partner, can lead to a misunderstanding in the communication. One of the older ladies remarked that "one needed to be "good at art" in order to do this exercise" – her view generally went unchallenged but I felt her view highlighted how our assumptions about ourselves or situation can hamper our ability to be open and simply listen and respond.⁴⁶

Exercise 3: The Community Conversations

In small groups, people considered a situation where they felt a sense of community in the place that they live. Dr Olivia Sheringham, a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Geography (QMUL) studying home, the city and migration, observed a number of *Rooms With A View* sessions to consider how arts based practices support conversations and understandings about home and the city. In this exercise she observed,

one older woman talking about coming together with her neighbours to resist demolition of houses in her street and having them listed; another talked nostalgically about a time when her whole extended family lived in the same block of flats; a young girl talked about how she had never met her neighbours in her block until there was a big carnival in the local park and lots of residents attended.⁴⁷

45 For further information on active listening and approaches to community dialogue to support conflict resolution see the work of the Oxford Centre for the Study of Intergroup Conflict < <http://www.psy.ox.ac.uk/research/the-oxford-centre-for-the-study-of-intergroup-conflict-oxcsic>>; Raj Bhari, Jo Broadwood, and Nicola Sugden, *We Need to Talk About... Can Discussing Controversial Issues Strengthen Community Relations?* London: *Talk for a Change*, 2012; Paul Born, *Community Conversations: Mobilizing the Ideas, Skills, and Passion of Community Organizations, Governments, Businesses, and People*. Toronto and New York: BPS Books, 2008

46 Tas Emiabata, 'Reflections from Rooms With A View practical day: Led by Raj Bhari, 2nd August 2015' (personal notes).

47 Olivia Sheringham, Reflections on Magic Me, email to Sue Mayo and Caoimhe McAvinchey, 13 August 2015.

Each person shared their experience with the whole group and the group reflected on what these narratives reveal of the group's collective and particular understanding of community.

Rather than focusing on ideas of community at this particular moment in time, of London 2015, many of the older participants focused on stories of the past. This nostalgic turn meant that the conversation was dominated by a sense of 'things aren't like they used to be' and 'there's no such thing as community'. For Mayo and Emiabata, this was revealing. For Mayo,

This was very chastening. I don't even know if it's what they believe but it's what they said. Why can we not disrupt that theory? Perhaps if you do not experience it, it is safer to say that there is no community than to say that you are no longer in a network that gives you access to community. If that is the reality, that's too scary: its much easier to blame 'out there', to say community no longer exists, than to say you no longer feel part of it.⁴⁸

Emiabata's reflections echo this,

Some of the older women are not able to recognise acts of community if they have not appeared in the same form that they were used to in the past [...] – "your door was always left open, you could just go into ...or we knew everyone..." – without taking into account that that community existed in a particular place and time. As all of us live now in the present I wonder if there is an extension exercise to the Community Conversation whereby the next stage might be to ask the questions of the group; what might community look like today? and what, as individuals, is our responsibility for shaping community? How do we put this into practice? The young girls do not live in the past as much as the older women and it might be a useful way to hear their opinions on what community means to them whilst strengthening their voices within the group.⁴⁹

The Community Conversation exercise was the distillation of the imperative of the project: the invitation to offer personal narrative to others; the encouragement to actively listen to this story; and the negotiation of the gap between differences in experience. The articulation of listening into three zones was an invaluable reference point throughout the project and the younger women were particularly articulate in their reflections on their own patterns of listening. For Sue Mayo, the listening exercise also brought out some clear articulations from the older participants about their enhanced understanding of their modes of listening, 'I thought I was a good listener

48 Sue Mayo, Interview, Goldsmiths, London, 7 December 2015.

49 Tas Emiabata, 'Reflections from Rooms With A View practical day: Led by Raj Bhari, 2nd August 2015' (personal notes).

but this has made me aware that I am always comparing what I hear to my own experiences'. This issue also highlighted some common issues to be negotiated in intergenerational practice that seeks equitable participation: what invitations allow participants a parity of consideration? If older participants retreat into nostalgia, shifting the balance from the present into established narratives of the past, how do artists support them in recognising this and steer the conversation back to one that *everyone* can participate in? If the past is prioritised over the present, if the experience of age is given precedence over people's expertise in their own lives (whatever their age), then the shared space becomes distorted and young participants may feel that they are not equally as needed in the conversation as the older ones. The artists on *Rooms With A View* were continually making and re-making a space for equitable and meaningful participation throughout the project.

For Bhari, the focus of the training sessions was to create,

*safe opportunities for participants to explore how good they are at listening and how able, willing or prepared are they to listen to each other. [...] Some [discover] what 'gets in the way' when we try to listen to others, particularly when the person that we are in conversation with is either expressing something very difficult for them or if they express ideas, views or beliefs that we might not share or agree with.*⁵⁰

Sue Mayo, reflecting on how challenging it was for the group to practice this heightened listening said, 'Good community is not about everything being easy. It is how things are negotiated [...] The biggest achievement of the first phase of the project was people being able to say, I can hear something I don't agree with.'⁵¹

Workshops

Investigating Identity Together

In the following section I focus on the workshops in the first phase of the project, identifying specific approaches that model an equitable invitation for all participants whilst negotiating the terrain of the project: home, belonging, community and the particularity of Tower Hamlets. I have also selected examples that give insight into how the materials generated throughout the project were used as a catalyst for devising drama and how the theatre making skills of the group grew over the duration of the project. I want to foreground the artists' expertise and experience in both envisioning and realising this and draw upon their reflections, through project diaries and interview, to detail this.

50 Raj Bhari, 'Reflections from *Rooms With A View* practical day led by Raj Bhari', correspondence with Magic Me, 28 July 2015.

51 Caoimhe McAvinchey, 'Production meeting notes at The Centre, London, 9 September 2015', personal notes.

The following notes from Sue Mayo's project diary from the first three sessions give insight into how a room of individuals was supported in developing their group identity through their playful interrogation and dramatisation of ideas of home.

Week 1. 15th January 2015. Tower Hamlets Local Library and Archives.

Space: the room is great: huge, warm, comfy chairs and very helpful staff
There was a local history event going on in the foyer which created a great atmosphere.

The older women arrived first and we spent some time trying to think of questions that an intergenerational pair could answer. This took quite a few goes, and staying very steady about the adults not interviewing the girls but finding questions all could answer. It was a great warm up into open and inclusive questions. Also got us thinking about sensitivities people might have.

Later, after the girls from Mulberry School arrived we had three maps at tables – London, the UK and the world. All the participants split into three groups and went [...] to each one. They were asked to tell each other about places that they had a connection with. These were great conversations with many interesting things. Some of the adults had very international connections and the girls were very excited about a residency they had had in Wales, and Dubai airport featured.⁵²

The abstract idea of place, illustrated through the maps of London, the UK and the world, was a catalyst for equitable conversation, allowing participants to offer something of themselves, their experiences. In this first group encounter, the stakes are low – people can contribute something without feeling under pressure to 'tell a great story'. However, as well as getting to know a little of each other, the exercise also starts to create new connections between people which, in turn, begin to fabricate the group's identity: everyone has had the opportunity to speak; everyone has been witnessed; shared ideas and memories linger in the air between people. Already insights into identity, family, belonging, hopes and desires are in the room. In week two, the conversation shifts from the wider terrain of London, UK and the world, to ideas of home.

Week 2. 21st January 2016. Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives

I asked the group to speak in pairs about where they felt at home (less what town or city but more a really clear location, like sofa, bed etc). Many of the girls treasured private space at home, and there were lovely images: Hanifa in her bed, alone or with her sisters; Judith with her beloved husband of 45 years; Jackie in Whitby, with friends who know her; Sumayah, in the middle of a family party, surrounded by cousins; Saima, dancing alone to her favourite music.⁵³

52 Sue Mayo, Subject: Rooms Diary 1, email sent: 15 January 2015 12:04

53 Sue Mayo, Subject: Rooms Diary 2, email sent: 21 January 2015 20:59



This abstract concept is textured through the detail offered by individuals revealing not only a wider negotiation of 'home' but something of the individuals in the room. In the third week of the project, the material generated by the group, *from* the group's experience, is returned to and developed. Sue Mayo details three separate but linking exercises:

Week 3. 29th January 2015. Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives

1st exercise. Each person had three small pieces of card, and they had to use two of them to write words to describe themselves (a word on each one). They then read these to their partner, who chose a third word for them, writing it on a card. They read them out, without telling us which one had been written for them. They were lovely, and there were also some commonalities.

2nd exercise. Working in groups of 4, the group continued last week's ideas about feeling 'at home'. I asked them to think about London, and any events or moments or people that had helped them to feel at home in London.

3rd exercise. Then we brought everyone back to the circle and had a short but great discussion about the fact that, had I asked, tell me when you have *not* liked being in London, these stories would have been different. Everyone knows a place through their own experiences, so one person's like might be another's dislike and we can all have different knowledge of a place. All very good stuff for the project.

