

Situational is reflexive: research, education, and designing in southern Europe under austerity

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I. Introduction

In a 2009 article in *Interactions*, Paul Pangaro and Hugh Dubberly contrast Claude Shannon's "arrow to target" emphasis on the fidelity of a message, with their notion of designing for conversations. The simple upshot is that designing for conversation especially in a service design context is more reliant on feedback between so-called sender and receiver, embracing collaboration and negotiation. (Dubberly and Pangaro 2009) The article suggests a reflexive model of communication through conversation.

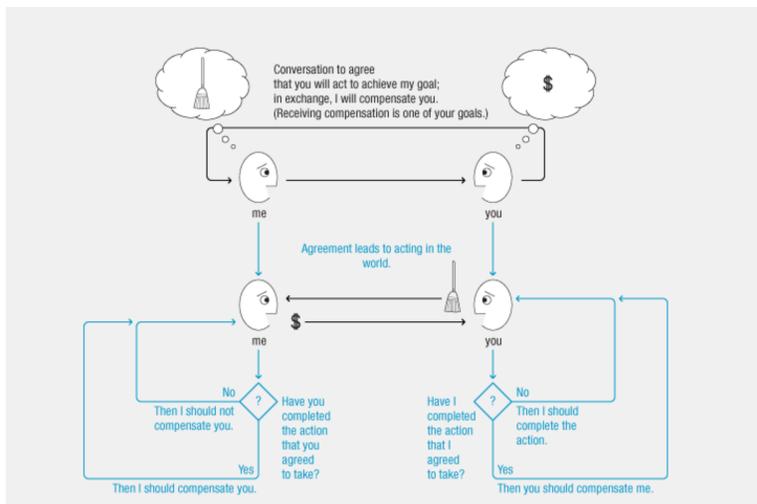


Figure1 Diagram of designing for "conversation," Dubberly and Pangaro.

Reflexivity is defined broadly as a concept or action "directed or turned back on itself." (Merriam-Webster 2018) In participatory design, reflexivity has implication in not only designing for—but also designing with— people and social contexts. In the disciplines of the social sciences (where much of design research originates) reflexivity is (among other definitions) 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." (McGraw, Zvonkovic, and Walker 2000)

This paper will therefore present reflexive "situational methods," e.g. designing for— and designing with— as critical for research practice and education, especially when working with issues of participatory design. Situational methods, moderated by the concept of reflexivity may be used to support the agency of participants. The first case study presents different design strategies for creating "conversations" with participants who find alternative ways of coping with austerity in their communities in Italy, Serbia and

Greece. The second case study extends designing for conversation with designing with participant designers utilizing both expert and “diffuse” design concepts. (Manzini 2015 p 44)

Dubberly and Pangaro’s general theme resonates with various ideas in sociology from the last 40 years or so. For example sociologist Anthony Giddens discusses the interweaving of ... “social structures (that) are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution.” (Giddens 1976:121) Human agency is the quality of properties. More than a mechanistic functionality, agency operates dynamically in social interaction. Giddens postulates agency through feedback and feedforward, where members are thinking and acting in an ever-changing social context. (Giddens 1984:5)

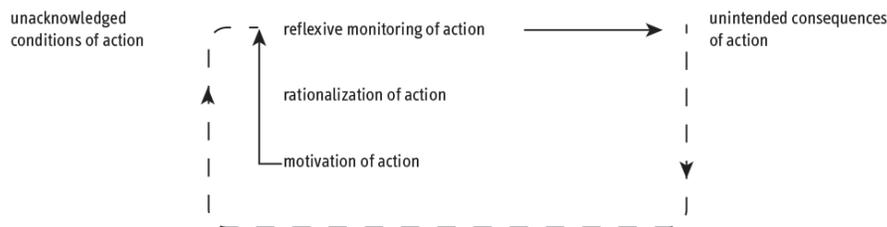


Fig 2 Agent (aka “agency”) from The Constitution of Society, 1984, Anthony Giddens.

