...and then the city told itself the same old stories

a discussion around a research project & exhibition at forest city gallery by broken city lab

a starting point

In the largest sense, we are interested in understanding locality in both its reading and practice. As artists, we work collectively to develop a process that can begin to unfold the complexities of a city and how the people, histories, infrastructure, planning policies, and connections shape and enact the city.

The work detailed in this publication generated an exhibition at Forest City Gallery, through which we aimed to explore the narratives around London, Ontario. Based on a research project we initially developed in Windsor, Ontario, our exhibition revolves around a curiosity about locality and the ways in which it becomes shaped through shared experience and interwoven narratives. *"...and then the city"* was at once a starting point and the organizing framework upon which we worked.

The narratives of a city that we embed into our daily lives shift and stretch based on perspectives that we develop through an ongoing and complex negotiation. Whether a long-time resident or temporary visitor, the ways in which we view and experience a city are built upon a set of assumptions and understandings that we have come to value and trust through a range of spatial, social, political, and economic experiences. Over time, we create deeply-vested frames of view around a city and community that are created and reinforced through stories that can range from dinner table rumours to front-page headlines -- perhaps you venture to a city as a visitor based on a friend's recommendations, or maybe you moved to a new city long ago based on an article about its employment opportunities. Regardless of their original citing, the narratives around a city circulate in a never ending cycle, some of which are felt across an entire region and others that are known on a much more intimate scale.

The cyclical nature of city narratives offers a view of place that creates an opportunity to develop points of access into the specific conditions and realities thereof. In turn, simple creative gestures become tools for initiating conversations that become foundational in generating a practice of exploring and exploding locality. Together this form of practice and this exhibition aim to open up a space for considering the possibility of actively being in a place -- engaging, playing, obfuscating, and ultimately changing the things you see in front of you.

assem-bling a story

As part of our earliest efforts in developing the exhibition, we attempted to get a sense of the history of London, the points in time that have come to collectively shape our experiences today. Immediately, the most accessible reference points were of interest -- we did not dig through archives at the city, nor did we consult any rigourous history texts -- rather we wanted to understand how the city itself charts an official history.

Pulled from websites like the City of London, Tourism London, London's Wikipedia page, and a handful of London-focused history blogs, this body of research became the starting point for the ways in which we would unfold the narratives of London. It is worth noting that we did not set out to develop any expansive understanding of the history of the Forest City. Instead, we wanted to use one layer of the typical narratives of place (that is, the official line, the story without any loose ends) to inform the next steps in our process. A knowingly under-informed reading of the history of the city provides a useful foundation upon which we can develop a more nuanced view of the contemporary city.

Armed with a general knowledge of the city's official historicity, we created a questionnaire of sorts to guide us through another set of narratives. We set out to access these other narratives in the first instance through an online form in which we provided a range of questions and fill-in-the-blank statements that would reveal a set of politics and concerns about London that might otherwise be difficult to access.

The response rate was unexpectedly high, so much so that it became a more interesting view of the narratives that get circulated and created about London. That is to say, from past experience, conversations and surveys prompted in public spaces garner a much narrower view of a city. Inevitably shaped and framed (literally) by the architectural and physical cues in a given place where we might engage in an oral survey or questionnaire, we felt that the possibilities for a more nuanced view of London, as a city, community, set of infrastructures, political complexes, and everyday activities, were best exercised through the online form. The responses shaped, for us, an understanding of London that is both more complicated and more simpli-

Fill-in-the-blanks to generate perspectives that shape our experience of London, Ontario.

Stacks of prints from our online survey.

