

# Urgent Moments

**Art and Social Change:  
The Letting Space Projects  
2010–2020**

Edited by  
Mark Amery  
Amber Clausner  
Sophie Jerram





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During the seven years chronicled in this book, Letting Space ranged wildly and admirably between disciplines and genres. The project is almost impossible to define. Letting Space producers Mark Amery and Sophie Jerram's mission was broad and ambitious: 'to transform the relationship between artists, the public and their environments to enable social change'. It's only now, by examining the extraordinary documents contained in this book, that it's possible to appreciate the unusual agenda that Amery and Jerram devised: to create an organisationally stable but conceptually fluid enterprise capable of responding to changes in the social landscape as it evolved.

Seven years is a very old age for an artist-run enterprise. The project's longevity can be attributed to its ability to shape-shift between high-art conceptualism, institutional critique and para-artistic social repair . . . a shift that was determined by the artists and other practitioners who responded to Amery and Jerram's many open calls.

As Amery sets out in his account of the project's beginnings (page 20), Letting Space began in 2010 in the wake of the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2007–08. In the ensuing years, Wellington's central business district became a ghost town of vacant commercial spaces that developers were reluctant to lease long-term at temporarily low market rents. All over the world, from Tijuana's Avenida Revolución and West Amsterdam to downtown Los Angeles, artists and artisans saw this catastrophe as an opportunity to occupy space, escape from the prevailing institutional structures and launch new careers with a very low overhead.

Amery and Jerram had, in a sense, been here before. They'd witnessed the explosion of alternative enterprises that arose in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland after the 1987 stock market crash, from the artist-run gallery Teststrip on Vulcan Lane to the more institutionally organised Artspace, which moved into a large, rent-free space on Quay Street courtesy of the building's developers after they had been unable to lease it at a viable commercial rate. This phenomenon wasn't unique to Aotearoa New Zealand. Among many notable international examples from this time, Marianne Weems' multi-media theatre company The Builders Association was born of a deal that Weems struck with Tribeca developers in New York intent upon warehousing their vacant space. These late twentieth-century enterprises were proactively parasitic. The artists involved were able to recognise adverse economic conditions and then capitalise on them, turning empty space into creative opportunity zones.

In 2010, the year of the Arab Spring and the year before the worldwide Occupy movement, Jerram and Amery realised that, this time, the situation was urgent and things had to be different. The GFC was just the latest in a long series of international influences and domestic policy shifts — from the destruction of the social safety net enacted by Rogernomics and Ruthanasia in the 1980s and 1990s to the Disneyfication of New Zealand that followed the success of *The Lord of the Rings* and its global perception as a billionaire's bolthole — that violently separated winners from losers and transformed the national mood to one of quiet, impending doom.

As the American writer Eugene Lim writes in his post-Occupy book *Dear Cyborgs*:

Everywhere there is no there there. Except for those and that that's fucked. There there's hell. Detroit, Dharavi, Guryong Village, Cova da Muta, Oakland . . . The smoothing of all difference into capitalist civility is remarkably unremarked on. Oh, the omnipotent juices of the market's gut — it eats it all! And maybe the non-remarking is but one other aspect of the digestive process. (How quietly it eats!) . . . Like the city itself the complex is unknowable, one's neighbors are so close yet so far away . . .<sup>1</sup>

1. Eugene Lim, *Dear Cyborgs: A novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017).

2. Micky Savage, 'The Real Cause of New Zealand's Failing Housing System,' *The Standard*, 23 February 2020, <https://thestandard.org.nz>.

Everywhere included Aotearoa, where a sense of the elegiac hovered over it all.

In a post on *The Standard* from 2020 titled 'The Real Cause of New Zealand's Failing Housing System', regular blogger Micky Savage recalls his experience growing up in the 1960s and 1970s: 'My dad was a boilermaker and my mum had to cope with five of us, but we had a modest but reasonable home to live in, plenty to eat . . . I grew up in a real working class area . . . where the cost of putting a roof over everyone's head was not a major draw on incomes that increased every year.'<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, in her 2017 essay about Groundwater, a festival curated by Letting Space (page 274 of this volume), Moira Wairama recalls the Hutt River that she and her sisters and cousins and friends knew during her childhood: 'The river was our playground and everyone swam there . . . Later, my own children swam at water holes at the entrance to Stokes Valley and under the Silverstream bridge. Now my mokopuna and our whānau whānui drive up to Akatarawa, Te Mārua or Kaitoke where the river water is still clean . . .'

Planning their venture in 2010, Amery and Jerram realised that Letting Space would need to be more like a predator and less like a happy parasite, using the donated spaces to interrogate what people want and where things went wrong. They asked: How best to activate these feelings of loss and regret into a liveable present and future? Their answer: supporting projects that exposed all the contradictions between the artistic participants and their developer hosts — projects that explicitly raised economic and environmental concerns.

This was a tricky position for Letting Space to navigate. How would it remain critical while accepting a development company's generous offer of free space? How to evolve from the parasitical position of grateful oblivion without actively biting the hand that feeds it?

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The earliest Letting Space projects addressed the proliferation of plastics (Eve Armstrong's *Taking Stock*, 2010); the grocery supply chain and retail experience (Kim Paton's *Free Store*, 2010); alternative paths towards development — on Mars! (Bronwyn Holloway-Smith's *Pioneer City*, 2011); and, most controversially of all, Tao Wells' *Beneficiary's Office*, in 2010.