Then we looked at the words from the first exercise and thought about where they might apply to London: where was funny? beautiful? hot-tempered? Etc. That was good fun but very noisy, with lots of conversations going on.⁵⁴

This series of exercises, building across three weeks, reveals a strong sense of the group being a resource – that their experiences and ideas are textured, layered and valued. Stories offered in the first and second session are returned to and built upon, or they act as catalysts for further material to be generated.

Although the group was yet to have Community Conversation training with Raj, it was clear that these principles were already at play: ideas of perspective, of position, and the disruption of such certainties by people with different ideas, were gently but consistently addressed. Sue Mayo explains,

The most evident shift in the first phase was people understanding that you know a place through your own experience, and you don't know someone else's experience of it. That sounds basic but it was huge. The group could hear each other say slightly different things – that's what it look like if you have a job, that's what it looks like if you don't have a job, that's what it looks like if you have buggy, that's what it looks like if you have a bike.⁵⁵

54 Sue Mayo, Subject: Rooms Diary 3, email sent: 28 January 2015 21:40

55 Sue Mayo, Interview, Goldsmiths, London, 7 December 2015.

Finding Connections with Stories in the Archives

In addition to working with narratives of life in East London generated by the participants, *Rooms With A View* actively engaged with stories documented in archives and local history libraries including Bishopsgate Institute and the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives. These narratives offered other perspectives beyond the life experiences of those in the room: they gave detailed insight into lives that get swept up in statistics or masked by top-line stories about the characteristics of the borough. The librarian at The Tower Hamlets Local History Library ran a session, 'Reading the Archives', that the participants particularly enjoyed and prepared the group for their engagement with materials including maps, newspaper articles, photographs, and the *Spitalfields Life*, a daily blog established by The Gentle Author in 2009, 'an ecstatic project driven by the desire to communicate my sense of wonder at the people I meet in the East End'.⁵⁶ One of the stories from *Spitalfields Life* is written by the anthropologist, Delwar Hussain, who grew up in Spitalfields. His story about his mother's industrial sewing machine was a catalyst for rich conversation about the garment industry, commercial labour in domestic spaces and generational conflict within families. It became a central scene in *Speak as you Find*. The following edited extract gives some sense of this rich source material – family life richly evoked through detail of transactions shaped by the commercial and industrial demands of a particular moment in the past.

Rather than the sound of Bow bells, I was born to the whirring of sewing machines in my ear. Throughout most of my childhood, my mother did piecework while my father worked in a sweatshop opposite the bagel shop on Brick Lane, stitching together leather jackets for Marks & Spencer. The factory closed down long ago and now, ironically, the building hosts a Marxist bookshop run by Trotskyites. Initially my mother's industrial-grade Brother sewing machine was in the kitchen, in between the sink and the pine wood table. But it took up too much space there and was also considered dangerous, once ambulatory children started populating the house. It was decided that it would be moved to one of the attic rooms on the top floor of our home, following the custom of the Huguenot silk weavers of the past. [...]

For a while my mother sewed the lining into jackets and winter coats, working for a short Sikh man who had a clothes shop on Fournier St. He had quick steps and a bunch of heavy keys dangling from the belt on his trousers. The man still owes her money, she recalls. [...]

I remember the almost-sweet smell of the machine oil, the thick needles, bundles of colourful nylon yarn, piles and piles of skirts in all shades and sizes, the metal bobbin cases and the sound of the sewing machine. When the foot peddle was down, the vibration could be felt throughout the house. Strangely, this provided a sense of comfort – the

56 The Gentle Author, *Spitalfields Life*, <<http://spitalfieldslife.com/>> (accessed 14 January 2016).

knowledge that my mother was upstairs and everything in the world was as it should be.

When I was around twenty, my brothers and sisters and I colluded with each other to get rid of the sewing machine. It had lain dormant in the attic room ever since my mother gave up taking in piecework some years previously. [...] I had an idea to turn our attic into a study, installing my PC which my mother had bought for me from the money she had saved from sewing.⁵⁷

Sue Mayo's project diaries captures the momentum that the piece generated.

We talked about the images of belonging present in it, and the disagreement about whether to throw [the sewing machine] out. Then in pairs [the group] enacted the conversation between Mother and Son. Then we placed two chairs in the centre, one for Mum and one for Son, and they came in and out performing these characters and the argument between them. Lots of laughs, great energy.

Interesting threads: How does something from your past define you? Is it precious or should you get rid of it to make way for the new?

[The mum's] work as a machinist at home was seen by her son as oppression; for her it was a way to earn, and therefore, perhaps, more freedoms. When does the child start to take over decisions from the parent?⁵⁸

This story allowed for one particular narrative of East London – the garment industry – to become a multi-layered chorus of stories: 'one girl's dad had a big industrial one at home; Henrietta was wearing a dress she had made; Carol loved the sound of her Mum's machine whirring away.'⁵⁹ Other stories emerged too: Sally worked as a machinist; Winnie had worked as a seamstress; Amarjit has been a librarian travelling to different garment factories.

One of the challenges in intergenerational work, particularly with participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, is to facilitate conversations that are *informed* by distinct experience rather than being *about* how people are different to one another. Delwar Hussain's story became a conduit for the participants to have conversations about their lives through a shared point of reference. This story became a rudder for the project, a point of reference about negotiations between the past and present, of generational difference and the shifting economic and social contexts of East London life.

57 Delwar Hussain, 'Arful Nessa's Sewing Machine', 14 July 2014, *Spitalfields Life*, <<http://spitalfieldslife.com/2014/07/14/arful-nessas-sewing-machine/>> (accessed 20 January 2016).

58 Sue Mayo, Subject: Rooms Diary 2, email sent: 21 January 2015 20:59.

59 Sue Mayo, Subject: Rooms Diary 2, email sent: 21 January 2015 20:59.

Negotiating Perspective: Stereotype and Nuance

The negotiation of different perspectives was realised through drama based exercises that explicitly engaged with ideas of conflicting views and different perspectives.

We made some stories and dialogues using the words ‘Yes and..’ and ‘Yes but...’ Great conversations about building on each other’s ideas, or being in conflict or competition with the other person. Also conversation about going in with no idea – the tension of hoping you will be able to come up with something. We noticed that it was easy to depart from the starting point of a conversation and end up somewhere quite different.⁶⁰

Olivia Sheringham details how both making and attending to small details enabled the group to develop their ability to both read and stage visual narratives.

Following a short group exercise where we introduced ourselves, we then moved on to think about performing still scenes. Sue got us to reflect on how just changing one thing shifts the way we interpret the scene. She asked volunteers to sit on a chair and then added different objects, changed the person’s position, facial expression, etc to illustrate how very minor changes can change the whole visual narrative.⁶¹

This attending to detail encouraged the group to think about the constructions of narrative, how meaning is read through the staging of object, gesture and expression. These ideas were addressed again, but this time working with photographs.

We then divided into smaller groups – pairs and threes – for a series of exercises using images from Spitalfields Life. Sue asked us to choose an image which inspired us in some way (and not to think about it too much) and then, together with our partner(s), to recreate it as a still scene. [...]

This was quite a short session with few participants and with several challenges in terms of people’s different interpretations of the scenes, levels of physical ability, etc. Yet, I was very struck by how even in this very short time it felt that something positive and creative was happening. People engaged with the images and with each other in interesting ways. So, for example, the photograph of the NHS protest in the postwar period (which some of the older people in the room could remember), resonated with recent protests about the NHS and cuts, so allowed us to briefly reflect on some similarities and differences across generations.⁶²

60 Sue Mayo, Subject: Rooms: Easter, email sent: Mon 30/03/2015 22:43.

61 Olivia Sheringham, Reflections on Magic Me, email to Sue Mayo and Caoimhe McAvinchev, 13 August 2015.

62 Olivia Sheringham, Reflections on Magic Me, email to Sue Mayo and Caoimhe McAvinchev, 13 August 2015.

Another exercise invited the group to think about stereotypes of East London – its people and places – and to imagine how these might be staged for film. Participants considered music, lighting, character interaction and text. By staging the stereotype in a way which encouraged a playful exaggeration, the group articulated – in words and image – some of the single-text narratives about East London that circulate in popular culture. The group’s critique of these then encouraged a more nuanced conversation about what stereotype doesn’t reflect. Working with the idea of resistance, of what something *is not*, allowed for a careful insight and articulation of what the group’s experience of Tower Hamlets *is*.

