

Urban Documentation as Dialogue in “Loose Spaces:” Creating Design Tools and Experiences to Engage Communities.

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Abstract

Keywords

Introduction

A primary issue of urban inventories is in how to reconcile local knowledge and situational experiences that are often in conflict with “global” knowledges. This is a major concern in our work and inquiry. In one author’s work (Townsend) investigation began with symbols and communication strategies used by the EU that avoided historical and nationalistic symbols in Florence, Belgrade, and Greece. These communication strategies are mostly ahistorical, often using contemporary branding strategies to create a sense of unity and affiliation among member countries. Recently this focus has shifted to long-term projects working with urban stakeholders on revitalization through design and social innovation concepts in Thessaloniki Greece, and documentation and community preservation of modern monuments in Kefalonia as part of recovering local history. Dr Maria Patsarika, a colleague at the American College of Thessaloniki and I have been able to create an interdisciplinary perspective based on design and social innovation and public sociology.

Disciplinary specific definitions: social sciences and design

Design and social innovation can be defined briefly as a “...developing discipline (that) challenges existing socio-economic and political paradigms (and) meets a social need more effectively in existing solutions.” Solutions often leverage or amplify existing, underutilized resources. Social innovation is a co-design process in which designers work as facilitators and catalysts within trans-disciplinary teams. Solutions benefit multiple stakeholders and have the potential to empower communities to act in the public, private, commercial and non-profit sectors. Design for social innovation represents “design for emerging paradigms and alternative economic models, and leads to significant positive social change.”(Carnegie Mellon School of Design 2015) Public sociology on the other hand calls for the engagement of different disciplines in the social sciences and universities with their publics (Burawoy, 2005). A public sociology may be briefly typified as a call for “the engagement of sociologists with publics in which each

brings something to the table” (2008, 2) that also “...interrogates that common sense for generalizable principles (creating) a design that is accessible to and thereby an object for discussion by other communities.” (2005, 325) We therefore have a convergence on similar external problems from different disciplines. To work together we must design interactions across our disciplines that do not share a common specialized language. Any practice of public sociology or design and social innovation must therefore acknowledge both ontology and epistemology—knowledge by whom, for whom and to what end—plus the commensurate issue of methodologies.

Briefly design in Western culture is defined as a praxis, shaping built environments, communication and informational systems, urban planning, service design and interaction, and experience design. Metaphorically this environment is recognized more as a dynamic contextual environment, for example a “service ecology” of participants and designed environments. What was more or less a professional practice has led to a significant critical rethinking of positioning and the social role of design, becoming more reflexive and polyvocal. Working in this enlarged context requires contribution from other disciplines. The social sciences especially are recognized as important contributors to design research as evidenced by the backgrounds of many key design researchers from psychology, anthropology, etc. Newer design influences are therefore not necessarily uncritical nor wholly instrumentalized, sharing with (at times) sociology the need to examine epistemologies and ontologies, what Willis has called “ontological design.” (Willis, 2006) Design and social innovation (Manzini, 2015) posits this role as a catalyst for communities working with local expertise and resources in long term change, and in various notions of transition design that are positioned to help lead to long term change and sustainable practices (Escobar, 2018). Arguably, therefore, critical positions in public social sciences, here sociology and design, are grounded on the premise of “reflexivity and multiple conversations with diverse publics” (Burawoy, 2005, p. 321). Irwin (2018) has commented on the role of “mindset and posture”, which is a significant contribution to what we propose. Notions of ontological design and inter-subjectivity suggest that “we design our world, while our world acts back on us and designs us” (Willis, 2006, p. 80) further eroding the notion of design as isolated self-referral and disciplinary maintenance.

Investigation or “sense-making:” boundary and social objects:

How do we talk about the “urban inventories” that we jointly create? One method can be found in boundary and social objects as the basis for moving across specialized groups in investigation and representation, or “sense making.” (Manzini 2015) Star and Greisemer’s concept of “boundary object” presents a method of analysis. (Star and Greisemer 1989) Boundary objects are collections of objects ordered in a standardized way as methods of common communication across dispersed work groups or— “people getting things done without consensus.” In the original article, boundary objects are cited from a diverse array of things from the archives of the Berkeley Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, including collections, notes and diagrams, etc. used as points of reference between and within the various groups. “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) Boundary objects are also a research method in investigating workings of design management and interdisciplinary design teams. (Mark, Lyytinen, Bergman 2007-Rhinow, Köppen, Meinel 2012, et al.)

