EVENTUAL EVERYDAYS: INFILTRATING AND OPENING SYSTEMS THROUGH DESIGN

CONTROVERSIES, CONTROLS

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore how design can be less a singular solution to a problem and more an opening to possibilities, facing a scenario of apathy and crisis of imagination. Infiltration is proposed as a method of active appropriation and opening in the urban space, generating prefigurative events rather than actual propositions. The project is an attempt to embody this proposition, and consists of the narrative of the NYC Subcommittee of Temporary Operations and Public Dissent (STOPD), an agency that exists non-existently. This paper navigates in the fields of urban and political theory, philosophy, activism, critical design and literary arts, to explore a social thesis (crisis of imagination), a design thesis (design as an opening process), a design proposition (infiltration-opening), and present a specific project with its supporting artifacts (narrative of STOPD). The project is evaluated through conversations with people involved in the context, as it intends to be a design stimulus to trigger imagination around government, dissent, and agency over the city.

OVERVIEW

The goal of this paper is to understand design as an opening process, and infiltration as a method of opening in the urban space. The project is an attempt to embody this proposition within a fictional approach, and consists of the narrative of the NYC Subcommittee of Temporary Operations and Public Dissent (STOPD). It is a design stimulus to trigger imagination around a solid institution and provide a framework for dissent. Here, I start by presenting STOPD, the site from which I explore my bigger questions. From STOPD, I retrospect to the social condition that motivated its emergence, followed by how I position design in relation to that condition. In sequence, I explain the design proposition of infiltration-opening as a framework for action, including the project brief I gave myself. Finally, I analyze its implication in a real context.

NYC SUBCOMMITTEE OF TEMPORARY OPERATIONS AND PUBLIC DISSENT

The NYC Subcommittee of Temporary Operations and Public Dissent (STOPD) is an agency that exists non-existently. It is a curatorial lab infiltrated into the New York City's Mayor's Office.
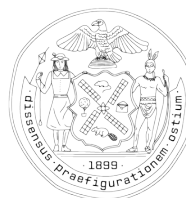
Figure 1: STOPD´s logo.

STOPD's parent organization is the Community Affairs Unit, which is organized geographically, and there is a director for each borough of the city. STOPD lives under the responsibility and outreach of Interstices – New York City's sixth borough. It is made of all the in-

between zones of the other five, the spaces that have not been addressed and remain overlooked. Interstices is a pulsating and fluid borough. It is contextual and can increase or decrease its size in response to social, economical and political forces that create borders in neighborhoods.

MISSION, GOAL & VALUES

The mission of STOPD is to challenge structures and open processes, allowing people to imagine new ways of interacting with the urban environment. Its ultimate goal is to build capacity for self-organizing and dissent, promoting conditions for distributed agency, imagination, alternative forms of governance and a just society to emerge. Above all, members of the subcommittee practice and advocate for infiltration – a method of active appropriation and opening in the urban space. The infiltration-opening process replaces actual propositions by generating prefigurative events – or *eventual everydays*, as they call their results.

STOPD's values are:
a. *Prefiguration*. Everything they do is temporary, not meant to last; their actions are an autonomous alternative to reality.

b. *Play*. There is an understanding of the rules governing a system to take advantage of them, and then make a tactical move.

c. *Appropriation*. They use what is already there, taking constraints as opportunities for creative action.

d. *Experimentation*. They employ active imagination, not only conceptualizing but also putting fragments of ideas into practice.

Figure 2: STOPD´s logo.

OFFICE PROCEDURE & LOGISTICS

Members of STOPD act across all city agencies by filling in for absent employees. In extremes cases, when they need to access an office in a day that everyone is present, they would send one of the office workers to their jury duty, so that a STOPD member can cover their shift.

They only meet in the hallways, as a means to get things done quickly and avoid getting trapped by the mazes of bureaucracy. When they need to make inter-agency contact, they use the elevator. They meticulously wait for specific people to enter, and jump in with them, quickly finding an opportunity to pitch ideas.