For Olivia Sheringham, this ongoing negotiation of what Tower Hamlets is revealed perspectives on home, place and identity and particularly generational differences in experience between people who have lived in East London, particularly Tower Hamlets, for decades and others who are trying to find a way to make their home there:

It was interesting how the three older women in the room [...] felt very comfortable and at home in East London and lucky to live there (they gave examples of the different activities they took part in, the free transport, day-trips, coffee mornings etc), whilst the younger women [...] who have young children expressed more anxiety and a sense of not belonging. [One woman, in her early thirties], who had grown up in Newham, talked about how she worried for her son’s safety as he grew up as crime in the area involved guns and knives rather than just fists as when she was growing up. She (and I) also talked about financial exclusion and the barriers to ever buying a house in London. This session did expose some of the very different perceptions of East London (Tower Hamlets) across generations and how for some of the older people there was a bit less of an awareness of some of the challenges faced by younger people who are trying to make it their home. This was a snapshot into what this project seeks to explore, and showed how some simple exercises can perhaps begin to shift (albeit in very minor ways) the ways people think about where they live. It did expose some of the challenges too though, and how people’s ideas of a place are very deeply engrained. Some comments from the older people included things like ‘Tower Hamlets is much better than Hackney (people felt that it offered much more for older people’, ‘people keep themselves to themselves now, but that doesn’t bother me as I just get on with my own business’). There was a lot more certainty in the way that some people spoke about Tower Hamlets compared to others, and a sense that such certainties could be difficult to shift.⁶³

63 Olivia Sheringham, *Reflections on Magic Me*, email to Sue Mayo and Caoimhe McAvinchey, 13 August 2015.



Open days

Throughout *Rooms With A View*, Magic Me was committed to gathering a wide range of stories about life in East London. The original group of girls and women who took part in the weekly workshops each Wednesday hosted four events where members of the public were invited to share their stories. These 'community collection days', or 'open days' as they were called during the project, were held and hosted in collaboration with:

- Sutton House (National Trust) – 14th March 2015
- Bromley by Bow Centre – 19th March 2015
- Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archive – 21st March 2015
- Geffrye Museum of the Home – 28th March 2015

These venues are all in East London, have good physical access and strong outreach programmes working with multigenerational networks in culturally diverse contexts. The open days were held at weekends, except for Bromley by Bow which is open weekdays only, and ran between two and four hours, bringing in a wide range of audiences. The Heritage Lottery Fund application details the specificity of each venue, the social and cultural work they are engaged in and the audiences they engage with.

- Bromley by Bow Centre focuses on supporting vulnerable young people, adults and families who can be hard to reach. They offer a broad, holistic range of services to people, addressing both immediate problems and longer term deep-seated issues. This means that they have strong relationships with people of all ages from diverse cultural backgrounds, many of whom see the Centre a secure 'port in a storm' in a difficult world.
- The Geffrye Museum of the Home, works with many different audiences, from early years to older people, schools, families, communities and adult learners, on special projects that explore their collections, displays and gardens in greater depth; themes often include social interaction within the home. These projects provide an excellent starting point for discussions about home-life past and present, and cultural identity, offering opportunities to share stories or have fun together. Audiences recruited through their networks are likely to already have an interest in sharing their thoughts and experiences on the theme of shelter.
- Sutton House has sheltered a huge range of people since it was built in 1535 by prominent courtier of Henry VIII, Sir Ralph Sadler, including a succession of merchants, Huguenot silkweavers, and squatters. Sutton House run a thriving group of those 55+, who would be invited to join the project as either researchers, performers or interviewees. Sutton House will host and run a taster session in order to recruit participants.
- The Bancroft Library holds the archives of the present-day London Borough of Tower Hamlets – the original East End of London – which, until 1965, comprised of the boroughs of Bethnal Green, Poplar and Stepney. Numerous local history and family history enthusiasts use the library, and will be invited to engage with 'Rooms'.⁶⁴

The structure of the open days was developed in collaboration between the project participants and the artists. They considered particular exercises that they had encountered in the project to date and thought about how these could be framed for a general public audience. Participants, in intergenerational pairs, hosted particular activities that would engage people in conversation about ideas of home, belonging and community through a reflection on London. Again, the imperative was to offer gentle provocations that encouraged people to think about their own experiences, their rich specificity, and how these could contribute to the collection of narratives informing the development of the performance, *Speak as you Find*.

64 Magic Me, 'Rooms With A View, Heritage Lottery Fund bid', 2014, p. 11, Magic Me archives.



Timelines

This exercise is an invitation for participants to generate a timeline that reflects major historical events with significant moments of lived experience: it weaves private events which have had a profound impact on an individual with moments in history that have had local, national and international implications without prioritizing one over the other. For Mayo, it allows a group to ‘visualise connectivity.’ There are four steps in the process:

- People are invited to think about three significant dates that relate to their relationship with London that they are prepared to share. Each of these is written on a post-it: a date and summary of the event.
- The post-its are then arranged chronologically along a wall or hung from a line.
- The facilitators add and invite new historical events to punctuate the decades.
- People are invited to examine this collaborative timeline and discuss what they observe.

This is the timeline generated by the public at the event at Tower Hamlets Public Library and Archives.

Timeline:

- 1901 Queen Victoria dies.
- 1937 Mary evacuated from Bilbao Spain to London.
- 1938 Mum and dad had honeymoon in London from Middlesbrough.
- 1940 -1941 Blitz reduces parts of London to rubble during WWII.
- 1943 Bethnal Green tube station disaster.
- 1949 Barbara was born to Esther, mum and Ashley, Dad.
- 1965 -1966 Year as teenager working as overnight cleaner in Kingston.
- 1966 Barbara married, first born son 1967, second born son 1968.
- 1968 When I left the East End to become a model – came back. Love the east end.
- 1968 Mankind landed on the moon.
- 1969 When I did my spiritual work but always return to my East end.
- 1970s Altab Ali was murdered, sparking anti-racism protests and the founding of Altab Ali Park.
- 1970 I came to live in London – Gita.
- 1971 I met my husband – Gita.
- 1972 Holly's mum visited London for the first time (the second time was in 2014. The third is yet to come).
- 1976 My daughter was born – Gita.
- 1986 Jan and Nigel meet (Lilly's mum and dad).
- 1987 The year I came to live in East London. I have now lived in Tower Hamlets 28 years.
- 1988 The first time I drove in London! Jackie.
- 1991 Son page boy at wedding: 3 white, 150 Afro Caribbeans at wedding.
- 2000 Australasia, millennium president apology.
- 2001 The first time Farhana became a bridesmaid.
- 2001 When Roda was born.
- 2002 When I did my Reiki Masters.
- 2005 7th July – London Bombings.
- 2005 7th July – Moved house.
- 2008 Writing my poems and having them published.
- 2009 I met James Earl Jones after seeing Cat on a Hat Tin Roof!
He told me to never give up my dreams about working in the theatre! *Swoon* – Jasmine.
- 2010 5th March, I moved to London.
- 2011 London Riots.
- 2012 London Olympics took place (and Sarah was a volunteer.
- 2012 I took voluntary redundancy from Tower Hamlets College after 23 years and I've never regretted it! Jackie.

- 2013 27th October – went to court. Mixed feelings. Nice people and from community. Horrible reason. Shuhana.
- 2014 August 28th – Holly moved to London and lived above a sushi shop on Hanbury street.
- 2014 28th August – Holly started work at Mulberry School for Girls.
- 2014 Light Night Canning Town Festival Solstice tree team participated!
- 2015 20th March – Son in Royal London.

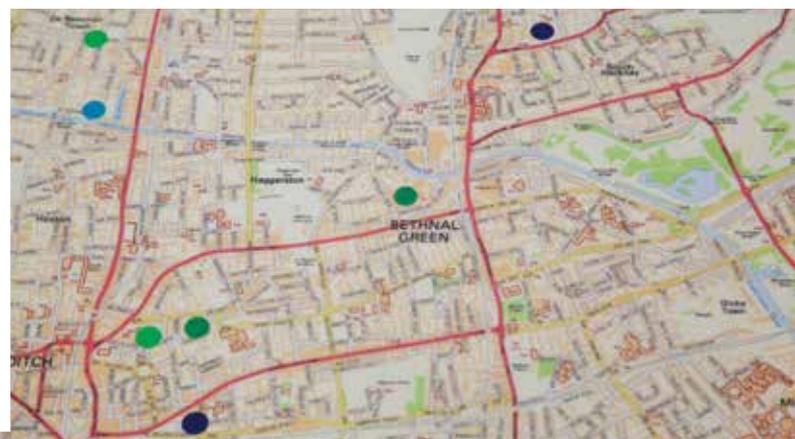
The Map of London

The Map of London exercise invited people to look at a large map of the city spread across a table and to identify specific places (institutions, streets, areas) that they have a connection with. People then placed a sticker on the place and spoke of their relationship with this place – some briefly, others with stories that contextualised their response.

Canning Town – wife’s first job in London.

I put a red dot onto Tanner street in Southwark because in the mid-eighties I went to sixth form college there. I remember walking down the streets to London Bridge station and smelling the vinegar that they were still using then in the tanning process. Back then (!) there wasn’t much in the streets except warehouses and the odd bus. Fast forward 30 years and just a few weeks ago I walked the same route with a friend. Long gone are the tanning factories, now they’re up-market bistro gastro pubs, galleries, boutique shops and all manner of la-de-da stores and shops. All very nice – but I think I preferred the whaft of vinegar. Robbin

Green point, this is where I spent significant part of my childhood kayaking and playing water sports with a community youth group called W heatsheaf Woodcraft Folk. I have fond memories in Shadwell. Even seeing dolphins in the Thames one morning at 6 am (1995-2003) age 9-13.



Leyton – Son lives here.

