

CHANGING A CITY: THE FIGURE AND THE GROUND

Exploring the space between Governance and Community
by simulating a space between desire and reality

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1. The Paper, the Theory, the Story

I have very recently emerged, bloody but unbowed, from the potential space of putting together this presentation. Our symposium theme has stalked me – and my two colleagues, John Newton and Himadri Potter of RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia – both with the excitement of the creativity involved and the terrible anxieties attendant thereon. I'm a consultant, a mainstream commercial practitioner and I habitually work in the space between the system psychodynamic approach to organizational work and the strategic marketing discipline. My two colleagues do consult, as I do study, write and very occasionally teach. But they are primarily academics. For our project, that made a fine and complementary team. For our time as a writing system, it made for mutual spaces that we occasionally felt were destructive rather than creative. In the somewhat less public

spaces of my mind, at least, I've dubbed this time 'the Winnicottisation of Jane'.

So we have the theoretical base to some degree sorted out in our minds and thus the basis for a published article – well, we suspect, for 4 or 5 articles. Today, I'm going to tell you the story of a consultancy and invite you into some of the spaces we encountered.

It's an unusual story in some aspects. I don't think what we did has quite been attempted before, either by a client system or by a consulting system. I don't know whether it 'worked', whatever that might mean. I don't even know whether the client system is still my client. But I do know a number of things:

- Most of the participants enjoyed themselves. (That's important from our theoretical perspective of 'serious play' which underlies our design for our intervention and our tentative understanding of what took place.)
- The system in various ways is still talking about it and, from the little feedback we are currently getting – are certainly still encountering it.
- A lot of things happened in a very short period of time.
- What happened seemed to us to be bristling with possibilities for our client system to learn to do some of their work differently. To a limited degree some of this has already been taken up.

Back to the 'don't knows':

- Did I attempt too much?
- Was the system in which I intervened just too big, despite their habitual use of representational sub-systems; and – vitally –
- What might constitute an adequate holding environment, for the 'happenings' I am going to describe, to grow from potential... to experiment... to planning... to policy... to habit

2. Two Questions

So – before I even set the scene – I ask you to join me in holding in mind two questions, both practical and theoretical. The first is a content, client-based question:

How can the city of Orange, the client system, link its past to its future through work in the present?

The second is:

How can one fruitfully intervene in a very large system; is there a size beyond which any intervention is fruitless, where indeed, the available spaces are not capable of being potentiating but are deadening and despairing?

3. The Client System

Orange is a provincial city of some 40,000 people and a regional centre for a population base of around 150,000. It is a city with a very distinct idea of itself, with a rich and documented history and an identity by which – in its own terms – it differentiates itself from other cities and regional centres. It defines itself as “the city in the country”: i.e. as offering the better of both worlds. It has long held to a system self-image of a city which is a leader, or at least a pioneer, in the provision of social services, a community that is inclusive and caring, a commercial centre that is enterprising and resilient.

I have here a diagram which summarises the city’s self-conceptualisation **as a brand**. Now that’s different in some ways from its sense of identity, or its ‘role idea’ as Bruce Reed would have it, or the ‘task idea’ as I have previously written about. It’s the persuasive self-notion or self-representation that the city wants to offer to its external world, to its marketplace: primarily potential residents, potential workers and potential visitors. I’ll make that brand architecture diagram available to the buzz group sessions. Here I think we need to look at it as evidence of how the city as a system wants – even yearns – to be seen by other systems and members of systems. It’s a series of thought- provoking clues that stand as evidence for one side of a fundamental split in the city that I’ll be presenting to you shortly.

The key clues here are the notions of

- i) Orange offering ‘the best of the city with the best of the country’;
- ii) for residents or potential residents, meeting the emotional needs of people who say: ‘I want to befriend a city that will befriend me’; and
- iii) the marketing tag line of; “Orange: A Different Country”.

For the purposes of the intervention here reported, the ‘city’ was understood to be comprised of 3 key sub-systems:

1. Council: elected councillors including Mayor and deputy Mayor.
2. Council Staff: full-time permanently employed or contract employed personnel, with a General Manager appointed by council.
3. Community: ‘the rest’: residents and workers, agriculturalists, employers, enterprise and visitors.

