VIDEO AND SOCIAL JUSTICE:
REIMAGINING THE CITY

by

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Abstract

There is presently an impressive body of literature on the relationship between video and empowerment, but there is scant attention paid to the larger concept of social justice, and in what ways video may assist in expressing and advancing claims to the city. This thesis explores some possible ways that video can contribute to the struggle for social justice. Using one short video, Wishlist, as a case study, the research probes the relationship between the right to the city, social justice, and video. Drawing on definitions of social justice advanced by Henri Lefebvre and Iris Marion Young, this thesis argues that the right to the city begins with imagining cities as being different from their present state. This imagining involves dialoguing, participating, and appropriating. Video is one creative tool that can assist in this imagining.
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Shadowed by reality
the dreams that we hold
can become oppressed by vulgar necessities,
that seem to go against our shining integrity
that may be tarnished sorely
by the lies and compromises we feel required to make
to live.

Sooner or later
our soul will claim its demands
break free of the weight of the restrictions of centuries
return to its source
revitalizing our stale old rituals
injecting us with the courage to speak our truth
the ability to shine our light.

Delayne Azrael, 2006.
Social Justice and Video

Introduction

This thesis examines the relationship between the right to the city, social justice, and video. Video and Social Justice: ReImagining the City argues that the right to the city starts by imagining our city as being different from its present state. Video, by engaging people in a dialogue over their rights to participation and appropriation, fosters this essential act of imagining, thereby contributing to the struggle for social justice.

Using a case study approach, the thesis draws on a five-minute digital video entitled Wishlist, which I was responsible for co-producing in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, during the summer of 2006. Wishlist was one of a trio of short films made in the Spring of 2006, originally conceived as a participatory video project that focused on a particular street in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) of Vancouver. Carrall Street was at that time the subject of a design project by the City of Vancouver (described in Chapter 2) and it was the film makers' collective intention to experiment with the use of

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1 Wishlist has been included as part of the thesis manuscript. It is the author's suggestion that it be viewed before reading Chapter 3. The short length of the video was predetermined by three groups involved in the video's production, a process which is described in Chapter 2. Given the length restrictions of the film, the broader applicability of the video is limited. This will be discussed in Chapter 6.
video as a way of eliciting residents’ desires for this pivotal street which connects different parts of the downtown area.

The purpose of Wishlist was thus twofold. First, we wanted to engage people in a dialogue about how they see themselves and their neighbourhood. Second, we wanted to be able to convey this vision to City of Vancouver planners, in the hope of affecting decisions made about the street. Wishlist provides a unique opportunity to ground social justice theories in a video case study, thereby expanding the range of tools available in the community’s struggle for social justice. The study of Wishlist also has important implications for the role of video in planning, a topic that will be explored in Chapter 6.

**Research Assumptions**

Three general assumptions are foundational for this study: first, that democracy is the only system of governance that enables self- and collective empowerment (Friedmann, 1987); second, that Canada’s democratic system is flawed and needs restructuring, especially at municipal level (Magnusson, 1981); and third, that deliberation, discourse, and conflict serve to strengthen democracy (Mouffe, 2005). These assumptions are implicitly addressed throughout this work.
Research Questions

This thesis addresses three main questions:

**Question 1:** What role do rights play in our understanding of social justice and the city?

In answering this question, I explore certain theories of social justice, arguing that the rights to participation and appropriation are crucial to the active inhabitation of the city.

**Question 2:** Can video promote dialogue?

In addressing this question, I examine the importance of dialogue in affirming our right to participation. Wishlist is used as an example of an inclusive process that deploys utopian thinking to encourage new understandings of city rights.

**Question 3:** What role does video play in encouraging urban imagination and appropriation?

I explore how, in affirming our right to participation, we come to claim our right to appropriation. I look at how Wishlist's visuals, vision, and politics serve to empower people to imagine how they could appropriate the city.
Reasons for undertaking this study

The right to the city has attracted considerable attention in recent academic literature, but the concept has remained theoretically amorphous, rarely grounded in practical application. The objective of this thesis is to examine the ways that video can advance claims to the city.

On a personal level, as a planning student with a previous degree in film studies, this thesis enabled me to pursue my two passions. I strongly believe that post-Rawlsian definitions of social justice need to be at the heart of current planning practice, and that video is one tool through which this can be achieved.

This thesis draws on theories of social justice put forth by Iris Marion Young and Henri Lefebvre, and discusses the applicability of their theories to video, through a close examination of the video Wishlist. There are related areas of study that will not be covered here. The issue of video access is crucial to any discussion of rights and imagination. As my scope is limited to the analysis of Wishlist, this topic is not included in this thesis. For the same reasons, a discussion of the role that participatory video plays in fostering social justice has not been addressed in this study.

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2 For a detailed account of why there has been renewed interest in the right to the city and in the thinking of Henri Lefebvre, see Purcell (2002).

3 John Rawls was a philosopher who argued extensively for a normative approach to social justice, including
Organization of the Thesis

I begin my exploration of the relationship between social justice and video by establishing Wishlist's context and research methodology. I then lay the theoretical framework for the study, exploring the question of how we define the city. Chapter 2 establishes the geographical, institutional, and production context of Wishlist and delineates my research methodology. Chapter 3 is centered on the question "what is the city"? I argue that the city is the site of dialogue and appropriation, and that we claim our rights to dialogue and appropriation through engaging in utopian thinking. I then expand on this argument in Chapter 4 to look at how Wishlist, through an inclusive interviewing and production process, facilitates dialogue. In chapter 5, I analyze Wishlist's visuals, vision, and politics to understand how we can move from dialogue to appropriation. I conclude by evaluating Wishlist's applicability, reception, and institutional integration, and argue that many of Wishlist's dissemination problems are common impediments in the use of video as a planning tool.
Contextualizing

Before discussing the links between social justice and video, it is necessary to situate Wishlist geographically, institutionally, and methodologically.4

Situating Wishlist Geographically

Wishlist is a video focused on a single Vancouver street: Carrall Street, which is located in the Downtown Eastside. The street runs north/south in downtown Vancouver, beginning at Water Street, and ending at Pacific Boulevard. Importantly, it connects the communities of Gastown, the Downtown Eastside (DTES), and Chinatown.