I was born in Islington in 1975 [...] My nan and granddad owned the Coach and Horses pub on Stoke Newington High St. My days were spent in Clissold Park and hiding in the barrels in the pub eating peanuts. I then moved to Walthamstow around 3 years of age. [...] sent to Catholic School on Shernhall St with lots of people from around the world, lots of Irish, west Indians and Spanish people.

We moved out of our flat into a house near the marshes where we had a garden for the first time, the fence was broken which gave us the opportunity to get to know our neighbours. We played with Parveen and Nazreen everyday. Their mum Baz was beautiful and used to bring us out freshly cooked chapatis to keep us going. I then moved to Spain for 6 years and then Woodford when I returned. I never really felt connected to Woodford and eventually moved to Clapton.

I met my future husband in Crouch End which took me all the way to Edinburgh.

I got married, had two children and yet something was missing. I missed London! [...] I came back in 2003 with my husband and two boys [...]

I work in Hackney, round the corner from where my nan was born. [...]
Sarah

Stepney – 1st job in London.

Walking from Old Street, I found myself on Theobald Road near Holborn and told the love of my life that I wanted to be with him. Every time I pass this road on the bus or walking I feel the same butterflies and smile as this was the point that changed my life.

Brady mead – Good friend lived there.

I came to London in 1988 and could not understand a word of English. I came to live here from India after I got married to my husband who lived in London. I found it very hard to adjust because I came from a different country and the cultures were very different. Slowly I started to adjust and picked up a few words of English. Even though I cannot speak English fluently, I am able to form basic sentences and try my best to communicate with others. Samina from Hackney.

Mile end – I sang in concerts here.

I came back to London in 1975 to teach. My first job was in Manorfield School Poplar. I lived in Shelmerdine (doesn't exist now) and then [...] on Burdett Road. Returned to East London in 2014 – live in Leyton. I can't afford Mile End Now.
Jackie.

My great great grand father and his brother arrived in London sometime in the 1850s/60s from Germany. They set themselves up as bakers and eventually opened a shop in Whitecross street in St Luke's. Sadly, the business no longer exists, but in 2011 I visited the premises which formerly housed the shop. Today the shop is a coffee shop. A couple of generations of the family lived in Central Street, not far from Whitecross street. The house no longer exists as it was either bombed during WW2 or cleared as part of the post-war slum clearances. Stuart.

Postcards to London

People were invited to write a postcard directly to London, as if it was a person – to tell it something you really wanted it to hear.

*Dear London,
You are fun
You are joy
No problem
Girl or boy
London is busy
London is great!
Don't sit back
And anticipate*

Dear London, I think sometimes you need to be quiet.

I was told London was a scary and dangerous place. My heart trembled when I moved in. What will happen to me in a day or two? Well! I have now lived in London for 20 years. I have nothing but love for you London.

To London, I love riding on your buses. 276 is my favourite!

When I came to this country I am very happy because this country's education very good. And the NHS service is very good. But I don't like London weather because London weather is very cold.

*To my dearest London,
I have been with you all my life. Born in the North of London, I have grown up with the stories about you, the places I should go and visit.
Of recent years I have fallen out of love with you...
With growing numbers and rude-ness I feel I have lost the London I once knew.
You will always be my home, with my family here, but I think I need a break...
I hope when I return you will have re-gained some of the charm I know you have – I look forward to that day...*

East End. Can't afford you anymore! Moved to Mile End in 75 when I lived here in 70s + 80s you were rough and ready like me. Now you've priced me out, but I still return from the depth of Leyton.

My small village in Belgium has always felt small. My family lived there for years, all of our habits revolve around the culture and location that we find ourselves in. The small size and its familiarity feels like home, but moving to London has made me realize that perhaps my personality belongs elsewhere. Somewhere that is ever changing, where everyday you can see completely new things, where walking down a street that I am accustomed to still surprises me each new time I wander down it. Now, when I return home, the time seems too slow. I miss the din of the planes landing at City Airport, and the morning rush over to Canary Wharf. I crave the feeling of not being noticed as I weave my way through crowds, or enter a bar where every face that I see is new.

This selection of examples, drawn from the research and development workshops with the group and the open days hosted by them, gives insight into both the structure and tone of *Rooms With A View*. All examples share a commitment to prompt and host multiple narratives and perspectives on London, richly textured by biographical details of daily life. The group had been together for just over two months when they hosted their first open day at the National Trust property, Sutton House. They reviewed the exercises and approaches they had experienced together to date to consider what might be the most useful invitation to offer to a member of the public encountering the project for a brief moment, without considerable contextual preparation. This shift, from participants to participant-hosts, offered the group an extraordinary opportunity to demonstrate their capacity in thinking about home and London, individually and collectively. They were welcomed into public spaces, many of which hosted significant cultural collections, as experts: they stepped into a role of host, facilitating the public's access to the idea of the project and the part they might play in it. One member of the public at the Geffrye Museum of the Home shared his observation that this approach, of being hosted by people from the local community rather than staff from the organisation, encouraged the public to think about themselves in relation to the community rather than in an isolated bubble within it. He considered how this approach might inform his own work with people recovering from addictions to support them in looking beyond themselves, to consider the wider community context they operated within. For the participants, this act of hosting the public in a range of venues with significant social and cultural capital, of inviting them to share in their collective endeavour of thinking about the themes of the project, gave them a stronger sense of the value of the work they were doing when out of the public eye and how this might be of interest to the audiences for the performances later in the year.

Performance: *Speak as you Find*

Rooms With A View culminated in a site-specific promenade performance, *Speak as you Find*, at The Centre, a community centre in Bromley-by-Bow. It's a venue that hosts a children's playgroup, computer and Zumba classes amongst many other things. There were some practical issues that informed the choice



of venue for the show: Magic Me was looking for a space that wasn't already identified as a cultural venue and accessibility was a priority. Once the venue was confirmed, the spaces within it informed the structure of the performance: one large room that could be divided into two, each of which could accommodate sixty people; two smaller rooms holding up to twenty people; and an outside space with two walk-in storage containers overlooked by blocks of newly built apartments. This meant that there could be moments when the entire audience could witness specific scenes together whilst, at other times they would stream off in three different directions, each group encountering scenes in a different order from the others.

There were over one hundred participants, volunteers and staff involved in all aspects of the production – from acting, to design, to front of house. *Speak as you Find* had a dress rehearsal with an invited public followed by a run of three days. All events were sold out.

Speak as you Find realised two very specific things. It reflected the process of enquiry pursued throughout *Rooms With A View*, offering audience opportunities to consider the fabric of dominant narratives of Tower Hamlets and how individual stories cut across this, warping and wefting a new pattern made visible through the public iteration of them. Additionally, it invited audiences to participate in this process through the structure of the piece. In the following section I will give a brief overview of the scenes in the production and the particular structural frames that highlight this invitation.

The introduction to this report begins with the opening scene of *Speak as you Find* (the estate agents selling the various celebrated aspects of Tower Hamlets) followed by the *How Tower Hamlets are You?* quiz scene where each member of the audience considers their own very particular relationship to and

experience of the borough. At the end of this scene, the audience was asked to look at the stamp on the back of their hand that they were given on arrival: blue, green, red. These colours identified specific routes through the performance and immediately the sense of 'one audience, in this together' was fractured. Once again, the structure of the performance unsettled expectations of what might happen next.

One group was taken into a room with a bank of computers – a classroom. There were six women, two younger women and four older women. Each of the women wore a swath of the hand-drawn Tower Hamlets fabric. In turn, the women faced the audience and talked to us. Narratives of ambition for gender equity, homelessness, post-retirement adventures and profound thankfulness for the life it is possible to live in Tower Hamlets were offered. The audience witnessed these life stories. Our experience of disrupted narratives in the first two scenes invited us to question the fact of these first person accounts: are they all true? Are *some* of them true? If they are 'true stories', do they necessarily belong to the women who spoke them? And does this matter? Once again, ideas of narrative, of veracity, of stability were put into question.

Another group was ushered into the space where we encountered the estate agents. The space was transformed. An old fashioned Singer sewing machine took centre stage surrounded with a circle of twenty chairs. Four women, two older and two younger sat in the space and the audience was invited to sit amongst them. A radio sitting on the sewing machine played the sound of whirring stitches. This was followed by the voices of two women and their specific memories of stitching and sewing: one working in a garment factory in East London, the other about working as a seamstress at home whilst rocking her sleeping son's cot with her foot. As these voices faded, the live scene began and the four women in the circle spoke. It was a staging of Delwar Hussain's story about his mother's sewing machine mentioned earlier in this report). For the audience it was like watching a radio play where the actors were in amongst us. Once again, voices invited us to witness narratives of unknown people, rich with the detail of their lives.