Recent criticisms of user research and design intervention are noteworthy. Paul Dourish has critiqued the reductionism of research subjects in Human Computer Interface (HCI) (Dourish 2006), where distilling out “what is in it for design” potentially misses the idea of agency and complexity through instrumentalized design practice. More recently Kimbell notes, vis a vis Tim Brown’s positions (2009) that the designer’s role as interpreter of user needs through ethnographically-inspired techniques “in practice, shows little of the reflexivity of the social science traditions. In contrast to much contemporary design practice and education, social scientists are trained to question what theoretical, political or other commitments they bring to their work and how these shape their research findings.” (Kimbell 2011: 295) The need for finding appropriate and open ways of engaging social and individual issues in research and design therefore should be a high priority for various reasons, chiefly for issues of agency in technological and social (as well as in often politicized) systems. In the first and second examples, agency is critical both in research and in participatory design practices and design outcomes.

In a 1989 paper, Star and Griesemer posited an interpretive method of “boundary objects.” The original article illustrates the concept through amateurs and professionals in Berkeley’s Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. These two very different groups had little in common socially, though engaged in tasks centered on the workings of the museum. As originally outlined, boundary objects are shared between such groups, where collections of objects are ordered in a standardized way as methods of common communication across dispersed work groups i.e., “people getting things done without consensus.” Such objects referenced in the original paper included the collections of the museum, notes and diagrams, etc. used as points of reference that engage different people and groups with different points of view to communicate with each other. (Star and Griesemer 1989)¹ “Boundary objects are objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites.” (Star and Griesemer 1989:393) As an interpretive method, boundary objects have also been used extensively in design management research as a way to examine the workings of interdisciplinary design teams.

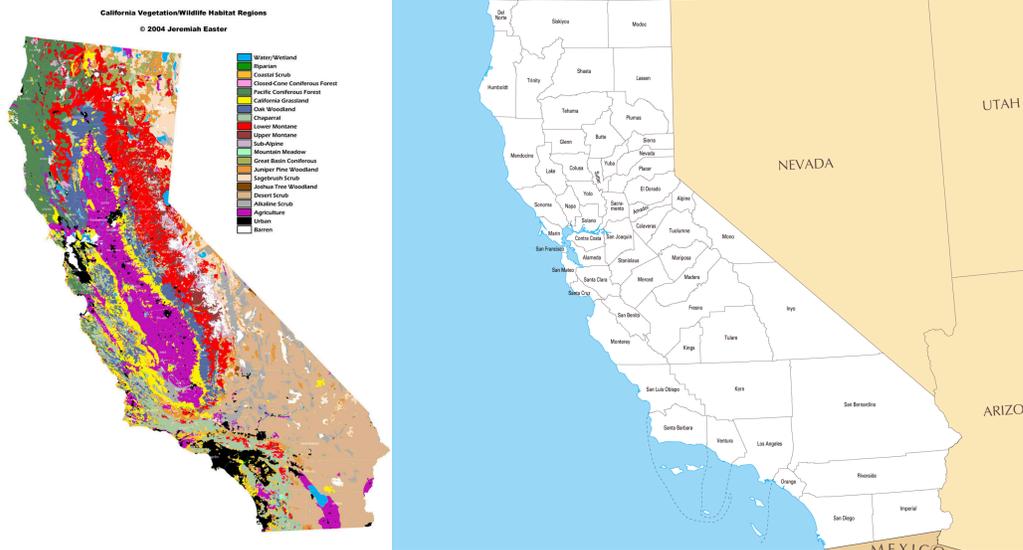


Figure 3 Boundary object. For example, certain kinds of thematic maps used by certain people “getting things done” can be thought of as acting as a boundary object between those groups. In this example naturalists may work with state administration, where the state of California acts as a boundary object both as “nature preserve,” and as administrative zone. Wikicommons. Accessed 1/12/18.

