

#4 Stagings Research

Practising ethics guides to built environment research

David Roberts

When planning

1. Is it unethical to remain silent?
2. Do I have the right to share this material?
3. Who will I work with?
4. Will it be safe?

When setting up

5. Have I analysed sites and situations?
6. Are there barriers to access?
7. Should I provide contextual information?

Before displaying

8. How will I engage audiences?
9. Should I document the event?
10. Who will keep the work?

These guides, curated by the [Bartlett's Ethics Commission](#) in collaboration with [KNOW \(Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality\)](#), and edited by Jane Rendell, (Director of the Bartlett Ethics Commission 2015-20), offer insights by experienced researchers into how to negotiate the ethical dilemmas that can arise during a research project. The aim is to help you practise built environment research ethically. David Roberts (Bartlett Ethics Fellow 2015-20) devised the format and structure of these guides to follow the ethical issues that arise during the development of a research process – from planning, to conducting, to communicating and producing outcomes – and Ariana Markowitz wrote some of the introductory text that runs across all guides. The guides focus on the different kinds of ethical issues you might encounter as a result of using specific processes or methods, and pay attention to the particular contexts and ways in which these methods are practised. Because when practising research, methods and context inform one another, we consider this series of guides as embedded in a mode of applied ethics called **situated** or **relational ethics**. Where you see words that are highlighted, they refer back to our definitions of key **ethical** principles and to terms contained in institutional protocols as found on [Practising Ethics](#).

1. *Making Images* (David Roberts)
2. *Asking Questions* (Yael Padan)
3. *Co-producing Knowledge* (Yael Padan)
4. **Staging Research** (David Roberts)
5. *Researching, Risk, and Wellbeing* (Ariana Markowitz)
6. *Researching Internationally* (Emmanuel Osuteye)

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'The ethical responsibilities facing exhibition organizers are obvious, and yet often overlooked. What we put on display and what we say about it is critical in shaping visitors' perceptions. In other words, what we exhibit and what we say authorizes, authenticates, and soothes, or, in contrast, offends, disturbs, and irritates. It is important to remember that exhibitions communicate values, and that these values are often competing or contested.'

Andromache Gazi, 'Exhibition Ethics – An Overview of Major Issues,' *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*, (2014), 1.

About this guide: why and how built environment researchers stage their work

Built environment research is as much about people as it is about places: the people who use and inhabit the places you are researching, the people who engage with those places emotionally or spiritually even if they are not physically present, the people who build them, and the people who own or manage them. In addition, you the researcher are necessarily a key actor: you devise the research approach, become a participant in the place where you gather data, and you determine how to interpret that data and what to do with it. Because people are unpredictable, research can also be unpredictable, and as a researcher you are likely to encounter unexpected **situations** that require you to think on your feet whilst navigating high expectations with limited time.

Even the best-laid plans often go awry when they come into contact with reality and real people and you will need systems in place to support you throughout that process, minimising **harm** to those you are researching and participating with, as well as yourself **Ethics** concerns the kind of lives we lead, the qualities of character to develop, and the **responsibilities** we have for each other and our social and ecological system. To conduct research *ethically*, it is important to consider the **benefits, risks and harms** to all connected with and affected by it.

How to define staging research

Staging work is a fundamental component of built environment research, whether through exhibitions that display design outputs or research processes; physical installations and interventions that celebrate or critique sites; performances and screenings that narrate experiences and share representations; or readings and workshops that foster discussion and participation.

The ethics of staging research

Making your work public involves engaging with collaborators and audiences, materials and contexts which, in turn, raise particular **ethical** issues. The practitioners and communities that you work with raise issues of authorship and ownership. The images, objects, stories or knowledges that you plan to make public raise issues of cultural sensitivity and dignity. The audiences who come into contact with your work raise issues of safety and access. The sites and **situations** in which it is placed raise issues of **justice** and **privacy**. To navigate these **ethical** issues with confidence it is important to take time to think about each phase of your work, from how to organise and display the material, how to prepare audiences to encounter your work and each other, and how to document and disseminate it.