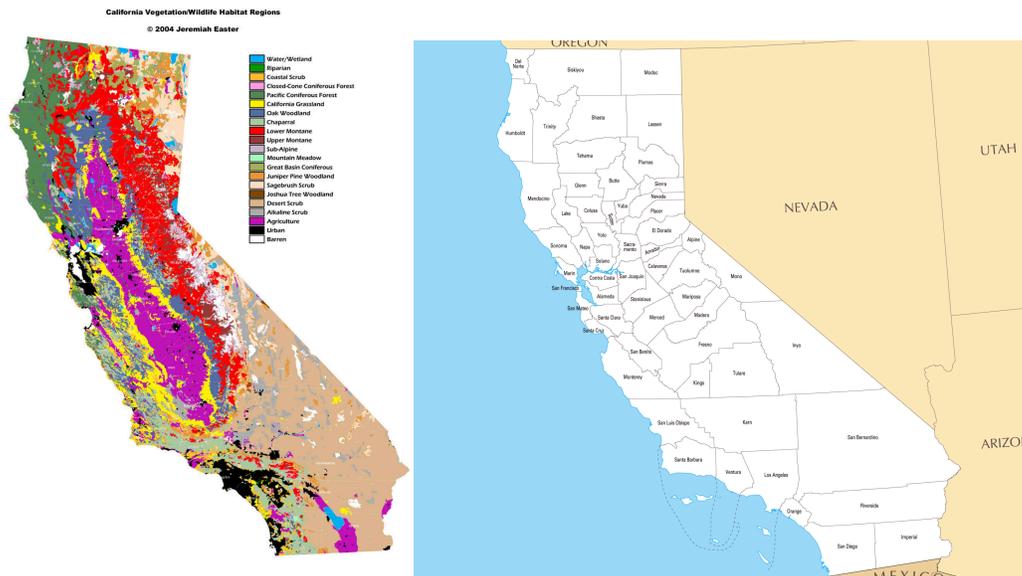


Fig. 1.

To cite another example, naturalists may work with state administrators, where maps of the state of California act as a boundary object as nature preserve and as administrative district. Interaction and communication may be well defined within a particular group or discipline— specialized language and concepts can be used with precision. Negotiating ideas between specialized groups however can be more ‘ill-defined’ where each group attempts to find a more common frame of reference to communicate to the other groups. The boundary object grounds the experiences between the groups.

Situated practice and representation: designing interaction maps as a collection of boundary objects

In one of the author’s (Townsend) work in communities in Florence, Belgrade, and Greece maps and other artifacts are often utilized 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. This allows users to describe certain places and functions where comparison can be made about use and experience.