Application

My work in communities in Florence, Belgrade, and Greece often utilize maps and other artifacts in communities to understand the social context and situational relationships between people. The methods are in part based on boundary objects. An online platform for example, supports conversations both within and across different groups that share urban spaces. This allows users to map urban spaces that they share with other groups, where they can compare different ideas regarding use and experience. The digital mapping tool is based on using API’s (Application Programming Interface) and Googlemaps for the underlying geographic datasets. It can be adjusted to location and scale. Part of the inspiration for this came from exploratory research my students and I conducted in the RTP (Research Triangle Park) area that revealed a contrast in urban planning goals with how recently arrived people created their own public “centers,” which were often depicted as marginal or under-utilized space officially.

Initially, exploratory interviews are conducted. Categories are created based on analyzing common themes out of interviews. Users upload subsequent mapping/narration of experiences in the space to the site. The maps are based on continuing feedback of users experiences and use of the space. This “design for conversation” can compare maps and interpretations side by side for different constituencies that share urban space based on their own values in terms of “getting things done.” These and other designed interventions can be used to help further visualize urban space usage in community discussion.

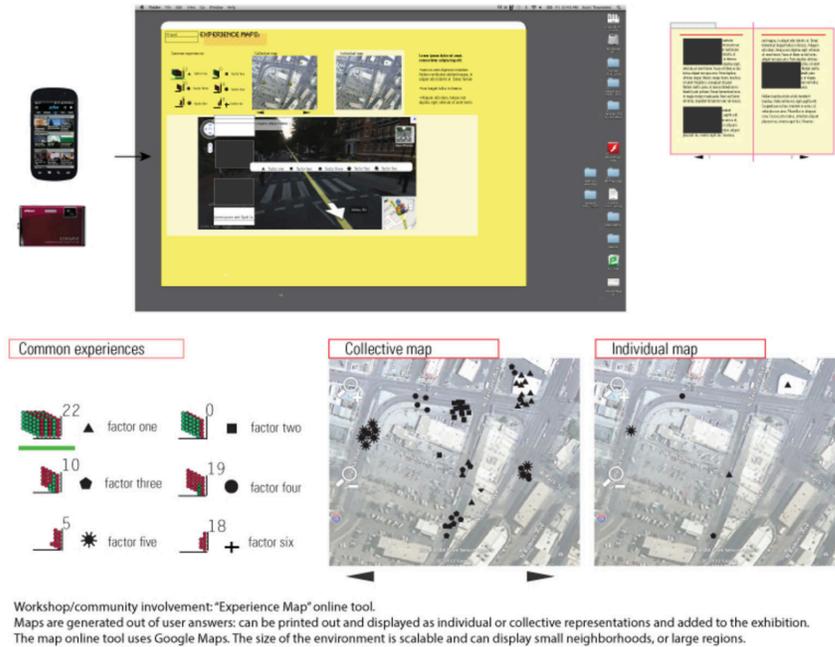


Figure 3 Digital map, Scott Townsend.

Exploratory work: exploration and critical appraisal

The first projects took place in Florence and Belgrade. While people were interested in discussions and in participation, the use of these particular tools was a partial failure especially in Belgrade, where my ideas of consensus were very much influenced by my own cultural framework. In Belgrade in particular, public discourse was viewed very differently based on two different spaces; one as a 'hegemonic' urban space (such as a museums, schools, commercial areas and malls, etc.) versus social spaces where daily practices take place in neighborhoods and homes.