The third group was ushered outside into an open, paved space. This was fenced by a tall metal fence and overlooked by recently built flats on each side. Two large walk-in containers lay with their doors open and the sound of voices speaking over each other drifted out. One of the outer walls of the containers was covered in magnetic words including 'unique', 'generosity', 'near', 'none', 'love', 'if'. Two performers met us, both wearing high-visibility jackets with the Tower Hamlets fabric stitched into the back. As the man was sweeping up a pile of Scrabble letters, the woman told us that she was preparing a speech for the opening of the Museum of Community ...but she wasn't allowed to use the word community in it. She invited the audience to help her write the speech, to articulate what community is by rearranging the words stuck on the wall of the container. As the audience stepped forward and began to construct sentences,

The penultimate scene, *Where do I Belong?*, gathered together the three strands of audience in the space we have already encountered in the *How Tower Hamlets Are You?* game. The letters A-Z are stuck on walls and we are now invited to think about places – anywhere in the world – that we have any kind of connection with. The letters are a prompt. K? Kilburn, Kent, Kenya. N? Newham, New York, Newcastle. L? Lewisham, Lancaster, Los Angeles. Every time a place was called out that someone felt a sense of connection to, the person stepped forward to write this on a paper bracelet. Within minutes the room was noisy, filled with people criss-crossing and grouping as they found others with shared connections around the same place. The audience was deep in conversation, sharing stories about Balham, Birmingham and Bilbao.

In the final scene we were invited back into the first room we entered for the estate agent scene and the sewing machine scene. Once again it had been transformed. A canopy of material draped across the ceiling and bunting, made with the Tower Hamlets fabric, decorated the walls along with the Postcards to London made by the many people who participated in the open days earlier in the year. There were tables and chairs, tea pots and cake stands. We were invited to take a seat by a table host who then initiated a Community Conversation. Rather than talk about the show, we reflected on what it provoked us to think about community.

At my table, there was a couple and their three year old daughter who had lived in Brick Lane all of their lives and who had recently moved to King's Cross in North London; another couple and their six year old son had lived in Bethnal Green for over a decade and were on the cusp of emigrating to Australia. The conversation was rich with detail, with details of discomfort and loss, with moments of great optimism for what community can be.





Raj Bhari commented on the politics of what he and Sue wanted to pursue and how the form and content of the *Speak As You Find* facilitated this,

We wanted some sense of dissonance, not clashing, but something that was uncomfortable to work with. You see so much [arts] work that wants to resolve and conclude and take people on a journey [that says], 'isn't it lovely because we started here and we finish here and everyone's really happy.' That does nothing for me as a practitioner. What resonates is when someone says something that I find difficult. Let's work with the discomfort.

We were looking for an immersive, dialogue-driven intergenerational frame: a way where the people going to see that kind of show could feel that they could contribute to it as well.⁶⁵

The audience members were able to contribute to the performance because the invitations made to them at each stage of the event were clear, from the *How Tower Hamlets Are You?* game, where we had to step into the frame and be part of the scene through to the *What is Community?* scene outside where the audience had to literally step forward and articulate their ideas by physically moving the words around. The space to listen, to really listen, to contribute and to listen again was illustrated most clearly in the Community Conversations. But the depth of reflection and clarity of articulation was only made possible through our experience of the entire show.

⁶⁵ Raj Bhari, Interview, Goldsmiths, London, 7 December 2016.

Testimonial from Shuhana Begum, a student from Mulberry School for Girls, about her experience participating in *Rooms With A View*.

This was read at the Magic Me AGM in October 2015 and published in *The Berry Bugle, the student voice of Mulberry School for Girls, Issue 11, Winter 2015.*

Magic Me has benefitted me in more ways than one. The long term project has introduced me to new ideas and has intrigued me enough to make a type of commitment I never thought I could make. I am very grateful to have been chosen to participate in this.

Before joining the Magic Me team, my knowledge about the senior citizens of my community was limited. Any information I had about elderly people either came from my very guarded grandmother or the television programmes I watch. Magic Me has helped me discover how fun older people are. Hearing about their full and exciting lives has shown me a new side of Tower Hamlets I didn't know about. Whether the person had lived through WW2 or studied many fields of education, I always feel a little more inspired when hearing about their past and present.

I haven't only learnt about the citizens of Tower Hamlets. I have also learnt about the community I live in itself. I have discovered new places and history of this borough that I normally wouldn't spend researching in my free time. The history I have learnt has benefitted me in my GCSE history lessons and the new places has given me a new insight of Tower Hamlets.

And then the friends. Magic Me has given me an opportunity to get to know not only the older citizens but my peers as well. I didn't know anyone that was going to this club but this opportunity has helped me make new friends of all ages.

Activities in Magic Me included a lot of geography as well as history. We looked at maps and located places where we felt at home. This was the general idea of the project. Places that feel at home to us in Tower Hamlets. Many places were located and we used this to host open days where people could come in and talk about their experiences in Tower Hamlets that made them feel at home. We later collected these stories and turned them into plays which we will perform to an audience later in the year. The play is the ultimate goal. The play includes a story of how a sewing machine paid for the livelihood of a family, a few monologues about the participants of Magic Me and a performance on what would happen if there was no community. The process has been long but worth it.

To conclude, Magic Me has helped me academically, and helped me get outside my comfort zone and meet new people and interact using the common knowledge of my community.

Part II: What organisational tools and structures are needed to develop this work responsibly?

Chapter 3: All the Underneath: Considerations and Challenges.

Rooms With A View engaged 591 people throughout this year long project. These included:

- People as participants in the workshops and performances, volunteers, student placements, table hosts for the community conversations in the *Speak as you Find* performances and people who contributed audio recordings of their stories to the project = 88
- Members of Magic Me staff and freelancers including artists, production managers, communications = 22
- Staff from partner organisations = 5
- Audiences for the community Open Days = 105
- Audiences for the *Speak as you Find* dress rehearsal and performances = 371

Rooms With A View builds on Magic Me's rich history of practice across three decades. It was intergenerational and developed collaborations with a number of non-arts partners across the borough of Tower Hamlets. However, there are a number of distinctive characteristics about this project that offered Magic Me an opportunity to extend its practices – working in new ways, with different artists and addressing a range of constituencies. Whilst many Magic Me projects refer to the locality, this is the first project to interrogate the idea of Tower Hamlets as home and how particular narratives about the borough are constructed. The project provoked a rich questioning about identity, belonging, community and home through a reflection on place and people's relationships with it.

Characteristics of the project

The duration, rhythm and scale of *Rooms With A View* were exceptional within Magic Me's programming:

- It had a series of phases of activity (research and development, devising, production, exhibition development and tour, CPD programme) each with its own distinct rhythm.
- There were waves of recruitment for participants and volunteers across the project.
- Expertise in art form and production management were required at specific moments in the project.
- Participants were involved in realising all aspects of the research and production and each individual chose how they wanted to be involved (such

as design, performance or front of house). This choice informed the rhythm of their engagement with an irregular pattern of workshops rather than a fixed weekly workshop.

- The project continued to reach and ripple out beyond the original group of participants at all stages of the project: through the open days, mid-point recruitment of participants, recruitment of volunteers, the production of *Speak as you Find*, engagement with audiences through Community Conversations and the touring exhibition.
- The project was peripatetic: the groups met in different locations at specific points in the project – Tower Hamlets Local Library and Archives, Queen Mary University of London, Christchurch Primary School and The Centre. None of these spaces was the ‘home’ site for the participants – it wasn’t a school or a community centre that anyone regularly attended. This meant that the group had to navigate a variety of sites in the borough and learn how to host others in them.
- The project culminated in a site-specific promenade performance in a found venue, produced by Magic Me. Previous performance projects of scale or involving promenade performance, such as *Weekend at Wiltons* (2012) and *Where the Heart Is* (2012), were produced in collaboration with an arts partner with significant experience of producing performance events (Duckie, Wiltons Music Hall and LIFT, the London International Festival of Theatre).

Magic Me is not a venue or building based organisation. As a small organisation, employing five people full time, developing nine projects a year with over 534 participants and 202 volunteers, the challenges and opportunities afforded by *Rooms With A View* were many. In the following sections of this chapter I will attend to aspects of this challenge and how it emphasised the particularity of Magic Me: a specialist organisation committed to intergenerational arts practice in and with the community with a network of artists, many of whom it has an ongoing relationship with through project based employment and participation in its Continuing Professional Development training. There are three areas of focus: People, Time and Intergenerational Performance Making. In many ways each of these three areas overlap but I’ve attempted to separate out specific strands to highlight key areas for consideration in planning and producing intergenerational community performance of this scale and nuance. In Susan Langford’s words, ‘what it takes to make it happen’.

People

Rooms With A View demanded very particular areas of artistic and production management expertise. Much of this was resourced from outside of Magic Me’s core staff. It is important to outline the key people and roles in the project as this allows a more detailed reflection on the kinds of organisational infrastructure that is needed to support a team of people working on a project of this scale in a freelance capacity. In addition to the core Magic Me staff of **Susan Langford** (Director) and **Sarah Dean** (General Manager) who support all of the organisation’s programmes, the artistic and production team for

Rooms With A View and its production, *Speak as you Find*, were freelance or temporary staff and included:

Sue Mayo, lead artist and director

Raj Bhari, associate artist

Tas Emiabata, co-director

Amanda Mascarenhas, designer

Dan Scott, sound

Marine Begault, project assistant

Nicole Artingstall, programme assistant (maternity cover).

