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WHEN PLACES SPEAK: DEVELOPING AN EXHIBIT IN PARTNERSHIP

Tasoulla Hadjiyanni, PhD

Abstract:

This essay outlines the partnership that developed among a faculty member, students, two photographers, University of Minnesota units, and a multitude of community collaborators to develop the *When Places Speak* exhibit. Featuring places enmeshed in sex trafficking in Minnesota, the exhibit sheds light on the instrumental role partnerships can play in overcoming domination.

Key words: partnership, design, sex trafficking, places, photography, exhibit.

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Partnership has long been lauded as an effective means of bringing about change. In the case of sex trafficking, one of the greatest social ills of our time, partnerships can shed light on the unexpected ways by which people connect. This is the story of how my path as a design scholar and a concerned citizen crossed with those of Xavier Tavera and Shiraz Mukarram, the two photographers who brought to life the *When Places Speak* exhibit. This exhibit includes photographs of places enmeshed in trafficking: from places where youth are recruited to places used by traffickers to transfer victims across state lines, places where purchasers meet victims, places used by law enforcement to stop trafficking, and places where victims can transition and heal. Throughout this journey, our lives intertwined with others who are passionate to raise awareness about an issue that is largely hidden from public consciousness.

The numbers are shocking—it is estimated that 27 million people, mostly girls and young women, are trafficked each year in what is a \$32 billion dollar-a-year global industry (Polaris Project, 2010). Minneapolis has been identified as one of thirteen American cities with a large concentration of child prostitution enterprises by the

2003 Department of Justice's Innocence Lost National Initiative (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2012). The Women's Foundation of Minnesota (2012) estimates that at least 213 girls are sold for sex an average of five times per day, and the average age of victims is 13.

The United Nations (UN) defines sex trafficking as: "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purposes of a commercial sex act, in which the commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age" (<http://www.unodc.org>). As such, sex trafficking fits well within the configuration of the domination model that supports relations consisting of top-down hierarchies of domination maintained by fear and force -- man over man, man over woman, race over race, religion over religion (<http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/ijps/about.html>).

I always thought that sex trafficking was happening 'elsewhere.' I never realized or even considered that it was happening right here, in the city where I lived and worked. It all started during lunch with Laura Bloomberg, Associate Dean of the Hubert Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, who invited me to an event about trafficking in Minnesota. Needless to say, I was stunned by the presentation. The youth we were talking about were teens, just like my two daughters. As a faculty member in interior design whose research explores how the design of building environments can support multiple ways of living and being in the world, I had to do something about what I had learned. The driving force behind my work is my belief that design can be leveraged for innovation and change to improve well-being and quality of life for *all*. But what could I do about trafficking? Knowing that all of our lives revolve around places and interior environments, I sensed that interiors must somehow play a role in the process of trafficking. It did not matter that I had no answers at the moment as to how to approach the problem of design + trafficking. That is what makes research exciting and why partnerships are a crucial component of any scholarship that tackles complex societal problems.

Right after I left the event, I emailed Melanie Povlitzki, an interior design undergraduate student who had expressed an interest in working with me as part of her Honors Thesis. She asked Hannah Preble, another interior design student, to join our project. We were able to secure a grant from the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP) to cover Hannah's time. We jumped into this brand new research project, charting previously unknown territory. Our goal was to uncover the places involved in sex trafficking. That collaboration resulted in a paper published in the *Journal of Interior Design's Special Issue on Collaboration* (Hadjiyanni, Povlitzki, & Preble, 2014). It took multiple forms of collaboration to put together the story of places: from collaborations across University of Minnesota units, particularly with the Urban Research and Outreach-Engagement Center's (UROC) Director of Research Lauren Martin, to collaborations with law enforcement personnel working to end trafficking, as well as with community advocates. These insiders provided us with addresses and information on local places enmeshed in trafficking that we could be investigating, information that would have been impossible to get otherwise.

The paper grounded my premise that designers can contribute to the fight against sex trafficking. However, to reach a wider audience and raise awareness that sex trafficking is happening 'here' and not just 'elsewhere,' a more powerful medium than a journal paper was needed. Traditional forms for disseminating faculty scholarship, such as journal articles, must be revisited and expanded if community-engaged work is to have an impact. Faculty and university administration must be open to exploring opportunities for alternative ways to connect and relate to community issues. When funding became available, the idea for the *When Places Speak* exhibit was born. The goal was to channel conversations toward the places where sex trafficking occurs and thrives, calling on educators, researchers, students, design professionals, anti-trafficking advocates, and the general public to imagine how spaces are used and misused.