I found that people had an acute awareness of the slipperiness of language, symbols and the urban environment, that domination and subordination of language and meaning changes quickly as one moves across these two kinds of spaces, and that this ambiguity had to be negotiated as part of daily life. (Townsend 2016)

Interviews and discussions within public spaces contrasted sharply with interviews that took place in someone's home and as part of social conviviality. Practices and roles adopted in the home included sharing, making, the pleasure of company, the pleasure of the food, gifts, and social experiences after dinner. These conversations emphasized relationships between friends, family, and guests. Being invited into common daily practices in the neighborhood and home also led to other objects and photographs referenced in personal stories and competing interpretations. In one interview for example, a university student recalled two different versions of Yugoslav Federation history: the one that she was taught in grade school, and an alternative history she was taught at home. School as a discursive public space was suspect, and while she could not reconcile the two different versions, she understood the politicization of potential «conversations.» Having dialogue directly with people in the community in their homes and the places that they worked allowed me to interview them and record their own ideas about their families and communities, rather

than abstract appeals to “issues,” which is suspect in many ways— the abstraction is where language breaks down, and where hegemony comes into play in language.

The online platform therefore could only afford so much in the communities that I had worked in. My assumptions about public discourse and transparency that I had based my methodology on had to be rethought in terms of a different way of forming public dialogue. Other work and projects began around this time in Greece and elsewhere in the region, and based on the reflexive and situational aspect of the previous experiences I designed another “tool,” in an attempt to not only learn things from the environment, but also with the hopes of making connections with people managing their environment through problem-solving.

II. Case study one: overview of designing tangible interaction boxes + sorting activity 2016-2018-

My process was to do unstructured interviews, analyze common references, and then create those references as titles and visual symbols. These references were then “deployed” as a mass-produced portable kits constructed out of cheap, lightweight materials. The kits are expressly not digital. The conventions we have learned regarding social interaction through texting and other online experiences are eliminated from the conversations. The kits can be placed on a desk in an office, on a table in a kitchen or other kinds of spaces that the participants feel in control of. The next round of interviews in 2016 used the kits as a both mediation and visualization tool. People can sort and discuss the references into a simple taxonomy in the box, visualizing their answers. Different patterns emerge from discussions alongside the recorded discussion. These visualizations plus the interviews provide both research and trust building between myself and others working further in the community.

This methodology is also based on breadcrumb/semi-structured interviews with discussants to sort and negotiate ideas and values. “Breadcrumbing” is the idea of networking through individuals to gain access to the group. Interviews are structured to encourage people to tell their story through a chronology of their eye-witness experiences (cognitively referred to as episodic), a common way that people build narrative without being dependent on complex interactions based on abstraction (“what is your position on an issue”) or problem-solving (“how do I use this interface, and who is seeing it?”) mindsets. As the discussion builds common references are placed in the box. Participants are more invested at this stage, having to justify and negotiate with other discussants more abstract ideas of value (cognitively more within the semantic). This shifts interaction away from me to the group itself. Finally the recorded interview and the box can be kept as a record (either through photographing in situ, or placing the box in it’s cover).