The Carrall Street Participatory Video Project was located in the DTES, an inner city Vancouver neighbourhood that occupies 113 hectares (DTES

4 It is essential to note from the outset that this thesis is focusing on video and not participatory video. Participatory video is defined in various ways, and its methodology is derived from participatory action research. Johannsen, in “Questions and Answers about Participatory Video”, defines participatory video as “a scriptless video process, directed by a group of grassroots people, moving forward in often iterative cycles of shooting and reviewing. The aim is to create video narratives that communicate what those who participate in the process really want to communicate, in a way they think is appropriate. Participants take part in some or all of: shooting, scriptwriting, determining content” (2000, p.3). In order to avoid getting into a discussion of how participatory the project was, and because this thesis is much more concerned with product rather than process, the scope has been narrowed to examine social justice and video through the lens of Wishlist as simply a video.

5 The DTES has been the site of contested definitions, naming, and categorizing. It is not within the scope of this paper to give a detailed, discursive account of the downtown eastside. PIVOT Legal society defines the DTES as follows. “The DTES is found in the downtown core of Vancouver. It is one of the city’s oldest neighbourhoods. Although it is
The DTES is infamous for being Canada’s poorest postal code. According to Statistics Canada, in 2001 the average household income in the DTES was $15,647 (City of Vancouver, 2007a). While the DTES has a high proportion of intravenous drug users in its population, the area is also home to a vibrant, artistic community with many diverse social groups, including a high percentage of First Nations Peoples.  

As a low-income inner city neighbourhood, it is the focus of ongoing contestations over the nature and scale of gentrification.

relatively small geographically, its population is very diverse. Forty-eight percent of its population consists of members of ethnic minorities, and men and seniors are overrepresented in the population compared with other areas of Vancouver.

The neighbourhood consists of five distinct areas: Chinatown, Gastown, Victory Square, Strathcona and Oppenheimer. It has long been a community with a high concentration of social problems, including poverty, mental illness, drug use, crime, survival sex work, high HIV/Hepatitis infection rates, unemployment and violence” (Eby, 2006 p. 5).


Exact percentages vary. PIVOT Legal Society estimates that 30% of DTES residents are intravenous drug users, amounting to 5,000 users in approximately 10 city blocks (PIVOT website). According to PIVOT legal society, Aboriginal Peoples constitute 8.4 percent of the DTES population (Eby, 2006 p. 8). The percentage of Aboriginal Peoples in British Columbia is 4.4 percent (Eby, 2006 p. 8).

Situating Wishlist Institutionally

In an always politically charged and antagonistic atmosphere, the City of Vancouver is making a concerted effort to economically revitalize the DTES.\(^8\) The redesign of Carrall Street into a greenway is intended to play an integral role in this venture.\(^9\)

The City of Vancouver has approved five million dollars for the Greenway in its 2006-2008 capital budget plan (City of Vancouver, 2007b). Additionally, the Carrall Street project is receiving funding from the private sector (City of Vancouver, 2007b).

According to the City of Vancouver's Carrall Street Greenway Webpage, the purpose of the Greenway is to foster community building and encourage economic revitalization. The redesign of Carrall Street “incorporates green infrastructure, facilitates private investments, and provides opportunities for social services, arts and culture programming to help achieve environmental, economic, social and cultural sustainability for the area” (City of Vancouver

\(^8\) Please see City of Vancouver. (2007b) The Carrall Street Greenway [Internet], City of Vancouver. Available from: <http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/engsvcs/streets/greenways/city/carrall/index.htm> [Accessed 4 June 2007] for more information on the economic revitalization plan for the DTES.

\(^9\) The City of Vancouver has a greenways plan for the city. Their greenways website explains: “Greenways in Vancouver are linear public corridors for pedestrians and cyclists that connect parks, nature reserves, cultural features, historic sites, neighbourhoods and retail areas” (City of Vancouver (2007c).
The City of Vancouver has held a number of charrettes\(^{10}\) and meetings surrounding the redesign of Carrall Street.

The Carrall Street Participatory Video Project (CSPVP) was in part created to articulate DTES resident’s visions on how Carrall Street might be used as a public space.\(^{11}\) The intention at the outset was to use the videos to inform the City of Vancouver’s redesign of Carrall Street. Wishlist was one of three video productions resulting from the project.

**Project Description**

The CSPVP was a joint venture among three groups: Projections, Ear to the Ground Planning, and the University of British Columbia’s School of Community and Regional Planning.\(^{12}\) While the videos were not funded by the City of Vancouver, the City was kept up to date on the progress of the project. The participants in the CSPVP included five at-risk youth from the

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\(^{10}\) "The French word, "charrette" means "cart" and is often used to describe the final, intense work effort expended by art and architecture students to meet a project deadline. This use of the term is said to originate from the École des Beaux Arts in Paris during the 19th century, where proctors circulated a cart, or “charrette”, to collect final drawings while students frantically put finishing touches on their work” (National Charrette Institute, 2007).

\(^{11}\) Because this video project was a participatory video project, the intent was never clearly delineated. Furthermore, due to time constraints, the actual ability of the City of Vancouver to use the videos to inform the public design process was limited. For an extended discussion of this, please see Vallilee (2007).

\(^{12}\) Projections is a Portland Hotel Society venture that provides skill building and video mentorship opportunities to “at-risk youth”, mainly from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. The term “at-risk youth” is used by Projections, who developed the term in partnership with the youth involved in their video projects. Ear to the Ground Planning is a planning consulting company that uses video as part of the planning process.
DTES, six planning students, and five mentors. My role in the project was as a planning student participant.13

The CSPVP was carried out between February 1 and September 30, 2006. The project ended with the completion of three separate, but thematically connected video productions: Wishlist, The Spinning Image and Stories from Carrall Street.14 The whole group discussed broad themes, and then individual videos were collaboratively written, filmed, and edited by groups of three to five participants. Wishlist is the result of collaboration among three planning students and one at-risk youth.15

The conceptual framework for Wishlist was developed over the course of a weekend and shooting and editing took just over three weeks to complete. During production, the Wishlist team worked closely together on the vision and argument of the film, decided how interviews would be conducted, and

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13 Due to my prior undergraduate education in Film Studies, I was immediately drawn to the CSPVP, which afforded me a unique opportunity to deepen my knowledge of video and planning and explore the synergies between the two. To this end, the project has proven to be an extremely rewarding experience.

