In the Mood

RESEARCH PROJECT REPORT

PlaceLab

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RMIT PlaceLab acknowledges the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the Eastern Kulin Nations on whose unceded lands we conduct the business of the University.

RMIT PlaceLab respectfully acknowledges their Ancestors and Elders, past and present, as the original and continuing Makers of Place.

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RMIT PlaceLab Initiative

RMIT PlaceLab is a new urban initiative connecting community, shaping place and taking a radically different approach to research.

Designed to free research from the campus and bring researchers street-side to connect with local government and groups, RMIT PlaceLab facilitates site-based research to support the co-creation of new ideas, partnerships, and systems that grow positive community impact.

Dynamic, actionable and accessible, RMIT PlaceLab research projects are bite-size and community-engaged, generating insights, ideas and solutions that can be implemented together with our government and place-making partners.

In The Mood Research Project

Key research themes and issues of liveability and social connectivity, important to the PlaceLab initiative, led to the collaborative project **In The Mood** with academic Professor Annette Markham from RMIT's School of Media and Communication and Digital Ethnography Research Centre (DERC).

As smart cities see an increasing amount of quantitative data collected, a void remains for meaningful data on people's lived experience to inform city planning and policy. This understanding of lived experience is necessary to improve the liveability and efficiency of cities. This project utilised a unique method of qualitative data collection to help to gain this understanding. Moodboarding does not rely on verbal expression, it avoids the engagement of logic and language, this makes it a great tool to explore lived experience in a particular topic.

By bringing together different stakeholders in the moodboarding process, **In The Mood** offered the opportunity for members across various communities to express what they feel is important to them about their city. By including collaborative moodboards, **In The Mood** allowed participants an equal opportunity to have their influence felt in the process and product of assembling moodboards representing their city.

Academic Researchers

Professor Annette Markham (lead), Distinguished Professor Larissa Hjorth, Dr Andrew Stiff and Dr Catherine Earl.

In three countries and four cities in 2022, place-based workshops were hosted, focused on the question: "What is the mood of the city, especially in a time of post-COVID recovery?"

As an experiment to build methods for citizen social science, principal researcher Annette Markham led the project whereby researchers and citizens playfully co-created visual impressions of the 'moods' of their cities. The workshops were part of a larger research project fostering creative collaborative practices among city stakeholders and citizens, to generate textured layers of lived experience data to enrich our collective experiences of what it means to live and thrive in our cities. While the workshops were playful, they also helped participants recognise that what counts as 'data' is often missing the more sensory, affective, and textural 'moods' that lie at the very heart of understanding what really matters, especially in a time of crisis. As much as large-scale data analytics and smart city infrastructures can make systems function more efficiently, and are intended to make our lives easier, they are unable to capture information outside of the constraints of numerical and verbal expression.

How do cities get information about how their citizens are feeling? Feelings about the city itself, about their own lived experiences in the city, feelings as they go about the daily practices of working, socialising, shopping, or accessing various social services? Generally, cities conduct a periodic census or survey of residents. In the smart city era, automated forms of data collection give city planners, urban designers, and companies a vast array of information. But how much do we know about the emotional state of a city's residents? Melbourne has suffered multiple shocks since 2019 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. And, as we've learned in the past three years of living through many converging crises, moods matter.

Research Questions

Why "Moodboarding?"

Moodboarding as a method is a type of visual exploration that can be conducted by individual researchers or in groups, as an open-ended collaboration and participatory method of inquiry. It yields visually oriented accounts of lived experience focused on sensory elements.

Traditionally, moodboards would be considered the outcome of an arts-and-crafts style process of three-dimensional collage. When produced deliberately, moodboards are a creative combination of colours, textures, words and phrases, and other materiality. The combination is done physically, by arranging objects together on a flat surface - a three dimensional collage imbued with meaning. There are also 'naturally occurring moodboards', rendered over time as people leave or place material objects in relation to other objects in physical spaces or online. Moodboards visually communicate a mood, an affect, a sensation of an experience. Moodboards have traditionally been used by creative professionals, such as advertisers, designers, and filmmakers, to make arguments through pathos to potential funders or audiences.