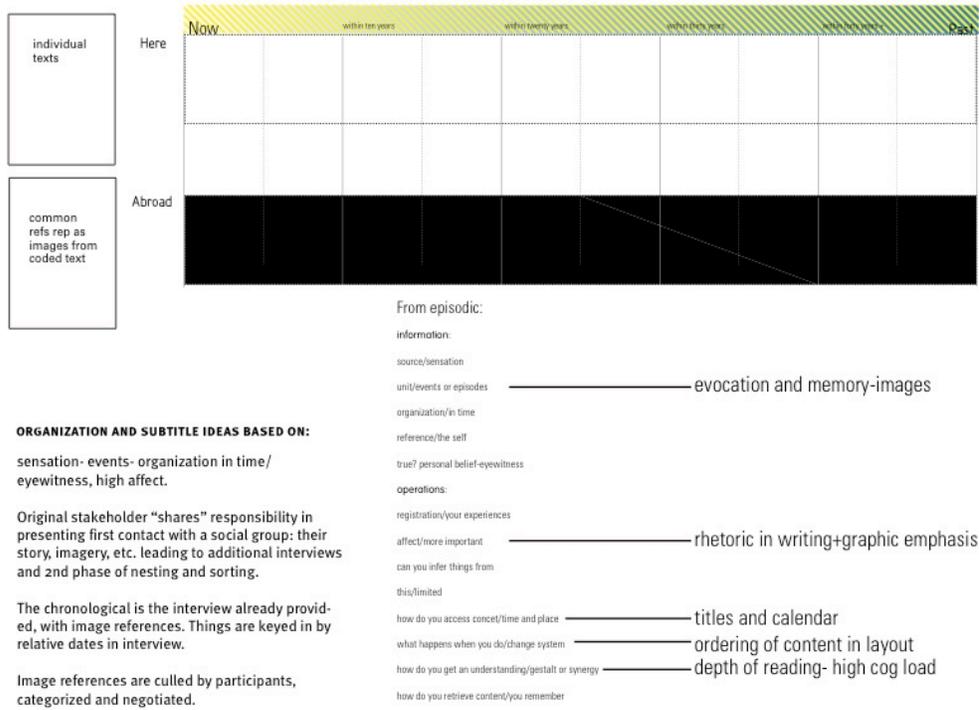


Figure 4 Original evaluation of chronological narrative in restructured interviews, Scott Townsend.

Categorization interaction based on nesting or unfolding rather than branching (as in a tree diagram) and separating.

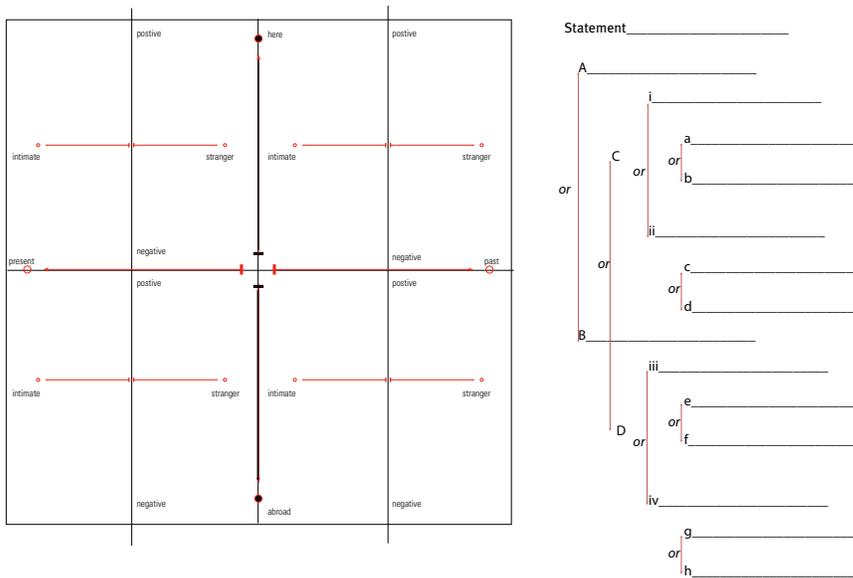


Figure 5 Sorting matrix, tagging and dialogue issues in interviews—progression of "unfolding" the issues- nesting rather than separating out as physical interaction as schema, Scott Townsend

Interview Three

Here and abroad in the past I was born in Argostoli, in 1947. I was 6 years old when the earthquakes took place. I really remember everything because it was such a frightening experience that even if you were a child you would not forget.

Just after the earthquake I went to Athens and began primary school. After two years, I came back, then I left again at sixteen and went back to Athens. I studied Naval Architecture, and I did my military service. In January, 1970, I left for Australia where I stayed for more than 40 years.

-Why did you leave Greece?