Through its council staff system the city had moved to pre-empt a State Government future requirement to conduct a community consultation regarding the citizens' vision of their city's future. This was known as the 2020 process. The output from 2020 was considerable. At the qualitative end, it was relatively easily expressed in a Values Charter and a vision-narrative. (Also available in summary for the buzz groups) Quantitatively, it yielded a massive, apparently unco-ordinated 'wish list' of hundreds of items, actions, dreams, hopes and specifications. In the minds of the council and council staff sub-systems, it was discernible that 'vision' had become 'demand'.

I had a history with the client system: I'd consulted to that brand architecture exercise and to various commercial groups within the city and environs, always under the aegis of the Council Staff. I also consulted to the closing stages of the 2020 project and helped the council and community representatives pull together and articulate their understanding of what the wider community was telling them.

As the Council Staff system struggled with the 'vision that became demand', they asked me to help them with 'fitting the 2020 output into the city's strategic planning process'. That was meant to constitute a brief - yet it was incredibly difficult to get a real brief from them. The 'them' was the Council Staff General Manager and his five person directorate, who constituted the commissioning client, as representing all three sub-systems. In retrospect, that difficulty derived, I believe, from the very split in the system that became so evident in the intervention event.

The client wanted:

- To do the right thing by the community;
- To be a 'leader' in community vision and community consultation;
- To do the right thing by the past, by respecting past councils and staff and communities and their efforts and contributions;
- To do the right thing according to the **ways of governance** that had worked very well and made Orange the significant city that it is; **and**
- To keep everybody reasonably happy.

This is not an unusual surface picture of a governance system in an elective model. What later events and our theoretical analysis brought to light is a view of a split that can be seen as a constant tension between '**city idea**' (on the one hand) and '**city praxis**' (on the other).

This split incorporated:

- Doing lots of often conflicting ‘right things’; being **seen** to do them; genuinely wanting them; paying lip service to them; experiencing a bondage to ‘rules’ that are imagined or believed to exist but are not genuinely tested, and many more paradoxes.

This tension, this split finds different members of the city sub-systems in different parts of themselves on differing sides of the split at different times. They find it incredibly confusing. So did we. So do we.

It is entirely probable that the **total** system, not just the community system or small parts of the council staffing system, had already located for itself- though neither articulated nor begun to understand - a yearning, or desire, to go about its planning task differently; to break, not with its past, which was and is highly valued and respected, but with **past practices**. The evidence for this was there, but has become, for me at least, only discernible through the understanding broken open by the “serious play” of the intervention we made. As the Orange system had not admitted its desire to consciousness my only clue at the time was my suspicion that the council and its staff were only interested in paying lip service to the consultation process. **Yet** I also saw that:

- They chose a consultant whom they knew to work in ‘some funny way’ that had something to do with some form of psychology
- They agreed to the intervention of a simulation event at all. This was a very public and thus courageous experiment in doing things differently. I was at the time deeply moved by the trust they placed in me.
- They chose the two people in their own council staff sub-system who had the greatest capacity to work with such a consultant **and** who were indeed the system-elected members with the highest valency to be both the guardians and promoters of the ‘**city idea**’.

In a way, I believe they were acknowledging ‘unknowingly’ (and I use that term advisedly) the city governance split and giving the ‘ideas boys’ a rein as free from the fetters of city-practice as possible. That, as it turned out, was something of a false hope. But we’ll come to that. As members of the system, the ‘ideas boys’ (I call them Stephen and Michael) were holders of the split. Well, of course: they were members of the client system. But detailing them to work with us freed **us** from the split and let us work with the system **as if both city idea and city praxis were capable of free dialogue**.

One aspect of city praxis is worth explaining, as it had and has so much power in constraining that praxis to a static phenomenon:

Even during the early research that led to the consultant's recommendations on the changes to the planning process, numbers of the council and council staff had referred to the 'squeaky wheel' method of winning the priority competition for major commitment of funds; i.e., ask long enough and loud enough and often enough and eventually we will acquiesce. This squeaky wheel phenomenon was deplored for its shortsighted view, for its lack of genuine representative nature, for its lack of true thinking about what the city genuinely needed **and** annually adhered to. Allied to the squeaky wheel was the notion, firmly located in the primitive/paranoid-schizoid mentality of change (*Krantz, 2001*), that expenditure may be

Either BIG BANG or incremental.

