INVITING CONVERSATIONS ON COLLABORATIVE DESIGN PRACTICE AND ENCOUNTERS THROUGH WRITING: FROM THE BOOK, *CO-CONUTS: FRESH VIEWS ON CO-DESIGN*

ENGAGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Co-conuts: fresh views on co-design is a contribution to the category of 'Exhibition' at the *Nordes Design Conference 2017,* written, designed, and produced by the first year students, 2016/17, of MA Co-design at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts (KADK). The contributions to the book are both visual and written expressions of the students' experiences of their first semester as co-designers. The images within were created by each contributor to accompany and complement their texts. They serve as a bridge from the visual to the written, both representative of the co-design process itself and of the co-designers' introspective journey into their own practice. The book is an invitation to other students, academics and interested practitioners of any field, with collaboration and encounters at the core, to converse both about co-design and the process of learning to develop a co-design practice. Through an interactive exhibition display of the book the authors hope to engage visitors of the Nordes Conference and deepen discussions and broaden reflections the theme of 'design and power'.

INTRODUCTION

The contributions to *Co-conuts* are reflective and critical articulations of the dynamics that can be found within co-design engagements, and the conference's sub-themes of 'articulations,' 'dynamics,' 'engagements,' 'negotiations', and 'relations' are explored throughout. Relations between stakeholders - including those between the co-designers themselves - are dissected, reconstructed, and reformulated.

There is a critical thread running through each of the contributions, as the authors reflect on their roles and positions in society, not only as designers, but as people entering other people's lives for the purpose of conducting meaningful collaborative encounters.

The book focuses on the students' experiences of co-design in a particular semester of their studies - after undertaking a number of projects - also taking in previous professional and personal experiences assessed and analysed in light of newly-learned co-design methodology. The book has been divided into four themes: 'Discovering New Ways', 'Comfort and Discomfort', 'Bridging Borders', and 'Beautiful Mess'. The themes mirror the core message, or notion, of each contribution, and are described in further detail below with extractions from the book itself.

Through an interactive exhibition display the authors of the book wish to express an invitation of engagement and conversation to the audience of the conference. The display will consist of extracted quotes from the book and copies of the book itself accompanied by an introductory poster as well as the collaborative editorial

process that made the publication possible. Audience will be free to move around the stand and enjoy the extracts from the book. For audience members interested in reading the full book on a later occasion, a link to the online free version of the book will be provided. The authors of the book present at the conference will answer questions and further engage in discussions that the exhibition might provoke and encourage.

INVITING CONVERSATIONS

The process of producing the book was in itself an opportunity for the students to meet and critically discuss the experiences of both *practising* and *learning* co-design. Referring to the project as 'The book project' helped the students emphasise that it was as much about the process of creation and collaboration as it was about developing a satisfying and valuable result. The project became one of *opinion-shaping* and *reflection-making* through *round table* conversations, where issues and topics were addressed introspectively and critically, leading to a final product expressing this process through a combination of words and images.

Shana Agid facilitating workshop session during the 'book project'

The *round table* conversation that arose between the students during the creation of the book can hopefully arise among readers through engagement with the contributions both during and following its exhibition at the conference.

Such engagement with the book raises questions regarding: what it means to experience and develop a social and collaborative design practise such as co-design; how processes influence both practitioner and participant; and how relationships arise from the dynamics of co-design, and what was those relationships mean to everyone involved.

The time set aside for this process of 'book making' was appreciated by those involved, and was a rare opportunity to 'deep dive' and critically-assess the activities undertaken. Practicing co-design involves taking on multiple roles, and continuous negotiation with peers and stakeholders. This can create a somewhat scattered experience, as the time for processing and utilising knowledge gained and lessons learned is limited by time constraints around impending deadlines. Reducing the pace and the intensity of the work - the execution, planning, analysis, and submission of results - allowed room to reflect on the recent co-design experiences themselves as the project progressed. We were able to ask ourselves: "how can co-design be a balanced practise of deep reflection and active execution?"