How to use this guide

These guides to *Practising Ethics* define appropriate ways to engage **ethically** in research. *Staging Research* aims to assist you in recognising the **ethical** dilemmas which arise from staging research and to address and **reflect** on these with confidence. It is designed to be a point of reference at any stage of your research – from planning your project, to conducting activities in the field, to communicating what you have learned through the production of particular research outputs.

Staging Research contains *principles*, *questions*, *guidelines* and *resources*. The *principles* in the next section inform best practice. These are not just regulatory hurdles for you to jump through at the beginning stages of your research but concepts that ground **ethical** inquiry throughout. They help you develop and refine an approach that it is **sensitive** to the physical and emotional challenges that may arise in the research process, enabling you to be a more effective researcher. The series of guiding *questions* act as prompts for you to **reflect** on the potential **ethical** considerations which emerge throughout a project, before, during, and after you conduct your research. The *guidelines* expand on the questions, illuminate the different **ethical** concerns they raise, and recommend actions which embody these principles. The *resources* section provides additional information.

These guides are not exhaustive and cannot address all the possible **situations** you will face, particularly for research on **sensitive** topics or in places experiencing violence or instability. But learning from the experiences of others, will help you gain the ability to **reflect** on what you encounter, and to make informed judgements about the best way to practise your research **ethically**. Insightful and imaginative research encompasses a range of sites, cultural contexts, and people and there will always be a need for flexibility and **care**.

Questions

When planning: *Balancing urgency with responsibility*

1. Is it unethical to remain silent?
2. Do I have the right to share this material?
3. Who will I work with?
4. Will it be safe?

When setting up: *Nurturing openness and reflexivity*

5. Have I analysed sites and situations?
6. Are there barriers to access?
7. Should I provide contextual information?

Before displaying: *Sharing and entrusting ownership*

8. How will I engage audiences?
9. Should I document the event?
10. Who will keep the work?

Principles

The people, places and research methods you use will each raise their own **ethical** considerations related to a common set of principles that encourage **ethical** conduct and promote interaction based on good faith and mutual **respect**.

Benefit not harm: Your research should have a **benefit** to society and any **risks** involved to participants must be minimized, balanced against the potential **benefit** to the overall community, and clearly explained to participants before they give their **consent**.

Informed consent: You need to inform your participants about the study and what is being asked of them, including any potential **risks** or **benefits**, in order for them to make an informed and voluntary decision about whether or not to participate in the research.

Confidentiality: You need to inform participants of the extent to which **confidentiality** can be assured and **respect** their right to remain **anonymous** in dissemination and display.

Guideline 1 When planning: *Balancing urgency with responsibility*

Is it unethical to remain silent?

Staging research marks a joyful and important moment when you wish to open up your research to others. This may come at an end of year show or public exhibition when your work will be displayed alongside that of your peers, or it may come at an earlier stage in your project at which point engaging with audiences is a key aspect in the research process. The urge to make your work public may be driven by a **moral** argument to share resources with communities and organisations, such as those hit by austerity or living in precarious conditions, or to add your voice to struggles for equality and **justice**, calling out **unethical** practices and amplifying other voices and narratives.¹

It is here that you encounter the principle of **benefit** not **harm**, whether the **benefits** of your work justify any **risk** of **harm** or discomfort. The necessity of your work to confront issues come face-to-face with questions of **ethics**. In the academic environment, there is evidence that students and staff self-censor to avoid provocative research that does not easily fit into **ethics** procedures. Creative practitioners like Barb Bolt urge the opposite. Bolt insists on the importance of such work to illuminate contemporary **moral** issues and act as a site of engagement for ethical debate, raising the question ‘*not* whether it is ethical to create discomfort but whether it is ethical *not to do so*’.² As such, Bolt advises researchers to mitigate against unexpected and unwarranted shocks by placing careful warnings on such artefacts as online tickets, entrances to exhibitions, or on leaflets distributed at events, with such forewarnings acting as informed **consent** so that audiences become **responsible** for their engagement.