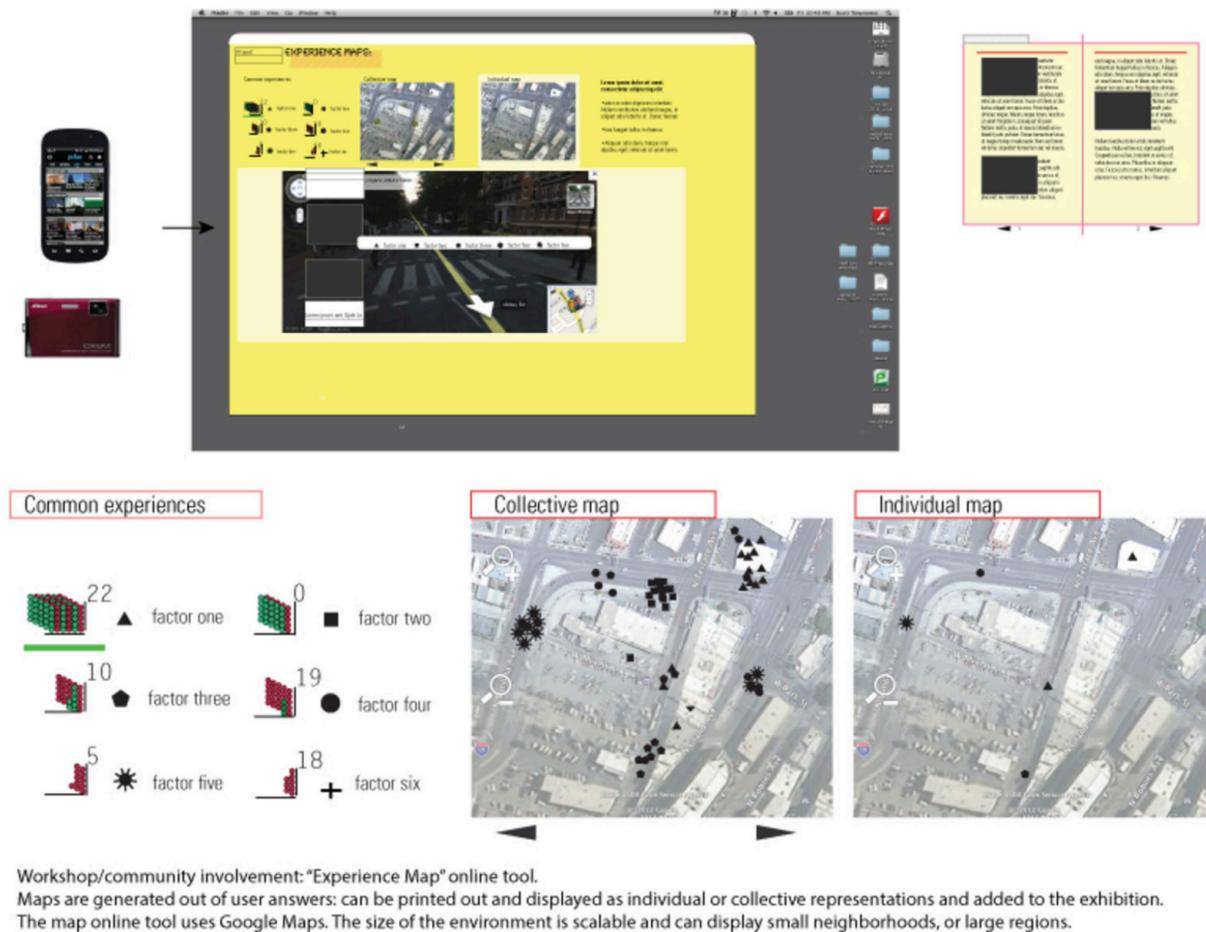


Fig. 2.

The digital mapping tool is based on API's (Application Programming Interface) and Google maps for the underlying geographic datasets. It can be adjusted to location and scale. Part of the inspiration for this came from exploratory research conducted in the RTP (Research Triangle Park) area in North Carolina. These investigations often revealed contrasting uses of space between officially sanctioned urban planning and different communities creating their own public centers. These spaces were often depicted as marginal or under-utilized officially.

In this design tool or intervention, initial exploratory interviews are conducted. Categories are created based on analyzing common themes out of interviews. Common descriptions from human geography (de Blij 2010) such as "center," "periphery," "margin," etc. are labeled by participants, as they record their experiences. Users upload subsequent mapping/narration of experiences in the space. This "design for conversation" can compare maps and interpretations side-by-side for different constituencies and built on to help further visualize urban space usage in community discussion. Boundary objects in urban spaces are often revealed in shared infrastructure such as transportation etc.

Designing interactions: social objects and a sorting box “tool”

Star takes pains to distinguish between boundary objects versus other kinds of interpretive ideas and “social objects.” (Star 2010, 612) Boundary objects are intended to be more about operations (Star 1989, 407, 2010, 604) (we could call this “doing”). Social objects are more about comparing and contrasting general interpretations (we could call this “reading”).

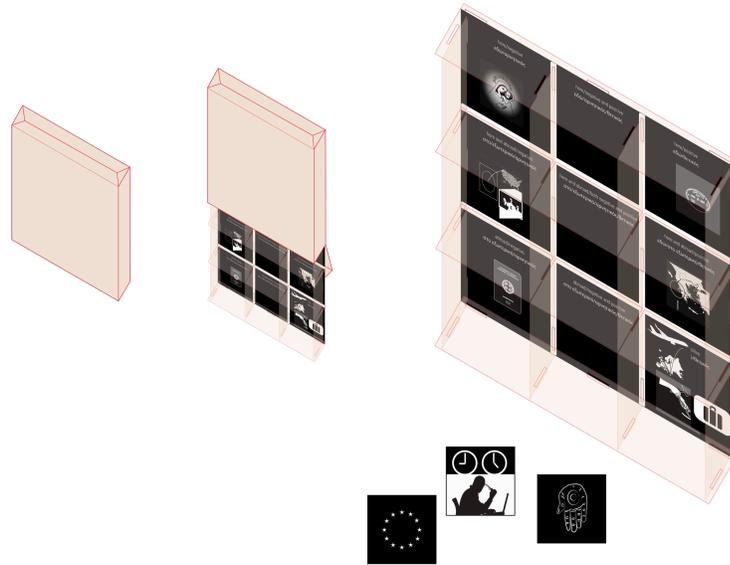


Fig. 3.

