BUILDING THE DESIGN LABORATORY IN A PUBLIC CULTURAL ORGANISATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the research objectives of a design research Ph.D project in the Municipality of Copenhagen. The aim of the project is to explore and develop an open platform of participatory inquiry and dialogue, within the organizational setting of three local cultural administration units (LCAU), consisting of public libraries and cultural centers at three different local sites in Copenhagen.

The focus of the research project is to build a design laboratory, that will suit the organizational setting of the LCAUs, in such a way that the lab, and the methods that will be adapted and explored in the lab, can be taken over by the cultural workers and librarians as a part of their ongoing work routines, after the research project has been completed. Each LCAU wish to explore and adapt new methods of reaching out to local cultural communities, organizations, networks and grassroots movements.

The research project is interested in exploring the laboratory, as an open platform for design dialogues, community building and as a strategy of democratization, on the borderland between public administration and public sphere.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of the design laboratory, as a way of framing the process of participatory inquiry, can be conceptualized both as a organizational tool, that helps structuring open and complex design assignments with many stakeholders, and as a sort of programmatic design research practice, that stresses the interventionistic aspect of design research (Binder 2007)

The PhD project presented here, wants to work with the design laboratory in a public organization, and approach the work in line with the research tradition, described by Binder and Redström. All though *Exemplary Design Research Driven by Program, Experiment and Intervention* (Binder and Redstrøm 2006) can be said to actively twine together the design proposal and the design method**,** it is a tradition that emphasizes process and method, by putting the inquiry at the center of attention. This research project proposes to collapse the relation between the design proposal and the design process even further, by asking the question: What if the assignment was to design a laboratory? A platform for participatory innovation, that is, a design proposal that *is* a program, process, practice and organizational tool, designed to facilitate future co-design sessions with different stakeholders in the context of a public organization?

MY RESEARCH QUESTIONS ARE:

- How can the programatic research practise of a design laboratory translate and transform into a sustainable organizational tool in a public cultural organization?
- How can the concept of the design laboratory assist an emerging organisational transformation in local cultural administration units?
- How can co-design methods and approaches help democratization and dialouges between networks in local communities on the border between public sphere and public administration?

CO-DESIGN AND USER-DRIVEN INNOVATION IN PUBLIC ORGANISATIONS

Over the last decade user-driven innovation has emerged as a programmatic political vision in the public administration in Denmark (Rosted 2005,The Ministry of Culture Denmark 2008). User-involvement is increasingly on the agenda in public organizations, and the task of providing products and services that can successfully meet user needs, seems to be a permanent strategic goal for public organizations in Denmark today.

Part of this movement sees user-involvement and innovation as the key to rationalization and growth, and as a way of legitimizing the very existence of the public administration. Public libraries and cultural centers are perhaps no exception to this, but the culture and leisure administrations, both in the state administration and in the different municipalities, are traditionally based on the idea of democratization. That every citizen should have access to knowledge, cultural experiences and should be given the opportunity to be part of the local community. It can be argued that this political program traditionally regarded democratization and inclusion as an enlightenment project, that could help ensure the stability of local communities, but there seems now to be an emerging shift of paradigm, where the public libraries and cultural centers try to direct themselves towards doing the future *with* local communities rather than *for* local communities.

A consequence of this nascent paradigm and the increasing focus on democratization, user-involvement and citizenship, is a growing interest in working with co-design methods within the public cultural organization.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The main target for this research project is to explore and establish ways of facilitating co-design processes within the public cultural organization.

The political and programmatic agenda contained in this focus, is not too far from the Scandinavian tradition of participatory design, that focused on empowering the workers whose jobs would otherwise be replaced by technology (Kensing and Blomberg, 1998, Löwgren and Stolterman, 2004). Still there are also some striking differences. Bjørgvinsson et al. (2010) points to a shift in the participatory design tradition from workplace orientated productive activities to public spheres and everyday life. This shift in focus can be described as a movement from "democracy at work" to "democratic innovation"(Bjørgvinsson et al 2010 p. 41). The research done in the Malmö Living labs are an example of this shift in attention. Their exploration of participatory innovation practices and democracy, through long-term bottom-up collaborations between diverse stakeholders, is very similar to the aim of my Ph.D project. My project also aims at building an infrastructure of innovation, but the lab in this project will be build on the border between the public sphere and the public administration, and on the border between the workplace and leisure space. The LCAUs in this research project deals with citizens, not clients, but still the lab will be investigated and prototyped as an organizational tool. The lab has to fit the organizations daily routine, and the success of the lab will be dependent on local cultural workers and librarian's investment in the lab work.