Abroad in the past It was not an economic factor that pushed me out. I had a very strong sense of adventure. I wanted to travel and that really was the impetus. Another thing is that I wanted to continue my studies in Naval Architecture. I changed course because in 1970 there was a huge crisis in ship building in Australia. We had up to that time four big shipyards. Within three months from my arrival all of them closed but one that served the Australian navy. I said, "Uh-oh what do I do? I will be unemployed." In Australia there were many Australians who left for Europe to work in shipyards in Greece and Italy. I decided to study computers instead of Naval Architecture.

While I was studying I had an offer to translate books and to work as a writer. The money in the IT industry was not good. When I received an offer to translate books write for a large Greek newspaper there, I say, "Uh-uh, here is a financial factor that I cannot refuse. I cannot deny this offer." That's how I started in journalism.

-What things did you miss when you were living abroad?

Here and abroad in the past We attach ourselves to the places where we see the light of life for the first time, or where we make our first steps on the land. That is a binding factor. I believe that the Greek word that has been used in English, nostalgia (nostos), is the main factor. You want to re-trace your past as a young boy, you want to live again with friends and family members and you miss the places as simple as where you used to swim. In Australia we have tremendous beaches, huge, but you swim four meters from the beach and you're gone. Here you may swim six miles, and if you can make it physically you are there. The first day I arrived in Sydney an experience that I'm not going to forget. I went to Sydney with a friend of mine, at the time we were studying in Athens. The first thing we did was to go to Coogee beach.

We went out about 50 meters and suddenly I heard a siren. There were a school of sharks just 500 meters away. The helicopter had spotted them, notified the beach authority and they raised the alarm. There's also crocodiles as well, salt water crocodiles.

Here in the present I wanted to relive that freedom that a Cephalonia beach gave. It sounds a little bit strange but it is a very important thing to be in the places you used to live in.

Οδηγός εικονιδίων στα κουτιά

| | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
|  Θρησκεία και Κεφαλονιά |  Οικογένεια στο εσωτερικό |  Μετανάστευση |  Παραδοσιακοί τρόποι εργασίας |
|  Νησιά Ιονίου Πελάγους |  Υπηρεσία |  Σύγχρονοι τρόποι εργασίας |  Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση |
|  Ιστορία |  Παραδοσιακά μαστεύματα |  Οικονομία |  Εκκλησία |
|  Ευρωπαϊκό Δίκτυο |  Κινητικότητα |  Επιστήμη και Τεχνολογία |  Φύση και Περιβάλλον |
|  Απομόνωση | | | |

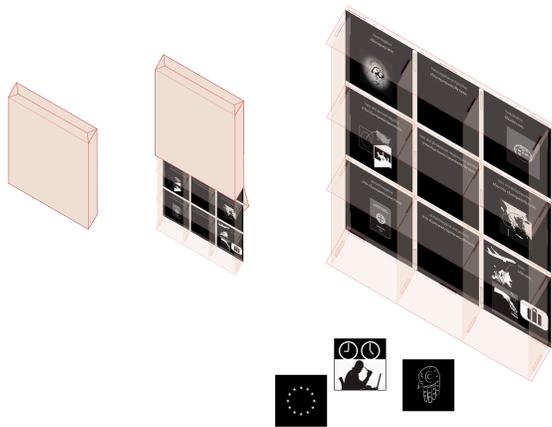


Figure 6 Interview panel with tagging of time and place, key to references, diagram of kit, Scott Townsend.

The original research and project work led to more specific discussions about community issues and local problems / solutions and the need for ongoing community research and design assistance.

Extending conversations into design agency in the community

How can conversation lead to stakeholder agency and participatory design? Manzini's and others ideas of "design and social innovation" are inherently based on social agency. Designing for conversations based on Giddens framework extends into actions and the role that design can play leading to outcomes of a practical nature.

Several constituencies in communities in Kefalonia and in Thessaloniki struggle with issues of education, biodiversity, urban planning and preservation of local history. These constituencies are internationally connected, however most must 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 and social innovation and social capital. Out of the original stakeholder engagement, problems and pain-points in the community began to surface (experiences and pointing to things in the environment i.e. the "here" part of the sorting).

