

“I took the decision to personally ‘reperform’ the material I had collected in order to preserve the confidentiality of the participants and their projects...”

**Case studies of built
environment research**

*#6 "Reperforming" as a Practice for Preserving
Confidentiality by Naomi Gibson*

Ethical Processes: Case Studies

These *Ethical Processes: Case Studies* offer insights into the ethical dilemmas that can arise during a research project. Developing an ethical practice involves a number of iterative and reflective processes generated in response to problems, dilemmas or difficulties – **hotspots** – often involving a challenge to an accepted value system or a tension between a research practice and an institutional ethics process, so requiring pausing the research in order to undertake some critical reflection. In reflecting on an ethical dilemma researchers often draw on principles, protocols, and publications – **touchstones** – in order to consider their options and decide how to act. The processes of reflection and transformation and the development of understandings around them can often reveal **blindspots** in social and cultural systems. This sense of growing awareness may provide opportunities – **moonshoots** – for re-imagining practice and the support structures required to enable an ethical approach.

Hotspot – recognising an ethically-important moment

A **‘hotspot’** is a moment in which a researcher-practitioner encounters an ethical dilemma, and is thus unable to continue to act as before. Guillemin and Gillam describe this in terms of an “ethically-important moment,”¹ or dilemma, “refer[ing] to a situation in which there is a stark choice between different options, each of which seem to have equally compelling ethical advantages and disadvantages.”² Recognising an ethical **hotspot** can be the first step in a process of developing an ethical practice. It is a process that can be activated by considering aspects of our own research practice, for example:

- Describe the ethically-important moment in your project and what took place.
- Make your account as clear as you can.
- Consider why this moment was so challenging for you.
- See whether any of the words in our lexicon of [ethical principles](#) could be used to describe the key qualities of your **hotspot**. Add words of your own if none on the list resonate.

Touchstone – reflecting on a hotspot

In responding to a **hotspot**, researcher-practitioners weigh up possible forms of action from an ethical perspective. By reflecting on their own practice, and with reference to ethical principles, decisions about new forms of action are reached. The philosopher Michel Foucault, for example, describes this process in terms of involving a “basanos” or “**touchstone**” – a way of testing the degree of accord between a person’s life or practice and a principle of intelligibility.³ For this reason, ethical principles can act as **touchstones** and be helpful in making ethical decisions. Continuing to reflect on your hotspot can involve referring to other examples and literatures to guide your future actions:

- Describe what happened after the ethically-important moment took place as specifically as possible.
- Think about how you responded, and why.
- Did anything in particular guide your actions? Advice from a colleague/friend? A book? A film? An instinct?
- What did you do to resolve matters? Did you seek advice from any particular source?
- See whether any of the words in our lexicon of [ethical principles](#) could be used to describe the key qualities of your **touchstone**. Add words of your own if none on the list resonate.

Blindspot – revealing a new ethical understanding

From a physiological perspective, a **blindspot** is the spot in the retina where the optic nerve connects, because there are no light-sensitive cells in this area the retina cannot see. The process of encountering a **hotspot** and reflecting on an ethical dilemma with reference to a **touchstone** can reveal a **blindspot**, an aspect of practice previously obscured perhaps due to habitual ways of doing things. Ethical practice can involve challenging the habits and norms of academic disciplinary methods and institutional cultures. This requires careful consideration, and it may take time to fully grasp the reasons and understand the context for what occurred in your own research practice.

For example, you may wish to think about what happened after the ethically-important moment took place and you responded to it. Some of the following questions might help as guides:

- In retrospect, do you think you did the 'right' or 'wrong' thing? If so, based on what criteria?
- Would you do things differently now?
- What did you learn from the experience?
- What advice would you give to others facing similar difficulties?
- Would you say you've changed as a result? If so in what way?
- On reflection, did this experience open up any **blindspots** for you? If so, can you name and define them.
- Do any of the words in our lexicon of [ethical principles](#) help to unpack the key qualities of any **blindspots**. Add words of your own if none on the list resonate.

