THE DISRUPTIVE AESTHETICS OF DESIGN ACTIVISM: ENACTING DESIGN BETWEEN ART AND POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is above all to construct a new conceptual framework for understanding how and why design activism in public space matters. The paper sets off by providing a literature review of some of the existing theoretical frameworks in design research for understanding design activism. In so doing, I will identify a theoretical 'blind spot' in the research literature, which has blocked our view of how design activism functions as an aesthetic practice and not only a socio-political one. To remedy this shortcoming, I then introduce some notions from Rancière (2004; 2010) that enable design research to better explain the close interrelationship between aesthetics and the political in design activism. This will be further demonstrated through a series of case examples from current urban design activism. On the basis of this, I finally offer a more meaningful framework for the practice and study of urban design activism.

INTRODUCTION

Design activism has become a topic of growing interest and research through out the past decade or so (see e.g. Borasi & Zardini, 2008; DiSalvo, 2010; Fuad-Luke, 2009; Markussen; Mogel & Bhagat, 2008; Thorpe, 2008). Generally, design activism is defined as representing the idea of design playing a central role in (i) promoting social change, in (ii) raising awareness about values and beliefs (climate change, sustainability, etc.) or in (iii) questioning the constraints of mass production and consumerism on people's everyday life (see e.g. http://designactivism.net/). Design activism, in this context, is not restricted to a single discipline, but range from product design, interaction design, new media, urban design, architecture, fashion and textiles, and so on (see e.g. Fuad-Luke, 2009).

However, what appears to be lacking in the current understanding of design activism is a firmer theoretical hold on how and why design activism matters? How does design activism work? What is the impact of design activism on people's everyday life and what makes it different from its closely related 'sister arts' – political activism and art activism? In this paper these research questions will be investigated as to how they pertain to design activism in the public sphere and urban environment.

Obviously, the term 'activism' is meant to emphasize design activism's kinship with political activism and anti-movements of various sorts: anti-capitalist, anti-global, and so forth. This has led some authors to assume that the activist nature of design activism can be properly understood in terms of concepts and ideas borrowed from either sociology (Thorpe 2008) or political theory (DiSalvo 2010). But even though design activism may share many characteristics with political activism, it should not be modelled one-sidedly on the basis of these external theories. Sociology and political theory has no doubt a fine-grained vocabulary enabling us to shed light on 'democracy', 'public space', 'participation' and other themes explored by design activists, but it has no language for expressing what is truly unique and singular to the *design* act. The design act is not a boycott, strike, protest, demonstration, or some other political act, but lends its power of resistance from being precisely a *designerly* way of

intervening into people's lives. This is a subject matter for design research.

By the same token, design activism has been interpreted in light of practices invented by certain art movements such as the avant-garde, 'social interventionism' and 'community art'. For instance, it has been pointed out that the subversive techniques used in contemporary urban design activism draw more or less deliberately upon practices of art production that were introduced by the Situationists in the 1960s (Holmes, 2007). However, in order to get a better understanding of what is peculiar about design activism, we need to shift the focus of attention from this art historian genealogy toward the design act itself. The techniques used by urban design activists may be similar to those of the avant-garde, but the effects achieved by exploiting them in a *designerly* way are different. These effects cannot be properly understood, for instance, according to the original avant-garde project of re-defining or broadening the boundaries of art. Nor should they be interpreted according to the grandiose social utopias or revolutionary hopes so dear to the avant-garde. Nonetheless, it is precisely in the intimate interweaving between aesthetics and the political that an interesting answer to the activist nature of design activism is to be found.

The aim of this paper is above all to construct a new conceptual framework for understanding what I shall call the 'disruptive aesthetics' of design activism as it is found in the public sphere. The notion of disruptive aesthetics embraces two key aspects of design activism. On the one hand, design activism has a political potential to disrupt or subvert existing systems of power and authority, thereby raising critical awareness of ways of living, working and consuming. On the other hand, design activism shares an aesthetic potential with art activism in its ability to open up the relation between people's behaviour and emotions, between what they do and what they feel about this doing. In creating this opening, design activism makes the relationship between people's doing and feelings malleable for re-negotiations. Understanding how the micro-political and aesthetic aspects come together in design activism (as compared to political activism and art activism) defines the crux of the problem.