When I learned that we had received the Imagine Fund award, I felt panic. How would I take the pictures? I had a decent camera and a good eye, but was that enough to

create pictures that could be worthy of a gallery exhibit? I connected with an architectural photographer, who used her contacts in the local photography community to identify photographers who might be able to join the team. I found Xavier Tavera's images of interiors touching and personal. With its bright color palette, his portfolio was able to evoke emotions and draw the viewer in. I contacted Xavier and he graciously agreed to take on this project. Xavier recommended that Shiraz Mukarram's eye for detail and ability to capture space would strengthen the exhibit. Both were students at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design at the time, and there was no funding to support them. The Imagine Fund grant would be used to cover the printing and framing of the pictures. The two photographers' commitment, skill, and dedication resulted in 20 photographs that allowed 14 types of places, from schools to residences to truck stops, to speak and share their stories

The exhibit was displayed in two settings: at the UROC and at the University of Minnesota's Goldstein Museum of Design, from January 23 - May 8, 2016 (See poster in Figure 1).

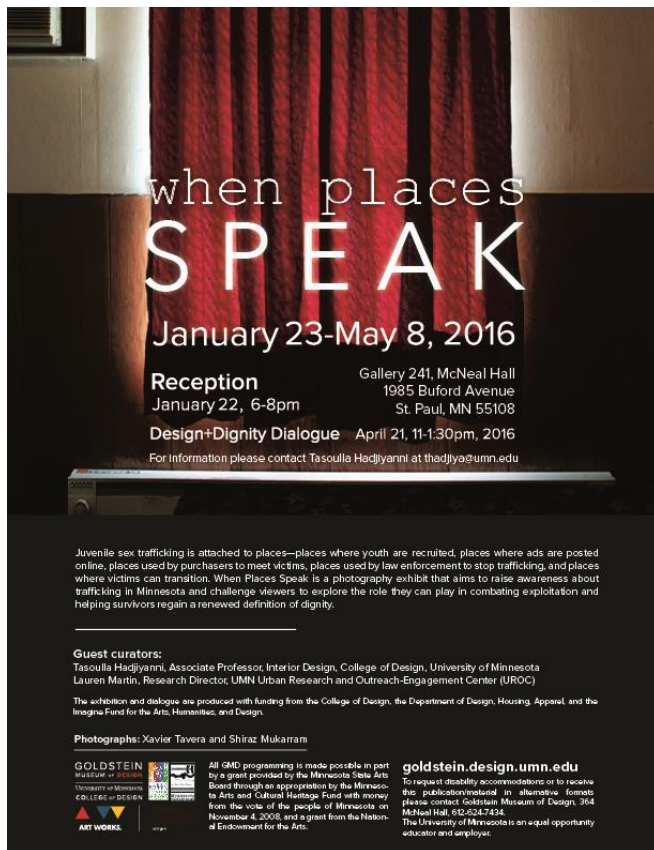


Figure 1. Poster for When Places Speak in the Goldstein Museum of Design

Using the Minnesota experience as a case study, the *When Places Speak* exhibit hopes to spark a global movement. We are calling on advocates from around the world to collect images of places enmeshed in trafficking and share them through the designagainsttrafficking web site that we are currently developing (dat.design.umn.edu).

The partnership model supports relations of mutual respect, accountability, and benefit, as well as hierarchies of actualization in which power is employed to empower rather than to disempower others in all relations, from intimate to international (<http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/ijps/about.html>). The partnership that resulted in the *When Places Speak* exhibit embodied the partnership model in the close relations that developed among all partners: a faculty member, students, two photographers, University of Minnesota units, and a multitude of community

collaborators—from police officers to hospital administrators and shelter providers.

In academic terms, this partnership can be called multi-sectoral collaboration, which has been noted to strengthen “a community’s capacity to address important issues by weaving together the skills, resources, networks and knowledge of the government, business, voluntary sectors and low-income leaders” (Tamarack, 2012). In life terms though, this means of conducting research is about trust, relationship-building, commitment, respect, honesty, and care. That is why partnerships are indeed life-transforming.

One lesson is certain: that the power of collaboration comes from the many new and exciting opportunities it provides, the multiple connections it forms that would not have been possible otherwise. We do not know where this journey will lead us, but we do know that being part of these efforts allows us to imagine a world in which *all* interiors support the health and well-being of *everyone*. With additional funding, we hope to be able to expand the number of places highlighted in the exhibit, locally, nationally, and internationally. Although we recognize that overcoming the domination that is present in sex trafficking will not be easy, what has emerged through this experience demonstrates that partnership by those who wish to affect change is critical to efforts to bring an end to modern-day slavery.

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Tasoulla Hadjiyanni, PhD, is Professor of Interior Design at the University of Minnesota. Her interdisciplinary scholarship investigates how private and public interior spaces impact the lives of immigrant, minority, and marginalized groups. Her research findings and teaching pedagogies have appeared in books and journals such as *Journal of Interior Design*, *Home Cultures*, *Space and Culture*, and *Design Studies*. Hadjiyanni served as the Editor of *EDRA Connections* and Guest Editor of a *Journal of Interior Design Special Issue on Design and Culture*.

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