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Title: Prioritizing people: designing as sociability

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## I. Introduction

Our talk is “Prioritising people: designing as sociability.” We will talk about the application of design strategies, tools, and methods drawn from the social sciences in design participation projects implemented over the last seven years, mainly in Greece.

We are interested in participatory design. Originating in Northern Europe, participatory design acknowledges that people are “experts in their own lives,” capable of sharing and negotiating their local knowledge.

This dialogical process is lengthy and has challenges- especially considering the disruption of Covid-19. For example, when we resumed work in Kefalonia, a Greek island in the Ionian Sea, we had to get back into contact with stakeholders in the community, re-establish common goals, and adjust our research schedule and methodology.

Kefalonia is one of seven islands in western Greece in the Ionian Sea. The Ionian islands are geographically located in a historically contested space.

While the rest of Greece was dominated by the Ottoman Empire for 400 years, the Ionian Islands were only briefly occupied for 20 in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

After that, the island was under Venetian rule for 300 years. The Ionian islands then passed into the hands of the French, the Russians, briefly the Turks again, and, finally, the British, to be annexed by the Greek state in 1864. As a result of these multicultural influences, the Ionian islands' culture is considered the most “westernized” in Greece

During WWII, Kefalonia was occupied first by the Italians and then by the Germans. Villages were bombed, people were killed and executed, especially those with an active role in the resistance movements, and families were torn apart.

Under German occupation, one of the most significant and memorable war crimes in southern Europe occurred. 5.200 soldiers from the Italian Acqui division were killed by the German Army.

The Greek Civil War that followed WWII divided the country. Two guerilla forces led the resistance movement, the communist-controlled National Popular Liberation army and the royalist Greek Democratic National Army. The communist group established a provisional government excluding the Greek king and the

exiled government. After WWII and under British supervision, communists and royalists were brought together in a coalition government in Athens. The communist army refused, and in December 1944 conflict broke out in Athens, marking the beginning of the Civil War.

The Civil War ended in 1949 with the defeat of the communists. Ideological and personal hatred divided communities. To this day, the civil war has left a lasting bitterness among many Greeks.

In western Greece, the 1953 earthquakes seem like a culmination of the many hardships experienced during this time. On August 9, the first earthquake hit, culminating on August 12 with a more devastating earthquake. Argostoli, the largest city in Kefalonia, was virtually demolished in the south, while many villages were flattened. Approximately 470 people died, and 2,500 were left injured.

The earthquakes left people homeless, hungry, orphaned, and searching for lost family members. National and international relief aid arrived shortly after. In addition, the United States, Britain, Sweden, and Norway supported rehabilitation efforts.

People started leaving Kefalonia in search of more promising futures. From the beginning of the 1950s until the end of the 1970s, millions of Greeks migrated to Australia and Germany.

Economic austerity hit Greece in 2009. In 2011, unemployment rates reached 21%, and the possibility of 'Grexit' in 2015 contributed to further emigration and financial hardship, which still continues today.

Kefalonia's trajectory in the 20/21st century is marked by struggle. It is not rare to hear people say they had to start "all over again" to build and re-build their houses, lose their fortunes, and start working from scratch. Yet, many of our respondents talked about Kefalonia's recovery with a sense of pride, attributing it to the islanders' resilience, open-mindedness, and cosmopolitanism. Kefalonians who emigrate maintain connections with their families and community through affordable international travel and the internet. This builds on what Kefalonia has inherited from its history as a cosmopolitan meeting point across cultures.

I've been working with issues of storytelling and audience interaction for 20 years—projects have been in various places globally and the US. Earlier work depended more on digital visualization of audience answers and working both site specifically and online with different audiences. I'm especially interested in how people define themselves by nationalism and borders.

I began exploratory work in Europe in 2013. I was interested in how the EU adapted and applied contemporary branding strategies to create a sense of unity where nationalism and conflict have defined people's identities.

What do we mean when we say storytelling? "Storytelling" in design, and especially graphic design, has come to stand for selling, promotion, and branding. What we are talking about is different.