The paper sets off by providing a brief literature review of some of the existing theoretical frameworks in design research for understanding design activism. In so doing, I will identify a theoretical 'blind spot' in the research literature, which has blocked our view of how design activism functions as an aesthetic practice and not only a socio-political one. To remedy this shortcoming, I then introduce some notions from Rancière (2004; 2010) that enable design research to better explain the close interrelationship between aesthetics and the political in design activism. This will be further demonstrated through a series of case examples from current urban design activism. On the basis of this, I then finally offer a new framework, which differs from existing frameworks in that it offers more meaningful concepts for the practice and study of urban design activism.

FRAMEWORKS OF DESIGN ACTIVISM IN DESIGN RESEARCH

Thorpe (2008) argues that "[d]esign lacks a good conceptual framework for activism, but fortunately sociology has one to offer, a typology of activism." She then uses this typology to systematise a large number of design activist cases into a limited set of design act categories. Design activism may thus manifest itself in the form of (i) a *demonstration* artefact that reveals positive alternatives that are superior to the status quo; (ii) an *act of communication*, in the sense of making information visual, devising rating systems, creating maps and symbols, etc.; (iii) *conventional actions* proposing legislation, writing polemics, testifying at political meetings, etc.; (iv) a *service* artefact intending to provide humanitarian aid or for a needy group or population; (v) *events* such as conferences, talks, installations or exhibitions; and (vi) a *protest artefact*, which deliberately confronts in order to raise reflection on the morality of status quo.

As always, such typologies and categories should be evaluated according to their ability to describe and provide new insight into the subject matter under scrutiny. In this regard, I will argue along with Fuad-Luke (2009: 81) that Thorpe's framework is insufficient. First, by using action concepts from sociology as her preferred conceptual tools, Thorpe put emphasis on what design activism has in common with social practices, but very little is revealed about the central elements of the practice of urban design activism itself: it's techniques, design activist methods, the intended end users, etc.

Secondly, the concepts in Thorpe's framework seems to be too vague and general to actually enable us to make conceptual distinctions for understanding types of design activism. Often, when applying it to design activist projects, one ends up describing them in terms of conceptual hybrids such as protest-demonstration-service artefacts. For instance, the Recetas Urbanas project by Santiago Cirugeda, which I will provide a more detailed analysis of below, falls in-between all three categories. Surely, anomalies are most welcome in theory construction, because they can help us to locate inconsistencies in a theory that calls for repair. But if design activist projects tend to fall in between the categories as a rule rather than the exception, then these categories are analytically too imprecise and the framework should therefore be modified substantially so that it become more sensitive to the particular nature of design activism.

Third, sociological action concepts reveal little about the intended reach of design activism and most importantly its *effects* in terms of eliciting social and behavioural change. Interestingly, Fuad-Luke (2009)

points towards *disruption* being a central notion for understanding the effect of design activism: "Forms of activism are also an attempt to disrupt existing paradigms of shared meaning, values and purpose to replace them with new ones." (Fuad-Luke, 2009, p. 10) Furthermore, he couples the notion of disruption with aesthetics when, in the end of his book, he argues that design activism calls for a revised notion of beauty: "we need new visions of beauty—we could call this beauty, 'beautiful strangeness', a beauty that is not quite familiar, tinged with newness, ambiguity and intrigue, which appeals to our innate sense of curiosity." In bringing the notion of 'beautiful strangeness' into the discussion, Fuad-Luke draws attention to aesthetics being a central discipline for explaining how activist design artefacts promote social change through their aesthetic effect on people's senses, perception, emotions, and interpretation.

Unfortunately, however, in his otherwise detailed introduction of various frameworks Fuad-Luke does not go further into a discussion of how the relation between disruption and aesthetics could be valuable for understanding design activism. Instead, his main argument seems to be that design activism should be analysed according to the issues and problems in the world that it addresses. For this purpose he proposes the so-called Five Capitals Framework "as a means of examining where activism aims to exert an effect on different capitals": Natural Capital (concern for environmental resources, recycling, eco-design, sustainable solutions, and so on); Human Capital (e.g. concern for all human needs and skills); Social Capital (concern for strengthening relations between social networks in order to increase civic engagement, communal health, social inclusion, etc.); Financial Capital (e.g. alternative banking and micro-loans); and Manufactured Capital which is man-made artefacts that enable and improve production (e.g. architecture, infrastructure, and technologies).

