

# DESIGN PRACTICE AS A DISCURSIVE AND INTERROGATING PERFORMANCE

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## ABSTRACT

This PhD is focused on how design can play a role in engaging people in potential serious issues, or producing forms of knowledge that are still unstable, or controversial. The research is based on a series of hands-on explorations in the sense that I design and evaluate a set of discursive concepts that in different ways aim to mediate and visualise those issues. This paper presents the status of two different research projects in relation to my current key areas of research where I employ my skills within interaction and product design in a co-design research environment.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Technology plays an important role in fulfilling societal functions and change; its functions depend on a relationship with other elements. Berkhout (Berkhout, 2004 et al.) suggests a way to understand how to construct change is through analyzing the qualities of our socio-technical constructions. To do this, I will make use of Actor Network Theory (ANT), which is a distinctive approach to social theory that originated in the field of science studies. ANT will be used as a framework and systematic way to consider the infrastructure surrounding technological achievements. It integrates human and non-human actors into the same conceptual framework and assigns equal amounts of agency to both (Latour, 2005). Accordingly, and in relation to my research, it is a move away from trying to attribute behavioural change to a set of externalised

factors. To be able to change our patterns of consumption, we need to acknowledge that institutions, infrastructures and daily life is an ongoing negotiation where individual behaviour is located as an outcome of socio-technical change, not as external drivers of it (Shove, 2010).

In a similar way, John Thackara (2001) argues, 'when it comes to innovation, we are looking down the wrong end of the telescope: away from people, toward technology.' Senger & Gaver (2006) argues that the HCI community has traditionally focused on how designers can develop systems with specific objectives and clear purpose for how design is used. Such an objective can work well to optimize a system like an Internet-bank, but provide little opportunity to achieve more comprehensive reflection in the everyday life.

I aim to make use of Latours (2004) concept of 'matters of concern' in distinction to the more common scientific category of 'matters of fact' as a guiding and critical approach to my practice, exploring how design can address the mediation between the existing and the yet to exist.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objective is two-fold. At first, to engage my practical skills as a designer to further develop the notion of discursive design. Bruce M. Tharp and Stephanie Munson describe discursive design as tools for thinking 'they raise awareness and perhaps understanding of substantive and often debatable issue'. ([www.discursivedesign.com](http://www.discursivedesign.com), 2010). And secondly, to investigate and question how the object of design can be a purposeful, deliberate, direct participant that can open up to dialogue among participants inside as well as outside a project.

The research will be based on a series of hands-on explorations in the sense that I will design and evaluate prototypes that mediate and visualise a set of different

concerns. My role as a designer is meant to reveal new experiences, tell new stories by assuming design is about linking the imagination to material forms. The artefacts primary purpose is to communicate ideas like props or conservation pieces that help us speculate, reflect and become engaged in discourses. At the core of my interest, is the question of how I as a designer can research the messy entanglement of societies, actors and networks, whilst allowing for creative speculation.

## APPROACH

As a way to employ my skills as a designer in making a research contribution I will use what Frayling has described as *research through design* (Frayling, 93).

The first project *IndustryWise* has been developed at Interactive Institute, Energy Design. The project is concerned with engaging people at work in becoming more energy aware. The second project, *Lev Vel* has been developed at the Danish Design School (DKDS) and is on-going. The project includes 16 different stakeholders and the overall aim is to develop a meeting place for elderly using technology.

### 1. THE WATT-LITE; A DISCURSIVE ARTEFACT AS DEPLOYED PROTOTYPE

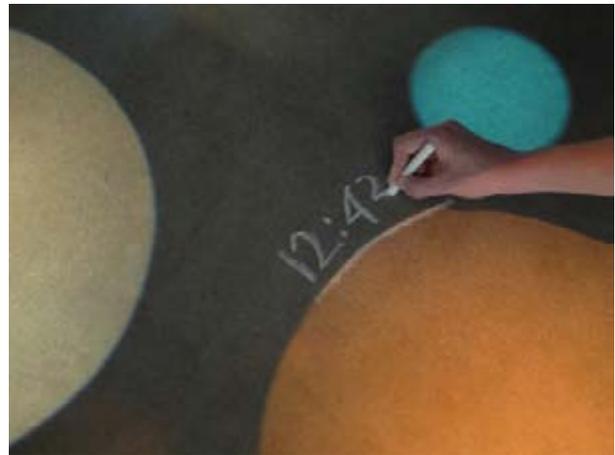
In the project Industrywise we developed the Watt-Lites, which are a set of three oversized torches projecting real time energy statistics of a factory in the



**Figure 1:** An example of how one can compare the real-time electricity value (white) with today's max (orange) & min (blue).

physical environments of its employees. The size of the light beam projected from the torches indicates the

factory's electricity consumption by expanding and contracting following the daily energy usage. In addition to the torches, a web service was developed allowing the user to compare historic electricity data using the same metaphor of changing light spots. During the spring of 2010 the prototypes were deployed in eight factories and a school in mid-Sweden for a total of four weeks.



**Figure 2:** The light spots communicates through their size and relating proportions. The projection surface acts as a canvas for collaborative note taking.