14 The other two films have not been included in this Thesis. If interested in viewing them, please contact Jonathan Frantz at Ear to the Ground Planning (www.eartothegroundplanning.com).

15 The two other planning students were Ian Marcuse and Elana Cossover, and the youth was April Curry.
who would be interviewed. The specific aesthetic and narrative decisions addressed in Chapter 4 were made collectively by the four participants, and sometimes a resolution was arrived at only after heated debate.

Our group determined that Wishlist would have several purposes. The first was simply to get DTES residents thinking and talking about the Carrall Street redesign. The second purpose was to honour people's ideas for the space, by incorporating them into the film. The third purpose was to communicate the ideas expressed in the video to several different parties: the general Vancouver public, officials at the City of Vancouver responsible for the Carrall Street redesign, and DTES residents.

**Research Methodology**

Planning theorist John Friedmann asks “Aren’t we all social actors?” (Friedmann, 2000 p. 461). This question has guided the research and writing of this thesis. My intention at the CSPVP’s outset was to explore the ways in which participatory video could contribute to the struggle for social justice in

16 Clearly, this process involved a politics of inclusion and exclusion. This will be discussed in chapter 4 with regard to voice.

17 Chapter 4 discusses one such debate, which involved the decision not to show people's faces in the film.

18 John Friedmann has written extensively on the role of utopian thinking and insurgency in planning. Particularly relevant to this thesis is The Prospect of Cities (2002), in which Friedmann discusses the usefulness of Utopian thinking.
the city.\textsuperscript{19} I conducted two literature reviews, one focused on social justice, the other on participatory video. I obtained informed consent from all participants and project leaders and it was my intention to conduct participant interviews. However, my initial plan to focus on understanding the relationships among participation, video, and social justice shifted to examining Wishlist in the context of social justice theory. Therefore, the video Wishlist became my data set.\textsuperscript{20}

Using Wishlist as the major data set for the thesis allows for a unique opportunity to integrate the two components of reflective practice: reflecting in action and reflecting on action (Schön, 1983). In the following chapters, Wishlist is primarily utilized as a discursive device, grounding social justice theory in a video case study. As such, it serves as a reflection on action, and in Chapter 6, is utilized as a reflexive device.\textsuperscript{21} In addition to reflecting on action, I kept a journal of the video making process, including personal experiences,

\textsuperscript{19} As part of this initial focus, I conducted an extensive participatory video literature review, which helped me to define participatory video. The literature review has been included in the works cited.

\textsuperscript{20} In switching methodological approaches from participant-interviews to participant-observation, it was my intention to observe audience reactions to Wishlist. However, because of circumstances described in chapter 6, this was not possible.

\textsuperscript{21} I am relying on the following definition of reflexivity: Reflexivity involves applying our critical thinking to practice, therefore changing contexts, projects, and people: "examining critically the assumptions underlying our actions, the impact of those actions" (Cunliffe, 2004: 410).
meeting agendas, and audience reactions to *Wishlist*. My experience as a participant provided additional insights into specific stylistic and ethical choices made during the course of the project. In turn, these experiences facilitated an analysis on reflecting in practice.\(^\text{22}\) The following chapters examine *Wishlist* through the methodological approach of a reflective practitioner.

\(^{22}\) Schön, in *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1983), describes reflecting in practice as a reflecting in action that is about the thinking involved in doing.
Living: The City and Habitation

The following chapter argues that cities are an assemblage of differences: places of overlapping dialogues, narratives, and identities. As such, people can only engage in the city if they are able to exercise their rights to participation and appropriation.

Cities as sites of dialogue and appropriation

Cities are sites of difference, where the "being together as strangers" is constitutive of city life (Young, 1990 p. 237). This being together is often fraught with challenges, as different lifeways bump up against each other, taken-for-granted ways of doing and being are called into question, and we struggle to find ways of peacefully co-existing. In spite of the aversion of most people to such discomfort, these challenges are often useful, as they force us to question our own epistemologies, meanings, and narratives (Lefebvre, 1996).

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23 Iris Marion Young's major contributions have included expanding on theories of social justice and urban social movements. In particular, her Justice and the Politics of Difference (1990), is considered a groundbreaking and innovative work that calls into question many of the ideas espoused by the Marxist David Harvey in his celebrated Social Justice and the City (1973).

24 Henri Lefebvre, born in France in 1901, was profoundly influenced by the events of Paris, 1968. He was a prominent intellectual figure amongst the Surrealists, Situationists International, and French Communist Party. While his work has influenced many thinkers, he never subscribed to one theoretical doctrine. His works include the Critique of Everyday Life (1947) and The Production of Space (1974).

"The city writes and assigns, that is, it signifies, orders, stipulates. What? That is to be discovered by reflection" (Lefebvre, 1996:102). This doesn't really sit well here. I suggest that you move it to the top of page, as an intro quote.
The result is that we are constantly re-interpreting, re-imagining, and re-making the city. The city is therefore both the site and the product of the evolving engagement of its inhabitants.

Participation in city life can change our sense of meaning and belonging, our sense of place and our understanding of our right to the city. When this happens, the city becomes the site of appropriations intended to enact new meanings (Lefebvre, 1996). Through our interaction with others, we adopt aspects of their perspectives that then inform our own narratives. These moments of appropriation are unpredictable, ambiguous and playful and, for Young and Lefebvre, it’s important to embrace them as being at the heart of city life (Young, 1990; Lefebvre, 1996).