While the Five Capitals Framework certainly helps to understand the many *problem spaces* of design activism and also the ideological agendas that design activists share, for instance, with environmentalists and non-profit organizations, it leaves the question of how design activism works on its own conditions unanswered. Admittedly, Fuad-Luke's book offers a rich toolbox of techniques and methods for how design can engage people through participatory means or co-design, but neither of these is tied up specifically to design activism. Rather they are in widespread use in almost every area of design. What is even more critical is that none of the frameworks examined so far has anything to say about how urban design activism uses the sensuous material of the city as well as explores the particular elements of urban experience.

Alternatively, in order to fathom these conditions, I shall argue that design research is in need of a new framework based upon the notion of design activism as a *disruptive aesthetic practice*. By introducing this notion I wish to increase knowledge in particular of the effects evoked by urban design activism. This is the only way in which it is possible to understand how design activism promote social change by addressing the urban experience itself.

Most recently, some insights into these effects have been laid out by DiSalvo (2010), who has studied some projects falling under the rubric of 'design for democracy'. DiSalvo suggests drawing upon political theory as a conceptual resource for developing a more sensitive understanding of design activism. Notably, he argues that the distinction between 'politics' and 'the political' would be beneficial for the practice and study of design activism.

In political theory (see e.g. Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Mouffe, 1998), 'politics' refers to the means and structures, which enable a state, region or city to govern. Among such structures one could think of laws, procedures of decision-making, systems of election, legislation, public regulations of people's behaviour in the urban environment, etc. In contrast, the 'political' is a condition of society, of ongoing opposition and contest (DiSalvo 2010: 2-3). The political can be experienced through acts of interruption, disturbance or resistance in public space that either reveals or confronts existing power relations and systems of authority.

Following from this DiSalvo then proposes to make a distinction in design research between Design for Politics and Political Design. Design for Politics is when the purpose of design is to support and improve the procedures and mechanisms of governance. An example of this would be designers working on improving the graphic design of ballots for presidential elections in the US to prevent uncertainties about cast votes as it happened in the 2000 presidential election between Al Gore and George W. Bush.

Political Design is when the object and processes of design activism is used to create 'spaces of contest'. For DiSalvo a paramount example of this can be found in the *Million Dollar Blocks* project. By using mapping techniques and diagramming this project creates spatial representations showing the residences of prison inmates throughout four US cities (see Fig. 1). Usually, crime analyses are based on data about where crime events occur, but here the idea was instead to start from data representing where the prison population live. In so doing the project makes striking patterns visible, namely a set of city street blocks where the government is spending more than $1.000.000 annually to incarcerate residents of those blocks.
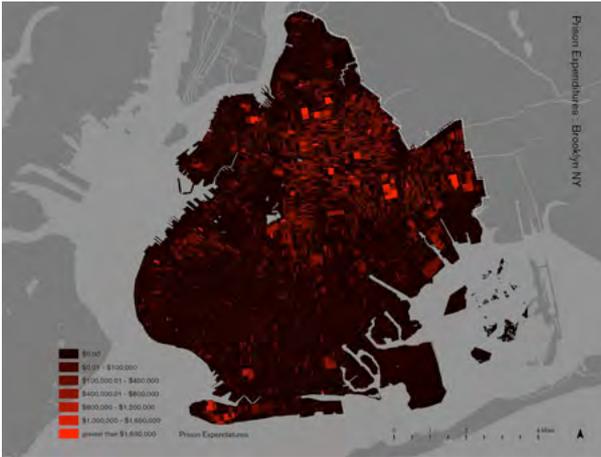
Figure 1: The *Million Dollar Blocks* project

The reason why the project qualifies as Political Design is because the objects and processes of the design (maps and diagramming) at one and the same time *reveal* and *contest* existing configurations and conditions of society and urban space. What are revealed are the understandings and information most often left out of standard analyses of crime occurring in the city. What is contested can be seen in the way in which the "maps effect an ongoing series of contests and dissensus concerning the relationship between crime, the built environment and policy." With this notion of revealing and contest, DiSalvo (2010: 5) suggest that we begin to consider political design as a "kind of inquiry into the political condition."

