
Design as Curator for Urban Discourses

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»[...] the task of curating is to make junctions, to allow different elements to touch. You might describe it as the attempted pollination of cultures, or a form of map-making that opens new routes through a city, a people or a world.«

Hans Ulrich Obrist

Abstract

This position paper aims for broadly contemplating the possibilities for design to participate in the creation of urban publics [3], referring to the initiation, support, and development of discursive spaces, in and by which the plurality of interests, needs, viewpoints and agendas that constitute the urban [6] is graspable and negotiable. Against the backdrop of the ongoing diversification of urban realities and the hybridization of urban spaces, the paper is asking for new possibilities in the design of provocative, mediating, framing – in short: *curating interfaces* for critical publics to form.

Introduction

The characterization of urban life as the encounters between a large number of people who are influenced and guided by a wide range of interests, needs, origins, and horizons is gaining in importance exponentially in the face of rising heterogenization of cities.

The productive discussions of concurrent and highly diverse life designs of urban dwellers and the associated variety of cultural, religious, and socio-structural views, needs, and requirements represents a major challenge in urban life-worlds, in order to work against tendencies of "tribalization" [10], i.e. the limitation of conflicts to the socially, economically, religiously, and ethnically "similar" [13]. Drawing from Torre and Rallet's [13: 5] analysis of physical and organized proximity within formal and informal organizations, we can assume that merely geographical proximity of city dwellers in relation to each other does not appear sufficient for stimulating discourses and crucial interactions to emerge. Meanwhile two phenomena characterize the past few decades, phenomena that open possibilities and in several ways define the scope of this research project. Firstly, examples like the initiatives *Kotti&Co* and *100% Tempelhofer Feld* in Berlin, the movements around *Stuttgart 21* and the overall increasing importance of neighborhood networks, i.e. institutional networking at the local level, show us that willingness to be involved in socio-political organization is on the rise. This suggests that new forms of political action apart from party or association membership are necessary and indeed emerging. Secondly, it is clear that technological developments are booming in their influence on exactly those concepts of civic-political action.¹ Media technologies are altering the way we experience the city [12] as well as the mechanisms of policy and the political; and in the consideration of these developments, often-praised *liberation dimensions of*

¹ For example online petitions, concepts like liquid feedback, adhocracy, but also the role of the global social networks such as Facebook and Twitter in the power shifts in the Arab and Eastern European world.

(potentially but not necessarily dialogic) network technologies are discussed in opposition to far more critical perspectives. According to the latter, the digitalization of democratic practices can actually contribute to leading the concept of democracy ad absurdum, as the markedly dialogic and participatory networks are ultimately characterized by their own dynamics of exclusion, censorship, and phoney effectiveness [e.g. 2].

Facilitating interactions

Aiming at contributing towards a more discursive, inclusive and ultimately more democratic urban environment, we can state that there is a necessity for design to better understand the socio-political interaction structures in negotiating substantial conflicts of interest in urban agglomeration areas. We need to develop a deeper understanding of already existing as well as visions of possible and emerging potentials of designerly intervention to curate and activate this physical proximity as well as to compensate the manifold hurdles for publics to come into being.

This is, of course, contextualized in the assumption that meaningful and inclusive discourse between strangers sharing a physical place can lead to a more dynamic, inclusive and just form of cityness and is thus not to be understood as the desire to force strangers into conversations they would rather not be having.

It is within this grouping of topics that this paper looks at design as a potentially reality-building actor that can exercise relevant influence on the processes of subjectivization in the appropriation of urban everyday worlds and relates to the current discourse on the

relationship between design and publics². To date, designerly possibilities for constructing discursive publics have been dealt with from various angles in the context of the academic design discourse. Specifically three perspectives are depicted, whereas the first two have been identified and described particularly by Carl DiSalvo [4] as (1) *Tracing* and (2) *Projecting*:

(1) The view to rather “traditional” design means, used to demonstrate connections and to convey complicated circumstances to an audience unversed in the subject matter for the purpose of empowering these people to react to the complex of issues before them (Making coherencies understandable, e.g. *information design*).

(2) The view to the objectification of possible futures as the ability to reificate and transfer abstract thoughts into concrete form, thus making it comprehensible, tangible, and understandable. Hereby the direct and indirect consequences of the respective groups of topics under discussion can be brought into the realm of experience and consequently be politicized (Making thoughts tangible, e.g. critical or speculative design).