In a 2009 article in *Interactions*, designers Hugh Dubberly and Paul Pangaro, emphasize a shift to designing for conversations. The simple upshot is that designing for conversation relies more on feedback between sender and receiver, embracing collaboration and negotiation.

Ideas of conversation resonate with sociologist Anthony Giddens' ideas of agency through feedback

and feedforward, where members think and act in an ever-changing social context.

The need to find appropriate and open ways of engaging social and individual issues in research and design should be a high priority for various reasons, especially for people and their sense of agency in technological and social systems. An individual's agency is critical in research, participatory design practices, and design outcomes.

Artifacts help mediate conversations.

One method is based on boundary objects. Sociologists Susan Leigh Star and James Greisemer developed a way to interpret how people work together without consensus through shared artifacts.

For example, maps used by different professionals "getting things done" act as a boundary object between groups. In this example, naturalists may work with the state administration, where the state of California is seen by one group as a "nature preserve" and while the other group sees it as an administrative district. Critical engagement becomes part of the "feedback loop."

My work in communities in the US, China, Florence, Belgrade, and Greece often utilizes maps and other artifacts to understand the social context and situational relationships between people. Things don't always work out as planned. For example, this online platform allows users to map urban areas they share with other groups, where they can compare different ideas regarding use and experience in their shared civic life.

In Belgrade, while people were interested in participation, using these particular tools was a partial failure, as my cultural framework and design background very much influenced my ideas of consensus. In Belgrade, public discourse was viewed very differently in urban spaces that different groups often contest. This contrasted with how people behaved in their neighborhoods and homes through daily social practices. Practices and roles adopted in the home included sharing, making, the pleasure of company, the pleasure of food, gifts, and social experiences after dinner. Being invited into common daily practices in the home also led to other objects and photographs referenced in personal stories and competing interpretations.

Therefore, the online platform could only afford so much in the communities I had worked in. As a result, my assumptions about public conversations and transparency had to be rethought in terms of a different way of forming public dialogue.

Design has a bias in favor of efficiency and outcomes— therefore, this kind of engagement would be seen negatively. From another perspective, this example reveals something about the need for reflexivity.

## II. Reflexivity.

In participatory design, reflexivity implies designing for— and designing with— people in social contexts. In the disciplines of the social sciences, reflexivity is where "...researchers place themselves and their practice under scrutiny, acknowledging the ethical dilemmas that permeate the research process and impinge on the creation of knowledge." This acknowledges all parties' values, beliefs, knowledge, and backgrounds and the need to challenge and evaluate these values and knowledge in the participatory design process, as they often affect the dynamic relationships between researchers and participants.

(Maria) My Ph.D. research at the University of Sheffield examined the design of schools and the participation of students, staff and the broader community. My research experiences in participatory design offered an alternative perspective, where designers and children could participate in a situated social process, i.e., an open and dialogic space for collaboration and co-creation.

During my work with the Social Design Institute, I developed a conceptual framework for learning through social design and knowledge exchange implementing a project aiming to map designer and stakeholder insights and experiences in knowledge exchange at University of the Arts London. Stakeholder experiences, needs, and aspirations were shown to be starting points for critical questions regarding dominant design perspectives and methods commonly used to engage people in design.

I realized that to explore and question issues of power and expertise, voice and influence, and reflection on our interdependent positions as scholars, professionals, students and community members are necessary if we are to understand design as a form of social dialogue.

Returning to the idea of “conversations,” the concept of “design and social innovation” posits that communities already have a considerable amount of expertise developed in context to address pernicious design problems through a mix of alternative resources. Communities in Greece, such as Kefalonia, struggle with issues of education, biodiversity, urban planning, and preservation of local history. The community is cosmopolitan and has many international connections. People often find additional resources through individual and community agency. This creates amalgams between governmental, non-governmental, educational, and science groups working with local stakeholders. While this is local, it also reflects a very cosmopolitan idea of bringing diverse people together through design, social innovation, and social capital.

(Scott) How can participation change design in a practical sense?

