

TIMES PLACES THINGS — FOGO ISLAND, NEWFOUNDLAND



A previous post on this site mentioned a recent visit I made to Fogo Island [\[Link\]](#) – and where I found myself revisiting matters I had raised in a book of mine – *Heritage Performance Design* (2019) [\[Link\]](#).

Making things and the specifics of place

Shore Time: Art, Design, Place was one of the biannual gatherings convened by Fogo Island Arts [\[Link\]](#), the contemporary art program of the social enterprise Shorefast [\[Link\]](#), on Fogo Island off the north-east coast of Newfoundland. This 2026 edition, from 1 to 3 October, brought together artists, curators, critics, architects and designers – the artists Leonor Antunes and R. H. Quaytman, the designers Sebastian Herkner, Glenn Pushelberg and Tommy Smythe, the architect Todd Saunders, the art historian Tom McDonough, with Shorefast’s founder Zita Cobb and Fogo Island Arts’ director Kitty Scott – in the restored Orange Lodge at Barr’d Islands, a fraternal hall of 1908 that now houses the Shorefast Institute for Place-Based Economies.

I opened the gathering, offered commentary along the way, and co-chaired the closing session.

New entanglements of people, things, and place

The organisers framed the gathering around “human-centred making and the specificity of place”. Their claim is that art and design now “look beyond the

creation of discrete objects to model new entanglements of people, things, and place”, and offer “novel models of collaborative problem solving” for present and future needs.

The sessions were conversations rather than lectures, and their prompts show the themes: how one honors the hands that came before; whether designing for a place differs from designing for a client; whether painting is a conversation with the history of a medium or a kind of excavation; how a designer ensures that craft leads the process; and, in a closing exchange between Cobb and Saunders about the Fogo Island Inn, how one builds for time – what must stay the same, and what must change, for a building to matter in a hundred years. Afternoons were given to visits to island makers’ studios. The gathering is described as central to “the regenerative project” of Fogo Island Arts and Shorefast: an island of some two thousand people, shaped by four centuries of inshore fishery and its collapse in 1992, proposed as a place of consequence for contemporary art and thought.

Topics in working with remains for future well being

A lot of the conversation circled around what I would describe as activating an archaeological sensibility, with making, design, architecture, and the arts exploring pasts-in-presents, attending to our engagements with materials, matters of environment and milieu, the landscapes and architectures within which we are immersed. Not in the abstract – immersed in the specific details of everyday *particularity*.

Times

Percolating time. Time does not flow, but bubbles round us, mists around us, mingling pasts, presents, future prospects and hopes and fears. Buildings and things re-member, re-mark, re-activate associations, connections. They prompt memory and present us with remains, traces that nudge and prompt. This is the very premise of Shorefast’s place-based economics taking up from the centuries-old sea-oriented communities, the end of cod, the changing prospects for the island (an *oikonomia* – see below).

Stories are a key mode of activation. The stories behind things bring them alive. Sebastian and Tommy pointed out how the authenticity of making involves stories of things. Zita shared the island’s stories, the shock of the disappearance of the cod

in the 60s because few on the island looked beyond their local concerns to the trawlers clearing out the north Atlantic.

Reenactment and replay. In our discussions of taking up (the remains of) the past for future well-being. I noted the distinction between reenactment that considers that authenticity comes in the imitation of the past, and replay takes up the past for the present and future. Replay requires adaptive change, not nostalgic repeat. To make a Fogo punt in 2026 is quite a different undertaking, a different thing than what it was in 1956.

One might note here a connection with the island – focused on the shore that links people to fish and boats, the dynamics of edges, transitions, connections – “**shore times**” indeed.



Designing, making, art

Making things is always making-with and involves gathering, composing arrangements, making connections between makers and people, makers and materials, makers and

stories.

Sebastian shared his profound **experiences** of making-with others in Africa. Rebecca talked of her painting as a conversation with the history of art, an excavation-with-traces.

Stories, images, things. Paintings, like quilts, are objects. Making an image is making an object, a thing. I brought to mind that phrase of Horace's – "*ut pictura poiesis*" – just as in an image, so too in poetics. Several discussions focused on close attention to things, attunement to material and purpose. The qualities of things, qualia and quiddities, and how understanding often comes after the event of making.

Glenn talked of emotional design and the significance of intangibles. His luxurious-designed interiors prompted us to think of the concept of luxury, here on the island and prompted by the extraordinary interiors of the Inn. Luxury may refer to the exorbitantly out-of-reach expensive. **Luxury** can also refer to what is "special" in opportunities to attend to everyday things that are well-designed. As Zita pointed out, here is a way of distinguishing generic branding from good design which generates connections, associations; originality is a term to describe this activation or gathering of particular combinations of local and global – customized and bespoke.