Moonshot – imagining a future possibility

According to Mariana Mazzucatu, “moonshot thinking is about setting targets that are ambitious but also inspirational, able to catalyse innovation across multiple sectors in the economy... bold societal goals which can be achieved by collaboration on a large scale between public and private entities.”⁴ The process of recognising an ethical **hotspot** and reflecting on this in relation to **touchstones** is not always easy. In revealing a **blindspot** a researcher often discovers something about the context in which they work that may be challenging for them and for those that they work with. It is often not possible to share ethical problems with researchers or participants due to concerns regarding confidentiality. So a **moonshot** provides an opportunity to imagine an action which might need to disrupt a norm, and go beyond the ethical principles offered by the **touchstones**.

What tools, skills, training and mentoring can be imagined that would address the challenges posed by the insights revealed in the **blindspots**, perhaps by offering certain kinds of support, training, mentoring and guidance?

"Reperforming" as a Practice for Preserving Confidentiality **by Naomi Gibson**

Context

This research project studies the speech used by architects in the early stages of architectural projects: how this speech is used as a mode of representation and as a design tool, and how speech relates to drawing. I am interested in how speech is open to interpretation, and my focus is on the conversations architects have with each other in design workshops where they discuss and develop design proposals. I am conducting fieldwork in the form of interviews and observations of design workshops with London-based architects to understand the use of speech within contemporary practice. These interviews and meetings are audio recorded and filmed to provide a clear record of both what is being said and how it is being said, and, in the case of the design workshops, I am documenting the meetings in order that are words spoken can be understood within context, i.e. in relation to drawings on the table, images on screens and those present within the meeting.

Hotspot

This hotspot for this research has been the issue of **confidentiality**. On listening back to the audio recordings of the interviews I had conducted I realised just how identifiable some of these voices were – the architecture profession in London is close-knit, with the directors of well-known practices familiar to many architects in the city and the UK more broadly. In addition, the conversations within the design workshops involve mentioning the names of people, places and other information that could enable the identification of the architects and projects. This is an issue because many of the projects that the participating architects are working on, and which the research observes, are **confidential**.



Naomi Gibson, "Redrawing a Meeting" (2020).

Touchstone

The research has required me to **reflect** on the differing ways in which it is possible to **anonymize** aspects of the research in order to maintain the **confidentiality** of the participants and their work, while at the same time, ensuring that these practices of anonymization do not undermine my own ability to conduct and present my research. I have produced **anonymized transcripts** of the interviews and meetings for sharing publicly, but in private I also continue to refer back to the meeting recordings, which are stored as encrypted files and will not be shared. The development of my research practice around **anonymization** has also shifted to working with “reperformance.”⁵ By verbally reperforming **transcripts**, as well as making use of animation and illustration to obscure identities yet still represent the setting and context of these conversations, I am able to really explore new relations between speech and drawing. These approaches are discussed with the research participants prior to making recordings and gaining their consent.

Blindspot

The issue of **confidentiality** surrounding architecture projects has presented significant challenges for this research, beyond anything I had anticipated at the outset. As I have reached out to architecture practices to participate in the project, I have become increasingly aware of the particular commercial sensitivities around many early stage projects, projects which have yet to be submitted for planning or to enter the public arena via the architectural press. Architects have told me of being bound by non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) for projects (an increasingly common practice),⁶ of client expectations that project details will be kept under wraps, or fears that the client may be too anxious. Even after having explained the measures I will be taking to ensure anonymity, allowing such architectural projects to be the subject of research is still deemed too much of a risk for the architects. Participating in the research using a commercially-sensitive project places the architect in a position of personal, professional, and legal **vulnerability**. I am aware that I am asking them to **trust** me. In addition, as I am a researcher from outside of their office, based at a public institution which is subject to FOI requests,⁷ their **trust** also needs to be placed in the data protection systems of the university. For that reason, it has been easier for me to conduct my interviews with architects and practices with whom I already have a relationship. Understandably, many architects ask me to wait until they have an appropriate (non-sensitive)

project that they would be happy to give me access to, but these feel few and far-between. In this situation, I cannot so easily stipulate the projects or conversations that I wish to observe, rather, my research has become responsive, and instead of choosing projects to study as I first imagined I would do, my research has been led by the projects and settings that I am able to gain access to.

