

Joseph Zeal-Henry

Modular sonic sculpture SUPA System launches at Harvard ahead of wider tour



Installation of SUPA System at Harvard University. All photos courtesy Malakhai Pearson.

Built at a human-scale, SUPA System asks what music and sound can tell us about how we occupy spaces of power, and aims to inspire new ways of thinking about communal gathering spaces.

This is the latest project from Joseph Zeal-Henry, and emerges from a collaboration with Deborah Garcia as part of the ArtLab Loeb Fellowship at Harvard University.

Taking inspiration from the aluminium frame of commercial billboards, the modular and open source structure riffs on a plurality of architectural traditions to create a flexible installation that repurposes commercial infrastructure to foster collaboration.

The installation launches on 16 May, and will be followed by a touring programme of events that will invite other creatives, such as visual artists and dancers, to respond to the work.

Repurposing commercial infrastructure to foster community



A manifesto made physical, SUPA System cites far ranging influences to radically rethink architecture, imagining how the vernacular of infrastructure could create new ways of living. The triangular aluminium frame is a direct reference to the resource efficiency of American-style billboards, and suggests that this consumerist-driven infrastructure could be repurposed to dramatically different ends.

Joseph and Deborah's research also looked to examples of ad hoc commercial infrastructure across disparate architectural traditions. Sound systems can be traced back to mobile cinema culture found in Trinidad, and other points of reference include humble rum bars in Jamaica which are central meeting points in the community, as well as the innovative grassroots approaches to housing found across South America.

"I'm thinking of architecture as everything that comes before a building is built. From the people to the ideas and the culture, it's the culture that precedes the design process that ultimately shapes what kind of built environment we inhabit.

"Sound is the starting point of aesthetics, and as designers we need to think more about infrastructures that support people's abilities to come together, convene and find common ground."

– Joseph Zeal-Henry, designer

A flexible structure with an open source spirit



SUPA System is a flexible structure that has no fixed dimensions and can be used in numerous ways. Set on hinges, the various walls of the structure can be opened and closed, allowing the shape to adapt to the space it is set within. Additionally, a semi-transparent gauze can be hung across the grid, transforming the structure into a screen for film projections.

Adaptive and responsive in nature, SUPA System has been created to embrace creative exchange, and could be manufactured by fabricators in different locations based on open source designs.

The quality of the sound production was essential to the construction of the SUPA System. Joseph collaborated with a sound engineer in the early stages of the design, a process which required sophisticated consideration throughout to ensure the materials supported the quality of the speakers.

Taking a playful and critical approach to the idea of infrastructure, the installation facilitates collaboration and exchange with other people. While Joseph fabricated the speakers using a range of low-fi and high tech techniques, including CNC-ing the speaker boxes, the utilitarian design of the object downplays authorship, thereby inviting others to creatively engage with the project on their own terms.

Rooted in place



Joseph originally arrived in the United States with a different idea. But his experience on the ground shaped the final result, in particular the remarkable history between Boston, Harvard university and the Caribbean.

Having lived and worked in London for many years, Joseph was in a new context and became increasingly interested in how cultural traditions shift across time and place. Boston, for instance, has deep ties with Jamaica, as it was the first city that Bob Marley and the Wailers played in outside of Jamaica and Edward Seaga, the fifth prime minister of Jamaica who also ran West Indies Records, studied at Harvard, so this prompted him to explore the contemporary resonances of sound infrastructures found in different cultures.

The speaker boxes held within the grid frame also feature a luminous indigo stain – akin to a Biro Blue – that references the extraction of the plant from India and West Africa during the slave trade, which also carries associations with protection and health in pre-colonial times.



An ongoing public programme

Designed with the intention to host events, screen films, play music and so much more, SUPA System is launching on 16 May at Harvard University.

For the inaugural sonic experience, Joseph will uplift Black British music through the notion of making and leaving home by playing a curated playlist through SUPA System. This activity will unofficially induct 20 classic UK hip-hop records into the Harvard Hip-Hop Archive, a gesture which highlights the gaps in Harvard's own music archive by creating its own informal and temporary archive within the university. And as a further extension of collaboration, visitors will also be invited to contribute to the playlist.

Sound facilitators will include James McNally, Nasir Jones Hip Hop Fellow at the Hutchins Center, and Tania Bruguera, an artist and Harvard faculty member in Theater, Dance, and Media. This public artwork commissioned by the Harvard University Committee on the Arts (HUCA), was made possible with the Johnson-Kulukundis Family President's Fund for Arts at Harvard University. The Loeb Fellowship and the Graduate School of Design provided additional support.

Major tour to be announced

Plans are afoot for a busy touring programme that will see the installation tour across the United States, United Kingdom and beyond, with each iteration inviting a local creative – perhaps an artist, a musician or a dancer – to make their own use of the object.

Notes to editors

For further information, or any image and interview requests, please contact Sabine Zetteler at sabine@zetteler.co.uk.

Joseph Zeal-Henry

Joseph Zeal-Henry is a designer, urbanist and curator whose practice advocates for a more equitable built environment through policy and cultural production. His unique multi-disciplinary practice works to develop public infrastructure through public service and culture.

He has written for Tank Magazine Dezeen, Casabella, and the Architectural Review, and worked for the Mayor of London in the Culture & Creative Industries Unit, delivering new cultural infrastructure for London. In 2022, the British Council selected Joseph to co-curate the British Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2023 alongside Jayden Ali, Meneesha Kellay and Sumitra Upham. Joseph is currently the 2024 ArtLab Loeb Fellow at Harvard University.

Deborah Garcia

Deborah Garcia is an architectural designer and critic focused on redefining our interaction with everyday spaces to reshape and transform the economic, cultural, and narrative frameworks that surround them.

She is a recipient of the Princeton University Butler Travelling Fellowship, the MIT CAST Fay Chandler Seed Grant, the Exhibit Columbus University Design Research Fellowship and has held residencies at ARTFarm Nebraska, MASS MoCA, and more. She currently teaches at the Yale School of Architecture and is the Residency Director of the Institute for Public Architecture in New York.