Holly Stratton, programme manager and producer (maternity cover)

Lucy Wood, production manager

Within the team, **Sue Mayo** had significant experience leading intergenerational projects with Magic Me and of directing large scale community projects with other organisations. Dan Scott had worked with Magic Me before on one project, *View from the Top* (2012) and Marine Begault was a volunteer with Magic Me in 2014. The other members of the team hadn't work with Magic Me before or in intergenerational contexts. In addition to their specific artistic skills in performance, design and sound, they brought to the project a wide range of experiences of working in different contexts, locally and internationally: conflict resolution, disability arts, Shakespeare in schools and work with young people around peer-to-peer violence.

The team wasn't fully assembled before workshops began in January 2015 as the duration and structure of the project meant that people became part of the project at specific times and had different relationships with it.

Sue Mayo initiated the project with Raj Bhari and led all practical and performance aspects of it.

Raj Bhari originally planned to co-facilitate the project but the demands of his work with Peaceful Change Initiative, particularly responding to the political and social unrest in Libya and Syria, meant that he had to adapt his role, stepping back from a co-leadership one just as the initial workshops began. Raj continued to be part of the project, supporting the Community Conversations trainings, supporting sessions when possible, including the run of *Speak as you Find*.

Tas Emiabata stepped in when Raj was no longer available bringing considerable experience in theatre making and group facilitation. Initially Tas was able to commit to the first phase of the work only (January – March 2016). **Dan Scott**, the designer, had worked with Magic Me on *View from the Top* and had been part of provisional conversations about the project when funding applications were being prepared in the summer of 2014. He then began to work on the project at the end of March 2016 with the designer, **Amanda Mascarenhas** and production manager **Lucy Wood**.

Holly Stratton was employed by Magic Me in September 2014, maternity cover for Charlotte O’Dair, Programme Director. Her role covered project management across five projects for Magic Me and then focused solely on *Rooms With A View* from October to December 2015.

Marine Begault’s role as project assistant was to support the older participants in the workshop contexts.

Nicole Artingsall was primarily based in the Magic Me office, supporting practical aspects of the project including participant recruitment, coordinating transport for the older participants and front of house.

The students from Mulberry School for Girls were supported by school staff, **Holly Green, Jo Latham** and **Miriam Franklin**. They would accompany the girls to the sessions (weekday and weekends) and attended to any of their particular needs.

Two students, **Josh Gardner** (Queen Mary University of London) and **James Shields** (Royal Central School of Speech and Drama) played significant roles in supporting all aspects of the project (including workshop, marketing, social media, admin, transcribing recorded stories) and participated in the performances too.

This overview of people, their roles and relationship within the project barely begins to scratch the surface of the labour involved in realising *Rooms with a View*. What it does do is begin to give a sense of a multiplicity of voices, perspectives and skills that informed the development of an intergenerational performance project of this scale. It also highlights the experienced understanding of what it takes to develop community based practice in the particular community context of Tower Hamlets.

There were particular challenges of managing a team of people who were not working in a residency situation, all in the same place at the same time, entering into the project at different moments. Three key areas ensured robust working practice:

- Magic Me’s acknowledgment of the time required to prepare materials for the project, beyond contact time with the participants. This meant that artists had time to meet, plan and reflect *as well* as be in the midst of leading work with the group. It also meant that people within the team were able to build relationships with each, to understanding the particular terrain of their disciplinary expertise and to anticipate what people may need at particular points in the process.
- Dialogue and reflection. Because not everyone was needed at every session, Sue Mayo and Marine Begault regularly wrote up notes of what had happened within them and circulated them within the team. This allowed for both reflection and an on going sense of connection as well as pragmatic communication about project needs.

- Leadership: it was imperative that there was consistent leadership across the project, that someone held an overview of the vision of the project as well as understanding the detailed negotiation of participants' needs within it. Sue Mayo navigated the terrain of the project, from concept through to realisation, holding threads of enquiry, resonant images, phrases and ideas across the entirety of the project. Holly Stratton managed the production team and the budget needed to make it happen.

Time

For the artists, the structure of the project demanded a particular commitment that was distinctly different to their previous experiences of community-based work. Collectively they reflected on the challenge and opportunities of this:

Sue Mayo, director: I loved the length of the project because it allowed things to develop [...] The thing that I just can't document is thinking time. There was a night I did not sleep, because there was a particular thing I needed to solve, but that's a really intense representation of just thinking, what *is* it? You keep looking for the central image.

Amanda Mascarenhas, designer: I liked the length of the project, especially the research and workshop time. I am used to doing one workshop at the beginning, one towards the end and then the production happens. This time we had the spaces between things, time to mull over, to let design ideas come through. I've never worked with an intergenerational group before and it was great to see how you respond to this. It has secured my feelings about community work – this is the direction that I want to go in.

Marine Begault: I really liked the different phases, being able to develop the relationships with the group and the people I was working with.

Tas Emiabata: This was my first time working on a project over a long duration. I'm used to working with a group for perhaps an hour [in schools] or two day intensive projects. But the phasing of this one was quite significant for me. Because of the circumstance it meant that I was only contracted for the first bit of it because if you said that job starts in January and runs 'til October, as a freelance artist, I would have been afraid to make that commitment. But as we went along I wanted to be involved in it a lot more [...] I so was invested in it, in the relationship with the group.

Dan Scott: For me it has drawn together a lot of bits of practice that I've been doing over the past few years in one project: the collaborative – working with a team and glimpses of small workshops situations was really lovely – the interviewing and thinking it through in terms of my academic work. It felt like a good forum, it felt holistic. I was working in a reactive way, rather than on the front line, which is different to how I would work if I was doing my own project.

Previous reports, *Detail and Daring* and *Wild, Wild Women*, have attended to the particularity of the arts practice in Magic Me's work: the kinds of invitation that may be offered through specific forms and how structured spaciousness, frameworks that support participation and responsiveness, allows for work to develop in unpredictable ways. In *Rooms With A View*, the time and space between workshops and rehearsals were particularly important for allowing conversations about the themes of the project that, in turn, informed the relationships within the group.

Sue Mayo reflects on a conversation with one of the girls after the first session:

Me to Mulberry student: Was that what you expected?

Her: No

Me: How?

Her: It was better

Me: What was better?

Her: / was better! I can't talk to people but today I opened up to Josh and to Jackie and to Winnie!⁶⁶

This sense of possible conversations in the spaces between formally structured moments is not unusual in arts projects, but the richness of them can't be taken for granted. During one of the day-long workshops at the end of the first phase of workshops there was a particularly significant conversation that Sue Mayo reflects on,

Over lunch one of the girls was showing some film on her phone of Sufi dancing. She asked Holly (from Mulberry) if this was really a Muslim practice. Holly explained that Sufism is a branch of Islam, and there was quite a conversation about what the girls understood as acceptable, like dancing and singing as part of prayer not being acceptable, but this being the norm in Sufism. This started a bigger conversation about belief in God, which everyone joined in with, all adding points of view that differed, but were listened to. Then one of the adults said "Why can't they all just get on?" (i.e all the religions) "It's the same God, isn't it?" At this, another adult got up from the table, saying under her breath, "No, it is not the same God!"⁶⁷

Intergenerational Performance Making

One of the key aspects of Mayo's leadership was supporting artists to explore possibilities for the project, whilst also being mindful that the group's ideas needed to be the core of the project. During one production meeting when the venue had just been confirmed but the ideas for the scenes in the show were still in flux, the team spoke about the eruption of the Syrian refugee crisis and the themes of the project – belonging, community, home. It was a rich, nuanced conversation full of possibilities about how some of those resonances

66 Sue Mayo, Subject: Rooms session 1, email sent: 15 January 2015 12:04.

67 Sue Mayo, Subject, email sent: 7 February 2016 22.12.

could be explored in the piece. Sue carefully navigated this conversation and the distinction between the show that this particular group of artists might make together, and the show that they could make in collaboration and 'in pace' with the participants. Mayo considers this negotiation of overlapping and different interests:

As artists we were very influenced by the potential arrival of Syrian refugees, the sacking of the mayor of Tower Hamlets, Lutfur Rahman, the general febrile atmosphere. And the group really weren't. If we went into that direction they'd say, "yes...and have you seen the house prices in Spitalfields?" I don't know if they did that as a tacit agreement to stay safe in the room because of who they were. It may have been that they just somehow went with that because other material would have been provocative in the room. Or whether really their concerns were much more about what came out of the Open Days: do I feel at home? Is it welcoming? Is it a good place to live when you've got children? Do I miss it? Do I want to come back? There was a guy who moved out of London when he had young children and regretted it. Those conversations and concerns remained. They were the concerns of the group as well and they were running the Open Days so maybe that influenced [what came out of them]. The bigger picture things that I thought were bound to influence what went on, didn't. They influenced us.⁶⁸

The negotiation between the artists leading and responding to the participants ran throughout all aspects of the performance making process – both in terms of theme and in the devising and presentation of work. Both Sue Mayo and Tas Emiabata spoke of the relationship between challenge and resistance. For Emiabata,

Something I will take into other projects is the level of patience I now know I have. It's good to know these things in a certain, conflicting situation, I can hold myself and be in that scenario. The challenge for me was getting that right balance between what we are trying to achieve and the resistance, trying to move the group, or individuals within the group towards that goal but actually finding the right pace for that person. It was quite hard.