Moonshot

I took the decision to personally “reperform” the material I had collected in order to preserve the confidentiality of the participants and their projects. This **practice** has also provided me with an active means for gaining a more embodied, interpretive, and **self-reflective** understanding of the role of speech as a creative and representative medium in architects’ design workshops. This practice of reperformance has also forced me to read my research materials more closely, and assisted me in thinking about and through the positions of both speaker and listener in a conversation, as well as the position of each of the people speaking. Concerning the paradigm of performance, Dwight Conquergood writes: “it dissolves hard-edged distinctions between observer/observed, self/other, subject/object.”⁸ In addition, making reference to Jacques Rancière’s *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2003), Norie Neumark notes performative works “enact and make evident, rather than represent or express.”⁹ The use of reperformance in my own research is not an endeavour to reproduce or represent reality for illustrative purposes; instead, discoveries happen through the doing, the processes of enactment and interpretation, of writing, rewriting, redrawing, and saying aloud. The practice of reperformance with the constraint of maintaining confidentiality is driving a creative – and creatively generative engagement – with the collected material, and forcing me to confront my position and role as a creative practitioner and researcher.

Principles

- Anonymization
- Confidentiality
- Transcription
- Trust
- Vulnerability

Endnotes

- 1 Marilys Guillemin and Lynn Gillam describe what they call 'ethically important moments,' which for them mark the 'ethical dimension' of decision-making around the day-to-day dilemmas of research practice. For Guillemin and Gillam negotiating these dilemmas and their relation to institutional ethical procedures requires a degree of reflexivity on the part of the researcher. See Marilys Guillemin and Lynn Gillam, "Ethics, Reflexivity, and 'Ethically Important Moments' in Research," *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10, no. 2 (2004): 261–280.
- 2 Marilys Guillemin and Lynn Gillam, "Ethics, Reflexivity, and 'Ethically Important Moments' in Research," *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10, no. 2 (2004): 261–280.
- 3 In Michael Foucault's lectures on parrhesia, when he describes Socrates asking Laches to "give the reason for his courage," he is not asking for an examination of conscience, a confession, or a narration of events in one's life, but rather to "make appear the logos which gives rational, intelligible form to this courage." The role that Socrates takes, for Foucault, in asking for a rational accounting, is that of a "basanos' or 'touchstone' which tests the degree of accord between a person's life and its principle of intelligibility or logos." See Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia*, edited by J. Pearson, 1999. Six Lectures given by Michel Foucault at the University of California at Berkeley, October–November 1983, (<https://foucault.info/parrhesia/>) (accessed 4 July 2019).
- 4 Mariana Mazzucato, *Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism* (London, Penguin, 2021), p. 28.
- 5 D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics, and Performance*, (London: SAGE Publications, 2012).
- 6 Mark Klimt, "What Happens on Tender, Stays on Tender," in *Architects' Journal*, 20 May 2015, accessed 11 October 2021, <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/archive/what-happens-on-tender-stays-on-tender>.
- 7 Intellectual Property Office, "Guidance: Non-Disclosure Agreements," *Intellectual Property Office*, 12 March 2015, accessed 11 October 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/non-disclosure-agreements/non-disclosure-agreements>.
- 8 Dwight Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis*, edited by E. Patrick Johnson, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 17.
- 9 Norie Neumark, "Doing Things with Voices: Performativity and Voice," in *Voice: Vocal Aesthetics in Digital Arts and Media*, ed. Norie Neumark, Ross Gibson and Theo van Leeuwen, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2010), 95–118, 96.