Wells famously set up an office on Manners Street for three weeks in 2010, courtesy of The Wellington Company, a prominent local developer, for his new

public relations firm The Wells Group. The firm's first agenda was to advocate for unemployment as an environmentally sustainable lifestyle. As the firm pointed out, 'The average carbon footprint of the unemployed person is about half that of those earning over \$100,000 . . . we need to work less so we consume less.'<sup>3</sup>

A beneficiary himself, with this project Wells provoked a torrent of rage from the media and general public. If this felt like déjà vu, it's because it was: in 2004, Parliament debated withdrawing funding from the artist chosen to represent New Zealand at the 2005 Venice Biennale exhibition because she refused to use her own name. Wells' action further exposed New Zealand's abhorrence of conceptual art that receives any amount of public funding and his benefit from Work and Income New Zealand was temporarily suspended. 'So that's where our money goes', *The Dominion Post* wrote.<sup>4</sup>

An editorial in the *New Zealand Listener* cavilled that Wells 'disparages working people, and exhorts them to ditch their jobs, live off the state and become minimalist consumers'.<sup>5</sup> 'If only he'd put the same effort and energy into his CV he probably wouldn't have a problem', acting Minister of Social Development Judith Collins remarked to *Prime News*.<sup>6</sup> Of all the Letting Space projects, *Beneficiary's Office* was the most successful at stirring up a hornet's nest of unresolved contradictions. Still, New Zealand being the small place that it is, Wells' contemporaneous video documentation *The Happy Bene* finds him in the office with The Wellington Company's CEO Ian Cassels, amiably chatting and bantering.<sup>7</sup>

Capitalising on the same small-country level of direct communication and accessibility, in two pitch events in 2010 and 2011, called Urban Dream Brokerage, Jerram and Amery enlisted members of Wellington City Council to listen to artists, landlords and property managers pitch their ideas for creative uses of vacant space. The open call was an improbable spin on reality television. Artist Kim Paton proposed setting new benchmarks for real estate pricing that included social and cultural benefit; artist and filmmaker Colin Hodson suggested transforming the upper floors of high-rise buildings into wild urban spaces; while artist and prankster James R. Ford proposed inviting the public to help him destroy his 'cursed Nissan Primera'. Of these three, only the car demolition project was funded. Nevertheless, in 2012 Urban Dream Brokerage became a permanent institution, matching artists and property owners.

Although less inflammatory than *Beneficiary's Office*, Kim Paton's 2010 project *Free Store* similarly exposed deep and revolving questions, this time regarding the psychosocial dynamics of generosity, food wastage and the boundaries of contemporary art projects within the genre of 'social practice'. An experienced grocer herself — she ran a grocery for three years in Raglan — Paton took over an empty shop owned by Foodstuffs on Ghuznee Street in central Pōneke Wellington to collect and 'market' donated food that would otherwise be discarded. Designed to look more like a shop rather than a food bank, *Free Store* aimed to remove (or at least examine) the stigma attached to receiving goods outside the normal means of exchange. Paton went on to develop a second temporary iteration of the store in West Auckland (to more media attention) and others picked up the Wellington store, which became a permanent institution beyond the artwork's demonstrational realm.

3. 'Beneficiary's Office', page 52 of this volume.

4. 'So That's Where Our Money Goes', *Dominion Post*, 16 October 2010.

5. 'A Blow to the Art', *New Zealand Listener*, vol. 226, no. 3677, 30 October–5 November 2010.

6. The Wells Group, 'Wells Group — The Beneficiary's Office on Prime News', 18 October 2010, <https://vimeo.com>.

7. Dick Whyte and Tao Wells, *The Happy Bene — THE MOVIE* —, <https://vimeo.com>.



*Inanga Love Park,*  
 Kedron Parker and collaborators,  
 Groundwater: Common Ground Arts  
 Festival, February 2017.

As Heather Galbraith writes in her essay ‘Visible and Actual’ (page 45 of this volume), art world observers became ‘uncomfortable with the growing distance between the initial propositional “small (art) gesture” and the more concrete, large-scale social service initiative. If *Free Store* is taken up, formalised and made part of an official service delivery, does the subsuming or the lowering of visibility of the critical creative impulse and ethical/philosophical investigations of the project lessen its cultural value?’

For two weeks in 2011, Colin Hodson took over Asteron House on The Terrace, a seven-storey commercial building that was temporarily dormant while its owners made plans to renovate it. Leaving the remains of the building’s vacated offices in place, Hodson programmed the building’s fluorescent lights to turn on and off in tandem with share-trading volumes on the New Zealand stock exchange. This kinetic sculpture, *The Market Testament*, brilliantly rendered visible the invisible flows of the market that govern our lives. Like the sound of church bells ringing every quarter hour to remind people in the Middle Ages of the passage of time and their own mortality, Asteron House was transformed from a vacant building into an elusive monument, one that revealed the relentless laws of financial exchange that pulse under the skin of the present.

Translating the ungraspable abstraction of high economic exchange into a giant abstracted pattern of light, *The Market Testament* was less overtly challenging than Wells’ and Paton’s more social projects. Nevertheless, as Martin Patrick reports in this volume, readers of *The Dominion Post* didn’t fail to observe that in ‘wasting power’, the project ‘didn’t seem very artistic at all’.<sup>8</sup>

8. Comments on Tom Pullar-Strecker and Tom Hunt, ‘\$6500 grant to light up a building’, Stuff, 12 April 2011, <https://www.stuff.co.nz>.

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A year later, in 2012, Amery and Jerram put out a call for new public artworks based on the theme of ‘community service’. This was one year after the city of Ōtautahi Christchurch had been razed by the biggest of the Canterbury earthquakes. John Key was in the fourth year of what was to be an eight-year tenure as prime minister, fulfilling the National government’s promise of privatisation by gutting the public service bureaucracy (or ‘draining the swamp’, as Donald Trump later put it). The Letting Space call for ‘community service’ projects was a pivot, a shifting of emphasis. If most of the projects produced up to that date had hovered somewhere in between conceptual art and social practice, this new series provided clarity and committed Letting Space to the exploration of a new means of public engagement.

