Case Study
Guerrilla Research Tactics: Alternative Research Methods in Urban Environments

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Guerrilla Research Tactics (GRT) involves the use of unexpected design interventions to actively engage participants in the co-creation of data within the urban fabric (Caldwell et al. 2013; Caldwell et al. 2014). Extending Gauntlett’s definition of “new creative methods… an alternative to language driven qualitative research methods,” (Gauntlett 2007), GRT is an important contribution to the growing body of literature on creative and participatory approaches to data collection. GRT is an evolution of participatory action research (Kindon et al. 2008) and unobtrusive research methods (Kellehear 1993). Researchers can use GRT as an alternative, creative approach to data acquisition that allows them to engage with the public as active co-creators of knowledge. This case study offers a brief summary of some of the previous work in this area to illustrate what GRT is and how it might be used.

The GRT project drew out of small-scale experiments such as Print + Talk = Love (PTL). This was a situated paper-based intervention that invited ordinary citizens to discuss place-based topics that had no connections to digital devices or web based platforms. PTL was constructed by a large piece of corrugated cardboard that had pinned pieces of paper with printed questions relating to the event or place in which the intervention was located as seen in figure 1. Clips and string were used to attach coloured pens to the board. The pieces of paper had blank space allowing for
participants to write their responses to such questions as, “What’s your great idea for Grey St.?" (Parra-Agudelo et al. 2013). The board was interactive, allowing participants to express themselves on paper through their own personalised way of manipulating, writing, drawing or repositioning the pieces of paper.

PTL was purposely designed to be easy to use and easy to interact with. When deploying PTL its location and setup was considered carefully along with its visibility and content. All of which contributed to the ability for researchers to stand back and allow for unobtrusive observation (Parra-Agudelo et al. 2013).

Another experiment involving an interactive application on urban screens was Discussions in Space (DIS), a public participation tool for urban public places (Schroeter 2012; Schroeter et al. 2012). DIS allowed situated users to respond to context specific questions such as “Brisbane’s laneways need more…?” through SMS, Twitter, and a website, as shown in figure 2. The responses and messages are revealed on the dynamic screen in an animated way. DIS has demonstrated that when it is situated within the right parameters, it can be a useful tool in collecting urban planning data from young people who generally do not participate in typical community consultation processes (Schroeter 2012; Schroeter et al. 2012).
Researchers employing PTL and DIS extended their data beyond the comments collected; they also conducted unobtrusive observations, photographs, and video recordings to examine how users interacted with the displays. In the case of DIS, geo-locative data was available through some of the twitter comments.

Confronted with the challenge of engaging research participants, a group of Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia, researchers began to interrogate the impact of activating PTL and DIS in public spaces and test their effectiveness as potential research tools. Providing researchers with both analogue and digital examples of experimental interventions allowed for researchers to trial and experiment with a range of research approaches. Analogue, digital, and hybrid (analogue and digital) variations of PTL and DIS were implemented in Australia and New Zealand, encouraging participants to engage both with the physical intervention and accompanying digital websites and surveys.
Figure 3 is a photo of a variation of PTL used to engage with Fashion Design students in a study about studio based learning environments. The researcher designed the pieces of paper to resemble Polaroids. The papers also had a mix of a few different questions and ultimately used this approach to collect data instead of a survey or questionnaire. Another adaptation of PTL is shown in figure 5 called the Puzzle of Collaboration where the researcher was examining the motivation behind interdisciplinary collaboration. This adaptation used coloured pieces of paper that were cut into puzzle pieces where participants could write their responses to targeted questions. The papers were pinned on the board and fit together as a large puzzle.