ENCOUNTERS AS THE CORE OF COLLABORATION

> … collaboration takes place when people encounter each other and exchange something (time, care, experience, expertise, etc.) in order to receive a benefit; in other words, they create a shared value. This definition also tells us that each collaboration has a core, and this core is an encounter: the collaborative encounter in which two or more people meet and interact in order to do something they all recognise as a value. (Manzini 2015)

The field work encounters with participants expressed throughout the book had a profound influence on the students' learning and development. A recurring topic of discussion and reflection for students became how to achieve not only well-executed encounters, but truly valuable exchanges between everyone involved. Ezio Manzini's book, *Design, When Everybody Designs,* was employed as a starting point at the beginning of the project, in order to stimulate reflections about the growing role of collaborative design in social innovation. His concept of "enriching complexity" provided a valuable insight into the challenges and opportunities inherent in fieldwork encounters, warning the contributors of the "increasingly blurred" lines between "designer, provider, and user" (Manzini 2015). Before taking to the field, the students' were thus well aware of the significance of their actions, but no amount of theory could fully prepare them for the real life of a co-designer. They took the insights of Manzini and others, and tried to make sense of the "dynamic fields of action" they were suddenly protagonists within.

Their attempts are appraised by Shana Agid, Assistant Professor at Parsons School of Design, in his foreword to the book:
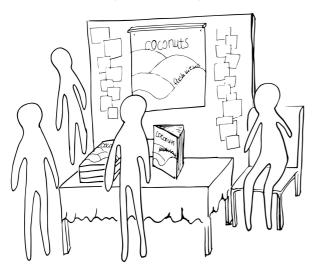
> The book offers ideas about and ways of approaching the idea of being a co-designer, from making capacities for conversation or exchange with people, to building tools for communication and observation, to finding one's way to facilitation, organization, and speculation as sites of design and ways of working… Like practitioners and researchers in Participatory

Design, Co-design, and Service Design more broadly, these student-designer-writers delve into the ontological and epistemological questions of being a designer working with others (Binder, et. al. 2015; Akama and Young 2012; Suchman 2002)… Critically, these essays present multiple takes on the authors' experiences, and critiques, of "parachuting" into design contexts, offering self-reflective shifts in their own approaches and sharing ideas for practice, from how to bring oneself into an interview or conversation to how to make space for silence between people… The students determined through that process to share experiences and knowing from their specific locations, not only as students, but as designers informed by trans-national and trans-cultural ideas, values, and aims. (Agid 2017)

Co-conuts takes the reader on a journey with nine students on their steep six-month learning curve of co-design methodology. The first semester of their two-year Master's programme consisted of threse 'real partner' projects of varying complexities, time-lines, and outcomes, all of which involved implementing newly-learned methods, skills, and collaborative processes.

TINGBJERG FERIECAMP

The Co-design students were commissioned to conceptualise, organise, and execute their workshop content at the free holiday camp in Tingbjerg, Copenhagen during a national school holiday in autumn. The collaboration was part of a wider project between Centre for Codesign Research, CODE and various partners to develop new concepts for the future of local libraries. (*Co-conuts* 2017)

Above: illustration of an interactive exhibition display proposal of the book accompanied by a selection of written text from the book displayed on printed paper in different sizes, as tool for engaging conversation and interaction with authors of the book present faciliate interaction with audience.

FUTURE HEARINGS

A partnership between The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts (KADK) and a Danish hearing aid company (hereafter referred to as HAC). The directive for the students was to engage with the hard of hearing community to develop specific 'dialogue tools' to further dialogue between users of HAC's products and services, and to uncover and describe potential needs and wants for those users in the future. (*Co-conuts* 2017)

GSA WINTER SCHOOL

During a two-week experience, KADK students participated in a 'winter school' organised by Glasgow School of Arts (GSA). Students were paired with local organizations and explored the potential in communal traditions and the role of designers as innovators in the service of wider society. (*Co-conuts* 2017)

These projects were an opportunity for the students to fully experience the challenge of producing valuable deliverables for the 'real partners', and conducting field work in a coherent, efficient, and ethical manner. For many, the experience of collaborating both with other co-designers, and external stake holders, was a balancing act of complex relationships, where negotiation was a constant necessity to ensure effective participation and collaboration.