Like all boundaries, the new definition would at once limit the scope of the enterprise and open new paths of discovery. One of the first projects, Mark Harvey’s *Productive Bodies* in 2012, recruited a small cadre of unemployed people and stay-at-home parents to mill around office foyers pushing lift buttons for government workers and applaud Te Papa museum goers as they entered and left the building. These actions might at first glance seem self-conscious and silly, but they raised vital questions about the value accorded to work and the shifting of responsibility for social care from the state to the individual. As participant Gradon Diprose would later reflect, ‘There was a certain pointlessness to some of our work, like collecting leaves off the grass . . . that made me think about the

pointlessness of so much of my “employed labour”, such as the endless work emails and report writing that will be forgotten next week.’<sup>9</sup>

But even more vitally, the new series opened the door to projects that took place outside city centres. D.A.N.C.E. FM 106.7 brought artists from Tāmaki Makaurau to Taupō and Tūrangi, where they set up a mobile temporary radio station, while Tim Barlow, in collaboration with engineers, constructed a temporary water fountain. Travelling around the region, the project involved many local storytellers, scientists, school and kura students and residents of a retirement village.

Building upon the ideas and exchanges that arose from these projects, in 2013 Letting Space set up the Transitional Economic Zone of Aotearoa (TEZA) in the suburb of New Brighton in Christchurch. Diminished by post-quake school mergers, a rise in sea levels and the abandonment of a once-thriving shopping district, New Brighton was paradigmatic of those (many) places left behind in the flush of neoliberal globalisation. It was an exurban ‘hinterland’, as defined by American geographer Phil A. Neel in his groundbreaking book of that title,<sup>10</sup> existing in limbo outside the cores of the supposedly post-industrial economy.

For a week in late 2013, Letting Space veterans such as Mark Harvey, Kim Paton and Tim Barlow joined forces with local organisations and a host of other artists, including the renowned musician/composer Phil Dadson, to host a series of events that would encourage New Brighton residents to imagine alternative futures. Letting Space producers and artists were aware of the failures of international projects that alight in troubled areas with evangelical condescension and zeal. To avoid this, Letting Space deliberately worked with existing local organisations. No conclusions were reached, but as respondent Andrew Paul Wood later noted, ‘TEZA was doing a better job of outreach than many of the politicians’.<sup>11</sup>

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Two years later, Letting Space set up another TEZA in Cobham Court, an underused cluster of vacant shops in Porirua. TEZA ran in tandem with a satellite Urban Dream Brokerage programme that Letting Space had established with the Porirua Chamber of Commerce. This spawned a series of projects, such as Toi Wāhine, a Māori women artists’ space, which would continue for years. Historically working class, by 2015 Porirua was being rapidly gentrified as middle-class people priced out of Wellington moved into the suburb. Letting Space initially set up in a vacant McDonald’s that had once been the scene of fondly remembered kids’ birthday parties and hosted more than 40 events.

As Reuben Friend, the then director of Porirua’s Pātaka Art + Museum, later noted, the presence of TEZA drew explicit attention to real but repressed racial and class divisions. ‘In the midst of this maelstrom,’ he writes in this volume, ‘some sophisticated strangers strolled into town [and] managed to stir up difficult conversations that many stakeholders are either too polite or too politic to discuss on the public record.’<sup>12</sup> There were concerns, he writes, from local store owners that the pop-up projects simply added to ‘the unrefined, construction-like feel of the area’. Local retailers were seeking large anchor businesses that could provide

9. Gradon Diprose, ‘Productive Bodies: Reflections’, page 182 of this volume.

10. Phil A. Neel, *Hinterland: America’s new landscape of class and conflict* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018).

11. Andrew Paul Wood, ‘TEZA Tour of Duty: A response’, page 180 of this volume.

12. Reuben Friend, ‘Art or Community Service’, page 235 of this volume.



Mark Harvey with *Productive Promises* and Barry Thomas with 'Want Mart', Transitional Economic Zone of Aotearoa, Porirua, November 2015.



'Citizens Water Map Lab',  
Julian Priest, Groundwater:  
Common Ground Arts Festival, February–  
March 2017.



a permanent revitalisation. And yet, as respondent Murdoch Stephens notes, 'Retail spaces are being gutted and this is not going to stop . . . The losers will be those who don't understand the new sensitivities of the economic zones of our urban centres. 'As the boat is sinking', he goes on, 'we cling on to whatever seems the most stable.'<sup>13</sup>

In Porirua, Letting Space used social practices to arrive at the same acute point of criticality achieved by their early conceptual projects. As Friend argues, 'They have activated our community in a way that no one else could or would have.' TEZA Porirua was 'a stealthy sleeper-project, distilled in plain view of the community', he concludes, and as such had 'a subversively powerful force'.<sup>14</sup>

The fine grain and social impact of these local projects offered a counterweight to other prevailing forces in the contemporary art world. The famously nomadic, inventive New Zealand artist Kate Newby now lives in the small town of Floresville, Texas. After completing her Master of Fine Arts at Elam in 2007, she — like most of her cohort — soon departed for the United States and Europe. Now, Newby says, the trend is for ambitious younger contemporary New Zealand artists to leave even earlier, after completing their BFA, to do postgraduate study in international centres. She mentions a handful of names, most of them names that I've heard of.

The genius of Sophie Jerram and Mark Amery's Letting Space was to provide a platform for interrogation for those artists who chose to remain in New Zealand. When you are almost inevitably going to be regarded as provincial, why not embrace that provinciality by producing works that critically, consciously engage with local conditions? For seven years, Letting Space ingeniously used Aotearoa New Zealand's singular circumstances — its physical distance from the international art world's main centres; the relative ease of communication that exists in a small, comparatively closed society — to enact something important, exemplary.