**The right to participation and imagination**

For cross-cultural dialogue and appropriation to occur, we first need to claim our right to participate in the city. We must know that we have a right to inhabit the city before we can be empowered to change it (Lefebvre, 1996). Inhabiting the city means recognizing that we have the right to determine our actions and the conditions of our action (Young, 1990). This involves the ability to see our current environments and circumstances as aspects of our

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25 As Homi Bhabha writes: “meanings may be partial because they are in media res; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made” (Bhabha, 1990 p.3).
lives that we can change. Thus, the right to participation is crucial to the active
inhabitation of the city.

Participation, Imagination, and Utopia

If participation is a critical component of city life, how then do we come
to claim this right? Lefebvre argues that acts of imagination allow us to come
together, despite our differences (Lefebvre, 1996). It is through imagining
things as being different from their present state that we begin to participate in
the creation of the city. The right to the city therefore originates with the right
to imagine participating in its creation.

Because utopias are stories that critique the present in order to construct
a better future, they are powerful devices for initiating this process of imagining
(Friedmann, 2000). For Iris Marion Young, this type of thinking is the first step
towards social justice. In expressing our desire for change, we claim our right to
imagine things differently (Young, 1990; Mitchell, 2003).

Utopias are useful tools for fostering dialogue because they allow people
to articulate their visions for their future without having to make direct
reference to their (often painful) present. This detachment can be liberating
because it enables people to move from their present context of fear, or
feelings of powerlessness, to a future context of hope. Instead of evaluating the

\[26\] For a further discussion on the importance of this, see Massey (1991).
present for what it lacks, utopian thinking insists that people imagine the future for what it holds. In this way, people are able to engage with their right to inhabit the city.

This chapter has argued that cities are places of overlapping narratives and contested meanings. In order to engage in discourses about urban life, the right to inhabit the city, in the fullest sense, needs to be established through participation and appropriation. As social justice begins with imagining the right to participate in the creation of the city, utopias are powerful devices for moving towards social justice.
Dialoguing and Representing

The preceding chapter has argued that we claim our right to inhabit the city through dialogue. Films can engage people in dialogue, and are therefore an important tool for stimulating multiple understandings of the city. Through a close reading of Wishlist’s aesthetic, stylistic, and procedural choices, this chapter reveals the important role that video can play in fostering dialogue through an inclusive process. The video is divided into three parts: “Basic Needs”, “Pigeon Park”\(^{27}\), and “Community Space” (Illustration 4.1).

Illustration 4.1 Screenshots of Wishlist’s three sections

Wishlist contains three main visual devices: a long pan of Vancouver’s Carrall Street (Illustration 4.2), three still images taken along the street (Illustration 4.3), and two one-minute segments of stop-motion animation (Illustration 4.4).

\(^{27}\) Pigeon Park is a park located on the northwest corner of Hastings Street and Carrall Street. It is Vancouver’s smallest official park, and a place where many residents congregate throughout the day. Pigeon Park is often described as being the heart of the DTES community, and, (as a recently painted graffiti tag in the park reads) it is “the people’s park”.

19
Illustration 4.2 Screenshot of Wishlist’s Carrall Street pan

Illustration 4.3 Screenshot of Wishlist’s Pigeon Park still

Illustration 4.4 Screenshot of Wishlist’s first animation sequence
The visuals are driven by the film’s soundtrack, which contains a mix of music, poetry, and dialogue. Thirteen unidentified Downtown Eastside (DTES) residents drive the narration, which focuses on re-envisioning Carrall Street. This chapter explains why we made these structural and aesthetic choices.

**Video and Dialogue**

Neil Leach, a British architect and cultural studies theorist, argues that our identities are constructed around place specific performances (Leach, 2005). Like place-specific performances, film viewing changes our individual identities and alters our perceptions of place. When we ‘read’ a film, we make sense of the on-screen world by projecting parts of ourselves into the story. However, this is not a one-way exercise; because we have projected ourselves onto the film, we are also affected by it (Leach, 2005). Films make us cry or laugh because we have invested parts of ourselves into them. Film, through its very medium, facilitates a process of self-reflexive dialogue.

**Dialogue, Style, and Voice in Wishlist**

If dialogue is central to asserting citizens’ rights to the city, how can certain stylistic choices in filming influence the nature of the conversation? The Wishlist production team struggled over this question, and made several

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28 Neil Leach has argued for a critical understanding of architecture that brings architecture within the realm of cultural studies (Leach, 2005).
stylistic and narrative choices in order to address issues of DTES stereotyping and representation.

The first and most divisive consideration for our group was whether to show people's faces in the film. Given the dreamlike tone that we envisioned for Wishlist, it made sense on a narrative level to avoid a talking-head montage. However, we also wanted to valorize people's opinions and worried that not showing their faces would be disempowering, especially considering that DTES residents are usually portrayed as being part of a homogeneously dysfunctional community. After many heated discussions, we finally decided that the sets of assumptions that outsiders might carry could eclipse what the speakers were saying: people would see class, addiction, or physical trauma instead of actually listening, and thereby might be prevented from entering into a dialogue with what was being expressed. As one of the main goals of the film was to address non-DTES residents' stereotypes of the area, we felt that this decision not to show interviewees' faces was crucial to the success of Wishlist as a dialoguing tool.

The second concern involved deciding which members of the DTES to interview. This was a highly charged issue because the people chosen would define the content and dialogue of our film. Making interview decisions directly engages with issues of representation, voice, and censorship.
One of the drawbacks of Wishlist is that, given the time constraints of the project, we were unable to make new connections in the DTES. As trust and rapport is crucial to the success of any interview, it was decided that the people with whom we already had an established relationship would be willing to share their utopian visions with us as and a larger audience. This decision meant that DTES residents who were less visible, vocal, and politically engaged were unable to participate in the formal, sit-down interviews that we conducted.

In an attempt to mitigate this issue of voice, we also conducted informal street interviews in the neighbourhood. Given that video crews and television newscasters have repeatedly exploited DTES residents, we decided that it was best to only use an audio-recorder. This decision also made it easier in post-production to integrate the informal and formal interviews. Unlike the formal interviews, the street interviews consisted of asking people one succinct question: “If you could put anything on Carrall Street, what would it be?” This

29 It is important to note in this regard that having a youth who worked and sometimes lived in the community was essential to building trust, and setting up interviews.