Do I have the right to share this material?

The next step to consider concerns the images, objects, stories or knowledges that you plan to make public. This raises questions of **confidentiality** and informed **consent**. If it will be possible to identify individuals, communities or their work, it is important to think carefully about their dignity and whether you may expose confidential or sensitive material, whether it will empower them or reinforce stereotypes. If you plan to share cultural material, it is vital to recognise that heritage, for many Indigenous communities, is a living heritage expressing a unique and continuing tradition that is central to identity, place and belonging.

The Australian Council for the Arts, Estelle Barrett and Janis Koolmatrie have prepared exemplary protocols to address these considerations, advising communication, consultation and **consent**.³ As Barrett explains of pre-ethics protocols, relationships built on **trust** need to be established through agreed negotiation of the aims and parameters of the research before the research commences.⁴ If you plan to depict an identifiable individual or community, you should ask for permission and consider the process of obtaining **consent** not simply as a one-off, but at different points throughout the project. You should also gain the informed **consent** of owners of cultural material before performing or displaying traditional knowledge or expressions of culture in public. This may involve careful consultation with cultural or religious leaders of Indigenous communities to ensure proper treatment and attribution. You may choose to collaborate on the dissemination, acting as a facilitator for others to display their material, or work towards a multivocal exhibition which accommodates multiple perspectives and foregrounds multiple meanings.⁵

Who will I work with?

Staging research is a collaborative process. This presents a wonderful opportunity to work with others to realise your ambitions. It does, however, raise considerations of authorship and ownership of work that is collective or co-produced, as well as whether participants could be made vulnerable through their involvement. In order to think through the ethical challenges of blurred boundaries between practitioners, researchers and others, it is important to discuss and agree to the roles and rights of everyone involved in the project and to ensure participants are engaged and active in the process as well as fully acknowledged in outputs.

Will it be safe?

Alongside context and content, you have a **responsibility** for those coming into contact with your work, whether designing, fabricating, installing, performing and engaging with it. As such, it is important to consider health and safety issues from the outset and to minimise **harm** at all stages.

Curator Emma Larkinson writes of the paradoxes of staging creative work today: you are expected to be innovative in materiality and methodology while limited by an increasingly **risk**-averse culture.⁶ To ensure your creative response is not restricted by this paradox, it is a really helpful exercise to write a **risk** assessment early in your project. This will allow you time and structure to focus your thinking on the activities, equipment, venues and audiences involved, the potential hazards each of these raise, and how you can decrease their likelihood or severity. This concerns the principle of **benefit** not **harm** as your work should not provide a **risk** to any person under reasonable interaction, from ensuring that exhibited work is robust and properly maintained to withstand jostling on an opening night or over long-term installations, to supervising attendees and participants that have particular needs at your event. Ensuring the work is welcoming, durable and safe will help give you peace of mind.

Guideline 2 When setting up: *Nurturing openness and reflexivity*

Have I analysed sites and situations?

When setting up the staging of your work, it is important to critically appraise the sites and **situations** in which it is placed and the effects it may have. A site is never neutral ground, there are always other claims on the space, its ownership, function and symbolism. As such, whether intentional or not, your work will have an impact: ignoring, celebrating, criticising or ignoring architecture, ecologies, histories and uses.⁷

In this contested space, a site analysis will allow you to understand the impact your work may have on social, cultural and ecological environments. This might concern a site's colonial history and Indigenous peoples' land-rights, or a **situation** such as an urban regeneration scheme, in which developers and local authorities increasingly invite creative and engaged practitioners to repurpose and reimagine space. However well-meaning, this work can unintentionally exclude existing communities and, even worse, contribute to marketing and colonising urban spaces in ways that break up local support networks, drive up rents and other costs, and displace people and activities that form and forge diverse communities.⁸

As you negotiate this sensitive terrain, it is helpful to draw inspiration from the work of other practitioners to consider your approaches. Architectural designer and historian Jane Rendell's concept of critical spatial practice brings together considerations and practitioners who engage in contested **situations** and encourage **reflexivity** in audiences.⁹ Critical spatial practice requires practitioners to be critical of what they do and open to change, critiquing the sites into which they intervene as well as disciplinary procedures through which they operate – raising questions, activating empathy and moving to action.