This meant that you could **either** blow all available funds on one project per planning cycle **or** you could give a bit here and there to a series of projects or programs, **BUT** the 'amount available' was a very minor proportion of the total budget, because **all past Council decisions had to be honoured and continued**, regardless of their contemporary relevance. Why? We believe because of the relatively fixed nature of the **city praxis** it had become a rule that all **past city ideas** be preserved. Thus both sides of the split were held in stasis:

[I have a somewhat mad image in my mind of the 'city fathers' sitting naked in the bath, counting their toes and reciting the following:]

" We do what we must. We must do as we have done before. We are what we have done. To stay what we are, we do what we did to become what we are, or were, again. But we are – or were – forward looking ... and visionary...and leaders.... "

And so on. Not an easy self view or self practice to maintain – particularly from an either-or mind state. And not, of course consciously acknowledged. All that the members of the system appeared to know - including the guardians of the city idea - was that whatever had happened was set in concrete.

Into this comes the fact of 2020. This is the vision narrative that emerged from the 2020 exercise and which the mayor endorsed as **his** introduction to the published pamphlet from the process. (**Read the vision narrative**) Also into this comes the recommendation of this chosen consultant that the system simulates itself as a way of exploring how its different sub-systems can encounter and negotiate their differing priorities when it comes to planning the expenditure of the city's limited resources.

The 2020 exercise was an extended event, which may have looked like a bid for resources, but which in essence was a deeply committed experience in surfacing, articulating and even celebrating, the '**city idea**'. When the simulation occurred, we of the consulting system

provided the participants with a series of potential objects for serious play. You will see as my story unfolds that I – quite as unknowingly as our clients – stacked the array of available objects **in favour of the city praxis**, not city idea, the more evolutionary side of the split, for which at the conscious level I had a greater likelihood of identifying. Intriguing, isn't it? Watch this space!

Oh, and a thought about our paper's title: we submitted the abstract during the design phase, where we had had the thought that the emergent design phase may have turned out as more figural than the simulation itself. The simulation we had originally posited as the figure to the ground of existing governance procedures. Well, like anything else in this multi faceted occurrence, we were right and wrong – i.e. there are many cycles of many experiences here; many new ideas emerging at different stages; many sources and sinkholes for system energy and a raft of possible actions and ongoing containers for the work. Can't count them all and you'll be relieved to know that today I shan't even try. In continuing my story, I'll tell you what we did (partly); what happened (mainly); and two parts of the emergent meaning of what happened that we are currently sitting with.

What **was**, and remains, in our minds is the sense that, in Hirshhorn's terms, the primary risk would be for the community to pursue the wrong form of governance for its desired future. Also, that the simulation would only be a 'potential space' if the design could allow for the **play** that is at the heart of true communication.

5. The Simulation Event, as Designed

We had: a 1-day simulation in which representatives of the 3 key sub-systems were to take up, not just simulated roles, but roles of those from sub-systems other than their own. Thus, council staff and council could only take up community roles and vice versa. There was a further representative system of observers, with its own dedicated consultant.

As the design unfolded –the central notion of presenting the simulation as serious play [Winnicott 1971] began to be operative.

What we hoped for, desired for our client system, seemed during the design phase to present as possibilities the following transformations:

From:

Hidden Agenda	to	Open Dialogue
Competition	to	Trade-off
Planning infrastructure	to	Nurture of city life
Education for compliance	to	Exploration of mutuality

Politics	to	Representation
Cosmetic ‘consultation’	to	Experiential dialogue

Certainly, in this phase, both the council staff system and the consulting system were learning to think about both themselves and the city system differently.

I say “present as possible” because such transformations were already beginning to be manifested in parts of the council staff system and even with those elected councillors who agreed to take part ... including the mayor. Willingness to attend on the part of the elected councillors was itself a significant sign that change was possible. To take part in a simulation is no small departure from, say being a Mayor, in the normal run of things. To do so even when it looked like a monumental waste of time was a step in faith that was truly admirable. Or perhaps, at the systemic level, it is more properly viewed as a step in hope. Certainly to me it looks from today’s perspective as another piece of evidence that the sides of the city split may have a capacity to learn to dialogue at the conscious level. At any rate, at this stage, we and some of those with whom we interacted were learning to think about the city system differently, or so we thought.