Figure 3: Public manifestation of STOPD´s signature.

OPERATIONS

As a curatorial lab, the subcommittee acts as two wings: urban experiments and an archive of possibilities. The experiments take a variety of forms: urban interventions, public programs, services, policy proposals, fellowships, internal and external consultancies. STOPD has been involved in literally thousands of creative and subversive human interactions in urban space. These actions have ranged from the overtly political to the quietly inquisitive.

While their experiments are temporary, the possibilities they open are permanent. Therefore, the curatorial wing of the group is in charge of storing ideas of infiltration-opening in decentralized yet connected archives throughout the city. Nowadays, they have mainly transitioned to digital technologies of storage, and are placing georeferenced USB sticks on small holes of street walls. They also encourage the population to do it by distributing kits with the device and a small portion of cement.

Figure 4: STOPD´s report of operations.

Figure 5: Documentation of an experiment in STOPD´s report of operations.

PRESS

Some years ago, a short documentary about the subcommittee was found and presented at a staff meeting at the New York Times. The source of the documentary is unknown; however, it was recently discovered that the journalist that brought the video was in the same cohort of the Strategic Communications graduate program at Columbia University as the current chair of the Press Office of the Senior Advisor Mayor at that time. A picture of the two of them having lunch together in the school's cafeteria was found in personal accounts in social media.

To a lesser extent, STOPD has been cited in academic papers and scholar lectures.

Figure 6: Outreach of Interstices.

A PARADOXICAL CONDITION

We constantly define our time as a moment where uncertainty, fluidity and decentralization are embraced. Paradoxically, our social order is still mainly informed by modern urban systems, dictated by determination, hierarchy, permanence and order. We can observe those principles in the organization of different urban structures and institutions in our everyday life, such as schools, hospitals, transportation, regulations and city plans. We can say that they work phenomenally to some extent, and the contemporary city and contemporary urban society are clear evidences of their success: "the

streets have been paved, and roads now connect all places; houses shelter virtually everyone; the dread diseases are virtually gone; clean water is piped into nearly every building; sanitary sewers carry wastes from them; schools and hospitals serve virtually every district; and so on." (Rittel and Webber 1973)

However, as we start acknowledging the interconnectedness and complexities of the structures that surround us, it becomes obvious that, as Rittel and Webber state, "the professionalized cognitive and occupational styles that were refined in the first half of this century, based in Newtonian mechanistic physics, are not readily adapted to contemporary conceptions of interacting open systems and to contemporary concerns with equity." (ibid.) Put otherwise, there is still a search for confronting problems of social order with scientific bases, as if they were easily understandable, isolated and consensual. Nevertheless, social issues are inherently different from problems in the natural and fragmented sciences – they are wicked, uncertain, ill-defined, and "they rely upon elusive political judgment for resolution. (Not 'solution.' Social problems are never solved.)" (ibid.)

To push this modern model of thought further and try to understand it, it is useful to compare it with contemporary principles. Exploring the relation of modernism and contemporary times (in his terms, 'fordist modernism' and 'flexible postmodernism'), David Harvey creates a comparative schema of values of each period, opposing respectively the modernist paranoia to contemporary schizophrenia, purpose (modernist) to play and chance (contemporary), determination to indetermination, universalism to localism, depth to surface, concentration to dispersion, industry to services, permanence to ephemerality. There is a clear inconsistency between the times that we live in, and the modernist principles that still regulate the structures that support them.

Although some level of order and accommodation are basic conditions to living in a city, these general principles don't serve us anymore. The disconnection between our constructed environment and our contemporary expectations only contributes to a general context of alienation, lack of agency, power disbalance and crisis of imagination. Further, the disconnect perpetuates a perverse system that "relies on us imagining that the system is the natural expression of human nature, or that it is too powerful to be changed, or that no other system could be desirable." (Haiven 2014) There is a general disbelief in the existence of the future, which leads us to passivity and apathy.