30 While using an audio recorder made some people more willing to be interviewed, there was still significant reluctance from people to be recorded. Consequently, a large proportion of the voices in Wishlist come from the formal interviews that we conducted.
question was designed to be as open as possible, while still adhering to the geographic constraints of the video project.  

In addition to recorded interviews, we employed a third strategy to include as many visions as possible. Because the DTES is an artistic community, and also one with a large percentage of ESL residents as well as high illiteracy rates, we felt that it was necessary to include non-verbal forms of expression in the film. We asked people who felt uncomfortable being audio-taped, if we could write down a few of their ideas, and incorporated these visions into the animation. We also asked people to contribute music, poetry, and art to Wishlist. The result was a montage of visions for Carrall Street, based on both verbal and non-verbal ways of dialoguing.

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31 In the formal interviews, we chose to not have a set list of questions beforehand: we began each interview by asking what the interviewee would put on Carrall Street, but the follow-up questions were based on our knowledge of the person. For the informal interviews, we only asked one question: “If you could put anything on Carrall Street, what would it be?” In conducting informal interviews, the device of making a film allowed us to discuss openly the Carrall Street Greenway in a non-institutional environment. It raised awareness of the changes occurring on the street and consequently encouraged people to reflect on how they have used the space in the past and would want to use the space in the future.

32 According to a report released by the University of British Columbia’s Learning Exchange, the DTES has a higher number of people who have less than a Grade 9 education when compared to the rest of Vancouver (Newman, 2005).

33 We would write down peoples’ ideas and then read them back to them, to ensure accuracy. Editing requires the selection of specific ideas that work with the narrative coherence of the piece. As such, while we tried to incorporate either visually or audibly something from everyone with whom we spoke, that was not always possible.
This montage of visions (as seen in Illustration 4.5) was made possible by our decision to use animation as the primary visual device for Wishlist. Our reliance on animation circumvented one of the main drawbacks of video, in which all too often inarticulate or camera-shy people are edited out of the final product.

Illustration 4.5 Screenshot of Wishlist's Animation

While using animation certainly resolved some issues of representation, we were still left with the difficult task of editing interviews. This process involved listening, (re)interpreting, and deciding which portions of people’s interviews to use in the final video. In most cases, this meant that a 20-minute
interview was reduced to a few words, which were then loosely categorized into either the “basic needs” or “community space” sections.\(^{34}\) Once again, we tried to mitigate this by writing down the ideas that were cut from the audio track, and incorporating these concepts in the final animation. This ensured that every person interviewed was represented in the film and guarded against potential feelings of disempowerment or disappointment.

**Wishlist’s Production: Process, Politics, and Product**

Throughout this chapter I have referred to the stylistic and aesthetic decisions made by the *Wishlist* production team as decisions that “we” collectively made. While it is essential to acknowledge that while *Wishlist* potentially empowers its viewers, it is equally crucial that the filmmaking process be equitable and just, serving to empower those involved in the film’s production. Any analysis of social justice in relation to video needs to include a discussion about how group dynamics influenced the filmmaking process, politics, and the final product.\(^{35}\)

**Process**

As previously mentioned, the *Wishlist* production team consisted of three planning students (myself, Ian Marcuse, and Elana Cossover) and one at-

\(^{34}\) It is also important to note that these categories were developed by the *Wishlist* team, and that interviewees did not describe which categories they thought their ideas fitted into.

\(^{35}\) Please note that the following discussion about group dynamics stems only from my own observations, and is therefore a highly subjective account of the filmmaking process.
risk youth (April Curry). The production teams were formed after an early morning brainstorming session, where group facilitators asked us to stand by our favorite brainstorming words and concepts. I and two other planning students gravitated towards a poem that April (after some encouragement from me and another student) had written. Her poem was about a city emerging from a forest, and had prompted a lot of discussion about what an alternative greenway might look like. Once the groups were formed, we were asked to brainstorm further and present our ideas to the wider group. We were then given until our next meeting to develop a treatment for our film.

The treatment process was interesting because two of the planning student group members were absent. April and I were therefore responsible for co-developing the initial concept for the film. Upon the return of the other two planning students, we quickly set up a production plan and then met regularly for at least four days each week, until the completion of the project, two months later.

Politics

Group politics and decision-making strategies invariably affect any final video product. In the case of Wishlist, group politics played a critical role in both directing the film’s content and empowering the filmmakers.

37 A treatment is a one-page document that pitches your film to a production company. This original treatment is included in the Appendix #1.
Wishlist's early group politics were affected by the overrepresentation of planning students in the production team. Being acutely conscious of issues of voice, the planning students were frequently deferential to April during the first two weeks of concept development. This deference was exacerbated by our film being inspired by a poem that April had written. Additionally, one of the planning students in our group had worked as a social worker in the DTES for many years and felt it was their role to teach and support the group's at-risk youth representative. While continual deference is rarely beneficial, I feel that this initial deference helped to give April a sense of confidence in her own decisions. In fact, April in later conversations told me that she was frightened at first to voice her opinion because she thought that we were so highly educated, but then she realized that she was just as intelligent as the rest of us!38

This initial deference abated as soon as we began to understand the talents each of us brought to the project. April and myself, as the only group members with previous video experience, became the creative and technical side of the team, while Ian and Elana naturally fell into the process side of the production. Additionally, because Ian (40) and Elana (32) were both

38 What is interesting about this conversation is that at the end of the project, many of the at-risk youth expressed a strong desire to return to school, and April was determined to become a midwife.

considerably older than April (21) and myself (22), April and I often found ourselves relating better to each other than to the older members of the group. This also helped to overcome the ‘planning student’ and ‘at-risk youth’ categories within which we were initially operating.

