

Tell-Tell, New Haven Bells

By Matthew Dehaemers

A Multi-Media, Community Collaborative, Public Art Project
Concept

The ringing of bells has been a symbolic gesture of community life throughout ancient and contemporary culture. Many poets such as Poe, Tennyson, Longfellow and Moore have romantically revealed the allure and significance of the ringing bell. It is the bell that tells the stories of community life. In some instances bells have been rung warning of an impending battle on the outskirts of a village or maybe rung to ward off evil spirits. It was often thought the ringing of the bells during a storm would help push it away from the village. At other times the ringing of a bells pays respect to the passing of a community member or a tragic community disaster. Still at other times bells have joyously proclaim the wedding of a couple. Bells were often used to announce and welcome royalty or an important head of state. This traditional form continues a subtle and important part in the everyday fabric of New Haven. The sound of New Haven's bells is a reminder of its history—from its first meeting house on the Green to the beginnings of to Yale. Today there are many bells within the nine square area that may be silent or their sound has been taken for granted as background audio. My concept works to blend aspects of visual art sculpture and light animation with highlighting the bell sounds of New Haven from large bell towers, to choirs of bell ringers and thousands of small chimes.



Part I: Visual Art Installation/Community Collaboration

The foundation of this project rests on the direct involvement by the people of the New Haven in its creation. Reflecting on the concept of bell towers, in particular the three bell tower steeples of the churches on the Green, I propose to construct three tower facades to be installed potentially on the lawn of the Green (#1). These three bell tower facades will consist of a large steel grid-like frame. Each tower will mainly consist of three stacked squares (each square 9 ft. x 9 ft.) that represent the nine squares of New Haven. Each grid-like square will consist of thousands of suspended miniature chime bells (roughly 30,000 bells in all) (#7). Each tiny bell becomes one pixel in forming nine graphic images representing the people, places and events that make New Haven what it is past, present and future (#2) (the images used on the board representation are not necessarily the actual images to be used but are taken from people, places and events of New Haven history). With my past experience doing a few projects of a similar process (past project entitled—Trifecta of Oakdale—www.matthewdehaemers.com), I will coordinate some citizens of New Haven and community groups to help in attaching the nearly 30,000 miniature bells (#7) to create these nine beautiful, colorful, mosaic-like images that represent their community (#2). It is through this process that community participants will gain a tremendous sense of accomplishment and ownership of these works of art. The erection of these three towers very much echoes the concept of barn raising in which all members of early American rural communities would pitch in to help build the local community town hall, church or schoolhouse. It is a true symbolic gesture of community gathering and solidarity. These tower facades (#1) will be engineered to attach onto a series of construction scaffolding structures. Each tower is approximately 9 feet wide, 9 feet deep and 36 feet tall. In the “point” of each tower an actual bell will be installed and be rung during the performative part of the project. Also during the performative part of this project the grid-like façade will be illuminated with constantly animating L.E.D. lights (#6) set to the sound of the tolling bells of New Haven. Potentially after these towers have been exhibited on the Green the nine individual square images could be disassembled to be reinstalled—one for a space in each of the nine New Haven squares.

Part II: The Performative Bell Collaboration

Imagine a mid-summer night just after dark on the Green. The city hall clock tower bell tolls nine times for 9 p.m., also signifying the nine squares of New Haven. It is at that hour a symphony of New Haven bells begins. From the three churches on the Green to Yale's Harkness Tower (#3) to an army of hand bell players (#4), the night time air is filled with the sound of a spectrum of bells. As part of this symphony of sound there would also be an amazing carillon bell system (#8) (they only of its kind in the country) that would be installed on the Green to play in concert with all the other various bells within the nine squares. At times you would only hear a melodic piece from Harkness Tower (#3), which then moves to more ceremonial tolling of the three bell towers constructed (#9) on the Green and then to the three churches on the green (#3). At another point an army of hand bell ringers would come enter into the mix. I would also invite the people of New Haven to bring their own small bells from their own cultural traditions for them to ring at various points in the performance. The blending and fervor of these bell sounds would work to bring the three constructed tower facades (#1) to life with a brilliantly animated light display (#6)—illuminating the large and small squares of all three towers. Colors would fade, flash, pulsate and move across the three tower facades illuminating the heart beat of the bells and the community (#6). This symphony of sound would be a collaboration among the various bells, carillon bell player, hand bell ringers (#4) and local composers (#5). We would work to create an original piece just for the community of New Haven. The composition may allude to the history of bells and how their sounding has been important to the life of a community through life, death, marriage, war and peace—elements that are still part of our world today. As the performative piece works toward its ending—much like a great display of fireworks—their will be a feverous finale of light and sound in which all bells large and small will create a final cacophony of sound that will leave the public in awe. In the end this project would be created, composed, choreographed and performed for the community of New Haven by a collaboration involving many.

Community Involvement

Local citizens and community groups of New Haven, Hand bell ringing choirs, various church bell towers within the New Haven nine square area, Harkness Tower and the Yale Carillon players, local musicians, local composers, the Mobile Millennium Carillon Player, local fabricators, contractors and engineers.

Potential Materials

30,000 plus miniature bells, three bells for constructed towers, Various bell towers of New Haven, the Mobile Millennium Carillon Player, hand bells, scaffolding, steel, specialized L.E.D. light systems, computer, the hands of hundreds of New Haven community members.