Because moodboards situate at "the intersection of visuality (seeing, looking, visualising), affect (the sensory experience we have in response to our experiences), and culture (the meanings we attribute to our world)", they can be conceptualised as a method for "creatively studying the material, multisensory and embodied nature of experience" (Tiidenberg et al. 2018). Moodboarding, as a process, is a form of visual exploration that is non-representational, playful, and even when guided with prompts, open-ended.

Moodboarding disrupts the logics of description and explanation. It is one of many forms of expression that seek to find and evoke affect. In this case, 'affect' refers to a pre-cognitive visceral sensation that happens just before we invoke some sort of cognitive logic and language to find a word to describe it to ourselves or someone else. Playing with arts and crafts supplies is a surprisingly easy and effective way to generate and then visualise some of these affective layers without thinking too much about their design. By evoking mood in layers of textures and colour rather than words, we find a different type of material evidence of lived experience.

Methodology

This participatory community-based experiment began with the basic idea of holding a workshop event to engage the public, with the twin goals of gaining knowledge about what's important to them and bringing together different stakeholder groups to influence public policies. Beyond this basic level of 'engagement', our experiment builds an intervention that facilitates co-creation and critique. By inviting participants from multiple stakeholder groups, we hold space for many voices, different knowledges, and potentially competing interests to come to the table with equal influence in the process and product.

The research design combined methods from action research, critical pedagogy, participatory ethnography, and participatory design, each with longstanding and well tested models. Action research offers techniques for facilitating different types of learning through iterative testing and experimentation. Critical pedagogy utilises facilitated interventions in the public sphere to bring people from competing interests together to focus on a shared issue. Participatory ethnography is an engaged practice of cultural observation and analysis where communities study their own lived experiences. Participatory design offers strong models for including participants at all stages of design processes to create products or solutions that effectively meet the end users' needs and desires.

The first workshop was facilitated by Annette Markham in June 2022 in Barcelona, Spain, as part of the Barcelona Design Week 2022. The workshop allowed the research team to better understand how participants engaged with the method, and the influence that the background of participants and their familiarity with moodboarding had on the process.

The following two workshops were hosted in metropolitan Melbourne, at RMIT PlaceLab's Brunswick and Melbourne Research Studios in September and October 2022, respectively. These workshops brought together members of the local community, including local government representatives, and students, to construct individual and collaborative moodboards. Annette Markham facilitated both workshops, with Professor Larissa Hjorth co-facilitating the PlaceLab Melbourne workshop.
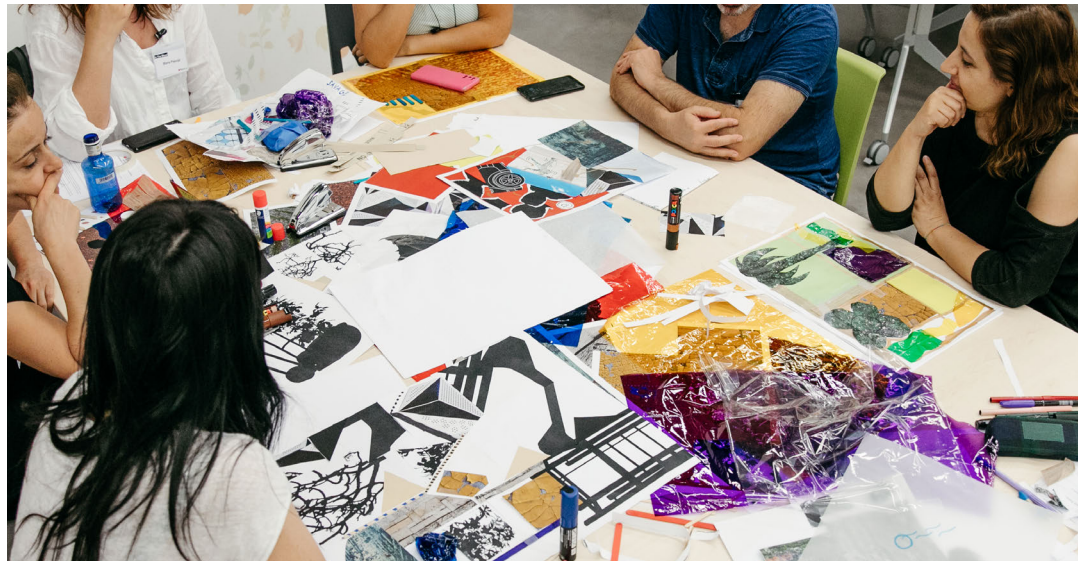
Participants in the In The Mood Barcelona workshop assembling moodboards.