And for Mayo,

I also learned a lot about the balance between challenging the group and supporting them. And I felt positive about that – I could say, 'no, we can't do that' quite clearly without lots of murk attached to it. [...] There were things about the language of making a piece of theatre which were really helpful, so you could say something about the chance to try it one way and then another, you could say that's what rehearsal is for.

68 Sue Mayo, Interview, Goldsmiths, London 7 December 2015.

The point is to make a collective piece of work with the right balance. [...] What I found with most of the adults was that they were used to being in things with no critique so they didn't expect us to edit their work. They didn't expect us to comment on their performance. They expected anything they brought into be included in the show. So much community arts is so open – the group were lacking in theatre making, the discipline of working together. Tas brought an emphasis on team-work – his warm ups were full of stuff that supported the development of the group and their performance skills.

Organisational considerations

Recruitment

The first phase of recruitment built upon existing relationships with Mulberry School for Girls and women who had been part of The Women's Library projects (2004-2013) or who were already known to Magic Me. There was a decision to make this phase of work women-only and then to expand to invited participants through other schools and existing networks after Easter. The recruitment during the summer months brought in more female participants and apart from the students, Josh and James, all other performers for the live event were women. The open days at the partner cultural collections offered opportunities for a wider range of people to participate in an aspect of *Rooms With A View* and some of the stories – audio recordings and the central Delwar Hussain story – were generated by men. The artist team included three men – Dan, Tas and Raj – who were, at times, particularly aware of being sometimes the only male in the group. There was great diversity of age and culture but not gender. Tas reflected,

I found it interesting that in the early stages there were no men [participants/performers] in the project. When we talked about bringing men in there was resistance from one of the women in the group who said that it would change how people spoke to each other. It would have been interesting to think about what the dialogue would have been, to find out more about Tower Hamlets from men's perspectives.

The duration of the project meant that not everyone who was part of the initial group was able to or wanted to sign up for the ten-month arc of the project. However, at Mulberry School, when some of the girls dropped out after the first phase of workshops, internal recruitment was initiated by one of the girls, Shuhana,

She was there from the first day and when a few girls dropped out, she recruited the new girls, she turned up at Holly Green's office and said, these are the people who are going to do the next bit. She was utterly committed to it.⁶⁹

69 Sue Mayo, Interview, QMUL, 8 December 2015.

The challenge of recruitment beyond schools or existing networks was a major part of the project manager's role. There were a number of Open Call days where anyone could participate in a day of workshops, being immersed in the theme of the project and Magic Me's approach. On some days, three people arrived. For Sue Mayo these highlighted the layers of offer, or invitation-making that enable someone to say, 'yes, I'll come to this':

Recruitment is not about telling people what you have on, you have to broker it. Very few people sign up to something without some knowledge, some connection. The lowest moments in the project for me were the drop-in sessions. This is my least favourite way of working and I just felt on every single of one of them, pulling an idea out and hoping it would work. We got some ideas and some people. [...] I found it agony just not knowing if anybody would come!

Recruitment beyond existing networks or schools and outside of a regular drop-in or venue based programme is something that demands longer term strategies of brokerage and invitation.

Support for the older people

Within the intergenerational context, one of the areas that the artists commented on in particular was the needs of the older participants: some of these were logistical (booking taxis to arrange pick and drop off for some participants) and other were more complex, negotiating people's expectations and, sometimes, behaviours. For Tas, 'What was real and very surprising were the needs of some elder people. And how challenging that could be.'⁷⁰ Sue Mayo expands on this when she says,

Because of the length of the project, I noticed more clearly that the Mulberry girls have fantastic support. We hardly ever had to deal with an issue with a girl because someone else was doing it. How do we make sure that the older people have the equivalent as Holly and Jo from Mulberry, checking, being responsible for the group. It's more difficult to do for the older participants as they are very, very different from one another.⁷¹

The balancing of space and opportunity to listen and hear each other was particularly challenging. It was particularly interesting to observe during the final evaluation session two women speaking very openly about something they felt the other person had done that had frustrated them profoundly. However, they found a way to negotiate this and the moment didn't become bigger than the project. Later I witnessed the women walk off together at the end with their arms around each other.

⁷⁰ Tas Emiabata, Interview, QMUL, 8 December 2015.

⁷¹ Sue Mayo, Interview, QMUL, 8 December 2015.

Some of the older women had had significant experience of working in intergenerational arts contexts, others none. Some had worked together for a number of years on The Women's Library project led by Sue Mayo. This meant that the project began with some relationships already in place. It also meant that Sue was alert to particular undercurrents in the room that no one else would be aware of, for example one of the older women was missing a friend who had participated in a number of projects with her and who had died in the past year.

Nicole Artingstall and Marine Begault were both responsible for much of the invisible labour and support that allowed the older participants to access a logistically complex project with a diversity of locations and irregular rhythm of sessions. Arranging taxis for each of the older participants required at least two phone calls to set up and remind people of the schedule. These conversations were rarely brief addressing only the practicalities of the project: they embraced the concerns and interests of life, tiny details that built up into relationships through many encounters both in person at the project as well as on the phone.

For Langford and Mayo, these aspects of intergenerational arts practice raise many questions about the parameters of duty of care – where does it begin and end for the artists and for the organisation?

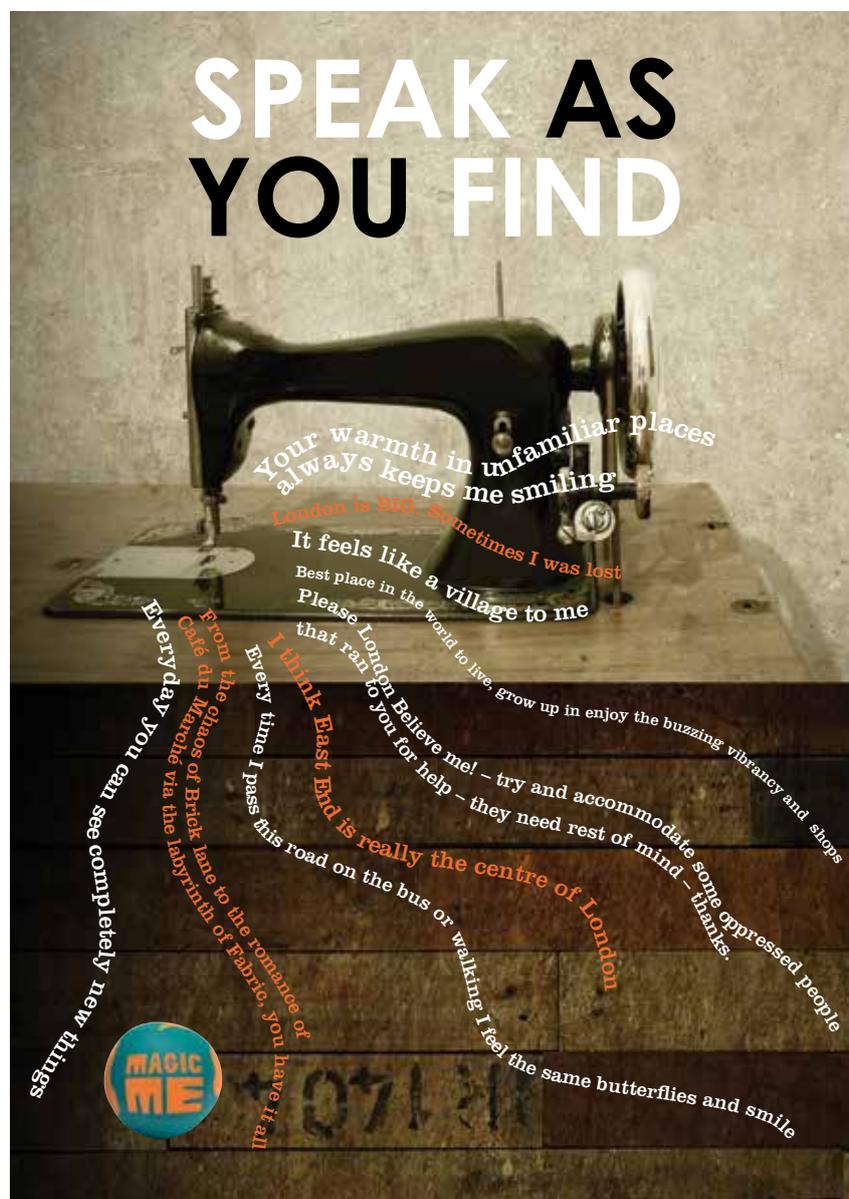
Resource

Rooms With A View evolved over two years. Part of the reason that a project of this size, with so many layers, was possible in this time scale was because of Magic Me's existing infrastructure and experience with robust community networks enabling access to people. However, as Susan Langford, director of Magic Me reflects, the project extended existing practices:

There are two bits of learning for Magic Me. The need on a project this long, that builds to a production, without another arts partner, to have an experienced production manager. They need to know who is needed for that and bring that team together. That was Holly's role. The other is about fundraising: to really research the elements of the budget so that it is costed fully and to fundraise even earlier. Even though we started as early as we did, we had to change the original schedule of the project because we didn't know about all of the money.