As events transpired, the whole project came to be experienced as a series of potential and developmental spaces/phases, where figure and ground shifted both between and within those spaces. The above hoped-for transformations did in some sense take place, but in ways that could not have been anticipated.

We also had:

- a selection process for the system representatives who would ‘play’ on behalf of the total system.
- An ‘invitation to play’ which framed the task of what had been originally conceived of as **educating** the community to the realities faced by the ‘city fathers’ but became:

“to provide different parts of the Orange City Community (councillors, council staff, community members) with the opportunity to explore how priorities are experienced and arrived at, given:
(i) a knowledge of community wants and needs
(ii) available resources”
- a selection of the ‘objects of play’ [Winnicott 1971] to be made
- available to the participants, including: venue, venue design, a role-script from which participants chose their simulated ‘roles-as-others’, a scenario script which set some time and territory boundaries. Significantly, it attempted to set

up a trade-off scenario, where the budget bottom line was not negotiable and participants were supposed to argue for an internal re-alignment of priorities. That is, it was a purely either/or directive. There were also some spatial objects (e.g. offices for the mayor, the General Manager, the local paper editor and the Council Information Officer, plus community meeting rooms and city cafes, notice boards, an observers' lounge (open to all) and The Budget.

- An event timetable, which set aside spaces for briefing, role adoption (which was consulted to) and plenary processing of the event.

6. The Simulation Event, as Occurred

- All confirmed participants arrived on time. There were 35 all told.
- After the introductory, task-setting stage, the real-life Deputy Mayor and one representative of the local indigenous community dropped out.
- All other participants stayed the distance (and never looked like wanting to drop out)
- All time boundaries set by the scenario script were observed throughout the event. So were all territory boundaries.
- The simulated Council Staff system 'went into hiding' and were unavailable for contact or dialogue for at least the first third of the event. In many ways Council Staff stayed unavailable for the entire event. They later reported that they were paralysed by the size of their task, the fantasy of the other sub-systems that they 'knew' everything that the others wanted to know and were withholding that knowledge, and that ultimately they resorted to lies and invention as a means of dealing with their fear and paralysis. In the end, they seamlessly joined with the simulated elected councillors ... something that is thought by some 'should' happen in real life but does not.
- The other two simulated sub-systems, councillors and council staff, were lively, noisy, active. They seemed to move easily within the spatial architecture of the event, to stay within role and to pursue the goals-in-role they read into/discovered in the role outlines provided (or much more likely, their role-of-other-in-the-mind). Until the key turning point in the simulation. And it's coming!!
- The 'action' – played out through a series of meetings and attempted meetings – focused on the evolution of competing demands for money in the simulated financial year (1 year in the future). The competing demands for money were mirrored in the pattern of competing (and generally unmet) demands for the Council Staff time.
- Then came the turning point or 'tipping point' as it is currently known – the shift that cannot be reversed once the need for realignment is felt across the system. But **here** I feel the tipping point is still confined to the play of the simulation and is studiously denied by the "real-life" system. More of this later.
- **The simulation system 'dumped' the scenario script entirely in the last third**

of the simulation sessions. They simultaneously (!) dumped the acknowledged planning protocol, a key plank of the city praxis platform, which stipulates that any past decision by any past council must be honoured and observed. The simulated system purported to have solved the trade-off challenge in one fell swoop. Without consultation, the simulated Mayor, General Manager, other councilors and Council Staff announced through the Mayor, that they had sold the civic Function Centre. **This was in fact the very venue in which the simulation was being held.** The proceeds, they indicated, were \$5m and were now sufficient to meet all of the competing demands of the simulated community ('played' it should be remembered by the real life councilors and council staff.) Problem solved, said they, looking extraordinarily pleased with themselves and looking also like the embodiment of solidarity.

- It was a lovely piece of enacted irony: it, in effect, showed an amicable but determined finger to the consulting system, (because we'd given them an either/or script, in accordance with city praxis), to the council and council staff systems and to the existing 'rule' about observing past commitments. It broke the either/or proposition (*Smith, 1995*) on which that rule was based: **Either:**

You may have only one new program or project per planning period because of the maintenance of all past programs and projects.