What could be called the "backstage" of the lab, the staging of the lab itself, must be done in very close collaboration with the LCAUs. The "frontstage" of the lab, the workshop sessions with diverse stakeholders, will be dependent on the willingness and investment of local citizens and cultural networks, but the line between the two may become very blurry.

The continuing mapping of this complex borderland will be investigated through the lens of actor-network theory. I am especially inspired by Bruno Latour's notion of the Thing, and his outline of actor-network theory in *Reassembling the social* (2005).

The writing down of a risky account will be accompanied by the producing of a box of methods. Drawing on experiences from the DAIM-project (Halse et at 2010), this project wishes to explore method assemblages (Law 2004), and leave a diverse collection of tangible traces of the collaborative work with the lab in the organization, after the research-project is over. The implementing of the box is however not something that is left to the last phase of the project. Like the DAIM-project, and contrary to the way design phases are traditionally sketched out in many design projects and much design literature, the co-design work in the UCLAUs actively pursuit the mixing up of phases. The implementation of the Lab and the box, in a sense, has already begun. I am currently well into the first phase of the project called *Visioning the Lab*. This first phase can also be considered the beginning of the implementation. It can be viewed as a simultaneous investigation, mobilization, exploration and intervention. In order to open up a design space that can meet the research program we set out from, the design proposals for the future lab and box in this project must aim for sustainability. This means prototyping for a lab and a box that will be able to travel on, after this project is over, in new networks in the UCLAs. The mobilization of the cultural workers and librarians, and the LCAUs as a whole, seems therefore to be pivotal to the programs success. This challenge may move this co-design research project close to other areas and disciplines concerned with organizational development and strategic design. It may therefore also be interesting to consider how this research project, with the emphasis on materiality and prototyping, differ from other approaches within the field of organizational development, that traditionally place more weight on strategic visions in the form of words, texts and discourses.

APPROACH

The research project is divided into three phases each lasting about a year. The first phase, and the current status of the project, is labeled *Visioning the Lab*. This phase can be seen as a preliminary investigation of the labs potential in the three LCAUs. The approach is a mixture of ethnographic fieldwork, interviews and a continuing dialogue with the cultural workers, librarians and different cultural networks in the local areas. This phase also contains workshop elements on a small scale, for instance the use of collages and doll-scenarios, that can generate open ideas and suggestions for the future work in the lab.

Phase two is the actual attempt to build the lab in the three LCAUs. This phase is named *The Lab at Work*. This phase will stage three exemplary cases, one for each locality. Each lab will involve different local cultural networks from outside the public organization, and an open design assignment of a concrete cultural project in the making. The lab will explore and elaborate on different methods from the co-design research practice. Formats that focus on the structuring and staging of ethnographic material, and the tension between estrangement and familiarization. (Halse 2008)

Phase three, *The Lab in a Box,* will consist of an ethnographic account of the lessons learned in the labs, and the producing of a box of methods.

REFLECTIONS

At the Doctoral Consortium I hope to be given the opportunity to discuss some of the challenges connected with my research.

The work so far has given me a better understanding of what kind of lab we might envision in the three LCAUs, but the research project is still in the early stages. At present some of my matters of concern are the task of mobilizing an organization, and at the same time be sensitive to the task of following the actors. In order to avoid the pitfall of the lab becoming yet another project, a lot of effort is put in including everyone in the organization in the process of building it. At the same time, not every librarian and cultural worker sees the intentions of the research program as the answer to the future challenges of the LCAUs. To some of them the core task of the organization is to provide services for the local community, not doing cultural work with them. One interesting question then, is how to include their concerns in the process?

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