(3) The transfer of designerly thought processes (postulated as a combination of anticipation and implementation competency) to the transformation of socio-political processes, a radically politicized interpretation of design that recognizes and advocates a fully extensive expertise for creating reality. Tony Fry [5] for example, acknowledges and authorizes the

² Regarding this I refer to the works of, for example, Pelle Ehn, Carl DiSalvo, Mahmoud Keshavarz, Noortje Marres or Ramia Mazé

agents of such design to be “redirective practitioners”, as pioneers in the redesign of our future life-worlds.

Hence we can describe three significant positions of looking at the action potential for design: (1) highlighting the political potential of what counts as one of the central constituents of Design itself, namely the mediation and communication of complexity; (2) the politicization of speculative design (whereas its potential impact outside of the galleries is rightly and heavily disputed³); and (3) the understanding of design as a suitable *modus operandi* for *altering the world* in a decisively holistic and political way.

While these descriptions are clearly valuable in both grasping and, in a normative fashion, producing designerly ways of interacting with the issue of publics politically, I propose to further look into the in-between of these understandings in order to gain novel perspectives on design’s possibilities to create meaningful interventions. Therefore, I argue for the importance of exploring design’s possibilities to directly influence at the formation of pluralistic publics in cities, whereas it seems fundamental to develop view points both grounded in a pragmatic understanding of our life worlds as well as in a *possibilitarian* approach to design itself, taking into consideration the potential values of redefining some or many of its constituting elements and subjects.

³ A very insightful discussion on this problem can be found in the comment section of a contribution on MoMA’s »Design and Violence« website:

<http://designandviolence.moma.org/republic-of-salvation-michael-burton-and-michiko-nitta/>

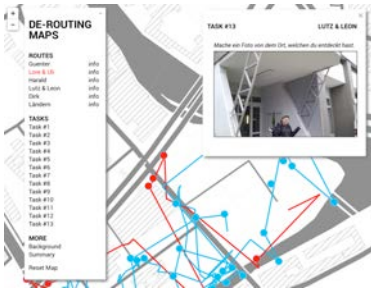
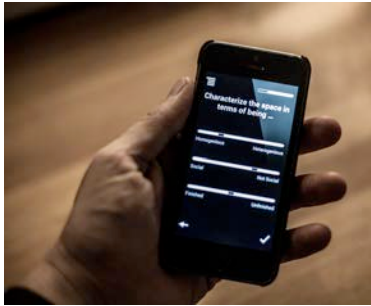


Figure 1: The De:Routing application and online platform. Walks and contributed observations can be filtered, annotated and discussed. De:Routing hence serves as infrastructure for exploration and as a starting point for discourse on the urban surroundings.

Design for Discourse

Based on this description of the problem and against the background of ongoing political, social, and technological changes it appears to be central to investigate new requirements and possibilities for creating and designing discursive spaces in the city within which plurality of backgrounds, views, needs and interests may be discussed and dealt with through negotiation. Reflecting on the ongoing project work [14] of my research group⁴, I argue that design- and HCI-specific perspectives (e.g. from interface and interaction design) can be harnessed and reinterpreted to develop human-to-human interfaces in the city.

Acknowledging that acting on levels of complexity like the one described can only be done by understanding the introduction of technological or other things as elements of socio-material structures, I believe that it can contribute in the compensation of some of the challenges in regards to fostering meaningful interactions – through acting as *curator* within the context of extreme physical proximity and simultaneity of highly diverse perspectives and life designs. Furthermore, ICT and specifically digital-analog hybrid interfaces can play an important role, for example in the case of emotionally charged conflicts of interest (e.g. through spatiotemporal equalization of discourses) or for including marginalized individuals or groups into societal processes. In exploring these spaces, my research unit is currently experimenting with different setups, which help us understand the relationship between the designed spaces as well as illustrate the directions we're heading. These projects thus serve the dual purpose of acting both as propositions in

⁴ www.community-infrastructure.org

themselves as well as functioning as objects of epistemic value that support and enrich the generation of knowledge in regards to our questions.