I find DiSalvo's notion of Political Design particularly relevant because – in contrast to Thorpe's and Fuad-Luke's frameworks – it allows us to study the effects evoked by practices of urban design activism. Notably, these effects consist in *revelation, contest and dissensus*.

The only problem with DiSalvo's approach is that he treats urban design activism merely in its relation to *political* conditions, that is, as a contest to those in power and authorities, while he does not say anything about how activist artefacts may also enter directly into the realm of real-life human actions. The *Million Dollar Blocks* project contest government, decision-makers and urban planners, whereas the citizens of the street blocks themselves are left largely uninfluenced. By focusing too narrowly on the political, DiSalvo thus neglect a crucial element of urban design activism.

Urban design activism is about introducing heterogeneous material objects and artefacts into the urban field of perception. In their direct intervention into urban space they invite active engagement, interaction or simply offer new ways of inhabiting urban space. In so doing, design activism alters the conditions for the urban experience.

Insofar as these objects and artefacts set new conditions for people's urban experiences and actions in daily life, design activism should be seen as having an *aesthetic*

dimension along with its political dimension. Aesthetics here is taken in its broad Kantian sense as pertaining to the fundamental forms of our everyday experience. Not so that these forms are *a priori* or universal, as Kant would have it. On the contrary, they are the result of ongoing social construction and negotiations of urban space (cf. Marchart, 1998).

The remainder of this paper will be dedicated to the unravelling of this aesthetic dimension of urban design activism, since no framework to my knowledge has uncovered this aspect. First, I will introduce the notion of disruptive aesthetics as it is found in the work of the French Philosopher Jacques Rancière. Secondly, I will use this notion as a backdrop for a case analysis of the disruptive aesthetic of urban design activism, mainly focusing on some of the basic categories of urban experience: *walking, dwelling, playing, gardening and re-cycling* (cf. Borasi, 2008, p. 21). On the basis of this treatment, I will propose a new framework for urban design activism that replaces sociological action concepts with action concepts grounded in the urban experience. Each of these concepts will be illustrated through case examples along the way in order to make the framework operational for the practice of design activism.

DESIGN ACTIVISM BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND THE POLITICAL

According to Rancière (2004; 2010) the notion of aesthetic activity should be extended so as to include much more than fine art production (paintings, poetry, sculpture and theatre). Generally, aesthetic activity concerns a distribution of the sensible, i.e. a "distribution of space, times and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution" (Rancière, 2004, p 12).

Clearly, urban design activism could be described as a distributing of urban space and time and constructing alternative ways for individuals to participate and take part in a 'common' public environment. Yet, we need to be more precise than that.

For Rancière, what characterises the aesthetic act in particular, is that it introduces new heterogeneous subjects and objects into the social field of perception. In so doing, the aesthetic act effects people's experience in a certain way: it reorients perceptual space, thereby disrupting socio-culturally entrenched forms of belonging and inhabiting the everyday world (cf. Corcoran, p. 2).

It is Rancière's philosophical thoughts on the disruptive nature of the aesthetic act that in my view contains a significant, and hitherto unexplored contribution to the theorization of design activism. Often, disruption is used interchangeably in Rancière with the notion of 'dissensus'. Indeed, the aesthetic act is said to be

enacted according to a 'logic of dissensus' (Corcoran, ibid.). Now, what does that mean?

Dissensus must be understood in contrast to consensus. Consensus concerns what is considered in a society to be a normal count of the social order. It prescribes what is proper and improper, and defines hierarchical systems where individuals are inscribed into certain roles and places. It is the idea that everyone's doing and speech are determined in terms of their proper place in this system and their activity in terms of its proper function. For instance, it is deemed improper if a citizen start to use the urban landscape as his own garden sowing seeds of his favourite plants and vegetables in ditches, as guerrilla gardener Richard Reynolds started to do years ago. In this way consensus could be said not only to delimit people's doing; it also entails a common *feeling* of what is right and wrong. Hence, consensus could be said, as Rancière does, to consist in the matching of a way of *doing* and a horizon of *affects*.