Despite this division of talents, tasks, and ages, the Wishlist team used consensus-based decision-making for all production issues, including editing. This model meant that everyone in the group needed to understand, and agree with, what was being proposed. On several occasions, this led to very lengthy discussions that always involved trade-offs and compromises among the group members. One such debate was about the overall tone of the film. One planning student felt that we were making an overly optimistic piece and that we needed to be more critical of the city’s plans for the Greenway. The result was that we typed up and then printed off all of the recorded interviews. Together, the team spent two days cutting and categorizing people’s quotations, before agreeing, based on the transcripts, that we really didn’t have enough overt critique in the interviews to make it them an integral part of the film’s narrative. While lengthy, this process allowed us all to step back from our own positions on the Greenway, and consider what our actual content looked like, before making any decisions.
Product

While consensus-based decision-making helped us to overcome the experience / inexperience divide with regard to video skills, we also made one significant decision to mitigate this problem. Because we were operating within a very short time frame, it was clear that I would have to do most of the editing. This posed a problem because part of the film’s purpose was to train those involved in video-making skills. While we had collaboratively shot the interviews and edited together on paper, the three other group members would be missing out on the opportunity to acquire video-editing skills. To compensate, we agreed to use stop-motion animation, rather than Flash animation (a process that allows you to digitally animate a film). While I edited the film from Projection’s office, April, Ian, and Elana, in a time-consuming process, manually altered each animated frame for the film’s two sequences. The result, I would argue, is an aesthetic that is much more in tune with the film’s tone: rather than appearing overly technical, Wishlist appears to be driven by collaboration.

In spite of initial power imbalances, Wishlist’s process was overwhelmingly collaborative, based on the consensus decision-making model. It was my impression that every group member felt empowered to speak their own mind, as we openly (and sometimes painstakingly) discussed every issue. Additionally, because fundamental decisions around the skills-building
component to the project were made early on, each group member walked away with a broader filmmaking skill set.

This chapter has argued that while video can be a powerful tool for fostering dialogue, issues of accessibility, representation, and censorship need to be carefully considered at a project’s outset. Wishlist has shown that in order to make an inclusive film that fosters dialogue, a film’s style and aesthetics need to be driven by the multiple ways of knowing that exist in the community(ies).
From Dialoguing to Appropriating

What do you see?

Does it always have to be that way?

As a utopian film, Wishlist urges people to claim their rights to participation and appropriation through engaging them in a dialogue based on imaginatively reinterpreting the present.

Wishlist as Utopia

Wishlist opens up a space for dialogue by confronting feelings of powerlessness and invisibility often expressed by DTES residents. Wishlist demands the impossible as a way of realizing all that might be, creating a space for new possibilities while urging the viewer to add her own voice to the assemblage of voices (Attili, 2007). In asking the latent question, “What would you put on Carrall Street?”, Wishlist confronts people’s fears of powerlessness (Lefebvre, 1996). This confrontation is crucial to claiming the right to participate in and to appropriate the city; we can only truly inhabit the city once we are able to believe that things can change. Hope means believing that the impossible is possible, despite all evidence to the contrary, and this very act makes the evidence change, as Loeb (2004) has demonstrated, historically.
Wishlist fosters this hope through using animation to imagine what an appropriated Carrall Street would look like.

**Wishlist: Imagining Spatial Appropriation**

Through its imagined street appropriations, Wishlist establishes a dialogue based on the right to actively inhabit the city. We are alienated from our urban environments when we cannot see ourselves reflected in them. The movement from fear to hope therefore begins with imagining that we have the right to physically alter the spaces of the city so that they respond to our needs, desires, and identities (Young, 1990).

Wishlist transforms Carrall Street into a place where people's meanings are validated, projected, and transmitted to others (Leach, 2005). For DTES residents viewing the film, they may hear (through the sound of a shopping cart on the street), or see (through their art appearing in an animation sequence) parts aspects of their lives reflected in the space. These validations and transformations are critical to initiating a dialogue over who has the right to appropriate space. For Marxist cultural critic Walter Benjamin, appropriation occurs both through use and by perception (Benjamin, 1968).39 Wishlist engages overtly in appropriation by perception; when people view the film, they

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39 Walter Benjamin, associated with the Frankfurt School, is a key figure in social, cultural, and literary criticism. His *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), with its analysis of art and its aura, is considered to be an early form of semiotic analysis and has influenced many cultural theorists.
enter into a dialogue with others over the multitude of possible uses, (and users) of the street. For DTES residents, the establishment of this dialogue is crucial for changing how the DTES is perceived. As one resident states in the film, “the frustrating part for me is that the DTES is not recognized for what it is, a vibrant, artistic community”. Wishlist therefore plays an important role in empowering residents, while simultaneously transforming people’s narratives to include a broader understanding of the interplay among space, place, and identity (Harvey, 1973). This comprehension is crucial for advancing the right to the city, as it opens up a forum for discussions based on the rights to participation and appropriation (Dikec, 2001).

**Wishlist’s Vision for Inhabiting the City**

Wishlist grounds spatial appropriation in a vision of inhabiting the city based on a politics of multiplicity. This framing is crucial to the film, as insights and revelations come not from recording and transmitting stories, but from weaving them together (Gurstein, 2007). On Wishlist’s Carrall Street, social groups intermingle while resisting homogenization, embracing the differences of opinion and understanding that are constitutive of city life (Young, 1990). On this imagined street, ideas for change (“I think there should be an area for play, where children and adults can interact, like a fair that’s always happening, where the multicultural, multi interests can be expressed”) are juxtaposed with
demands for leaving things as is ("Honestly, I'd just leave it the way it is. I like it. It's real"). Because Wishlist is a compilation of overlapping images, ideas, and soundscapes, it demands that the viewer engage with the film as an active listener and mediator. The result is that Wishlist allows the viewer to move from an individual analysis of place to a collective, politically charged critique of space, thereby rendering the act of viewing a highly political one (Harvey, 1973).40

Wishlist's Politics

There are no inevitabilities in this world... there are always responses, resistances, attempts at shaping and reshaping the historical forces that impinge on our lives (Friedmann, 2000 p. 461).