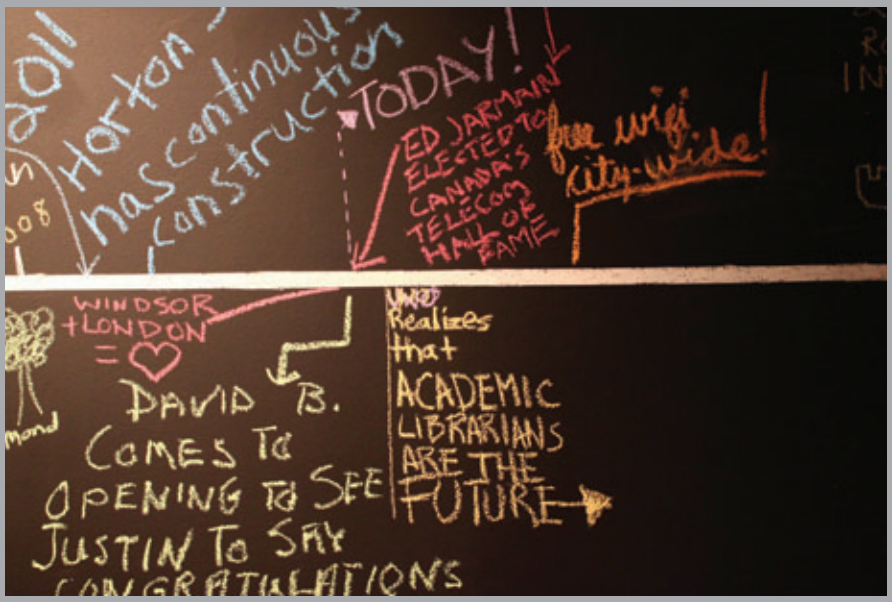
fied than any official narrative circulated, and in turn, a richer portrait of everything that makes London the city that it is today -- failing, mismanaged, hopeful, and promising. We utilized all of the responses as triggers, starting points, and raw material for the works in the exhibition, which we hope will have (at least temporarily) opened the space for a new dialogue about the city and how one may indeed help to redirect and reclaim that dialogue.

The process of painting murals.

Bulletin boards outlining a range of histories of London, Ontario.

Highlighting interest, taking measurements.

At work painting billboard-sized texts.



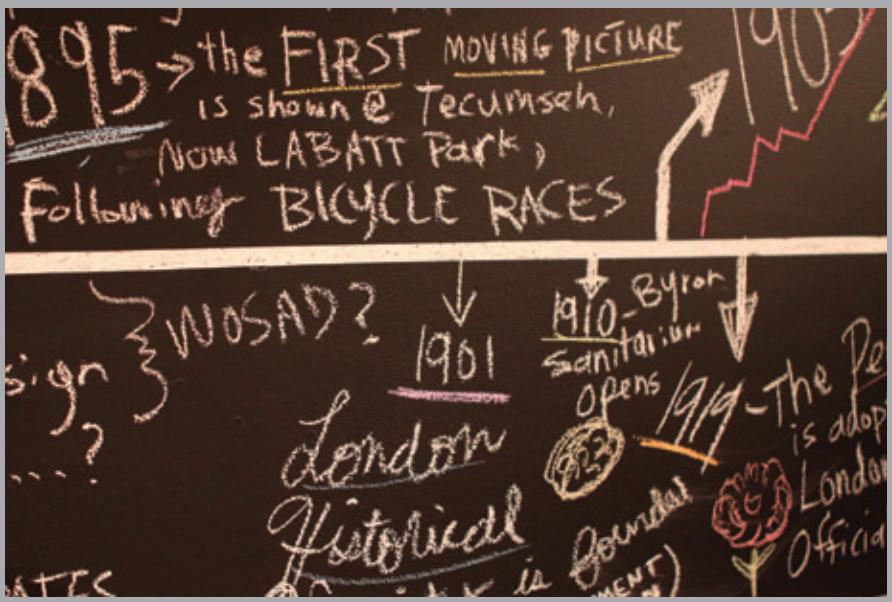
A collectively-written time line of London, Ontario (detail).

Billboard-scaled texts summarizing one of the cycles of narratives of London.

Video diptychs of a never ending cycle of narratives about place.

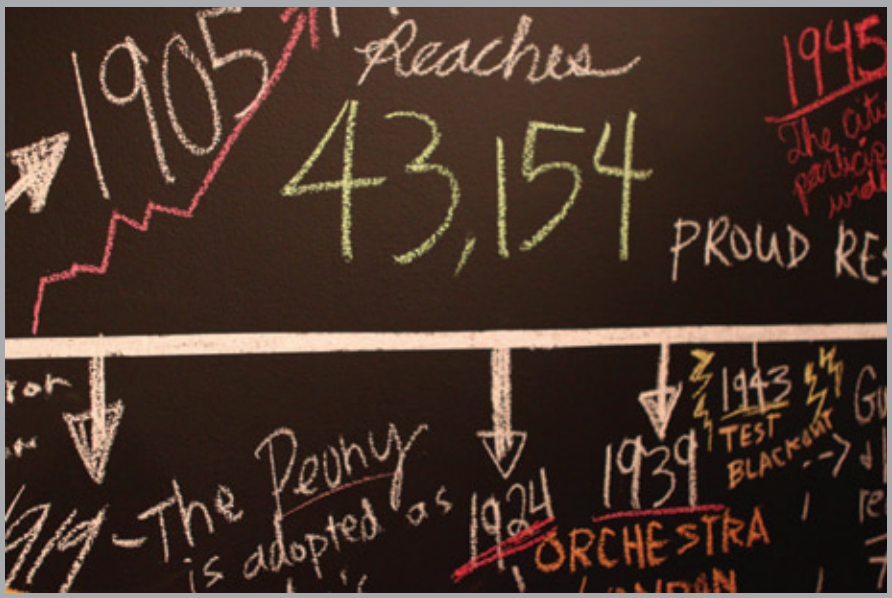
Layers of rumours, histories, and stories of London, Ontario.