In 2017 I worked with Greek academics and stakeholders with a group of US design students from my college plus Greek students in communications and social sciences.

Institutional partners:

Ionian Center for Art and Culture (Kefalonia)

Original host.

Kosmetatoes Foundation

K-12 and community education regarding regional history and preservation of local bio-diversity, EU research network member fostering biodiversity.

Ministry of Culture (Greece).

Preservation of recent history and developing shared goals between development and preservation.

Insitut Francais (Thessaloniki),

American College of Thessaloniki

Kitty and Michael Dukakis Center for Public and Humanitarian Service

"Franchise" spin off with sociology research and "public sociology" in urban planning vis a vis stakeholder knowledge and ideas of sustainable development.

A significant learning objective in the service-learning course we created is in developing a better understanding of methods, tangible outcomes and possibilities in designing in a participatory way with communities. This learning objective, for design

students if successful, fundamentally shifts student viewpoints and affects their eventual practice after graduation, especially in regards to empathy with the users they will design for.

Design and social innovation

Simply put as a gloss of design and social innovation, the basic idea is that communities already have a considerable amount of expertise developed in context to leverage «problem solving» to address pernicious design problems through a mix of alternative resources and expertise. Recognizing that, designers work with and catalyze those abilities within the community. In a tighter focus of practice, Manzini describes a framework for participation bringing together “expert” and “diffuse design.” (Manzini 2015:44) Expert is defined as the specialized training that designers have and use in their discipline. Diffuse design is the idea that problem solving and innovation are a natural consequence of a stakeholder’s knowledge and agency in their own context.

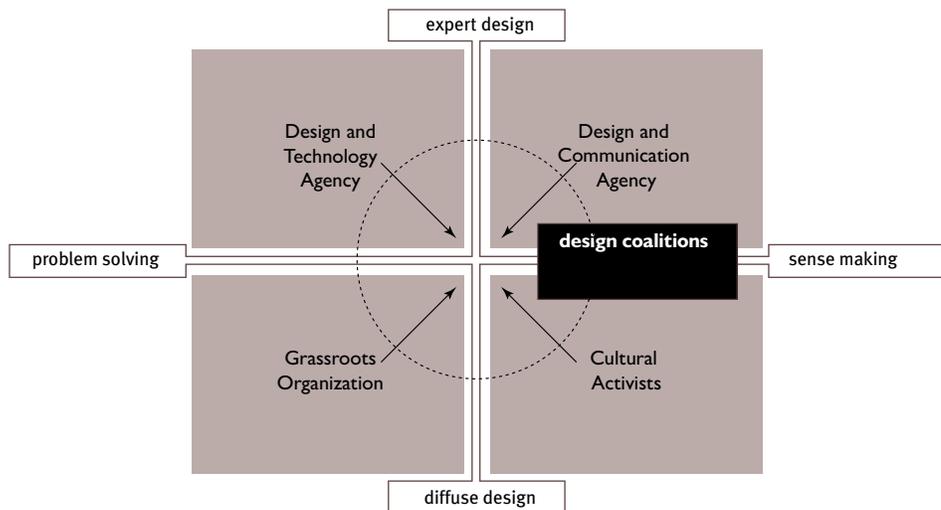


Figure 7 After Manzini.

III. Case study two

The following example ties together the notion of agency in participatory design with a very clear and simple artifact.

The Kosmetatoes Foundation operates a museum and a botanical garden. The purpose of the foundation is two-fold: to conduct research in bio-diversity in the EU with strong research networks in universities, and to create educational programs that focus on children and young adults regarding the history and bio-diversity of western Greece. One of the issues the foundation is confronted with is raising visibility of the programs for funding and external recognition. Previous solutions included publishing books on the

garden, supporting academics and others in writing histories of the region, and in the creation of a branded website. These efforts required financial resources. In our discussions with the people at the Foundation, digital platforms and user feedback on programs were the first ideas that the staff wanted in extending this visibility further. In more informal settings where individuals conducted their work, other ideas began to surface. Staff are engaged in daily practice in the garden, where the idea of both practical, necessity-driven sustainability, urban regeneration, and the social capital of the community come together. This is reflected in the overall approach and design of the garden as “genius loci,” or “spirit of the place,” extending to the site-specificity of the region and community.