![Figure 4: The Puzzle of Collaboration. Photo: Lindy Osborne](image)

Mural Wall was a hybrid adaptation of PTL, which was used to engage with the public to question their preference for design ideas of a third place for an underutilised railway underpass (Caldwell et al. 2013). Five hand drawn vignettes—such as the one in figure 5—were posted on a large corrugated cardboard depicting potential uses for that location, and participants were invited to vote for their preferred design idea by using sticky dots and post-it notes. The Mural Wall also included QR codes that linked to a wordpress site that included more information about the research project such as ethical clearance, survey and social media links, and research team information (Caldwell et al. 2013).
More projects began to be conceived in the same GRT mode, for example a hybrid approach called “Poll Bombing”: the strategic placement of physical artefacts with embedded QR codes linked to web-based surveys and polls. Figure 6 is an example of an origami paper crane that was placed in targeted locations. The paper used text and words to express the research topic in question. It also had a sign asking for the participant to unfold the crane and look inside it. On the inside a QR code was found which when scanned would take the user to the survey.

A similar approach was the use of carefully designed stickers placed in urban spaces shown in figure 7. The stickers used bright colours and simple graphics and text to ask open-ended and location specific questions, such as, “This space needs…”. The sticker also included a QR code taking the participant to a website that contained more information about the research project.
Social media, predominately Facebook and Twitter, were employed as a means to disseminate links to the websites, surveys, and blogs extending the access to research participants well beyond the physical location in which the interventions were placed.

The success of guerrilla research tactics relies on the ability for researchers to appropriate and adapt their methods to create context specific applications and interventions. It is not a straightforward process. Guerrilla research tactics requires creative design thinking, the desire to make tangible artefacts as well as clever use of social media, ubiquitous technologies, and a willingness to explore alternative research methodologies. GRT should be easy to implement and easy to use. Influenced by guerrilla activism, the key characteristics of GRT is a political agenda, the use of the unexpected, and the unconventional design that created opportunities for interactive, unique and thought-provoking experiences for the researcher and participant alike (Caldwell et al. 2014). Burgess et al. (2006) argue that active citizenship is practiced by everyday people through their day to day life, leisure and entertainment activities, as much as through formal political debate and engagement. GRT draws on these everyday practices to provide researchers tools for gathering information from larger parts of society.

As a form of participatory action research, GRT encourages the collaboration of researchers and participants in reviewing and questioning problems pertaining to space and place, social and natural environments. As such it can be understood that GRT is a ‘bottom up process’ where data emerges from interactions with the urban fabric itself (Kindon et al. 2008; Caldwell et al. 2014). The process of generating data encourages participants to reflect upon local issues that are directly
related to them and consider actions that are required to create positive change (Kindon et al. 2008). Through GRT, civic research has the capacity to promote active citizenship (Burgess et al. 2006) and effect positive change in urban environments.

Part of the GRT framework involves implementing unexpected design interventions in urban locations so that passers-by are confronted with an element of surprise and intrigue. By luring people to participate and interact with the intervention, researchers can increase the possibility that passers-by become involved in the discussion and advocate for their opinions and ideas. Motivation and empowerment for participants are critical elements of GRT. The collection of information from people, how and for what purposes it is used and how that information is revealed to others, does, however, need careful consideration.

GRT faces many challenges. Of foremost concern is to ensure that data is collected ethically and that participants are aware of their actions. This comes into tension with the ability to conduct unobtrusive observations where the researchers do not influence the actions of participants. GRT may also be difficult to understand by users who do not recognise the intention of the interventions, and are not aware of how they can participate or interact with them. Environmental factors such as inclement weather and lighting also have to be acknowledged and considered when designing and deploying GRT (In windy or wet conditions how does the researcher ensure the stability and security of its implementation?). Ultimately, it is understood that this approach to research is not suitable to all researchers or contexts—however it may be adapted to suit a range of different areas of investigation beyond creative based disciplines.

Not only is GRT a useful, fun and creative data collection tool, but the actual process of developing unique applications of GRT and transferring it into other domains will ensure its evolution. Motivated by the open-sourcing of information, the GRT website (GuerrillaResearchTactics.com) was created with the intention to share the experience with others, to invite them to continue to evolve, adapt, appropriate, and share their versions of GRT.
References