Dissensus, on the other hand, consists in an egalitarian suspension of the normal count of the social order – of consensus. It is about the demonstration of a certain impropriety, which disrupts consensus and reveals a gap between what people do and how they feel about and is affected by this doing. In creating this opening the disruptive aesthetic act makes the match between doing and affect sensitive to renewed negotiations. Hence, new forms of belonging and inhabiting the everyday world may ensue and new identities – whether individual or social – may emerge.

Insofar Rancière sees dissensus as being an effect of aesthetic activity and not only political practice, his notion of dissensus has more explanatory power than the notion of the political that underlies DiSalvo's idea of Political Design. Indeed, Rancière offers several characteristics that allow us to distinguish aesthetic dissensus from political dissensus.

Political dissensus is usually conceived as having to do with one group superadded to another, the people against the State, friend against enemy, left and right, or other burning pairs of oppositions that characterises ideological propaganda in all its manifestations (cf. Thrift, 2007). Taken in this sense the political dissensus manifests itself as a struggle between two or more groups that as its goal has a reordering of the relation of power between the existing groups.

In contrast to this dichotomous notion of political dissensus, aesthetic dissensus is not about an institutional overturning or overtaking of power. The ultimate goal is not the realisation of grandiose social utopias through violent acts, riots or revolution, but a non-violent unsettling of the self-evidence with which existing systems of power control and restrict the unfolding of our everyday behaviour and interaction. The disruptive character of the aesthetic dissensus lies in the subtle way in which it cuts across hierarchies between practices and discourses working to establish zones where processes of subjectivation are momentary

free to take place. The aesthetic act may of course deal with political issues, but it treats "stakes of politics as a form of experience" (Rancière, 2004, p. 13), and not as an open-ended set of practices driven primarily by a contest of power and authorities.

WALKING

These are key insights for understanding how urban design activism matters. Let me try to illustrate this in relation to the first of the five urban act categories of my framework: *walking*. Consider, for instance, the iSee project by the Institute for Applied Autonomy. In our cities today, surveillance technology networks are increasingly being connected to remote monitoring services that stream CCTV data across the city into control rooms operated by local authorities and private security companies. This increasing surveillance is taking place without public debate or transparency concerning decisions about what areas of the urban environment needs surveillance systems. For instance, if the argument for the presence of CCTV cameras is to prevent crime, then it would be natural to set them up in low-income neighbourhoods and not only in the financial and high-income districts of the city. However, this is not the case.

The iSee project is an inverse surveillance system that enables people living in the city to track and avoid CCTV cameras. By visiting the iSee website you get a map providing an overview of the existing surveillance infrastructure in cities like New York, Amsterdam and Ljubljana (Fig. 2).
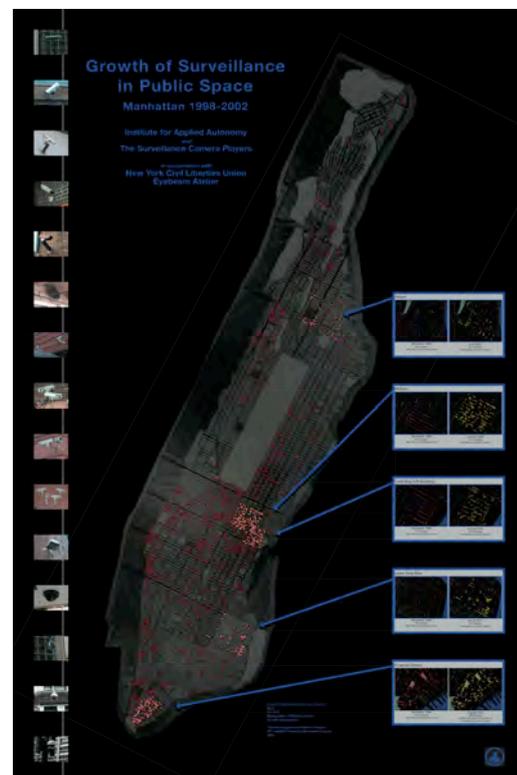