Essentially the branding of the space from a traditional “expert design” perspective did not communicate the unique environment and local commitment to either the international audience or the larger community. This has repercussions to the overall experience of the space as well as visibility in attracting outside sponsors internationally and while it was competitive with other institutional messaging on some levels, it did not differentiate the successful alternative ideas and approaches of the Foundation “community.”

Participatory research and design led by a sophomore Industrial Design student revealed an alternative idea using resources of the garden to change the “brand experience,” in one small touchpoint.

In conversation with a key stakeholder originally interviewed in the exploratory research phase of my work, we learned about the nature of working and experiencing the garden space from her informed perspective as “diffuse design.” The garden is multi-sensory: things bloom and grow as part of genius loci. Different kinds of educational programming occur in the space throughout the year. Our stakeholder, EM, had both a grasp on the nature of the space and her intentions in developing it in the community along with her academic connections to botanical preservation in the EU as a networked researcher. EM suggested that in pruning the garden, refuse is generated and composted, yet contains many of the 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 out to visitors to the garden.

The resultant “brand experience” that grew out of these conversations became a package that contains herbs from the garden that would have normally been composted. The package is given to international visitors. On opening the package, the user creates an “unfolding” experience through the package design, where the dried herbs are experienced through tactility and fragrance- which helps recall the unique experience of the garden. The brand acts as a memento to be shared with the friends, reinforcing conversation. The package is printed cheaply and locally, and packaged on site by the people who staff the garden. When we questioned the ability to transport specimens internationally, EM knew conventions on international transportation- dried specimens are deemed safe.

“Diffuse design” represented by EM’s participation, 1) changed the nature of the design strategy 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 memorable experience of the space with outsiders with an emphasis on distinguishing the “brand.”

This is a simple example. In trying to solve more intractable problems, longer-term programs are primarily where design and social innovation have their most potential. Working with my collaborator Dr Maria Patsarika, in the urban environment of Thessaloniki, we

are developing “design coalitions” in the Stoa Malakopi neighborhood. The intent is to communicate and change perceptions of the municipal authorities and support ways that they can work with entrepreneurs that are doing the essential spade-work in finding solutions in both preserving the architecture but also finding ways to promote their businesses. These entrepreneurs also see the need to support a livable and sustainable neighborhood, which drew them to the area in the first place.

Both of the examples reveal something about situational methods as applied to complex problems. While a large systems perspective in design is important, balancing that with small-scale interactions with reflexive practice uncovers and reasserts the role of agency. This rediscovery of resourcefulness has the potential to solve at least some problems at a certain scale, and heightens the critical and creative practices of expert designers as well as design students. It also suggests a more inductive approach, rather than a prescriptive, or at worst instrumentalized practice of design, where potentiality (as in Giddens) is traded off in favor of control through functionality and assessment of “users.” It is also important to note that theory and research is not something that goes on expressly “inside” institutions such as universities, but is tied very practically to what we might call “users,” or rather, participants with agency, in designing their environments.

Notes

1- This is not an exclusive list, but rather reflective of the “object” as interpreted as “...a set of work arrangements that are at once material and processual (that) resides between social worlds (or communities of practice) where it is ill structured. When necessary, the object is worked on by local groups who maintain its vaguer identity as a common object, while making it more specific, more tailored to local use within a social world and therefore more useful for work that is NOT interdisciplinary. Groups that are cooperating without consensus tack back and forth between both forms of the object.” (Star 2010)

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