The results indicate that the torches were treated differently depending on the place positioned in the factories. When situated by a shared coffee machine, employees did start to leave notations of time and traces around the projected light on the floor when queuing up for refreshments. However, in other factories the torches ended up in less sociable places where fewer individuals stopped to engage with the Watt-Lites. Results also indicate that very few users seemed to have used the website, the engagement does not seem to have spread beyond the torches.

An important stage of understanding the Watt-lites as discursive designs is in relation to them being deployed and appropriated in a real life setting. Evidently they can be understood as discursive artefacts since the employees interacted and discussed the energy consumed at their workplace in relation to the artefact. In addition, after being deployed they actually created an overlapping and 'unintentional' conversation between the various stakeholders in the project, exposing controversial gaps we as designers did not even imagine existed. Visualising the electricity made the employees question how, as well as, what part of the building that was visualised, and in extension measured. This was exposed in an email from the school where they questioned whether the Watt-lites malfunctioned since the contraction/expansion of the light spots did not seem to cohere with the opening hours of the school. Was it even possible that the school was paying for electricity for the other companies that they shared a building with? We were in the end forced to remove the Watt-Lites since neither us, nor the concerned energy provider could map how the electricity was structured in the building.

This unintentional effect was well outside the scope for our project, however it led me to understand the controversies that can appear through visualising and making the invisible tangible. An approach and understanding I hope to make use of and carry with me in future projects.

## 2. LEV VEL; PROTOTYPES BEFORE PROTOTYPES

The Lev Vel project employs a slightly different tactic than above described project, here there is no clear purpose of deploying a prototype. Instead the project is situated in a more characteristic co-design tradition of engaging and mobilizing 16 participating stakeholders that all bring a diverse set of knowledge in relation to elderly. Some brings tangible development work aimed for seniors, others actual activity centres or online social media networks aimed for elderly to meet, while others bring a more theoretical perspective to the project.

Accepting the complex negotiations, a small group of from the Danish Design School set out to develop a mini project. The project engages into how design thinking as a creative process can help set the different stakeholders and their diverse knowledge at play through making quick and rough mock-ups.



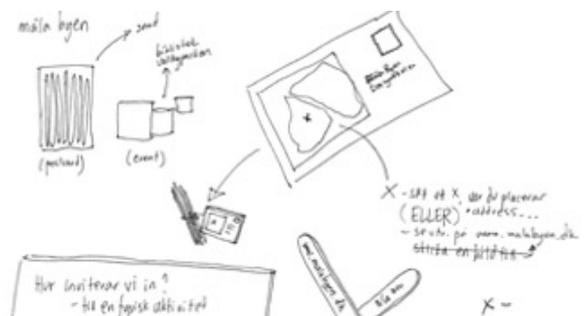
**Figure 3:** Some of the stakeholders in Lev Vel project discussing their contributions and possible paths for collaborative projects.

The mini project, which currently goes under the name *prototypes before prototypes (PbP)*, started with a workshop. The discussions at the workshop and the many documents sent and shared among the stakeholders later became the foundation for how we framed PbP to investigate our collective terminology. A shared terminology we propose to see as something slightly controversial that we can turn and twist and see from many different perspectives. Words such as ‘unwanted alone’, ‘busy pensioners’, ‘health technologies’ and ‘senior activities’ has started to become the scaffolding for our common understanding within the project. But it seems like we have never really discussed what this scaffolding is made of, and what all those terms actually mean?

As the PbP is work in progress, I can only describe our approach and intension with addressing the issue of our collective terminology as a design challenge. One of the

questions raised within the workshop is how we reach out to elderly without moralising or focusing upon age. But if we take a look at the term ‘senior activities’, referring to activities like knitting, bookmaking, and wood carpentry, it seems like an unavoidable dichotomy not to moralize when we come to describe the activities through the very word ‘senior’.

Within our project our challenge, I speculate, is to set ourselves a brief that engages into other ways of seeing the activities. Here we propose to see all the skills that exist within the activity centres as a resource that can be moved away from their safe places to potentially become more public. Can the skill of knitting or carpentry be seen as a knowledge that can be shared not only between the seniors in the activity-centres but as something important and valuable making the seniors experts of their preferred and specific mediums? Or can the activities be challenged by becoming less predictable, can we propose a design concept that allows seniors to act more like a street-artist?



**Figure 4:** Sketches for a concept where we invite and encourage the seniors to act in public by ‘painting their city’ by sowing flower seeds in the different colours.

So, what is possibly interesting about such a project, and what meaning does it have to the rest of the stakeholders? PbP simply exist temporarily in a space where the actual prototypes have not been developed, we can thereby be aloud to speculate, as well as to fail when we sketch the fast design interventions. One could of course argue that we haven’t actually asked any of the concerned pensioners if they want to move and change their activities to, for example, become public. However, our design intervention will not fully be deployed, instead it is a way to raise questions within the project. And our role as designers is to mediate and sketch upon propositions about the possible future within the project. What matters here might not be what designerly methods we are using, but rather what we visualise, with the focus on engaging a dialogue among the stakeholders. In such a project as Lev Vel where there will be actual outcomes that later linger out in the society it seems important to critically reflect upon the pre-conceived notions within the project group. Those collective notions will later be embodied in the potential outcomes of the Lev Vel project. Thereby, we hope that we can help nourish a co-critical understanding within the project allowing us to make mistake before it becomes to expensive or difficult to go back.

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