All this requires re-activating sensibilities of **taste and judgement**, aesthetics, located in embodied corporeal senses, emotions, sharings. And surely this is territory that AI and tech will have difficulty treading and navigating.

Making-with as gathering. I suggested **design** is well-conceived as project management. Not the specialized branch of management science, but arrangements of resources and plans, people and skills that make-things-happen.

And all projects leave deposits – deliverables, traces, impacts, documents. Another aspect of an archaeological sensibility.

It occurred to me and Tom in conversation that we were circling around old tensions between arts, crafts, design, (division of) labor, resources, wealth and energy.

Places

Leonor spoke of how her work activates space through materials, with making as collaboration, not just solitary work-of-the-hand.

And always, in the conversations, there was the sense of place in which we were immersed, the *haecceity* of the island – its “hereness”. The vernacular of house, shed, and fishing stage. Granite and shore.



Looming, looking much bigger than it is, was the Inn – an extraordinary provocation of **hospitality**, designing commensality, the sharing of a table. For me this involves the figure of the innkeeper, the host, who welcomes the visitor, and haunting ghosts (of place, past times, previous inhabitants and visitors).

The Inn was designed by Todd Saunders along with his studios – shed-sites for making and creating, art and design. Todd's buildings stick out. They don't fit into the landscape. They activate. Todd describes them as frames through which to appreciate the qualities of place, as apostrophes, punctuation marks on the land. I'll have more to say of such "site specifics" in a separate comment [Link]

Three comments about pragmatics – getting things done

Heritage inhabited, not displayed. It was refreshing that the concept of heritage hardly appeared in conversation. But the gathering had much to say about matters of heritage. Shorefast's distinctive move is to put its heritage to use. The outpost houses it has restored are lived in rather than roped off; the Inn is a gesture towards a regular feature of villages and towns, but provocatively in its design and intended visitors. Zita Cobb was insistent that none of this stands up without a business plan: the "connective tissue" of a cultural project, she argued, has to include its financial feasibility. I found that candor and insight very valuable. Most heritage organisations act in the name of abstractions – the nation, future generations, humanity – that cannot be asked why. Shorefast names its warrant to act, and a named warrant can be discussed. What, we might ask, on an island where a third of houses now stand empty for part of the year, does inhabitation mean, and for whom? This intersection of community life, business and economic feasibility is well-named *Oikonomia*, after the original Greek – the management, regulation, design of community conceived as extended household.

Community made visible to itself. Fogo has already run an experiment that our gathering was convened to discuss – place as an achievement, not a given. In 1967, filmmakers from the National Film Board and organisers from Memorial University made twenty-seven short films in which islanders spoke about the failing fishery and the threat of resettlement; the films were shown back to the island, then to the provincial cabinet, whose filmed replies were shown back again. This "Fogo Process" made a community visible to itself and audible to power, and it did so by handing the means of articulation to the people being articulated. Every one of

Shore Time's four questions – what we know, have, miss and love – was a question the islanders put to themselves on screen sixty years ago. That history deserves to be at the centre of the island's cultural program, and it sets a demanding standard for any gathering that comes after it: who holds the camera now?

Building for future time – a vital matter of succession. Zita and Todd shared some searching questions discussing the Inn: how it came to be built with a particular future-oriented purpose, what might stay the same, and what might change, for it to last and matter in a hundred years. What and who comes next? I have shared the same questions with several members of the car collecting community. Car collections are not easily finding new young enthusiasts to take them into the future once their founding collectors retire or pass on. Our Stanford Revs Program found it surprisingly difficult to establish grounds for a transfer to younger generations of enthusiasm for automotive history and archaeology, and even though the automobile is a defining feature of life since the beginning of the twentieth century.

This is a matter of **education and learning**, of inter-generational communication, in schools, colleges, and opening events such as Shore Time to participation from younger people. Of spreading the word too: Tommy mentioned the importance of helping people come to appreciate the things we were discussing – especially qualities of good design, applied to place and community.

What and who comes next? An archaeologist hears such questions in a particular way. Every project leaves a deposit; the Inn, the studios, the restored houses, the craft businesses are the island's next stratum, and they will be taken up or neglected by people who did not know their makers. Shorefast, the social enterprise founded by Zita to build economic and cultural resilience on the island, is twenty years old and the record of founder-led cultural ventures is sobering – most do not outlast their founders by long. The honest version of "building for time" is a question about succession and about what one is prepared to let go, as the island had to let go of the cod. Fogo is better placed than most to address these critical questions.





Slide deck from my opening address.