13. Murdoch Stephens, 'Doing Critique', page 252 of this volume.

14. Friend, 'Art or Community Service', 235.



John Key and his family after the announcement of the 2008 general election results, November 2008.

## The Time Travellers // Pip Adam

In 2037 — bored with Mars, bored with boring, running from dead and injured workers, the fires coming closer, clean water nowhere to be found — the billionaires turn their money to time travel.

‘Things,’ they say (in private), ‘are getting us down.’

‘It’s hard to stay positive.’

‘And everywhere in history is better for a white, rich man.’

They move slowly though. Act calmly. There are no urgent moments when you have money and resources. They move slowly and smile and although the planet is burning the stocks stay stable.

And so — because of the money, because of the time, because of the connections — the people with the most power come to time travel first. And when they come to it, they imagine it white, empty. The logo is like that. The videos for investors are like that — beautiful, slim people walking in a white infinite space. They imagine a white room. No corners, no walls. Empty but for invited guests. This is the way a focus group imagines time. This is what they want to see. This is the vision of time that agrees with them. The branding people and the communications people and the marketing people who took these jobs to support their writing and their art and their dance and their families spend days, nights not writing, not painting, not dancing, away from their families, giving them exactly what they want. A white space. Empty except for the possibilities alive in them. And so the feedback is complete.

And they are shown what they suspect. Reassured by the animations and the artwork that their journey will be without politics. They expect travel through time will be completely neutral. That their presence will be welcomed. That their needs will be met. That they will observe but will always get what they want.

For them it is as if John Key is forever prime minister.

But of course they, like all colonists, are wrong. Time is already owned. Populated by the people who live there. Time cannot be commoned because it is already common.

They travel to Deepwater Horizon, to Fukushima, to Tongariro, to the *Costa Concordia*. They call it disaster tourism but it’s not really. Not for them. Because they can leave. They do leave. As soon as it gets a bit too like a disaster they go somewhere else. To Sky City on 9 November 2008 — so happy to be here. Drinks flowing. People cheering. Max in a blue T-shirt. The last time we see Stephe. The only ones shouting, *Eight more years*. Thinking it’s a joke and not fully understanding the consequences of their joke. Sheltered always from the consequences of their joke.

They travel to Tunisia in 2010 and want a Big Mac and want to be welcomed, and want a power point for their brand new iPad. They come and then they cough, and in 2012 Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus breaks out. And the consequences of their travel are not always unintended. The United States Department of Justice shuts down the file-hosting site Megaupload. They buy a pastel version of Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. They sell a pastel version of Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. Lorde’s song ‘Royals’ makes it to number one in the US charts. Microsoft ends extended support for Windows X. At the start they are

conservative — starting small and in whispers but, gradually, they become brave and have the ear of everyone. And when it goes badly they leave. Time becomes their plaything. Just like everything else.

And so, Occupy Wall Street protests begin.

They become careless and leave a door open. They are careless because they have no cares. They have time travel, nothing can touch them. Like the safari from behind lion-proof glass, like a shark cage — nothing hurts.

A secretary is the first to notice the way in. A personal assistant who is also a sculptor, who didn't get funding and didn't get funding and didn't get funding and got this job because she said she had experience with budgets and project plans. 'I understand how to work in order to achieve predetermined outcomes,' she said in her interview. It wasn't entirely true, but she could imagine more than a white room.

It isn't a metaphorical door. When she explains it to the others — the cleaner, the comms person, the bookkeeper — she makes it clear she's not talking about a 'door' in any figurative way. There is literally a door on the fourth floor, by the toilets and it is open. 'I walked in,' she says. 'You can walk in and you can go where you want.'

'Is there food?' someone asks and the others nod like they would also like to know. Because there is no food in 2037, they are starving, and their children are starving.

'I didn't go anywhere,' she said. 'I just looked. But surely there is food.'

And they follow her and they look and they talk and of course, they say, they will also be colonisers. Their poorness and their desperation doesn't make them any less culpable. And they look out the window at the red, red sky and the acid rain. And in desperation they decide to go. Just for a moment. Just to eat.

And after they are fed. After they bring back food. After they ensure the way in. They start to make it possible for others to travel. There are rules like 'do no harm' but they know these are impossible rules to keep. So they make rules like 'stay and fix what you harm' and 'listen to the people you have harmed'. None of the rules make it right but some of them, sometimes, make the time travel less wrong. They will all travel just once, to one time, and then stay and do what they can.

Some don't travel. But for most of the workers in 2037, time becomes their arc. Those who want to travel make a case for the time they want to go back to. They research, they read books, they read this book. They weigh up the good and the bad and some walk among us now. Some came back through the gap that the financial crash left, some slipped in through the rain of a storm the size of Australia.

And once here, some of them find themselves in a room in a poorly funded archive. A soft din, a sonic tincture colouring the air. Some visit a free store. Some help carry things to the *Free Store*. Some are helped across a street. Some help others across the street. Their art dreams are fulfilled but in complicated ways. But they stay there, for the hard times and for the times during which they are hated, and for the times when what they thought was the right thing turns out to be the wrong thing. And they stay and they get old and they die — some in their sleep, some too early, all in a single urgent moment.



*Free of Charge*, Julian Priest, February  
2012

## Before



After an intense period of state intervention in the economy and rising inflation during the early 1980s, the Fourth Labour Government began a programme of massive deregulation and privatisation of state assets. It contributed to stock market expansion and fast corporate growth.

This became physically evident in major New Zealand cities, including the Auckland central business district, where many historic buildings made way for tall towers or parking lots, while finance was arranged for new builds.