The final workshop occurred in October 2022 at the Study Melbourne Hub in Ho Chi Minh City. Facilitated by Dr. Andrew Stiff and Dr. Catherine Earl from RMIT Vietnam, the workshop sample consisted of architectural and anthropology students. Although the students' English language skills were considered excellent, the difficulty of translating 'mood' into Vietnamese meant the students understood the mood of a city as its 'vibe'.

Nearly 100 participants were involved across the four workshops.

A collaborative moodboard from the In The Mood Ho Chi Minh City workshop.

Co-Creation in Workshops

The challenge of genuine co-creation is that is can be thwarted - often inadvertently - by the dominance of one stakeholder group who controls the questions and outcomes. These four **In The Mood** workshops were designed with mindful interaction techniques whereby researchers combine observations of social processes in the flow of the workshops, and foster development of positive yet critical group dynamics. Thus, facilitation functions both as the primary method of engagement and the mode of inquiry.

Seemingly casual, the use of moodboarding in groups is purposeful. On a practical level, the methodology fosters skillsets among participants that they can take with them. First, by selecting a colour, image, or texture to convey a particular affective element of the city, participants are learning about processes of datafication:

They are literally translating observation or tacit experience into discrete units of cultural information and placing these in proximity to other units of cultural information to create an overall moodboard.

Second, by working in groups to generate shared meaning, participants must continually adjust their own analysis in accordance with others' interpretations, while trying to retain their own interpretation. This process is aided by expert facilitators who demonstrate what is required in this process of give and take. Third, participants see alternate ways of making sense of the environment as they watch each other contribute to or reconfigure the 'mood' of the moodboard, which builds an understanding of multiplicity in the construction and depiction of reality.

Iterative Experimental Design

In the **In The Mood** project, workshops were selected as a classic form of participatory engagement methodology. Participation was built into the design of each workshop to encourage people to play with the materiality and sensory or bodily experience of moods, as well as discuss them in a more conceptual sense, through words and conversation. The four workshops were carefully designed to unfold as a sequence to build reflexive loops into an action research model. That is, through a process of recording, analysing, and reflecting on the process and products of the workshop, the researcher was able to tweak subsequent workshops to test different frames or prompts. This can seem random to outsiders of the research project but is a carefully monitored experimentation process. Of course, the participants and contexts are quite distinctive in each of these events and therefore the experiment is not controlled or even intended to be controllable. Instead, the setup is intentional and the framing or phrasing of questions is deliberate, which might include some spontaneous elements but is not unplanned. This is common in educational forms of action research as well as design thinking and participatory ethnography.

Examples of moodboards assembled individually by participants during the In The Mood Barcelona workshop.

Based on the results of the first workshop, the research lead, Annette Markham, made changes in the delivery of the subsequent workshops. This included which materials were used and how they were presented; alterations to how she introduced the ideas; shifts in the phrasing of the prompts; modifications of certain aspects of the timing of the events; and framing the discussions differently.

A collaborative moodboard from the In The Mood Brunswick workshop.