Because of our inactivity, it is easy to notice that the old style of top-down, outside-in principle of design is simply not working. However, if we understand design from a broad perspective, as a projectual practice and as a means of changing the existing situations into preferred ones (Simon 2001), there is an opportunity to challenge and open the given conditions. As a projectile,

a project carries in itself a latent movement: it is a predisposition of the operational means to put into practice imagined processes. (Argan 1998)

In a context that leads to programs and shutdowns of possibilities (of being), design, as a projectual practice, has the capability to understand and operate over fissures of prescribed spaces, opening zones of imagination and allowing alternative realities to emerge within the given one.

DESIGN AS AN OPENING PROCESS

In this scenario, how can we think about design less as a singular solution to a problem and more as an opening to possibilities, a science of opportunities?

Except for when it was considered merely a cosmetic element, design has been traditionally associated with models of order and rationality. It has been usually distinguished from art practices precisely for its methods of problem-solving, frameworks, solid plans for action, and its commitment to social transformation. That said, it has correlated in many senses with the scientific mindset of the first half of last century. Although it is a projectual process, in its professional history, design has formally materialized ideas through strategies that try to control outcomes and predict consequences. In regards to methodologies, the classical approach to systems-thinking was a scheme of distinct and sequential phases of work.

However, both comprehension and extension of the practice have expanded. Since it is contextual and deals with wicked problems, design is by nature not scientific – making the old approach immediately obsolete; yet its investigative character and attempt of sensemaking and depiction of orders of reality do approximate the field to an open and dynamic science, a science of opportunities. Such a science would extrapolate the limits of a single discipline, studying human interactions and coexistence in time and space. There are no more restrictions in the ideas of materiality and artificiality. Latour postulates that today's *matters of fact* are becoming *matters of concern* (Latour 2008), meaning that we should see matters of fact critically, and not simply as all that is given in experience. Taking matters of concern as a starting point, we can shift from projecting objects to projecting things in a broad sense: now we can design issues, rather than accept them as given facts. Thus, design is a process of making things right, a way of shaping how we live with each other and deal with artifacts. It is a context-based practice that speculates, imagines, and proposes actions; mediates things and persons; and intervenes in the contemporary universe with operations and courses of action.

The proposition here is that design can stretch its capabilities even more and act as an opening process. Instead of creating new things, it can interact with the actual existing context, showing possibilities and taking advantage of given constraints as opportunities for creative action. Design can then play a role in "keeping

open the open." (Heidegger 2003) By open, I mean Martin Heidegger's notion of human beings defined by their ability to constantly reflect on their own conditions of existence in the world. In that sense, design can shape the circumstances that foster and keep the enigma element of living alive. By engaging with prescribed situations in unexpected and unpredictable ways, design becomes a dissensual way of thinking and acting, leaving room for the contestational and conflictual nature of common life. Each individual is empowered and capable of contributing to daily micropolitical operations and participation, extrapolating the designations and prescriptions of the city.

There is, however, a double implication in the concept of design as an opening process. In order to have an opening capacity, design itself needs to be opened. As said above, it is a practice traditionally meant to designate orders of action, testing and predicting implications, and operating under relatively safe assumptions. As it becomes an opening process, there is a shift in the order of actions. Instead of going from prototype to type – or from a working test to the actual implementation of an idea, an opening process implies the inverse sequence. The course *from type to prototype* attempts to recuperate the primeval power (Klee 1966) of a designed element or situation, returning to an experimental phase, almost un-designing what has been designed, and looking at it with fresh curiosity. In that sense, it doesn't have actual propositions as outcomes, but rather early experiments, fragments of ideas that are not meant to be permanent.