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

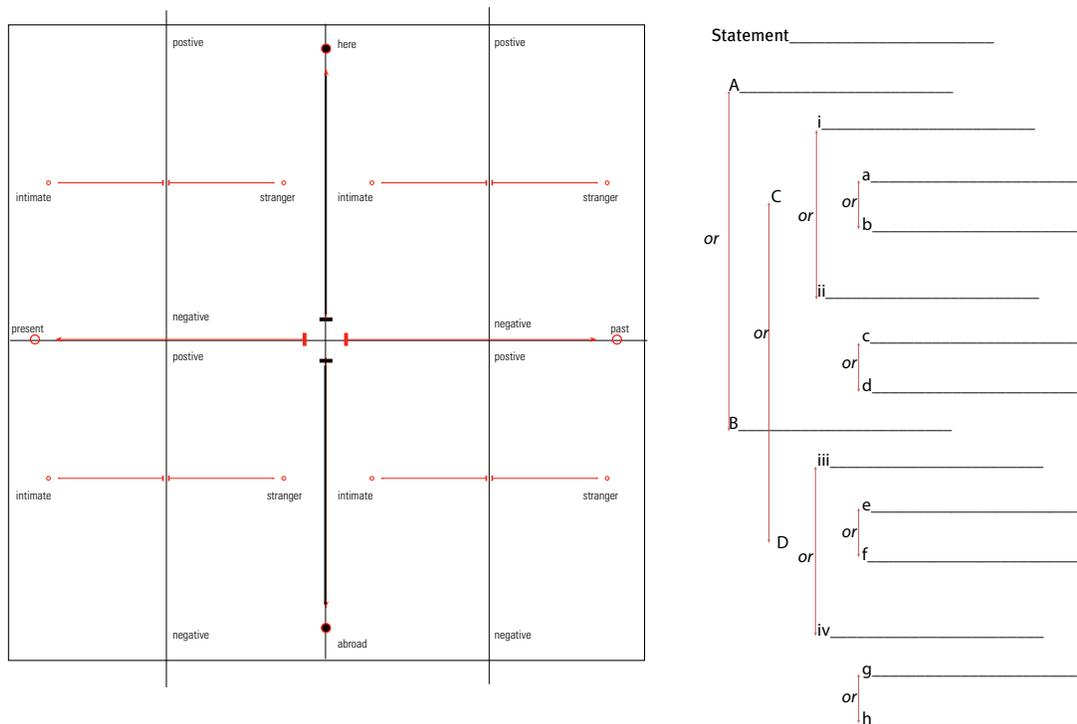


Fig. 4.

In this tool, portable sorting boxes help people negotiate common concerns through iterative dialogue. Prior to this, unstructured interviews are conducted, analyzed for common references, which then become part of the kit. The kits are expressly not digital, being mass-produced out of cheap, lightweight materials. 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 kits therefore function as mediation and visualization.

Group dialogue can take place working through individual stakeholder networks. In this design intervention, discussions are structured to encourage people to tell their story through a chronology of their direct experiences as episodic (Tulving 1983), a common way that people build narrative without being dependent on abstraction (“what is your position on an issue”) while purposefully avoiding digital media which might change the nature of disclosure through concerns associated with social media and the internet (self consciously: “how do I use this interface, and who is seeing it—”) as well as learned digital conventions and habits that often denigrate reflection and nuanced lived experience. People can sort and discuss the references into a simple taxonomy, visualizing their answers.

Negotiations take place about different viewpoints and operational practices. Participants are more invested at this

stage, having to justify and with other discussants more abstract ideas of value. This shifts interaction away from the interviewer to the group itself. If the interaction occurs in a common work environment, objects within the space are sometimes referenced as boundary objects shared between co-workers. 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).

Creating a shared discussion space through exhibition

Common themes from the participant inventories are interpreted through animations, amplifying key concepts and symbols, while drawing broadly on specific stories from individual interviews and recorded experiences. This is done in consultation with the original participants. Strategies of juxtaposition/mise en scene and personification are employed in time-based vignettes or simple scenarios. The display of this total work—interviews, visualized responses and background and projected animations is staged with additional programing—how do discussions and pain points surface through common themes, how can community networking be extended, and then how can plans be created to engage tangible issues rather than less actionable opinions about general conditions and abstract concepts?