When we use our imaginations, we are playfully engaging in appropriations that are often deeply political. In creating Wishlist, the production team was keenly aware that direct action could be one of the film's outcomes. Because the Carrall Street redesign process was already well underway (discussed in chapter 6), we decided that Wishlist's potential was in asserting a vision that did not so much depend on mobilizing to address or respond to the current political regime, but rather depended on individuals and

40 David Harvey, in Social Justice and the City, develops the idea of the geographical imagination. He argues that no geography is isolated from the social, political, and economic histories within its landscape (Harvey, 1973).
social groups mobilizing for their right to appropriate space in spite of political power. As one resident in the film argues: “Using that space in a productive way, socializing there, we can take something that we didn’t really ask for and turn it into a community building tool”. In other words, the Carrall Street redesign process could act as a catalyst for multiple forms of (re)appropriation. By spatially appropriating Carrall Street through perception, Wishlist establishes the context in which such a physical (re)appropriation could occur. Wishlist is therefore less of a ‘Wish List’ for City of Vancouver planners, and more of a do-it-yourself (DIY) ‘Wish List’ for current and future users of Carrall Street.41

This chapter has argued that Wishlist, as a utopian film, empowers DTES residents to imagine how their acts of participation and appropriation might affect Carrall Street. Relying on animation, Wishlist challenges both DTES residents’ and non-residents’ perceptions of Carrall Street, thereby initiating a dialogue over who has rights to the city. This dialogue describes the possibilities for the creation of a more diverse Carrall Street based on the principles of DIY, or (in Lefebvre’s language), appropriation.

41 The idea for the title of the film came from one group member, who liked the idea of naming the film Wishlist because the film, unlike so many planning processes, demands that residents see themselves (rather than the State) as agents of change.
Evaluating

The preceding chapters have examined how Wishlist fosters the right to inhabit the city by engaging people in a dialogue over their rights to participation and appropriation. This last chapter moves away from this discussion to evaluate Wishlist for its applicability, reception, institutional integration, and relevance as a planning tool.

Applicability

When I have had the opportunity to screen Wishlist to city planners and community organizers, the question I am asked first concerns the film’s applicability to wider social and geographical contexts. My first instinct is to answer that it does not matter; that broader applicability was not the purpose of the film. After further consideration, I usually explain that because the film is relatively short (just over 5 minutes in length: an imposed project constraint), it does not contain the necessary space to frame Carrall Streets’ social, geographic, or political context. The reason for this is because Wishlist was never intended to be screened separately from the other Participatory Video project films, and that ‘package’ of films includes a ten-minute process piece.

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42 As will be discussed further in this chapter, I have only had the opportunity to screen the film on a limited number of occasions. I have been present for only six screenings, three of which were for a planning audience.

43 The film does not even mention that Carrall Street is located in Vancouver.
that contextualizes all three films. Without establishment of the relevant context, it has been difficult for some people to see how they could use a similar film in their work. However, others have suggested that the film’s aesthetic and narrative characteristics could be applied to different planning contexts.

I have two main comments regarding applicability. First, I would argue that many of the ideas expressed by DTES residents are relevant to communities in other cities: the desire for safe drinking water, emergency pay phones, and even farmers markets are all items that most people would want to have access to in their neighborhoods, although, of course, each neighbourhood has its unique and context-specific needs. The second and more important question is whether Wishlist’s approach, its aesthetic and narrative choices, are artistic and political strategies with wider applicability. The two preceding chapters suggest that they are. The real challenge, however, is related to scale. For a large neighbourhood, or city, can such video-making principles be applied? And what would be the cost implications of such an expanded scale of engagement? It was beyond the scope of this research to

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44 This is a point which was much debated amongst the participatory video group: many of us felt that it was important to be able to screen the films separately, but organizers emphasized that this would undermine the collaborative nature of the project. If Wishlist were to be screened separately, it would be quite easy to put some text at the beginning of the film to explain the overall context in which the film is set.
answer these questions, but they remain important for future research on video, social justice, and the city.

Reception

The success of a film is often gauged by the audience’s reaction. For films like Wishlist, intended to promote dialogue, people’s responses are crucial to evaluating their effectiveness. Due to circumstances described later in this chapter, Wishlist has been screened only on a few occasions and only once in the DTES. The Participatory Video group screened preliminary versions of all three films at the Interurban Gallery, located at the intersection of Carrall Street and Hastings Street in the DTES. Participants from all three films were invited to attend and were asked for their feedback. Wishlist was shown last and, unlike the other two films, was met with some degree of apprehension. A few residents expressed concern that this video, unlike its predecessors, was uncritical of the Carrall Street Greenway redesign, and seemed to accept gentrification as a fait accompli.45 What this reaction underscored for us was that Wishlist successfully challenged residents’ narratives of place, power, and agency. Instead of ‘preaching to the converted’ by focusing on the negative actions of city planners and developers, Wishlist seriously challenged residents

45While this was the sentiment expressed by three vocal residents, it is unclear whether everyone who attended the screening shared their opinion. Several other members of the audience approached me afterwards and expressed their happiness with the piece. Clearly, screenings in the future need to be facilitated in order to generate a variety of responses.
to move beyond their anger and to imagine that they had the power to affect the street. Essentially, Wishlist caused such a stir because it had successfully urged people to move away from their fear of displacement towards the hope that they could change Carrall Street.

Wishlist has also been screened to non-DTES residents.\(^\text{46}\) The first reaction amongst non-residents is to ask about the logistics of undertaking animation; most people are curious about the process and often express that they believe animation could be used in their own projects. At one screening, audience members began to brainstorm about the different spaces in Vancouver that could be used for a sequel (they finally settled on the Vancouver Art Gallery steps).\(^\text{47}\) This reaction shows that the film is successful in getting people to imagine how they can appropriate their own spaces. Non-DTES residents also commonly express surprise when they find out that the articulate, educated voices in the film belong to DTES residents. This reaction usually instigates a conversation over people’s misconceptions and stereotyping of the DTES. This reaction is another indication that Wishlist is a successful dialoguing tool.

\(^\text{46}\) The film has been screened at the World Urban Forum, the World Planners Congress, Planners for Tomorrow, DOXA, and at community consultations.

\(^\text{47}\) This comment is interesting because the Art Gallery used to be Vancouver’s courthouse, and was traditionally the place for political protests.
Institutional Integration

Patsy Healey argues that imagination needs to be coupled with proper institutional analysis in order to bring about change in the public realm (Healey, 2001). In the case of Wishlist, several problems occurred with the video’s dissemination that significantly hampered its ability to be used as a dialoguing tool. It is important to underscore that many of the problems pertaining to Wishlist’s dissemination are problems frequently experienced when people attempt to use video as a planning tool.