After a dramatic crash in the stock market in 1987, the flow of finance slowed drastically, a sustained recession set in and commercial vacancy in the CBD rose to high levels. The seeds of Letting Space were planted. Artists of all disciplines found space to live and practise in older inner-city buildings and developed fledgling gallery and theatre spaces. As a consequence, the 1990s were an important time for independent arts practice in major New Zealand cities. A range of festivals, venues and production organisations were established to support this practice, slowly adapting to the new neoliberal order as ‘creative industries’. By the end of the decade property values were back on the rise, Auckland was home to a bustling professionalised arts scene and Wellington was officially dubbing itself the ‘creative capital’.

Not-for-profit art gallery Artspace was established in Auckland in 1986. By 1988 it was operating in a large, old, open-plan first-floor space on the waterfront on Quay Street – a space offered for free by the property development company that owned the building, and were unable to rent the space. With an ambitious exhibition and experimental performance programme, Artspace played a vital role in the development of contemporary arts practice in the city. It would be joined in 1992 by Teststrip on Vulcan Lane, often described as Auckland’s first contemporary artist-run space.

In 1992 the future founders of Letting Space, Sophie Jerram and Mark Amery, joined Artspace’s board. With fellow board member Judy Millar, they put together a programme of projects in vacant commercial sites under the title ‘Letting Space’ that aimed to provide ‘the opportunity for artists to exhibit outside the dealer system, taking work out into the public domain, examining the relationship between society and art . . .’<sup>1</sup>

A 1994 Yuk King Tan installation on an upper floor of a distinctive red pagoda-shaped new office tower commented on the tower’s representation of Asian business interests. Other projects were organised by Tessa Laird, Judy Darragh, the late Ant Sumich, Kathy Waghorn, Joyce Campbell, Jon Bywater and Donald Fraser.

Amery and Jerram separately moved to Wellington, and in 1994 Jerram initiated *The Concrete Deal*, a series of installations in the large spiral of the James Smith Carpark on Wakefield Street.

Between 2007 and 2009 the global financial crisis led to global economic recession, manifesting locally in another bout of commercial vacancy. In Wellington, Amery and Jerram decided to join forces again and use the newly

1. Artspace, ‘Access All Areas’ newsletter, 1994; Letting Space Archives



Yuk King Tan installation, 1994.

available vacant space. Letting Space was established in 2009 under the auspices of the Wellington Independent Arts Trust. The proposed programme was different to that of 1993–94 — the new Letting Space was committed specifically to work that had economic and environmental concerns. During its first year of projects, in 2010, Jerram was also working with artist Dugal McKinnon to present a programme of public discussions called Dialogues with Tomorrow. These brought together artists, scientists and leaders in other fields to explore art's interface with issues of sustainability and ecology — concerns that would be key to many of Letting Space's projects to come.

**John Key is prime minister of New Zealand // The first iPad is released // The Deepwater Horizon oil drilling platform explodes in the Gulf of Mexico and the resulting spill spreads for several months // Julian Assange leaks footage of a 2007 airstrike in Iraq titled 'Collateral Murder' on the website WikiLeaks // The 2010 flash crash, a trillion-dollar stock market crash, occurs over 36 minutes // A 7.1 magnitude Canterbury earthquake causes widespread damage // A 'storm the size of Australia' passes to the south of New Zealand causing widespread damage // GST is raised to 15 per cent // Breakfast broadcaster Paul Henry is suspended by TVNZ after questioning whether Governor-General Anand Satyanand is a proper New Zealander // Unions threaten to boycott the \$670 million project to film *The Hobbit* // A gas explosion in Pike River kills 29 workers // The attempted suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Tunisia, triggers a revolution in the country and the wider Arab Spring // The European Union and International Monetary Fund bail out Greece // Major cyber attacks are made in response to the banning of file-sharing websites such as LimeWire and The Pirate Bay // A litre of regular petrol is \$1.77 // A litre of milk is \$3.25**



**2010**

# Realty Pitch

6 May 2010 and  
29 July 2011  
Wellington



Property panel at the 2011  
*Urban Dream Brokerage* realty  
pitch forum, Wellington.

From Letting Space's inception in 2009, it operated independently, outside of established arts institutions. Letting Space looked to inhabit new kinds of public space by building partnerships with the private property sector. It also sought grants from Creative New Zealand (CNZ) — itself two-thirds funded by lottery money derived from private individuals.

In its first application to CNZ, Letting Space pitched a dozen short project ideas from artists across the country that it admired. If successful, Letting Space advised CNZ, it would develop five of them as a programme.

In this way, Letting Space looked to develop support for a wider community of artists and encourage a different kind of public practice, where new ideas might grow. Final projects were very often different in form from their initial seed ideas. There was no PR company or beneficiary's office, for example, in Tao Wells' first project description. While the financial support they received was modest, artists were given space to allow more radical approaches to develop.

With the backing of Wellington City Council (WCC), Letting Space ran two live pitching sessions: at City Gallery Wellington in 2010 and the Wellington Town Hall in 2011. Designed as ice-breakers to generate creative ideas for the use of empty commercial space and encourage future thinking in the city, the events were called Urban Dream Brokerage.

In a twist on the reality TV show *Dragons' Den*, artists presented their creative ideas for vacant spaces — 'realty pitches' — to a panel of property owners and managers, then property owners and managers made their own pitches to an artist panel. The audience decided on their favourite ideas at the end. Letting Space had already conducted an open call for realty pitches from which four projects were selected to be presented at the event and a number of others were published online.

There was a full house for the first event, with property pitches made by The Wellington Company's Ian Cassels, property developer Richard Burrell and former city councillor turned commercial realtor Rosemary Bradford.