Magic Me has a small number of core-staff and there were changes within the organisation within the life of the project. This meant that apart from Sue Mayo, who is an associate artist with a long history of working with Magic Me, all of the other people involved in realising the project were freelance or on shorter-term contracts. This is not an unusual circumstance in arts organisations working in community contexts in the UK. However, it does raise a pertinent issue about expertise and knowledge developed through *Rooms With A View* about what skills and expertise it takes to make an intergenerational

performance project, with layers of activity that culminate in a site specific piece in a found space. During reflection with the artistic and production team, Langford distils this when she says, 'how does this expertise carry on when Holly [the project manager] is gone, when you, as freelancers aren't about?'⁷² This question of articulating and sharing organisational knowledge has been an integral part of Magic Me's commitment to research, continuing professional development and to the documentation of its practice. This research report, shaped by observations of this emergent knowledge through practice as well as reflections with the artistic and production team, aims to reveal aspects of the specialist labour required to produce *Rooms With A View*: to consider aspects of 'all the underneath'.



72 Susan Langford, Interview, QMUL, 8 December 2015.

Conclusion

Rooms With A View was a complex project: it had distinct phases of activity that took place in different locations across the borough and called upon expertise in a range of fields including archival research, oral history, community development, site-specific performance-making and intergenerational practice.

Part I of the report reflects on the rationale and structure for *Rooms With A View* considering the cultural and political imperative for the project and the structures of invitation within it: the community conversation training, the research and development workshops with the core group; the open days in cultural collections and community venues hosted by the group; rehearsal and performances of *Speak as you Find*. Two years of research, planning and production have culminated in these public structures where research about ideas of home, community and belonging, with particular reference to Tower Hamlets, has been collaboratively developed and shared. Part II of the report details each of these phases of the project and how it has been realised through the clear articulation of a vision for the project and the layers of skilled labour by artists, participants and staff at Magic Me and partner organisations.

At the heart of *Rooms With A View* is conversation, dialogue, debate and a commitment to listening. At a time when ideas and experiences of home, belonging and refuge are in crisis, locally and globally, *Rooms With A View* was an artistic intervention offering an on-going invitation to publics to examine their experience and expectation of these ideas: to attend to another, their perspectives and to host alternative views with equity of consideration. Theodore Zeldin, in *Conversation: How Talk Can Change Your Life*, offers conversation as model of solidarity and activism:

I don't think you have to be talkative to converse, or even to have a quick mind. Pauses in conversation do no harm. [...] What matters is whether you are willing to think for yourself, and to say what you think. Many people are not, either because they've been told too often that they are ordinary people and they assume they have nothing of importance to say, or because they have received too many knocks from life.

My answer is that throughout history, ordinary people have suddenly come out with the most amazing statements, when they find the courage. What matters most is courage. [...] [S]ince so many of those who have power and authority are failing to move mountains on our behalf, let us see what we can do ourselves, using our own brains and our own tongues.⁷³

Throughout each of its phases and structured invitations, *Rooms With A View* supported participants and audiences to do this, to use 'our own brains and our own tongues': to speak as you find.

73 Theodor Zeldin, *Conversation: How Talk Can Change Your Life* (London: The Harvill Press, 1998), p. 16.

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Appendix – Programme from *Speak as You Find*

Speak As You Find

A living archive of the stories and experiences of local people has been cut and shaped into a unique performance project, led by intergenerational arts organisation, Magic Me.

Using storytelling, local history and performance *Speak As You Find* reveals layers of conversation and shared memories of Tower Hamlets. Part of a bigger project *Rooms with a View*, it has involved more than 100 people of all ages from the East End. A core group, including older women from the local area and students from the Mulberry School for Girls, collected stories and personal histories about living in Tower Hamlets and shaped them into an immersive theatre experience.

The project is led by Magic Me's Associate Artist Sue Mayo, Sound Artist Dan Scott, Designer Amanda Mascarenhas and Theatre Practitioner Tas Emiabata, working with consulting artist Raj Bhari from Talk for a Change. Moving through the building you will encounter connections and disharmony, whispers and shouts, all deeply rooted in the lived experience of the performers.

This site specific performance experiments with theatre and dialogue in a way not seen before by inviting the audience to take part in a community conversation as part of the performance. Stories and experiences were shared and collected at public events, informing the themes and content of the performance you will see this afternoon.

About Magic Me

Magic Me is the UK's leading creator of intergenerational arts projects, an award winning charity based in Tower Hamlets. Our innovative programme brings together younger and older people for mutual learning, enjoyment and benefit. For more information about our work, visit www.magicme.co.uk

Speak as you Find is part of Magic Me's *Rooms with a View* project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Arts Council England National Lottery – Grants for the Arts and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

About Talk for a Change

Talk for a Change work across the UK and internationally supporting local people to talk about what matters, and building capacity to manage tension and change positively. The organisation believes in the power of dialogue to bring about greater understanding, empathy and stronger relationships between different groups; and strengthen the 'social glue', that sense of trust and understanding we all need in order to feel comfortable on our streets and in our neighbourhoods. www.talkforachange.co.uk

Performers

Sharmin Akhtar
 Maheswary Anantharajah
 Lara Balkwill
 Barbara Beasley
 Shuhana Begum
 Sally Flood
 Josh Gardner
 Roda Ibrahim
 Mohima Iqbal
 Zahra Khanom
 Amarjit Kochhar
 Rachel Ogunleye
 Henrietta Onipede
 Farhana Rob Chowdhury
 Sarah Salem
 Gita Sarkar

Makers (set and costume volunteers)

Emma McElroy
 Yasmin Pierre

Conversation hosts

Saima Ahmed
 Nazha Harb
 Joyce Herron
 Anita McKenzie
 Jo Kinsella
 Douglas Nicolson
 Alexandra Riesinger
 Winnie Roach
 Rebecca Rourke
 Olivia Sheringham
 Roberta Stewart
 Michal Paker
 Joshua Young

Sound and backstage volunteers

Chris Ali
 Ayesha Begum
 Tong Tong Chen

Roberta Mussato
 Kat Stevens
 Rebecca Taylor

Tinka Werner

Project partners

Queen Mary University of London
 Jules Deering
 Caoimhe McAvinchey
Mulberry School for Girls
 Miriam Franklin
 Holly Green
 Lilly Jaggard
 Jo Latham

Recorded voices

Laurie Allen
 Aishah Begum
 Mannie Blankett
 Colin Daly
 Dennis Ellam
 Holly Green
 Elissa Philips
 Quentin Wadman
 Lindsay Fagan

Research participants

Musammat Begum
 Sharon Falcone
 Jimmy Ferry
 Carol Johnston
 Saima Khatun
 Najah Maxamed
 Judith Richards

Research participants cont'd

Madeline Kenley
 Jane Miller
 Marlon Vogelsang
 Nela Milic

Project Team

Director and Lead Artist
 Sue Mayo
Co-director
 Tas Emiabata
Consulting artist
 Raj Bhari
Sound design
 Dan Scott
Visual design and costumes
 Amanda Mascarenhas
Production Manager
 Lucy Wood
Project Manager
 Holly Stratton
Project Assistant
 Marine Begault
Communications Manager
 Catherine Lambert
Front of House Manager
 Helen Lolljee
Stage managers
 Phil Atherton
 Kiron Chakraborty
 Jack Harding
Design assistants
 Liz Marsden
 Ivan Todorov

Project volunteer

James Shields

Magic Me staff team

Susan Langford MBE
 Nicole Artingstall
 Sarah Dean
 Clea House
 Charlotte O'Dair (until Oct 2014)
 Ellie Watmough

About the author

Dr Caoimhe McAvinchey

Dr Caoimhe McAvinchey is a Senior Lecturer in Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies at Queen Mary University of London. Her research is in applied and socially engaged arts practices particularly intergenerational arts practices, prison theatre and the politics and practices of documentation and evaluation. Publications include *Theatre & Prison* (Palgrave, 2011) and the edited collection *Performance and Community: Commentary and Case Studies* (Methuen, 2013). Since 2007, Caoimhe has collaborated with Magic Me on research reports and projects including *Our Generations* (2009), *Wild, Wild Women: A Decade of Intergenerational Arts Practice at the Women's Library* (2013) and *A Sense of Place: Intergenerational Arts Practice in Cultural Collections* (2014). The journal article, 'Coming of Age: Arts practice with older people in private and domestic spaces' (Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance, Vol 18, No. 4) examines the role of the artist in intergenerational arts practice.



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For more information, films and audio, visit www.magicme.co.uk/rooms

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Supported using public funding by
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ISBN: 978-0-9538680-3-2