An example of an individual participant's moodboard from the In The Mood Brunswick workshop

Defining this methodology as a form of experimentation is useful in two different ways. First, it encourages the open-ended tweaking that emerges as needed in the 'laboratory'. Second, it emphasises how the project is not a matter of knowledge transfer from the Academy to the Public Sphere, but rather, a process of working with communities to co-create knowledge, using some pedagogical techniques well-honed by the researchers to bring out the place-based expertise of the participants.

Critical Data Studies through Moodboarding

Participants were able to map some of the valences of mood they or others have noticed in the city, express their own moods, or speculate about future moods. However, the underlying goal of conducting these participatory engagement workshops was not to collect data about 'moods' from participants per se, but to use critical pedagogy techniques to facilitate participants' abilities to critically explore what is involved in abstracting lived experience into something that functions as data. The research questions emerge from a critical data studies perspective on what's missing in large scale data collection, aggregation, and analysis. In this sense, moodboarding becomes a method for thinking about datafication in smart cities, and what gets lost. What's missing in increasingly automated data-collecting and data analytic systems is the sensory texture of lived experience.

What's lost in this process of translation from mood to metric? This is a very useful question to ask when almost every digital media platform is interested in transforming our moods into metrics to sell us something. On the flipside, what generous, inclusive, and helpful patterns might be gained by harnessing the possibilities of data sharing and aggregated data analytics to bring more richness and nuance to how people understand place? How can cities improve our futures by finding ways to add these sensory elements to smart city data ecosystems?

The method used in the **In The Mood** Research Project represents a marked shift away from observation to intervention, from data collection to scholarly activism and participatory action, from matters of fact to matters of concern (Markham, 2020). As a 'citizens as sensors' approach to smart city data acquisition (Goodchild, 2007), moodboarding augments the digital devices used by the City of Melbourne and other local governments to provide deeply analog data sets that incorporate affective sensory information. We believe is it essential to keep the human in the loop of these automated systems, to better inform planning and policy decision-making.

Recommendations

The core recommendations of this project relate to finding practical and iterative methods of organising data systems toward the end of building what Rob Kitchin (2018) has called "genuinely humanising smart urbanism". This requires attention on what information should be included in shifting from places that are driven by market logics of consumerism or tokenistic civic engagement, to more inclusive, collaborative, and co-created infrastructures that carry the potential for strong resilience. Mood mapping is not necessarily the best solution, but only a demonstration that mood matters and 'moods' are reflective of much more depth than can be attained through massive data collection and automated analysis. Data-oriented systems have impacts at the qualitative level of experience, and the **In The Mood** research project of having residents map the 'mood' of their cities has been a provocative reminder of the limits of datafication to adequately represent the sensory and affective components of everyday life.

Both the process and outcomes of this project emphasise the value of experimenting with multi-stakeholder and multi-method approaches that match the needs of specific contexts, to building rich and respectful information about lived experience of what matters to people. Importantly, this is not just an activity to assess how people feel now, but how they feel about various possible futures.

Recommendations include:

- **Building meaningful moments when residents and community groups can contribute information about how they are feeling, and consider how relevant city stakeholders can access and therefore pay attention to this information.**

- **Engaging in continuous evaluation of what's missing in existing datasets in a city's digital twin system, with particular attention on the sensory and affective components of lived experience.**

- **As data systems grow more automated, ensuring the presence of strong 'human in the loop' systems to counteract the dehumanising tendencies of data-heavy smart city information systems.**

- **Adopting a stronger future-orientation by putting processes in place that regularly involve community members as co-creators in building hopeful future imaginaries to inform future place-making.**

6.   Afterword

The **In The Mood** research project has documented a method that allows stakeholders from various backgrounds to communicate their mood and feelings towards their city in a new, creative and playful approach. This process can be used to capture the diverse perspectives and preferences of community members, such as residents, business owners, and policymakers. By using moodboards, stakeholders can visualise and communicate their ideas and connect with others more effectively, which can lead to more collaborative and inclusive public policy and city planning processes.