Or:

You may have a series of smaller increases spread across existing programs as needs dictate.

In either case, you can, in each planning cycle, access **only about 5% of the total budget.** The rest is committed to continuity of past practices.

- In effect, the real-life community said in simulation, to the real-life governance system:

We can have both/and (*Smith, 1995*): **both** major capital expenditure **and** incremental program support.

We can do this by trading off, not one future against an alternative future, but a communally desirable future against an aspect of the past which has outlived its functionality. (We are convinced that at the system-unconscious level this pun - i.e. the dysfunctional function centre- was fully intended.). The big bang is the sale and the diverting of a no- longer- needed past; and its fruit is the growth and development of a discovery process aimed at identifying genuine community need ... i.e. 2020, as the emergent (*Long 1992*) demonstration of the city-idea. The incremental is the continuation and maintenance of those past actions that we currently value and wish to endorse as part of our future – to reincorporate into our city idea.

- The simulated community (via the person of the real-life mayor in his simulated role as the President of the Country Women's Association) objected: about the lack of consultation; about the lack of honoring past decision-makers and community members who had made sacrifices so that the city could have its own Function Centre ... and then promptly congratulated the 'Mayor' (who had presented the fait accompli to the assembled community with all the inherent charm of a snake-oil salesman) on finding a way of accommodating the community's demands. (As a data aside, the real life mayor is male and a used car salesman)
- In the pause between this final session of the simulation and the ensuing processing session, the real-life Mayor confided to one of the consulting team that the council would love to dispose of the Function Centre, which not only ties up capital but costs a lot to maintain and has now become a white elephant. But council is "not in a position to so break with the past." In the processing session it was clearly and unequivocally stated that the Function Centre sale 'could never happen in real life.' It seemed not possible once council participants returned to their real-life roles to entertain the possibility of doing things differently (or, more likely, to be **seen** to entertain such a possibility).
- The feedback in the informal drinks session following the simulation (attended by nearly all participants) was upbeat and positive. Report has it that this has continued in the system after the intervention YET
- The planned follow-up session with the lead consultant and all simulation participants has been cancelled on the advice of the two members of the Council Staff directorate who were on the management team.
- Reasons given are that
 - 1) it might take the gloss off the good feelings generated by the simulation;
 - 2) it might perpetuate the split in Council around progressive change vs continuity and connection to (past and therefore) existing practices i.e. the city idea – city praxis split is alive and well.
- At the same time, two things are reported to have happened and two requests had been made:
 - One councilor is pushing for an overhaul of the council committee system with the committees reorganized in the language and value base of the 2020 consultation report; (this is seen by council staff representatives as dangerous and by us as very hopeful).
 - The council directors from the management team are proposing recruitment to key committee posts for some of the 'more leadership thinkers' from the community representatives in the simulation.
 - The lead consultant has been asked to come back with a recommendation for the next financial year's budget (!) as 'what we should do next year'.

- The Director of Human Services (council staff) has requested that the closing comments by the two other consultants on the use of power and authority [Ambrose 1989] be written down, so that ‘people can go on thinking about them’.
- Even before the simulation event, in the chronos of consciousness, the council staff had adopted the 2020 statement of values as a values charter for the whole of the council annual strategic planning process. **And** to use it in their published plans as a reference to each specific action in the plan... i.e. publically made themselves accountable to their constituent community on the basis of the community’s values.

6. A Key Hypothesis

I hope the story to date has justified my simply picking the eyes out of the intervention and its attendant stages. There is just so much here and, we believe, material for any number of papers from the business of intervening in very large systems all the way through to that of working in a systems psycho-dynamic way with client systems who do not know that this is what you are doing. Here, I will content myself with putting forward a single hypothesis which has underpinned our developing understanding of what took place. It concerns Winnicott’s notion of serious play and how that enabled something to take place which would not have been able to take place under any other circumstances. It also relates to the sense of a defining split in the city system: the either-or struggle, the primitive, paranoid- schizoid split, in Smith’s terms, between city-idea and city-praxis.