An early design project with the Botanical Garden in Kefalonia is illustrative. In our discussions, increasing the international visibility of the Garden and its programs was a major priority. Staff at first focused on digital platforms and user feedback, which is part of a long-term strategy. Then, additional ideas began to surface in more informal settings where individuals conduct their work.

Our stakeholder, EM, works with the garden and the community and on preservation through an EU network of universities and databases. EM suggested that in pruning the garden, refuse is composted yet contains many native plants that are recognizable herbs and spices. This olfactory and tactile experience in the garden happens as visitors brush their hand across a specimen. Out of our in situ conversations, we developed an idea for a cheap and simple package that could be given to international visitors to the garden.

Simply, engaging people with context-based knowledge, represented by EM’s participation, 1) changed the nature of this simple design touchpoint from the participant’s perspective and motivation, 2) tapped into experiences of the space, 3) leveraged a resource that would have been neglected, 4) utilized a much cheaper to produce final product, and 5) conveyed through a much broader scope a level of the memorable experience of the space with outsiders. These issues are important to know about regarding the work in the gallery.

### III. Overview work in the gallery

The gallery exhibits the ongoing project in Kefalonia, including interviews, the various tools used to help people discuss and negotiate issues, and, from the different themes that emerged, animations created to visualize the topics.

Animations were a way initially to visualize interview themes in gallery spaces. For example, 'boundaries and immigration,' the relationship between more powerful and less influential countries, such as 'center and margin;' (1<sup>st</sup> frame is Tsirpras and Schauble), 'EU as future,' and then some of the themes that emerged from the interviews, such as 'nostalgia' and 'long distance,' related to family living abroad, etc.

Interviews with local stakeholders in Kefalonia took place in four phases in 2015, 2016, 2019, and 2022. Throughout these years, we collaborated closely with the Ionian Center for the Arts and Culture, whose director, Sophia Kagkadi, has been a valuable ally. Her insider knowledge of the local communities has opened a range of possibilities for collaboration with individual stakeholders and partners.

(Maria) Interviews in 2015 and 2016 included references to the earthquake, but many people were too young or not born at the time. Interview topics included living abroad and maintaining cultural identity, returning and living in Greece, concerns about austerity and seeing a younger generation going through a similar pattern of immigration, and dissatisfaction with more powerful EU members' imposition of austerity. Our participants focused on their entrepreneurial practices, personal histories, and aspirations for Kefalonia's sustainable development. Interviewees under 30 talked about students and young professionals having to leave for more promising futures abroad. These interviewees returned to Kefalonia with a desire to see the island changing for the better in terms of sustainable socioeconomic practices, infrastructure, and services.

The second set of 6 interviews took place in Kefalonia in 2019. We worked with social science and design students from US and Greece to refine the scope of the interviewing and sought out our participants' local knowledge and expertise to inform design speculations. Engaging more so-called key stakeholders, especially in an institutional or community leader context, the 1953 earthquake was again the primary marker for discussions, interviews, and photo documentation. Participants focused on their everyday lives and cultural practices and shared community values and identity in the era before and after the earthquake. Simultaneously we began "design speculations" as an outgrowth of our conversations which had broadened in scope. Scenario building leading to particular focus points in the community helped to define design speculations.

In Spring 2022, a group of students from the 2<sup>nd</sup> General High School of Argostoli, under their dedicated Greek language teacher Vasilis Manikas, implemented seven interviews. During the school year 2021-2022, we maintained ongoing communication with the group and developed guides, interview checklists, and other material to use in the interview process.

Recently in the summer of 2022, over 18 interviews were conducted across the island. Interviews were semi-structured and video-recorded and now comprise website content our partners are expected to take ownership of and further enrich as a cultural and educational database.

2019 and, mainly, 2022, interviews were informed by oral history, storytelling, and the use of objects (e.g., photos, religious icons, documents, etc., that the participants bring to the interview) as memory cues.