Projection and ongoing work

In 2017 and 2018, we worked on two problem focuses in Kefalonia and Thessaloniki, along with exploratory ideas about how to proceed further. The first included design students from the US documenting and visualizing “modern monuments” in Kefalonia, a region that was depopulated after a catastrophic earthquake in 1953. The earthquake and subsequent emigration off the island broke the continuity of local histories and practices, and the documentation of churches, villages and other sites along with gathering interviews and descriptions from the people that returned is a first step in recovering and preserving that history. The second project is in catalyzing entrepreneurial practices in rediscovered historical urban centers in Thessaloniki, through research, interviews and building a contemporary community in these spaces. New business entrepreneurs are independently redesigning neglected historical commercial spaces, however stakeholders lack a collective common understanding of the space, and its specific history. Historically the commercial arcades and financial centers helped foster community practices that are reflected in contemporary social identity and attitudes in the urban/regional area. Finally, exploratory design processes and methods were tested out in smaller and more tangible design projects. Our next summer focus is in Kefalonia, and in supporting new practices in with “modern monuments”— how can practices be developed to encourage sustainable development and also preserve historical sites local experiences and practices?

How and when does the act of making an inventory become a design project?

If design is a shared practice with active participation, then solving problems is an ongoing process of “solution finding” and modification, rather than how design is usually thought of as a static solution to an equally static

problem. In a common default framework, designing is separated into an active engagement as creator/producers producing things for consumption by a non-creative or otherwise occupied or even distracted consumer/user who participates in a kind of satisfying experience without pain points and frictionless interactions. In this relationship, when consumers encounter need or “friction” in their current practices, tools, or built/social environments they play the role of a potential market, or political constituency. Demographic research articulates desires and needs to be addressed through product, service, entertainment, image, rhetorical messaging and appeal etc. On the other hand, in participatory design those that encounter “friction” in their particular designed environment can be more directly involved in modifying and redesigning the tool or practice that does not fit their needs. Hacker workshops for accessibility issues are one example, in which off the shelf tools are repurposed or customized, or other kinds of design interventions are created based on improvisation and the immediate needs of a user. (Adaptive Design Association 2019) This suggests a necessity driven paradigm through participatory design that changes roles and relationships especially where needs are not being met through a consumer model that often does not integrate issues of sustainability, lack of resources, unequal wealth, and the actual well-being of the community/individual. Specifically from a Foucauldian perspective it’s important to acknowledge that power is not static, rather, it circulates, it’s diffuse and better described as an activity than a possession. Therefore, it’s not just about who holds power but also about how power circulates. To put it differently, opening up spaces for participation to the public is not enough—one has to consider how participatory work takes place (1) whose voices and knowledge are legitimized through the participatory process, or who is invited or allowed to take part? (2) Are certain voices excluded? (3) How is information presented, is it merely educational and informative or offering opportunities for people to challenge the information and discuss alternatives? (4) When participants intervene, is their role merely reactive to ready-made solutions and pre-decided plans or are they offered time and space to co-create ideas how public narratives are being framed? (5) Are participants concerns re-framed into economic and technical issues or denigrated as outside of consideration? (Masuda et al., 2008) The qualitative weight attached to different forms of voices and knowledge interacting in community and in specialized disciplinary partnerships is at the heart of stakeholder power dynamics.

The communication that scholars and experts use—whether written, oral, visual, tactile—to engage the public or communicate their findings back to them, for example, are inevitably imbued with disciplinary meaning and cultural layers of interpretation, which re-create the social world rather than just represent it. From a Bakhtinian perspective also, while the “themes”, i.e. the subjective nuances given to “meanings,” that community members and expert outsiders give to social practices, differ, the imbalance of representation that prioritizes the expert gaze over the public perspective does not always allow space for community parole to inform the research process and outcomes (Collins, 1999).

Foucault problematizes the distinctions between the two in this case. The binary between expert and community can be argued as stemming from what he identifies as “will to knowledge” and “will to truth,” the first being a general desire to know. “Will to truth,” or “connaissance”, on the other hand is the desire to determine truth and falsehood in a particular discipline in this discussion— (Foucault 1980) or more directly by disciplinary experts (Dunkerly-Bean

& Bean, 2016). Following Foucault, Dunkerly-Bean et al. (2016) caution against missing the “savoir” for the “connaissance” when scholars are more concerned with the minutiae of accurately applying disciplinary conventions in community work than issues of representation, inclusion, diversity, dialogue etc. as outlined above.