The simulation was **explained** to participants as ‘serious play’ and interpreted to them as ‘pretend reality’. Personally, I found it interesting to note that the participants who found it easiest to play were those most removed from the day- to- day praxis of governance and closest to what they embodied as the city idea. In many ways, for these community members, the split wasn’t a split, at least within the play-pen of the simulation. Orange was just a darned good place to live and they were on about making it a bit better and keeping it that way. For real-life councillors and some staff, the city idea **and** the city praxis were **fixed entities** and – to all intents and purposes – constituted dogma. That is, they might not be challenged without serious damage occurring to both questioner and questioned. [Chapman 1999, 2003]

In the simulation, the community members connected with and preserved the essence of the **fruitful** or **generative** past and purported to carry it towards their **desired and desirable** future.

In other words, in serious and creative play, they momentarily fused city-idea and city practice. Whatever its faults (and there were many), this was the key strength of the event design: **only** community members, only non- council staff and non-councillors, we believe, could have made this creative leap: primarily **because they did not ‘know’ that**

it could not be done. In one sense, this was another level of **role dialogue** [Long, Newton, Chapman 2006], where the dialogue occurred from and to the **role-of-the-other** and thus **the role-of-the-other-in-the-mind** and at the less than conscious level. Here the creativity of the potential space of the simulation was experienced by the relatively unfettered community members who were more exposed to the developing city idea than to the fixed city practice, **dialoguing through play** with the apparent leaders of the governance system who experienced the terrible anxiety of an attack on their city practice.

My hypothesis then, is that for a space to be truly potential, **both container and contained-** here, the design and the participants – **need to be able to encounter within themselves a lack or lessening of what Ambrose refers to as “the internal restrictions that prevent the child from playing in a free and viable manner in order to imagine in play a different world or a different way of inhabiting that world.”** [Ambrose 1989] I believe that the community members who played councillors and council staff started with less internal restrictions, possibly because they were in a sense far more an embodiment of city idea than city praxis. As they moved into role, they experienced for a while the dead weight of city praxis, and in a way that they developed a hatred for it. They had also noticed that, whatever they did, the consultants who had designed this peculiar past-time, did nothing at all when they tinkered with the design. So they broke the design rules. They refused to see the budget bottom line as immutable. They needed extra money to keep their city idea both intact and growing. They’d been given a whole function centre to play with. Nobody had stopped them doing anything that they’d done to date. So they took the two biggest, unwieldiest objects of play with which they had been provided – the city budget and the Function Centre itself - and they turned them on their ear: with relish and mischief, and a good deal of satiric humour... and with a committed seriousness underlying it all.

I would also suggest that another level of freedom was discovered in the simulation design. Not only did the real-life community members experience the freedom of not knowing the ‘rules’ that were so thoroughly inculcated in the mindset of council and council staff but they also experienced, as did councillors and staff, the freedom of finding themselves in the role- of- other. This was a burden for some – but they found a way to slough off that burden by continuing, rather than refusing to play. This was the case for the simulated staff. On the other hand, the real-life councillors and staff who were playing community members had a wonderful time. They poked holes in their own praxis with matching relish – **because they “knew” it wasn’t real!** So the ‘praxis boys and girls’ also had a both/and moment most powerfully captured for me when the real-life mayor upbraided the simulated mayor for flogging off a community icon (which he secretly longed to do himself) while congratulating him on finding sufficient resources for competing community demands (which, in play, he had been vociferously demanding).

So both the container and the contained were able to experience ‘degrees of freedom’. For a blessed, playful moment, they solved their ‘problem’ and got their desired result.

Of course, The Empire Strikes Back. This **is** a continuing saga. At least I hope it is. I, too, write and speak from a potential space between desire and reality.

This, I think is the time to engage each other in some mutual thinking in the buzz groups. I’ve got some questions for the groups, but this too needs to be a both/and exploratory space. For the moment I ain’t writing no more either/or scenario scripts!

My questions are:

- Have I read it all wrongly? Was it a fun exercise but ultimately a patriarchal containment forum in order, in Australian slang, “to keep the punters happy” i.e. give them a sense of false involvement while the ‘real’ power plays continue?
- Why do my closest clients, the two directors who worked as part of the management team, want to keep me away from the action? Is it to protect me? Themselves? The event? The city? Do they believe that the city idea is best protected by keeping it not too visible for the major proponents of the city praxis?

For the groups, I have provided a copy each of :

The 2020 vision narrative

The Values Charter

The Brand Orange Architecture (see attachments)

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