Ultimately, design as an opening process prompts eventual everydays to take place – or the potentialities intrinsic to the actual everyday. (Critchley 2004) By interacting with systems in the city that permeate daily life, especially the ones defined by modern configurations of thought, there is a chance to challenge them and project new imaginative realities. In a small scale, this shift in the concept of progress and linear evolution contributes to a reconfiguration of common imagination – outside, perhaps, of the reality of these words in a capitalist context. "The common imagination holds that the 'commons' are historic precedents, current realities and future objectives all at once, and is courageous in spite of the fact that no common will ever be common enough." (Haiven 2014) To some extent, design as opening is a never finished project – it has to remain open, as the commons are not built on fixed or universal values, but on and out of the never ending negotiations between people and the shared projects of imagination and eventual everydays.

INFILTRATION-OPENING

There is no room for revolutions nor destructions – the grand narrative of modernism is gone, we can't go back in time, and the world can't be reinvented. Potential transformations in space come rather from below, from the appropriation of given structures and systems. As argued earlier, the approach of design as an opening

process comes as a response to our current times, where we have a set of prescribed and imposed urban structures (as well as mindsets supporting them) that don't coincide with our contemporary expectations and needs. There could be many ways in which design acts as an opening device; here, however, I am proposing the use of what is already given, an appropriation of the actual existing structures in order to open them. I am calling this process infiltration-opening. In regards to the definition and common use of the word *infiltration*, I understand that an infiltrated agent depends on an initial comprehension of a structure or system and, from there, navigates and takes advantages of the determined and undetermined paths – tubes, pores, gaps. Here, the context of action is the city, the space of the poetics and politics of the everyday, where we practice ways of making and living together.

A key concept for infiltration is the idea of constraints, and how one takes advantage of the restrictions imposed by the system as opportunities for creative action. Although we usually think of inspiration as requiring "total freedom," in reality, that would mean automatism of the mind, the immediate ideas. Constraints actually open up mental categories and allow unintended connections to be made.

Along these lines, the scope of this proposition is to explore the potentialities of infiltration as a method for opening possibilities within imposed realities. This framework is applied to a specific situation, as a demonstration of the major idea within a relatively controlled scale. Nevertheless, it is an open-ended stimulus that can be translated to many contexts and spectrums of operation.

THE CONTEXT OF NYC MAYOR'S OFFICE

Political institutions, such as government agencies, are a representative situation of the context presented. More specifically, I am looking at the NYC Mayor's Office. It is an opportune context for this design thesis and proposition to engage with for the current practices and tendencies in the public sector, as well as for the city's collective social imaginary in the background. Also, the specifics of NYC Mayor's Office organizational structure illustrate a solid institution that operates under modernist principles.

Public sector has increasingly become a mutual point of interest between designers and the government. The latter's overall mindset and processes are still heavily influenced by risk aversion and decisions that aim for permanence, stability, social control and order; whereas design approach is human-centered, empathetic and iterative. Jhen-Yi Lin identified four tendencies in the current research of innovation in the public sector: co-creation and citizen engagement for new policies and services; the setting up of labs to gather user insights during the process of policy implementation and service delivery; the redesign of the physical environment for a more pleasant atmosphere; and big data as tools to

accelerate feedback and to inform policy analysis and decisions. (Lin 2015) Although not definitive, this identifies a current movement and precedents of design entering and/or engaging with the public sector in different ways.

By choosing the context of the city of New York, there is also an opportunity to address a social context of gradual loss of collective imaginary and objectification of the city. The politics of global flows, especially concerning entertainment – and New York City is emblematic in that sense – is built upon alienation and spectacle, slowly dissolving an idea of the social imaginary around the collective production of the city. Henri Lefebvre argues that there is a science of the city, that has the city as an object and as a consummate reality; however, that condition of an object is also falling apart, as it is no longer understood practically, but as an "object of cultural consumption for tourists, for an aestheticism, avid for spectacles and the picturesque". (Lefebvre 1996) There is no way to go back to a traditional city; however, there is a call for approaches to understand and create opportunities for the urban society, which remains as a virtual object, to become a place of encounters, opportunities and participation. (ibid.)