Oral histories are based on personal recollections, therefore are inherently subjective. Our participants' lived experiences, memories, and testimonies animate the era and the associated events we focus on, adding a social, anthropological, and environmental dimension to formal historical narratives. Storytelling lets us put individuals at the heart of their accounts and pay attention to their insights. It helps generate contextual and culturally relevant information that other qualitative methods may not offer to such an extent as a structured interview.

(Scott) Using objects during the interview enabled us to elicit memories about the interviewees' life and experiences in Kefalonia. Participants were encouraged to utilize their collections of memorabilia to describe events or discuss how the memorabilia is otherwise significant to their story.

#### Interactions

Since the early 2010s, how we communicate through digital interactions, especially through social media, has changed and has become problematic in work like this.

Physical interaction tools were developed. The activities and interactions help people discuss ideas and help visualize answers within groups. The kits are mass-produced out of cheap, lightweight materials. The conventions we have learned regarding social interaction through texting and other online experiences are eliminated from the conversations. This is also something that I've explored with my graduate students in the US.

Speculations: the emergence of oral histories (Living Histories) as a strategy to engage intergenerational learning, including practices.

Out of our long-term community networking with stakeholders in Kefalonia, we began to look at some of the issues that had emerged. Kefalonia has a unique history and social practices regarding place-making. This has eroded through the 20/21st century due to World War II and the Greek Civil War, and repercussions and opportunities presented by EU membership and globalization. This is clearly intergenerational. As people travel and live abroad, they struggle with maintaining a connection to 'placeness' in the community. Local institutions, such as history museums and educational outreach programs, are in decline due to a lack of support while critical stakeholders retire.

During our design course/intervention, we networked with community stakeholders as design co-participants to develop practical solutions based on local resources and expertise. Proposals identified diverse 'users' in the community and those that now lived abroad, looking at their potential motivations and interests in

preserving place.

(Panels from the exhibition) One proposal created 'outdoor museums'- about the history of place-making through small displays in the city that would tell a comprehensive story through a walk or itinerary. Historical events are told through first-person narratives from an event. A key object central to their narrative is displayed as an aluminum cast sculpture. Additional programming around the core displays can be made through online place-based mobile apps, where curation can continue through historical and other descriptions of other identified sites in the community.

Another proposal shifted historical archiving and community engagement into an educational framework. Educators in a secondary school, or Lykio, would create units of instruction in their curriculum and teach methodologies for interviewing and archival collecting of 'recent history' in the community. The collected community data would be archived into a simple database and saved as an ongoing archive of memory, practices, and places, and would be available to the community and provide a long-term archive that could be used for historical interpretation later. The ongoing practice of collecting data would also engage students and their parents in events at the school, in other words, intergenerational learning.

A third proposal prototyped a way to connect diaspora communities directly with the local community, where the absence of "placeness" is keenly felt. We proposed a kind of online genealogy service for those abroad trying to reconnect with their old community; however, instead of the usual way these services are provided, this would engage those abroad directly with the community and create an online community, again, contributing to an archive that could be tapped into later for historical interpretation.

#### Outcomes.

In 2022, a version of the second speculative proposal was developed.

We developed instructional guides, working with Vasilis' students to gather additional oral history collection leading to the development of an online platform created with available open-source software.

Researchers outside of the community also did additional oral history collection. By working with several different institutions and people "in the field," a more diverse group of people were interviewed. For example, interviews with older people through a more formal structure with the researchers had more men come forward to be interviewed. On the other hand, the Lykio students interviewed predominantly more senior women. Many students had long-term relationships with the people they interviewed in their communities. Interviewees tended to share more personal experiences, objects, and photographs.

As a "beta version," the site acts as an ongoing archive of full-length video interviews, a timeline and historical context of the oral histories, and the methodologies used.

The website shows the locations where the interviews took place and objects often referred to in the interviews and uses the coded prompts from the interview questions to organize contrasting viewpoints about particular subjects. We uncovered a possible future direction as the website continues to evolve in the

community. A common thread emerged about sustainable local practices based on local resources and knowledge. Interviewees discussed, for example, how to make a bread oven with local resources, gather local plants as food sources, and adapting architecture for the local climate.

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