Figure 2: *iSee-map showing Manhatten's surveillance infrastructure*

In this way, the iSee project reveals how CCTV cameras permeates the urban environment, but it does something more. Additionally, it gives people the opportunity to create their own routes, so-called *paths of least surveillance* "allowing them to walk around their cities without fear of being 'caught on tape' by unregulated security monitors." (Fig. 3; http://www.appliedautonomy.com/isee.html)

Figure 3: *Paths of least surveillance*

iSee illustrates how design activism as an aesthetic practice has the ability to open a gap between people's doing and affect. By revealing and contesting the existing surveillance infrastructure, iSee makes citizens aware of how local law enforcement and private industry always keeps a watchful eye of each of their actions and doings in urban space. But – in contrast to the *Million Dollar Blocks* project – iSee invites the citizens themselves to react against and change these conditions. Simply by using iSee to construct new conditions that elicit more positive feelings about walking in the streets. In this sense, people's doings and their affects about this doing are matched in a new and unforeseen way. So much said about the category of walking, but what about *dwelling*?

DWELLING
Municipalities all over the world place many restrictions on people's possibility for dwelling. Especially in densely packed cities where getting a permission, for instance, to add an extra room or a terrace to your house involves a lengthy bureaucratic process, which more often than not ends up with a rejection. Sometimes aesthetic ideals are called upon in order to legitimate the delimiting of house owner's wishes and creativity. For instance, people can be informed that adding a room to their house would perhaps disturb the homogeneity and visual consistency of the street façade.

However, in a series of projects gathered under the overall title of Recetas Urbanas (Urban Prescriptions), Santiago Cirugeda shows how citizens can get some of their dwelling wishes fulfilled without breaking the law. Municipalities are typically sworn enemies of graffiti and so if you ask the authorities for a permit to build a scaffold in order to remove graffiti from your house you are likely to be granted that permission, perhaps for a couple of month or so. In his *Scaffolding*-project, Cirugeda then uses such scaffolds as opportunities for

adding an extra room to buildings where enlarging is usually prohibited (Fig. 4).

Figure 4: The *Scaffolding Housing project*

The *Scaffolding*-project illustrates how design activism function as an aesthetic practice in the sense given by Rancière. Hence, the scaffolds represent a way of "doing and making that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making" (Rancière, 2004, p. 13). The "general distribution of ways of doing" is the standard procedures and practice for enlarging houses sanctioned by the authorities. What the *Scaffolding*-project does is not so much a contesting of these politically determined procedures and conditions. Rather, it exploits these political conditions by turning them into new enabling conditions for unintended urban actions. By giving people the opportunity to build an extra room to their house their felt sense of belonging to the place is most likely to increase – or at least change. This is what is meant by the idea that design activism has the potential to re-negotiate the relationship between people's doing (here: dwelling) and their feelings about this doing.

PLAYING
In most cities urban planning legislation destines the citizen to behave according to certain rules and regulations in the sense that it only allows people to experience certain things, but not others. Yet, the consequences of legislative power are far from being transparent and often they do not seem at all to reflect the interests of those living in the city. Citizens are typically not allowed to plant a tree at the corner of their street or to construct a seesaw in front of the local café for their kids to have fun while they are drinking a cup of coffee even though the owner of the café and a majority in your community think that this is a good idea.

In the project "Taking the street" (Fig. 5), Santiago Cirugeda turns local legislation into urban recipes instructing citizens, living in a district in Seville, in how they can order and transform dumpsters into playful installations or other kinds of installations of their own desire thereby enabling them to take active part in the planning and shaping of their neighbourhood (http://www.recetasurbanas.net/index.php?idioma=ESP&REF=1&ID=0002). If only on a temporary basis this project reveals how urban design activism may function as acts of resistance that can be used to suspend existing structures of power and bureaucracy in order to make unheard voices and hidden energies resound through the urban landscape.