Are there barriers to access?

Anthropologist Sally Yerkovich outlines three dimensions to the subject of access.¹⁰ This can refer to a site's physical accessibility – how easy it is for the public to enter. You should assess whether there are means for people with physical and cognitive challenges to access, and how this can be improved by installing wheelchair ramps, braille signage and tactile architecture, as well as including auditory inductions or guides. Access can also refer to affordability – ticket prices and entrance fees. If this is essential to the financial support of your project, there are alternative models you can use such as 'pay what you can'. Access can also encompass the ways in which the information presented is approachable – attending to socially inclusivity is not, as Mark O'Neill notes, about simplifying difficult things; 'It is about providing points of entry for people whose education or background has not equipped them to approach difficult works that they might in fact be interested in.'¹¹

Should I provide contextual information?

When planning your exhibition or event, it is important to consider how best to prepare audiences to encounter your work. Archaeologist Andromache Gazi summarises how decisions concerning space, style, presentation, and language are critical in how audiences react, interpret and make meaning.¹² You may choose to provide content with context, leading to difficult choices of what information to include on labels, guides or websites, whose voice will be heard and how much room there is for alternative voices and interpretations.

It is important to consider how the staging of work inevitably **reflects** your beliefs, assumptions and ethical values and therefore promotes certain knowledges or perspectives at the expense of others.¹³ Some curators choose to 'sign' exhibitions by providing first-person statements on how the content presented represents their own thoughts and beliefs. This act of **honesty** invites audiences into the interpretative process. Others include polyvocal texts which narrate meanings from multiple different perspectives instead of a single institutional voice. This approach encourages the public to **reflect**.¹⁴ And before viewers even see the work, it may be important to warn those who may not wish to see it at all. A health warning advises viewer discretion for content likely to trigger health conditions, such as seizures due to flashing lights. A trigger warning is a statement alerting the viewer to the fact that the work contains potentially distressing material.

Guideline 3 When presenting: Sharing and entrusting ownership

How will I engage audiences?

Presenting your work at exhibitions or events, in readings and workshops, or through interventions and performances represents an exciting moment of opening your research to publics. The opportunity for people to engage with and enter into dialogue with your work gives them a unique sense of involvement whether through participatory discussion or through physical interaction with their bodies, voices, brainwaves. This engagement raises the principle of **benefit** not **harm**, as you must negotiate the different types of **risk** involved in how people may interact with your work.

In terms of physical interaction, you may have little control over how people may engage with your work, raising the potential for injury or damage. It is a common requirement for practitioners to provide a legal warranty or guarantee of the work's safety for its agreed lifespan. For this reason, it may be important to secure and maintain public liability insurance, even after an event has finished or a work's de-installation.¹⁵

In terms of participatory involvement, it is important to consider how you will invite audiences to participate, act, work and create together. Performance theorist Jen Harvie raises important questions concerning the quality of participation and on whose terms.¹⁶ It is, again, vital to analyse site and **situation** as your ambitions to foster social engagement, mutual support and equality of opportunity may, in reality, only offer a spectacle of communication, limiting **agency** divested to audiences.

Should I document the event?

With so many considerations leading up to the staging of your work, it is often easy to overlook its documentation. This is really important to ensure you have a lasting record in order to share and celebrate your work further. It does, however, raise further considerations concerning **confidentiality** and informed **consent**.

You must first assess whether it is appropriate to film, photograph or audio record the event, especially if it is an intimate setting, if you will articulate or elicit personal information or culturally sensitive material. If you do wish

to document, the next step is to ask for written **consent** from participants and performers, and to notify anyone attending about your policy. To do so, it is important to collectively agree on recording agreements – whether you allow feedback and **consent** on edited versions, and allow rights to control the use of the footage.