(Sophie Jerram had been able to meet property owners in Wellington through her previous role with the Sustainable Business Network.) On the artist side, pitches were made by Kim Paton, Bronwyn Holloway-Smith, Erica van Zon and theatre group The PlayGround Collective.

Following the 2010 event, WCC found funding for two projects from a pool of 20 realty pitch applications, to be produced independently. In *Smash n Tag*, James R. Ford invited the public to help him destroy his own 'cursed' car 'as a public, cathartic action for those badly treated or misled by dodgy retailers and online traders', and an abandoned Kent Terrace house became an immersive installation site, transformed by an entanglement of fabrics, in Siân Torrington's *Inhabitanace*.

Ford also appeared as a live realty pitcher at Urban Dream Brokerage in 2011. Dressed as a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle, he proposed inviting tortoises to live on a bed of grass in a vacant retail space for a week, their shells decorated to correspond to 10 subatomic particles, including the Higgs boson or 'God particle'. Other pitchers were Tim Barlow, proposing a 'fearless speech lane'; Shona Jaunas, with Natalia Mann on violin and harp, who explained French squatter laws and proposed a composer and filmmakers' studio and presentation space; and Bruce Mahalski and Bev Hong, who revisited colonial exchanges of goods for land.

Letting Space went on to develop projects with Tim Barlow, Bronwyn Holloway-Smith and Colin Hodson inspired partly by their original realty pitches, and a number of other projects were realised independently.

In 2012, after further conversations with WCC, a permanent brokerage service between artists and property owners was formed. Naturally, it was named Urban Dream Brokerage.

## Market Forces, Boom & Bust and the Death of the Small Business Dream // Kim Paton, April 2010

**Premise: Dynamism** is achieved in a commercial inner-city area that services multiple audiences in an ongoing and sustained way. **Vibrancy** is achieved through the historical legacy of an area, which builds, shifts and changes organically and independently over a sustained period of time. **Liveliness** is achieved through attracting tenants who are independent, diverse and wide-ranging in the products and services they offer.

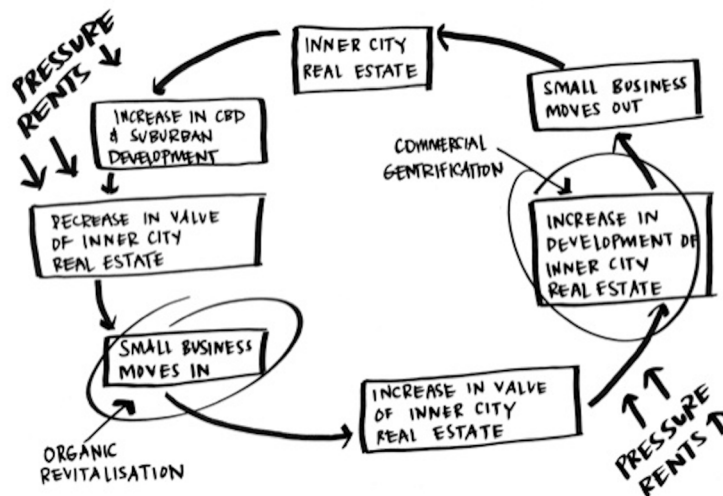
Each tenant is different. All of them share only one common goal, which is to be successful enough in their endeavour to cover their costs and pay the rent. Some tenants are driven to make a great deal of money, some however are not. Some tenants are driven by the products and services they passionately believe in, some in the dream of self-employment and some in the people they encounter on a daily basis. It is this diversity that enriches the inner city.

If the property developer/manager is driven (as they should be) for rich, vibrant, bustling streets it is their fundamental obligation to understand, encourage and incubate these tenants.

**Action:** An overhaul of the current rent pricing structure for the inner city and the abolishment of the standard market square-metre rate.

Introduction of a new rent pricing system requiring three benchmarks are met:

1. The site will **benefit** from the tenant in a commercial, cultural and social context.
2. The tenant can realistically sustain the demands of the price for the **long term**.
3. The property developer/manager will not suffer **undue** financial burden by the fixed rate, but may choose to offset profit from one site against loss from another in pursuit of diverse tenants.



## New Uses for High-Rise Developments During Times of Negative Growth // Colin Hodson, July 2011

The vertical levels of the inner city can accommodate the ebb and flow of a city's most dire economic fortunes. In times of slow apartment sales and decreasing tenancies, high-rise urban projects enter periods of low occupancy. This is the time to turn the upper floors of high rises into wild space.

The concept maximises urban high-rise use when floors (particularly upper floors) are under-tenanted during 'finance-energy' contractions. This vertically oriented concept is analogous with urban movement's lateral ebb and flow, wherein fringes of the city become a contested and shifting ground of wild spaces and newly emerging wastelands. Thus, during energy price ramp periods, disabling lift services and withdrawing services from upper floors will make economic sense. In these periods, we can look to the upper floors of under-tenanted buildings to stand in for our city fringes.

Open up the windows to allow New Zealand's flying wildlife access. Encourage them into this new habitat with lower-dwelling tenants contributing compostable waste upstairs rather than shipping to distant landfills. (The savings in energy transport costs to city fringes and associated health benefits from physically carrying this waste upwards are a big plus here.)

Feeding on this waste, urban birds — pigeons, seagulls and sparrows — can come to inhabit these floors. Their guano can help fertilise the growth of the burgeoning upper-level gardens. Native birds, feeding off the new plant life growing on these wild floors, will now have reason to set up here. Then, depending on the saturation of birds, predators like cats, dogs, stoats and rats can be released on to the upper floors when moderation is needed.