The first issue for us was one of project timing. The CSPVP began when the City of Vancouver was wrapping up the public outreach component of the Carrall Street redesign. In a meeting with a senior planner at the City of Vancouver, we were informed that the physical design of the street had already been decided and therefore, our videos could only have a minimal impact on the street’s design. While it was suggested during this meeting that the videos could potentially contribute to the programming of the space, there was no formal agreement between the City of Vancouver and the Carrall Street Participatory Video group. Consequently, there was no structured venue in which to screen Wishlist.
The second problem was one of flawed communication between the Carrall Street Participatory Video group and the City of Vancouver. As already mentioned, Wishlist was one of three films produced about the Greenway. Upon project completion, some of the staff of the Planning Department within the City of Vancouver deemed one of the other films to be controversial and inappropriate. In response to their concern, the School of Community and Regional Planning, Projections, Ear to the Ground Planning, and staff of the Planning Department of the City of Vancouver agreed that none of the films would be publicly screened or distributed until the controversy was resolved. Unfortunately, this decision meant that Wishlist could not be used to inform the last part of the Greenway planning process.

Patsy Healey explains that when we critically imagine, we enter into new dialogues about governance and decision-making (Healey, 2001). The Wishlist story told in this thesis has shown that without proper institutional buy-in, this dialogue can never get started. It is therefore crucial that future video projects negotiate opportunities for engagement with planning and governance institutions at the outset of the project.

48 It is beyond the scope of this thesis to detail this miscommunication. It is acknowledged, however, that this type of misunderstanding can have political and social consequences, surrounding issues of freedom of speech, on the one hand, and the need to negotiate viewpoints, on the other.
Relevance

The experience of Wishlist suggests that, in the proper context, video can serve as a powerful tool for stimulating conversation over people’s rights to inhabit the city. DTES residents are often unable (or unwilling) to engage with institutionally driven public meetings, workshops, design charrettes, and council reports. Video, as a visual medium, offered them a different way to engage in an inclusive and locally based discussion over their rights to the city. Community-based videos such as Wishlist have the potential to serve as an a priori policy document, in which discussions about changes to public space can occur in the public domain, without people having to form interest groups.\(^49\)

To this end, community control over the medium and its dissemination is crucial in ensuring its legitimacy and applicability (Gurstein, 2007). Issues of representation and censorship need to be carefully considered in a project’s scoping and venues for dissemination need to be confirmed at the project’s outset.

While there is great potential for multimedia to influence policy and promote community development, video is only one of the many tools at the disposal of city planners, community organizers, and residents (Sandercock, 2007). Because video has come into fashion as a way of disseminating

\(^{49}\) Young (1990:73) explains how the formation of interest groups depoliticizes public debate.
information and ideas, there is a tendency for it to be seen as a panacea for
difficult planning contexts. It is crucial that video be approached from a critical
standpoint and, like other planning tools, be tailored to different community
contexts.

Research conclusions

This thesis has argued that the right to the city originates with the right
to imagine participating in its creation. Video, as demonstrated by Wishlist, has
the potential to catalyze this right to participation. Wishlist establishes a
dialogue based on utopian imagining and visual appropriation, thereby
contributing to the struggle for social justice.

But even though video has the potential to foster innovative modes of
participation, relationship building, and decision-making, it is clear that
institutions and communities need to develop their capacity to incorporate
video into their governance structures. More theoretical and practical research,
including case studies and risk-taking by government is needed on the
relevance of video to different contexts, so that we can better comprehend how
video can contribute to new forms of governance processes.
Works Cited


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Appendices

Appendix A

Wishlist: Visual Treatment

Part 1: 45 Seconds
Starts with a forest that merges into photos of Vancouver ‘becoming’; Vancouver as a growth city. The Forest disappears and felled trees replace it, followed by photos of Vancouver as it grows through the decades. This sequence increases in cutting as time elapses, leading towards a montage of highrise construction on new development happening in Vancouver,(30 seconds) and will end on a static time elapse camera shot taken from above on a Carrall Street intersection (15 seconds).

This section will be narrated by Jeff Sommers, a Strathcona resident who has been heavily involved in researching the story of Vancouver as a City of Capital accumulation; He will speak about how Vancouver projects have been driven by capital; this will serve to frame the following film segments against the drive for Vancouver to perpetually grow and develop through money; beautifying the city for economic investment.

Through the transition from highrise development to Carrall Street static shot, have voices begin to emerge about what people would imagine on the street.

Part 2: Transect 1: (location TBA)
Starts with the camera moving along through a section of Carrall Street. This movement ends on a still frame of the Street.

Imaginings as told to us through interviews and music/performances by people in the community overlay the camera movement.

Part 3: Still Image Animation 1: (location TBA)
The still image that is frozen slowly becomes overlaid with other images, created through clay, painting, collage, using stop motion photography. As the animation continues, the faded pan of the street will begin again, and the animation will slowly fade and we are once again brought into the streetscape.
People’s imaginings (community gardens, bakeries, art) and people’s contributions to this (ie; photographs, art) are overlaid on the image as they speak about them.

Part 4: Transect 2 (Location TBA)
The Streetscape pan continues, and then freezes.

Imaginings as told to us through interviews and music/performances by people in the community overlay the camera movement.

Part 5: Still Image Animation 2: (Location TBA)
The still image that is frozen slowly becomes overlaid with other images, created through clay, painting, collage, using stop motion photography.

People’s imaginings (community gardens, bakeries, art) and people’s contributions to this (ie; photographs, art) are overlaid on the image as they speak about them.

Part 6: End and Credits
The still image freezes and then fades into shots taken of the street, of people walking, busking, resting. Included in this are shots of the people we interviewed, walking, (smiling?). Eventually, the transparency increases, and credits come in, possibly going with images of the people we have interviewed.

Interviews conducted about public space, process, and vitality in the city overlay the images.
Appendix C

Supplementary Materials: Wishlist DVD