Who will keep the work?

It is understandable to feel a sense of exhaustion after staging your work alleviated, hopefully, by a sense of achievement. There is, however, one final consideration to address. Because of the collaborative nature of this work, there can be complicated questions related to the **responsibility**, authorship and ownership of works generated during the research process.

Ethicists and artists Susan Cox, Sarah Drew, Marilyns Guillemin, Catherine Howell, Deborah Warr and Jenny Waycott advise communication and consultation on who will determine the storage and long-term display of work, how this might be used or appropriated in the future, and whether cultural and intellectual property rights of others must be brought into consideration.¹⁷ This is particularly important for internet publishing, through which your work **risks** being taken out of context through wide dissemination. For this reason, you may decide to issue a copyright notice, which is a form of legal protection that provides information about uses that are acceptable and includes details about contacting the copyright owners for **consent** to use in other material.¹⁸ Or you may collectively decide on a creative commons license that enables the free distribution of your work, to give other people the right to share, use, and build upon your work.

Resources

Australia Council for the Arts. *Protocols for producing Indigenous Australian performing arts: Performance Art*. 2007.

Barrett, Estelle. *The Ethics of Intercultural Research*. 2017.

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Lydiate, Henry. *Public Art Liabilities*. Artlaw. <https://www.artquest.org.uk/artlaw-article/public-art-liabilities-2/> 2010.

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Rendell, Jane. *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*. London: IB Taurus, 2006.

Endnotes

- 1 The expression 'silence is violence' is used by members of Black Lives Matter movements to attribute inaction to endorsement by not speaking out.
- 2 Barb Bolt, 'Beneficence and contemporary art: when aesthetic judgment meets ethical judgment.' *Visual Methodologies*, 3: 2, 53–66.
- 3 Australia Council for the Arts, *Protocols for producing Indigenous Australian performing arts: Performance Art*, (2007), 4
- 4 Estelle Barrett, *The Ethics of Intercultural Research*, (2017).
- 5 Ruth Phillips, 'Community Collaboration in Exhibitions: An Introduction.' In: L Peers and A Brown (eds) *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 155–70.
- 6 Emma Larkinson, *Artist in the Public Realm Health and Safety*, (The Glasgow School of Art: 2006).
- 7 Mike Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- 8 Ben Campkin, David Roberts and Rebecca Ross (eds), *Urban Pamphleteer 2: Regeneration Realities*. (Northampton: Belmont Press, 2013).
- 9 Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, (London: IB Taurus, 2006).
- 10 Sally Yerkovich, 'Ethics in a changing social landscape: Community engagement and public participation in museums.' In Bernice L. Murphy (ed.) *Museums, Ethics and Cultural Heritage* (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 242–50, 242–3.
- 11 Mark O'Neill, 'Museums, professionalism and democracy', *Cultural Trends*, (2008), 17:4, 289–307, 123.
- 12 Andromache Gazi, 'Exhibition Ethics – An Overview of Major Issues', *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* (2014), 12: 1: 4, 1-10, 5.
- 13 Gazi, 'Exhibition Ethics', 2.
- 14 Gazi, 'Exhibition Ethics', 6.
- 15 Henry Lydiate, *Public Art Liabilities*, (Artlaw, 2010).
- 16 Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- 17 Susan Cox, Sarah Drew, Marilys Guillemin, Catherine Howell, Deborah Warr, Jenny Waycott, 'Guidelines for Ethical Visual Research Methods' (2014), 17
- 18 Lydiate. *Public Art Liabilities*.

Bio

Dr David Roberts is a Lecturer in Architecture at the [Bartlett School of Architecture](#), and Research Ethics Fellow for the [Bartlett Ethics Commission](#) led by Professor Jane Rendell, seeking to raise awareness, expand understanding, and collectively develop approaches of ethical practice specific to built environment researchers and practitioners.

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