Through research findings such as these, RMIT PlaceLab proves what's possible when local community knowledge and expertise informs world-class research. Together, we're tackling real-world, urban challenges and seeking innovations that improve liveability, community resilience and connection, evolving spaces into places.

Delivering benefit for local government and partners by making research inclusive, practical and hyper-local to achieve real impact.

Ethics

This research project has been assessed and approved by the RMIT University College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN). Ethics Reference Number: 25550.

Research involving human participants is consistent with the guidelines contained in the Australian National statement on ethical conduct in human research and Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.

Author Contributions

This project was led by Professor Annette Markham, director of DERC, the RMIT Digital Ethnography Research Centre and involved four additional RMIT researchers. Annette has been studying the impact of digital technologies on identities, relationships, and societies since the mid-1990s. Her pioneering sociological studies are well represented in her earliest work, Life Online: Researching Real Experiences in Virtual Space; (1998, Alta Mira). Annette's more recent work focuses on innovative methods for building digital literacy in the public sphere through creative workshops and arts-based interventions. She has conducted workshops, PhD courses, and exhibited work in UK, Denmark, Canada, USA, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland, and her work on moodboarding emerged in 2018 in the development of a PhD course to explore how visual methods like moodboarding could be used to enhance ethnographic fieldwork techniques.

Annette's experience with community workshops has led a strong recognition that when citizens become ethnographers of their own lives and communities, the gain in confidence that their local knowledge practices can produce rich insights that are not only useful in a local sense, but also add value to discussions at the level of municipalities, cities, and regions. These workshops help people recognize that citizens can generate complex forms of 'data' about their desires or needs. When it comes to generating information about the mood or affective feeling of a place, how might these moodboarding exercises help city planners or technology designers make more informed decisions?

The **In The Mood** Melbourne Workshop was co-facilitated by Annette Markham and Distinguished Professor Larissa Hjorth. Larissa Hjorth is a digital ethnographer and socially-engaged artist within the School of Media & Communication at RMIT. From 2023 she will be an Australian Research Council Future Fellow examining grief in media. Hjorth has two decades experience leading mobile media projects to explore innovative methods around intergenerational connection, intimacy, games, play, loss and death in the Asia-Pacific region (Japan, South Korea, China and Australia). Hjorth has also worked extensively on how mobile media is used for grief, loss and recovery – including the Fukushima disaster of 2011, Queensland floods in 2011, and Australian bushfires in 2020. She is passionate about creative, inventive and playful methods for community engagement, communication science and research translation.

The **In The Mood** Vietnam Workshop was co-designed by Annette Markham, Andrew Stiff, and Catherine Earl, and co-facilitated by Catherine Earl and Andrew Stiff.

Andrew Stiff is a lecturer in the School of Communication and Design at RMIT Vietnam. His practice focuses on experimental film-making processes that explore the space between urban inhabitance and the built environment. Through his studies of urban spaces, Andrew shines a spotlight on the impact of Vietnamese culture on the development of the dense and tight urban spaces of Saigon. The films capture the creation of space through the values of family and community and offer an insight into how cities can develop resilience through the pressure's urban migration and modernisation.

Catherine Earl is a Lecturer in Communication and lead of the Cities and Urbanism research cluster in the School of Communication and Design at RMIT Vietnam. She is a First Year Higher Education (FYHE) specialist and holds teaching awards for team teaching and programs that enhance learning. Catherine is a social anthropologist, policy analyst and community educator. Her research interests include sensory studies, experimental ethnographic writing, rise of middle classes, changing nature of work and welfare, mega-urban mobilities, and gender and social change in contemporary Vietnam and Australia. Catherine aims to translate research into practice and policy, especially concerning higher education and gender equity. Catherine teaches Asia focused contextual courses in the Professional Communication undergraduate degree program at RMIT Vietnam.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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We hope this report sparks more important conversations.

We'd love to hear your thoughts via: melbourne.placelab@rmit.edu.au

Find out more about the RMIT PlaceLab initiative and our research activity, go to:

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