The bifurcation of everyday experience and disciplinary practice, or lay vs. expert knowledge, locates knowledge in different silos allowing no crossover and interaction (Dunkerly-Bean & Bean, 2016). This is problematic when the goal of design interventions in the public domain is both to achieve meaningful outcomes, relevant and useful output and sustainable practices as well as establish participatory and dialogical conditions for change. Above all, this is problematic because it allows the dominance of “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1980) in what ought to be, instead, an effort to communicate through documentation multiple perspectives of the world.

Recasting design and social innovation traits into a design intervention

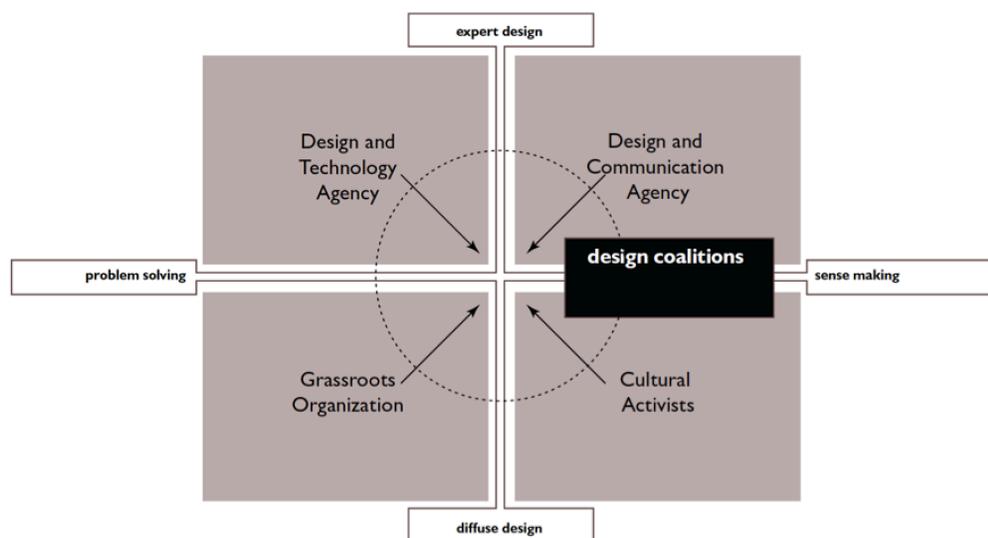


Fig. 5. From “design and social innovation” Manzini’s concept of expert and diffuse design. (Manzini 2015)

In the diagram above, Manzini suggests a framework for design and social innovation. Design and communication agency converge through “sense making,” while design and technology is separated and more within “problem solving.” Different community stakeholders are differentiated, for example activists are distinguished from grassroots organizations. Sense making and problem solving appear to also be somewhat discrete.