People with less affluence looking for accommodation would also find upper floors appealing, as ground-floor occupancy is highly sought after in times of high transport costs. Much like outer suburbs becoming ghettos when the ability to get to a mall becomes prohibitive, foot or bicycle access to necessities becomes a key driver of prime real estate, and these upper floors become the cheaper place to live. Thus, views and light become synonymous with financial and social isolation during these contraction periods.

So! When the next wave of cheap energy floods the market, these upper floors will become viable for tenancy again. Speedy lift services can now shoot rising artisans up to clearer views and fresher air, first displacing the human ghetto dwellers. These new occupiers start to clear these wildlands, taking out the compostable rubbish and junk, now squeezing out the animal settlers. By this time, the waste from outer landfills — the biodegradable part of it having been given time to decompose — can be put into service again.

And soon the upper floors become palatable again for an affluent market, and views, a feature that came to be associated with poverty, isolation and danger, are reclaimed as a sign of privilege. A new gentrification has taken place, and distance from the centre is back in vogue, the lower city abandoned and the upper limits celebrated.

In times of financial contraction, send urban waste upwards. In positive readjustments, resume horizontal displacement.



## Security Matters // Murdoch Stephens, April 2010

In the desert of Central Iran is an abandoned caravanserai (silk-road trader hotel) which was used as a prisoner of war camp in the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88) and then as a detention centre (1989–2005) for Afghans who had fled the Soviets, warlords, Taliban and NATO. In one room of the caravanserai were thousands of abandoned files, each showing an image of a detained illegal immigrant.

I have 1100 of these photos.

I want to use either a series of empty apartments or a large commercial space to exhibit photographic reproductions of the most poignant of these images. They have not been shown or published before.

The commentary on these images is limitless, from sociological discussions on hospitality, war and family, to artistic/aesthetic discussions on the limits of found art and the ethics of documenting. The images will be voiceless sentries greeting citizens who are at war in Afghanistan, but who do not experience the war in any significant manner. Instead of using the apt sixties slogan of ‘Bringing the War Home’, I will simply quote the chilling new no-speak of the war on terror: ‘You know that we don’t comment on security matters.’

### Postscript

Murdoch Stephens, 2022: I spent two years trying to work out what it meant for me to have these photos and where they belonged. In this first email to Letting Space I see how my focus was on the New Zealand context of using these images to speak to our government’s role in the war on terror. While the secrecy of ‘security matters’ continues, my ideas about the images became less oblique as I thought more about what it would take to honour the people in the images. The first step was realising that I was in possession of an archive — the Anjīrak Afghan Archive.

I eventually showed the photos at Pātaka Art + Museum in 2013 and kept the idea of the sentry by having a curved wall where the viewer would feel themselves surrounded by the images and seen by those in the pictures. That same year I founded the Double the Quota campaign, which led to the first increase in New Zealand’s refugee quota since 1987 and, eventually, a doubling of our refugee intake to 1500 places.

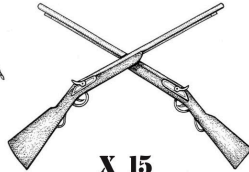
The photos in the exhibition were digitised and the originals given to the permanent collection of the Afghanistan Center at Kabul University.

After the return of the Taliban in 2021, an Afghan photojournalist friend told me that they had lit a small fire in the building housing this collection. There is no longer anyone there who might be able to report on the condition of the images. The safety of the images now means a lot less to me than the conditions being faced by my friends and their families who remain in Afghanistan.

# FOR SALE



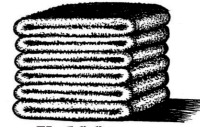
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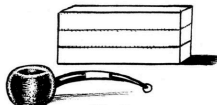
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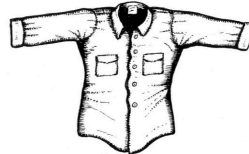
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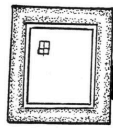
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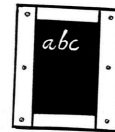
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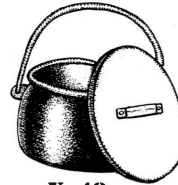
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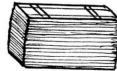
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X 48



X 60



X 240



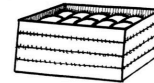
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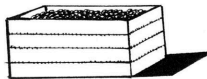
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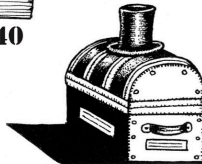
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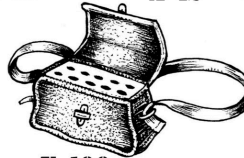
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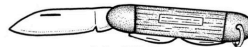
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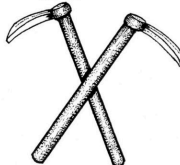
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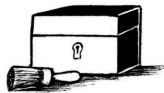
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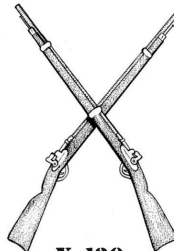
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X 72



X 12



X 120



X 1200



X 100



X 100

# WELLINGTON

(SEE REVERSE FOR DETAILS)



## Price of Wellington // Bruce Mahalski, April 2010

*The Ancient and Royal New Zealand Land Trading Company (since 1839) is proud to announce the opening of their new retail premises.*

*Do you have some land that you'd be happy to trade in?*

*We will give you top value in quality modern goods for your piece of unwanted real estate!*

*Goods swapped for land include:*

- ALCOHOL
- CARS
- CIGARETTES
- FOOD
- CLOTHES
- WEAPONS

*Come in and see what we will give you for your piece of land!*

*Spot prizes for lucky winners!!!*

///

The proposed exhibition references the 1839–40 land transactions of the New Zealand Company, who believed that they had swapped goods worth £5000 — including tobacco/umbrellas/guns/fishhooks — for about one-third of the land in the country.