Figure 5: Taking the Street by Santiago Cirugeda

GARDENING AND RE-CYCLING

Rancière's notion of aesthetic dissensus is useful for understanding the subtle tactics with which gardening can be exploited in a designerly way for the purpose of constructing disruptive interventions. According to Rancière, aesthetic dissensus is not an effect resulting from acts striving for institutional overturning or overtaking of power. Rather it follows from non-violent acts that unsettle the self-evidence with which existing systems of power control and dominate certain groups in our society. This unsettling of power may create spaces enabling new processes of community and identity making. It is important once again to underline that the act resulting in dissensus is inherently political and aesthetic.

The usefulness of these ideas can be demonstrated by analysing a recent project made by the Atelier d'architecture autogérée (aaa). In La Chapelle area, in the northern suburban parts of Paris, aaa used gardening as a tactic for intervening in the area's wasteland and left over spaces. La Chapelle area is haunted by a number of social problems such as drug addiction, unemployment as well as the lack of cultural infrastructure. Typically, such problems do not attract finance and the attention of developers. However, aaa invited the local residents of La Chapelle to participate the design and building of Ecobox (Fig. 6).

Figure 6: Ecobox by aaa in La Chapelle, Paris

Ecobox consists of a series of gardens made from recycled materials as well as mobile furniture for meetings, gathering, cooking, playing, and other forms of social interaction. In addition a wall was build around the Ecobox, which had a series of peepholes determining the viewing conditions for people watching and gazing in from the outside. In the form of this wall, the Ecobox contest the dominating visual regimes in public space thereby suggesting a reordering of the relation of power between existing groups in society. The local residents of La Chapelle were used to be the ones looked at by the police or surveillance cameras, and many of them are denied the right to express themselves, as they are considered illegal immigrants. However, the Ecobox turns this power of relation on its head by giving the residents the control of the public gaze. This is not only an act of political design, but also an act of aesthetic practice as it changes the conditions for urban experience and provides means of expression for an otherwise overlooked social group.

A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR DESIGN ACTIVISM

On the basis of this I wish to propose the following

diagram representing a new framework for the practice and study of urban design activism.
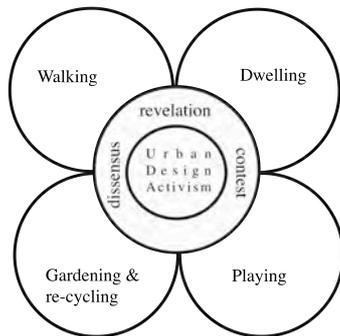
Figure 7: *Framework for urban design activism*

Needless to say, this framework should not be considered exhaustive, as many more categories of urban experience need to be added. Moreover, what the framework does not include either is a mapping of the techniques used in urban design activism. Among the techniques involved in the project examined in this paper, one could for instance think of *tactical cartography* as in the iSee-project, or *hacking of urban regulation* as in the Recetas Urbanas project by Santiago Cirugeda. There are a multitude of such techniques. Some of them are included in the other frameworks examined in this paper; some of them are not. The reason why I have not included techniques in the framework is that it is not the technique in itself that defines design activism. It is the effect it is capable of evoking in the user. Consequently, I have decided to include these effects in the framework.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that the development of a new framework is necessary for understanding how urban design activism matters, how it works and it's effect on people's daily life. As was shown in my brief literature review, most of the existing frameworks are insufficient, because they do not take the elements and material of urban design activism into account. For instance, Thorpe bases her framework on sociological concepts, while Fuad-Luke takes his point of departure from environmentalist thinking, namely as it is represented by the Five Capitals Framework.

Moreover, I have argued that a look toward the effect elicited by design activism is necessary to make clearer concepts about this practice. Surely, many of the design acts mentioned by Thorpe (acts of communication, protest, etc.) can be involved in design activism. But the point here is that they should only be considered of a design activist kind if – through aesthetic means and expression - they evoke the effects laid out by DiSalvo: revelation, contest and dissensus.

While DiSalvo goes a long way in unravelling the political side of these effects, he ignores their aesthetic dimension. I have argued that a turn toward aesthetics in the sense given to the term by Rancière is useful for describing how activist artefacts promote social change by altering the condition for urban experience.

On the basis of this I have proposed a framework, which is in no way claimed to be exhaustive. Rather, it should be considered as an initial step toward a more complete picture, which cannot be provided however before more future work and studies of the practice of urban design have been carried out.

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