Design and social innovation principles applied to boundary object concepts

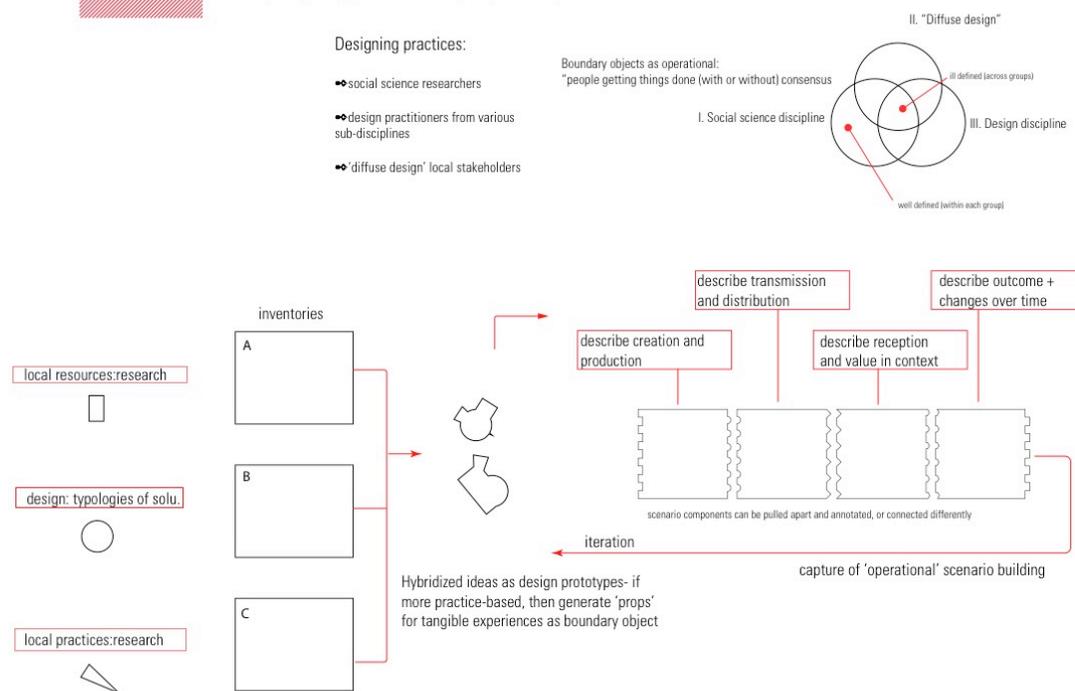


Fig. 6. As designed intervention.

Borrowing somewhat from concepts of feedback from Anthony Giddens, (Giddens 1986) and integrating concepts from boundary objects, this diagram is an attempt to refine and frame participatory interactions from “diffuse and expert design” communities and public sociology as a workable design intervention.

1. The self-described immediate issue that may include a tentative solution.

A problem is articulated in the community, or may be determined through researching more subtly placed issues. A very proximate solution can be defined through a tangible example and how it interacts in context and can be speculated on through scenario building.

2. The building of inventories and designing them to be understandable and accessible to the different converging groups.

This is provided through social science field research and archiving of local resources and practices. Design inventories are created of design typologies and practices external to local context.

3. Use a systems oriented scenario through consecutive frameworks of creation/production, transmission/distribution, reception and value in context, outcomes, changes and maintenance.

This process can be pulled apart or recombined sequentially to make the tentative solution into a series of alternative prototypes with specific traits that change the scenario. This framework is based on operations and descriptions that provide a framework to support the operational “getting things done without consensus” aspect of boundary objects as prototype. Through tangible scenario building, evaluation shifts to experiences and operations rather than what the design object is meant to signify based on strategies of marketing and branding and valuing.

4. Iterative prototyping.

The boundary object/prototype can be a discrete design solution, or it can be approached as a kind of “prop” or series of props as touch-points, especially in modifying behaviors and practices (educational materials can be looked at in some situations as “props” for example) or if approaching services (and service design). Boundary objects also provide a means of general discussion about methods (and methodologies) analysis of data (from social sciences) and negotiated understanding with other community members. Case studies from other locations and contexts support a borrowing approach. Resources and practices as an inventory may be unique to local communities: what local resources can be repurposed or alternative expertise be tapped? Can the definition of an “operational part” or practice be combined with another part under the circumstances? Can things be configured using different “parts” from other sources?

5. Incremental solution finding and modification in use. This helps erode the barrier between creative production and expected final reception and prescribed use by the consumer. Community ownership of the solution finding continues the intervention “without specialists” (design and social sciences). What are possible ways to refine ongoing evaluations of outcomes? As an ongoing active solution, how does the final prototype get produced, implemented and maintained? What are next steps? Is it something that can be easily modified, adapted or enlarged? Is there enough reward from it and is it satisfying to continue to support it?

Conclusions

The central preoccupations of investigation, situated practice, representation, projection, and the question of when an inventory then becomes a design project are the cornerstone for “urban inventories.” This helps break down the bifurcation in design and interdisciplinary work in “knowledge in general, and knowledge in particular.” Design dichotomies as disciplinary “knowledge(s) in particular” may obstruct new practices (research versus professional practice, design thinking versus design histories, design for public interest versus market driven design etc.). While the concept of boundary object has had its “growth and death” according to Star (Star 2010) becoming more

generalized and obfuscated as method and as abstracted theory, what Star and others attempted to describe still exists in social practices, especially in contextual practices of designing across different communities. Communities of practice and notably hacker culture necessitate outcome driven solutions. (Adaptive Design Association 2019). Operational- rather than instrumentalized design suggests a more open exchange between disciplines, education and knowledgeable local practices to provide a critical and practical mode of design as a common human activity.

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