The practice of swapping goods for land in perpetuity evolved in North America in the 1620s when English Puritans bypassed the English Crown and started swapping goods for land with the local inhabitants.

Not much has really changed since, except we now use tokens — i.e. money — in exchange for goods where land deals are concerned.

I have always found it interesting that it is possible to swap a piece of land — which is permanent — with something as insubstantial and impermanent as a keg of tobacco (or a carton of cigarettes).

The proposed exhibition will not attempt to critique the ‘wrongs of the past’ but will rather ask the questions: ‘What is land ownership?’ and ‘Should land really be sold — or swapped — at all?’.

The exhibition space will be decorated with large posters advertising past and future goods for land deals and promoting the fact that ‘It’s time to think short term — not long term!’

It will also be decorated like a stockroom, full of large cardboard boxes labelled ‘FOOD’ — ‘ALCOHOL’ — ‘CLOTHES’ etc., which will of course be full of nothing at all . . .



## The Temporal Temple // Tiffany Singh, July 2011

Tiffany Singh's concept is to take one or several empty commercial sites around the city and transform them into shrines, or temporal temples, in order to produce art as an offering and a space for interaction, contemplation and cultural development.

By bringing together different traditional elements of ceremony and ritual the hope is to create an inclusive, accessible and respected space of contemplation within a commercial/urban environment. While re-examining the division between ritual space and productive space, this work attempts to invert a commercial sensibility to create an intervention of sanctity and rest and which hopes to initiate enquiry into ways in which cities understand their boundaries in relation in commercial and sacred space.

## Fearless Speech Lane // Tim Barlow, July 2011

*Fearless Speech Lane* is a public assembly platform based on the classic Western model of the speakers' corner. Historically, the speakers' corner created a public commons site, often in the heart of the city, that was a space of free speech — anyone was able to stand on a soapbox and speak or perform whatever was on their mind.

The speakers' corner is based on a platform going back to the famous Stoa of Zeus, the covered walkway in the agora of ancient Athens, where Socrates is said to have met with other philosophers for debate; some say it was the site of the beginnings of Western democracy.

Strong arguments in favour of *Fearless Speech Lane* are: the encouragement of the arts of conversation, performance, instantaneous rapport, argument, heckling and choice of who to listen to, all happening in real space-time.

The Opera House Lane is the ideal central location for *Fearless Speech Lane* — it is weather protected, retail space is vacant and it is a busy commuter walkway.

This contemporary speakers' corner will add social media technology to the mix. With at least two monitors/projectors enabled for video conferencing links, national and international citizens will be connected to the local passersby, therefore all spatially included in an inter-communicative debate. Speakers would be invited to participate in the e-corner platform, possibly with a suggested topic or question, e.g., what does self-government mean to you?

The dramatic urban vistas in Opera House Lane also give a potent backdrop to anyone wanting to make a point.

*Fearless Speech Lane* will also include a 'political foods' market, offering the attractions of refreshments, enticing, delicious smells, warmth and atmosphere.

Popular  
Archaeology:  
Cassette,  
c. 1967-94

**Dugal McKinnon**  
18 April-9 May 2010  
Wellington



By 2010, the most likely place to see an audio cassette tape was in a player in the dashboard of an older-model car. Once abundant, considered to be vinyl's poor cousin in the seventies and eighties, usurped by the CD in the nineties and the iPod in the aughts, most people's once-beloved collections had long gone into storage.

Resembling a room in a poorly funded archive, Dugal McKinnon's *Popular Archaeology* exhibited vintage cassette players. Each played a short, looped fragment of a New Zealand chart hit in chronological order from 1967 to 1994 — the approximate period in which the cassette was a major mode of music distribution. The tape players were arranged on a grid of Lundia office shelves at the back of a dusty, bare, dimly lit concrete, vacant space, spanning the width of the room as a wall of sound. You heard this long before you picked out any specific songs or saw any visual details. Sonic architecture, it was — a 'room that echoes', to quote the title of an 1985 New Zealand hit by Peking Man.

Each song was reduced to a disembodied, deteriorating voice; together, they were akin to a dying Gregorian chorus. McKinnon wrote: 'A soft din, a sonic tincture colouring the air. Shards of pop history puncture the noise of time. A choir of scavenged hooks, licks and choruses. An invitation to remember through the dismembered, the almost discarded, the chanced upon somewhere, the kept just because.'

In the new era of portable digital music libraries, and against the backdrop of the spectacular rise and fall of illegal file-sharing platform LimeWire (2004–10), *Popular Archaeology* emphasised the frailty of memory and analogue materiality. Loops needed constant repair; magnetic tape eroded through repeated use. 'The installation plays

upon the myth of totality that has emerged in the online era,' wrote McKinnon, 'an era in which the entire world is available in digitised form, effectively replacing the real . . .'

The artist also invited the public to unearth their own tape collections and put them into a temporary public archive near the space's front doors. The exhibition of people's home-recorded tapes was a chance to air personal stories attached to mixtapes and cassette compilations of radio singles, LPs and CDs. It recalled that home taping on to blank cassette tapes (C60s and C90s) was once widespread and stereo systems with built-in tape-to-tape dubbers encouraged by the retail market.

*Popular Archaeology* opened on Record Store Day, a worldwide annual event celebrating independent record stores at a time when many had been closing, struggling to compete with chain stores and online downloads. A few doors up, the Samurai record store sizzled sausages while a DJ spun records. Across the road, stereo retailer Sound Expression had sleekly designed, multi-CD-player stereo systems exhibited in its window.

With offices in the building above being gradually renovated by The Wellington Company, 141 Willis Street was a temporary watercooler space as well as a community archive, and a place where Letting Space first became a community — a group of artists playing at keeping office for three weeks.