DIFFERENT DATA DETROIT (+ STOCKHOLM)

EXHIBITION: DESIGN AND ITS WILD CARDS

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ABSTRACT

Different Data is a collaborative critical design research project by which we collect, manipulate, and display data in location-specific, and theme-driven scenarios. As research through-design and practice-based research, we investigates place and explore methods for generating and collecting data, developing an experimental approach to visualizing connections and meaning. We map hidden, overlooked and silent aspects of the urban cultural ecology.

We collect narratives of cities using standard datasets transforming it to 'different data'—that which is affective, emotional, and subjective; marginal and little-valued; esoteric and ephemeral; idiosyncratic and absurd; questionable and inappropriate. Work is executed publicly into a seamful artifact that creates an alternate or counter-narrative. These explorations are designed to challenge preconceived notions of place and its dynamics, and offer another view of given reality.

PAPER

Different Data is a collaborative critical design research project that through the assemblage of a diverse collection of data—concordant and contrasting—investigates the narrative space of the city with the intent of creating a counter-narrative using methods in design research, visual communication design, data visualization, and video. (see Van Toorn 1998, Hall 2011, Davila & Hadlaw 2011).

We combine open data sets with itinerant research in an experimental reworking of "ground-truthing," (referring to the process of on-site research to aid in the calibration of data collected remotely.) Our goal is not to uncover truth, but to attempt to multiply and confound what emerges from data. It is a method of graphic design research as a mode of counter-production and critique that forms a space of inquiry from which one can critically view and reflect upon the cultural environment. Irreverent conclusions are a key component to the value of this critical project and its challenge to what can be considered legitimate research. As a foil to conventional research, speculative conclusions are an important form of creative thinking as imprecise and questionable associations generate new semantic connections and new forms of thinking and knowledge. (Lotman, 2000)

An important component to this work is the notion that the urban landscape is a complex and living ecology of flows, forces, and agents that takes form in realms of the physical, operative, psychological, and semantic. As James Corner states, "Materiality, representation, and imagination are not separate worlds; […] place construction owes as much to the representational and symbolic realms as to material activities." (Corner, 2006) The urban ecology of Detroit is in an active state of flux as made evident by extreme movements of economic and cultural agency, and of material and psychic shifts (long-term and short-term) in response to global and local forces. Detroit, like other cities, struggles to balance or rectify these fluctuations.
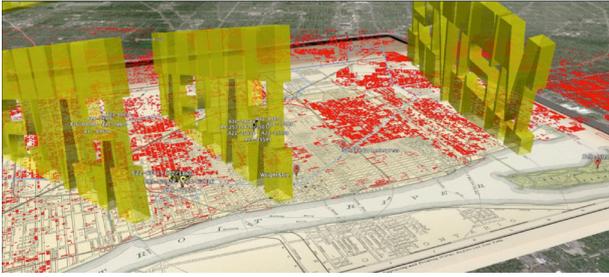
Figure 1: Video screenshot, 'Different Datascape: Post-It Note Dérive,' 2014. © Rachele Riley and Joshua Singer

In the Fall of 2014, we (the authors) participated in a residency at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD) in their Department of Education and Public Engagement (DEPE) in conjunction with DesignInquiry and its DesignCity program. We created a 2 x 7 meter layered wall composition and three-dimensional virtual environments as ways of presenting a view of the city through multiple paradigms. We mapped various narratives of the city, layering data gathered from diverse sources: open datasets, historical maps, field collections of visual and GIS data, and data generated through studio-based experiments. Outcomes included visualizations of 'unknown' city parcels, large collections of typographic typologies from the urban landscape and imaginary structures that delineate hidden pasts. Rather than examining discrete and specific issues, we used various datasets, intrinsic and enigmatic, conventional and marginal, and made irreverent connections among them, revealing other realities of the city. The ultimate goal was not to create a single 'seamless' (Manovich, 2006) artifact since complex and fragmented realities of today's systems do not allow for a seamless experience. Instead, we believe we should pay attention to the seams and necessary disruptions: aiming at cities that maintain, as Mark Weiser puts it, "seamful systems, with beautiful seams." (Lynch, 1991)

Figure 2: 'Different Data,' installation view in progress at MOCAD in Detroit, 2014. © Patricio Davila, Daniel McCafferty, Rachele Riley, and Joshua Singer

The project at MOCAD included a distinctive performative act in a public space. This approach turns the process of design into an exposition of itself. It demonstrates that giving data form–deciding what is used or discarded, and how it is experienced—is a creative, experimental, and subjective process. (Pickles 2004)

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For Nordes 2015, we will bring the outcomes of our work in Detroit to Stockholm and merge these two ecologies on the walls of the exhibition space over the course of the conference. We propose that the discursive relationship between these two cities is nascent and probable, on various levels. There are connections that we can presuppose (structure, form, system, mythology) and those that can only be realized through discovery. These connections must surely run deep, even if they are forced by our subjective measurements and if only as a fiction (which is enough). They are hypotheses that remain to be realized. In keeping with the methods of Different Data, the Detroit (+Stockholm) project will be both methodical and poetic, creating a link and a layering of the two cities in both factual and speculative comparisons.

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