The **De:Routing** Application (Fig. 1), for example, allows different actors to record observations on a space they take a walk through. This android-application guides the user on a predefined path through a chosen physical space (by chance, much like a *situationist dérive*) and poses tasks and questions, which can be answered by text, photo, video, audio-recording, etc. The contributions of different users are GPS-tracked and the given information is uploaded to a website that consolidates the inputs of different participants, who are thus enabled to reflect on their own perception of space in relation to those of others. This served our projects as a valuable base for conflict-rich discussions, although we are still contemplating other use cases. For this, we work towards an open source release with a strong interest in learning through the appropriation by others. While De:Routing represents a snapshot in thinking about the initiation and concentration of discourses, a second project looks at the connectivity of conversations: The **Hybrid Letter Box** (Fig. 2) aims at bridging the gap between analog and digital with a perspective on enablement of elderly citizens to take part in societal processes that become more and more digital. The Hybrid Letter Box [11]⁵ is part of a larger citizen platform that we co-created with inhabitants of Fischerinsel, a Berlin neighborhood, during the last three years. It allows both technologically savvy individuals and digital strangers to browse and to contribute to discussions that take place in an internet based social network.

⁵ www.design-research-lab.org/?projects=hybrid-letter-box



Figure 2: A message gets handwritten and submitted to the Letterbox. It becomes digital and can be discussed both online and offline and can be printed.



Figure 3: Installation of the Hybrid Letterbox at the »Nacht&Nebel« art festival in Berlin-Neukölln.

For this, we utilize the well-known communication behavior of dropping a letter into a letterbox, and translate it into the world of ICT: the hand-written message gets scanned, uploaded and categorized and can be discussed, annotated and put into relation to other contributions. The ongoing conversations can be browsed on a touchscreen on the Letterbox and interesting feeds of discussions can be printed by the touch of a finger. Having designed the prototype for the inclusion of digital strangers, we are again working on putting it into different contexts. *Fig. 3* shows the application on a busy street corner in Berlin-Neukölln, where we asked passers-by to contribute a narrative description of the street we were on. These inputs were then projected on a big wall and could be answered by

sending a text message to a displayed number. These answers became visible next to the original, hand-written message and together they created a discursive narrative of the public space in situ. Here, too, the goal is not merely to design novel interfaces and test it in a limited number of case studies, but to understand these prototypes as infrastructures to be changed, adapted and appropriated by others. As with De:Routing, the Hybrid Letter Box will soon be released Open Source and I anticipate the research of these appropriations as leading towards further understanding of the research questions, hence as starting points outlining spaces for further explorations.

Discussion

Regarding this outline, I propose that design can have actor properties (which are to be specified) in the following three dimensions of elevating the likelihood of discursive, urban publics to emerge:

a) Initiation refers to the potentials of design for deploying and making possibilities (in regards both to solving and rendering problems) visible and tangible in order to empower citizens to have an influence. I propose that the enablement of individuals for political participation requires the conveyance of action horizons and possibilities as tangible through providing adequate infrastructures [1]. Given the apparently dwindling importance of established institutions like parties or associations, novel and project-based spaces for taking on responsibility are gaining in significance. Equally important is the provision of suitable frameworks for discussions as well as means for identifying relevant content out of diffuse and individual attitudes or opinions in order to make problems graspable and the emergence of *publics* possible [14].

b) *Accessibility* marks the possibilities of fostering connectivity between individuals or groups and respective discourses (e.g. residents without communal voting right in regards to decisions shaping their neighborhoods, digital strangers relative to conversations conducted online, actors not yet versed in the subject matter).

c) *Development* accords to the design and provision of tools, infrastructure and framework to transform conversations into manageable and productive problems or projects, to lead discursive problems towards desirable consequences. Obviously, this objective requires the adoption of different roles (e.g. facilitator, organizer, etc.) and thus explores the disciplinary fringes.

Concluding, I propose that design can occupy a strategic position in contributing to the further democratization of city-making through applying its resources towards a) making the emergence of public discussions more likely, b) fostering the connectivity of discourses towards a multitude of actors and c) providing support for creating meaningful consequences out of it.

This can have a dual purpose: For one, we need to further contribute to the existing urban-political discourse from a design perspective situated in the day-to-day urban world. And secondly, I believe that the descriptive as well as normative powers of design as a perspective as well as a practice must be furnished with new positions that support meaningful, socio-political action through design.

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