Collectively-written time line of London on wall-sized chalkboard, looking forward through time.



Collectively-written time line of London on wall-sized chalkboard, detail.

Collectively-written time line of London on wall-sized chalkboard, looking backward through time.



Collectively-written time line of London on wall-sized chalkboard, detail.

never ending cycles of a city

Signs of resistance are everywhere. Through negotiations of ephemeral narratives and negotiations of the physicality of the city, it becomes possible to imagine not only a new way forward for London, but a way of deciding what forward even means. In short, negotiating these dynamics as a way of resisting the city itself.

In the practice of critique, we can find both destructive and constructive tendencies, and in this case, we do not need to privilege one over the other -- both tendencies come to shape a place, intentionally or otherwise -- however, we must consider the ways in which these tendencies can inform one another.
The idea of these dualities existing alongside one another can provide a certain polarization that aggressively sets up the necessity for response. It creates that space of tension, in which one can momentarily occupy a place of commitment (to one side or the other or in refuting both sides). The largest concerns about the cities in which we live easily become obfuscated by layers of misinformation, bureaucracy, and near-infinite time scales. The immediacy and urgency that we bring to the things most important to us can be erased when we are forced to, simply, wait it out. So we must consider ways to trigger an urgency.

The images across the next three pages make up the video diptych presented as part of our exhibition, outlining a cycle of narratives that may (or may not) be pinned to a specific time and place in London's history. The colour-coding provides an opportunity for organizing these statements -- but we provide no legend. In the video, these statements randomly align and realign themselves as the videos loop and create an everchanging space for urgent committment to having a stake in the city.

...and then the city invented a new policy.

...and then the city almost gave up, entirely.

...and then the city lost track of time.

...and then the city played all by itself for the first time in ages.

...and then the city stood up to the bullies.

...and then the city got knocked down, again.

...and then the city lost sight of what it was really about.

...and then the city fixed that.

...and then the city looked back on all the good times.

...and then the city started to get really confused.

...and then the city just let go.

...and then the city alloted more time to recreation.

...and then the city tore itself down.

...and then the city rethought its plans.

...and then the city knew what it had to do.

...and then the city asked for some advice.

...and then the city took one last look.

...and then the city got back to work.

...and then the city planted a lot of new gardens.

...and then the city thought long and hard about it.

...and then the city had the highest unemployment rate in the country.

...and then the city felt really, really bad.

...and then the city felt like it was in love again.

...and then the city knew it was just fooling itself.

...and then the city came up with a new plan.

...and then the city overlooked the best thing it had going for it.

...and then the city honestly felt like a new place.

...and then the city got in touch with its old friends.

...and then the city understood nostalgia.

...and then the city stayed away for a while.

...and then the city wanted to turn around.

...and then the city changed course.

...and then the city forgot its troubles.

...and then the city started to feel better.

...and then the city lost hope again.

...and then the city started over.

...and then the city made some new friends.

...and then the city moved on.

...and then the city lost everything, but got back on its feet.

...and then the city decided to go back in time.

...and then the city reinvented itself.

...and then the city forgot its history.

...and then the city lost all hope.

...and then the city started over.

...and then the city repositioned itself.

...and then the city put on quite the show.

...and then the city forgot how to speak.

...and then the city became rather dull.

...and then the city thought creative economy meant something.

...and then the city stopped hiring consultants.

...and then the city acted on its plans.

...and then the city wrote another report.

...and then the city stopped believing in itself.

...and then the city felt like it was alone.

...and then the city outgrew itself.

...and then the city retooled.