The variety of projects also allowed students to experience a contrast in ways of working with and approaching different project partners, from private-sector companies to charitable organizations. Many students found that co-design demands the development of a deeper empathy and a genuine trust with all stakeholders involved, particularly participants of field-work. The contributions to this book capture the full range of experiences, emotions and insights gained during these projects. They have been organised into four themes which represent the approaches taken by the authors in putting their reflections to paper:

DISCOVERING NEW WAYS

Tools are not just physical objects, but can be the methods of communication the co-designer employs to extract knowledge and generate understanding with participants. A co-designer's toolkit is made up of every skill and technique they have at their disposal, from their Bachelor's degree in Design to experiences from everyday life. These tools allow the co-designer to constantly discover new ways of communicating, to innovate, and to develop new design methods. (Co-conuts 2017)

For many of the contributors, the projects didn't exactly go to plan, at least not at the beginning. Co-design was a challenge. However, this challenge was a fruitful opportunity to innovate in unexpected ways. Many found that processes had to be adaptable in order to work, and that their methods should be shaped through the

feedback they received, both from participants and their fellow co-designers. The conference sub-theme of 'negotiations' captures the essence of the contributors response to this challenge: they had to become skilled negotiators, developing new methods and tools to build the relationships and spark the interactions fundamental to successful co-design practice.

COMFORT AND DISCOMFORT

As they approach unfamiliar people and new spaces they are challenged to find comfort in the discomfort, and confidence in their own abilities to navigate potential collaborative futures. (*Co-conuts* 2017)

During the process of discovery, emotions sometimes ran high. The subtle negotiations required for successful fieldwork brought personalities and feelings into play, challenging the contributors' notions of themselves as designers. The contributions to *Comfort and discomfort* are themselves an interpretation of this re-assessment of the self. Through these reflections, contributors make sense of uncomfortable experiences in the field, thereby drawing lessons on how to shape future engagements. The conference sub-themes of 'dynamics' and 'engagements' are explored within this theme through the contributors analyses of their journeys from discomfort to comfort, from their re-interpretations of how their own feelings and emotions can influence the outcome of their encounters.

BRIDGING BORDERS

Bridging borders bring the lens both close up, to specific moments of 'bridge building', and further away, allowing a broader view of where the map of collaboration and collaborators unfolds. (*Co-conuts* 2017)

The conference sub-themes of 'articulations' and 'relations' are specifically addressed by contributors within the theme *Bridges and borders* as they attempt to probe the finer points of co-design practice. They focus in on how to articulate and develop successful relations through careful consideration of the building blocks required to create meaningful and valuable connections with participants. The contributors consider how to build consensus and break down barriers by examining situations and experiences where barriers have been raised and consensus lost. They search for 'meeting points': places where intimacy can be found and honesty extracted; where relationships can be forged and ideas exchanged.

BEAUTIFUL MESS

Collaboration is a journey colored by mistakes, achievements, random encounters, and sudden changes in direction. It's a learning process that feeds our growth as individuals and as collaborators. It is messy, but we don't fear it: we call for chaos as we believe in its power to resolve and to challenge… [We] explore the coming together of people and things, the unstable dialogue of opposing forces, and the ever-changing roles and positions we take on as we walk in each others' directions. (*Co-conuts* 2017)

Each of the contributors to this book are reflecting on a journey. Their first experiences with co-design have been eye-opening, challenging, empowering, and, to some extent, chaotic. But they have embraced the chaos. Each experience related within this book charts the ups and downs, the wrongs and rights, and the downright messy. The contributors have come to appreciate how the open-ended and human-centred nature of co-design invites differences, contradictions, and clashes. All this 'mess' is an inherent part of co-design, challenging assumptions and shaping new perspectives. Beautiful Mess addresses how the challenges inherent in co-design practice shape the designers understanding of their own role within the design process. The contributors each shine a light on the internal dynamics of the individual designer as they negotiate their varied contexts, influences, and responsibilities.

The contributors to this book have taken to the field from a range of backgrounds, some outside of design, with a variety of skill sets. They have all become co-designers through a sense of curiosity and optimism, with a belief that through collaborative design they can assume the power to shape the society in which they live.

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