...and then the city made good on all of its promises.

...and then the city forgot to call.

...and then the city grew.

...and then the city lost track of time.

...and then the city collapsed.

...and then the city made up for it.

...and then the city thought it would be ok.

...and then the city suddenly changed everything overnight.

...and then the city knew it was probably too late.

...and then the city wanted to try again.

...and then the city figured out a better way.

...and then the city wrote a different story.

...and then the city knew it had been foolish.

...and then the city increased capacity.

...and then the city went back to sleep.

...and then the city lost its way.

...and then the city realized it wasn't what it used to be.

...and then the city knew that it was coming of age.

...and then the city returned the call.

...and then the city regrouped.

...and then the city became something entirely different.

...and then the city forged ahead.

...and then the city made new friends.

...and then the city became very lonely.

...and then the city reinvented itself.

...and then the city knew it would never be the same.

...and then the city longed for the good old days.

...and then the city decided today was the day.

...and then the city imagined a new future.

...and then the city started to dust itself off.

...and then the city believed that change is an actionable item.

...and then the city wrote a new to-do list.

...and then the city created new opportunities.

...and then the city remembered the last time this all made sense.

...and then the city wanted to stop feeling alone.

...and then the city started to get desperate.

...and then the city invited some new friends over.

...and then the city learned the hard way.

...and then the city opened up.

...and then the city decided to turn around.

hope & no hope for the forest city

In thinking about the ways in which narratives are structured and circulated, we can begin to decipher a pattern. There are heroes, villains, story-arcs, and happy endings, and often these are organized in such a way that we are guided towards a very specific direction through that narrative.

In employing an online form to garner an understanding of the city of London, we knew we were biasing that understanding from the very beginning. However, it would seem appropriate to not only acknowledge this, but to fully capitalize on it -- certainly, the official narratives about the city already do this, so why should a collection of the everyday narratives be any different?

The responses we received to our questionnaire were of course highly varied in tone and content. Sarcasm, optimism, pragmatic arguments, and impossible hopes provided a healthy range of perspectives, but more important than the range was the act of reclaiming a narrative about the city in the first place.

The stories about London from the inside and outside all go into creating an experience of the city on a daily basis. It would seem that the largest narratives -- the news stories that go national, the press releases from politicians, the planning decisions that shape our spatial experiences -- would have the most control (or perhaps, more politely, the most influence) over the city's day to day enactment. But, if we provide a venue for another set of narratives, how can we imagine reshaping the city?

Pulled from the responses to our online form that posed questions around the emotional (e.g. What's your earliest memory of London?) or the political (e.g. What would you change about London if you had no financial or political constraints?), the following pages feature responses to a short set of fill-in-the-blank statements that triggered the widest range of meditations on what truly shapes the city.

Using a similar colour-coding system as the video diptych from the exhibition, this sampling of statements becomes organized in the loosest sense. Similarities and contrasts between the statements can be extracted and attributed to any range of sensibilities, but more importantly, we believe that they can trigger a response.

It would seem that London has had trouble responding to itself. However, it is important to note that there is no shortage of responses. On the contrary, there are a range of issues and responses that would suggest a deep investment in thinking about London, and indeed, in actively being in the city, but the city at large seems to have forgotten how to enable and support those responses.

In charting a time line, unfolding a set of narratives, and prompting a range of responses, we have aimed to open up a space for a conversation about not only the existing narratives of London, but what other narratives might be possible. Our experience of a place is always framed by the stories (both official and unofficial) that we come to know about that place. So, the question must be, what other stories do we need to tell to create the place that we really want?

I really need London to know that it does not actually exist.

London makes me want to bang my head against the wall.

If only London had a critical mass of permanent residents living downtown, then things would be a lot better.

I really need London to know that it has shaped me.

If only London had an emphasis on community, then things would be a lot better.

London makes me want to run for a ward seat.

I really need London to know that there is no need to reinvent.

If only London had a well thought-out urban plan, then things would be a lot better.

I really need London to know that good things are happening.

London makes me want to speak up.

If only London had a mayor with vision, then things would be a lot better.

I really need London to know that I may leave it behind, but I'm sure I'll come back.

credits & thanks

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http://www.brokencitylab.org

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LONDON ONTARIO

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Broken City Lab is an artist-led interdisciplinary creative research collective and non-profit organization working to explore and unfold curiosities around locality, infrastructures, and creative practice leading towards civic change.

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