Narrowing the context down, the Mayor's Office is the executive branch of New York City's government. It administers all city services, public property, police and fire protection, most public agencies, and enforces all city and state laws within New York City. (The Official Website of the City of New York 2015) Its organizational chart illustrates the overall hierarchical structure and relationships of the internal actors. It is an arborescent and color-coded diagram, evidencing silos and isolation, usually leading to redundancies.

PROJECT BRIEF AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The project consists of the conceptualization of an infiltrated agency in the NYC Mayor's Office. It is a subcommittee committed to practice and disseminate infiltration-opening. Besides the experiments, they also collect ideas from the public in decentralized yet connected archives throughout the city. STOPD represents a challenge of the current processes of decision making and lack of experimentation in the government, and it comes precisely from inside it. It questions the controlled structure of officiality, creating a temporary autonomous zone, (Bey 2003) an agency that is deliberately slippery. Being slippery, and thus relating to different audiences and approaches, the project explores the interconnections and mutual influences of zones of fiction, reality and in-between narratives that coexist in the project.

The project benefits from theories and practices of different fields, including social and political theory, philosophy, critical design, urbanism, art and literature. The chart demonstrates the main domains that relate to

the social thesis, the design thesis, the design proposition, and the project and artifacts. The intersections between those domains informed specific propositions of the work here presented.
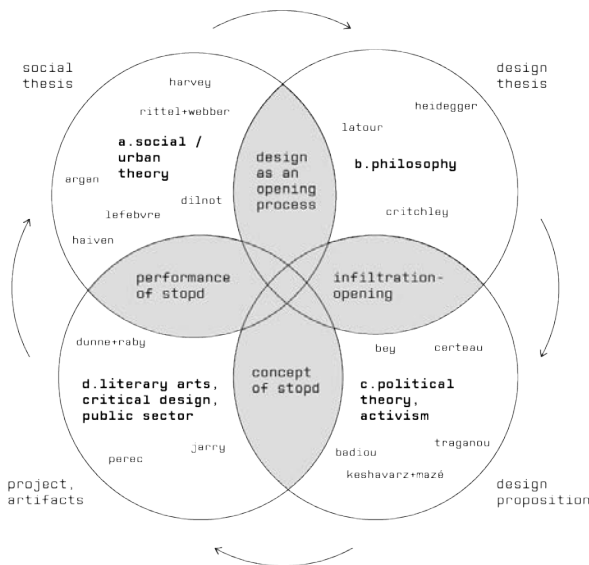

Figure 7: Theoretical framework and propositions.

When it comes to the design proposition, infiltration as a method for opening, I was mostly informed by political theory and activism. By playing with the circumstances and creating opportunities for action (infiltration), the agentic (infiltrated) opens space to what Hakim Bey calls temporary autonomous zones (TAZ): "an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to reform elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it." Put otherwise, it is a tactical act not meant to last, where one can't find progress in its traditional sense. It is an extraordinary and temporary experience that has the experimentation and opening as its main purposes. It can be considered a prefigurative movement, where one can prototype a possible way of living. Prefiguration is an alternative social arrangement that embodies and enacts the values being sought.

The strengths of tactical acts, TAZ and prefiguration lie precisely in their ephemerality, because they constitute an event. For Alain Badiou, a political event unsettles the state of things, the power which claims to have the monopoly of possibilities. It makes the impossible suddenly possible. He elaborates on that:

"[t]he power in place doesn't ask us to be convinced that it does everything very well (...) but to be convinced that it's the only thing possible. With a political event, a possibility emerges that escapes the prevailing power's control over possibles." (Badiou 2013)

In the end, infiltration-opening opens up possibilities of dissent. Dissent not only values differences, but also allows new forms of negotiation, belonging and

identity. Here, each individual is empowered and capable of contributing to daily micropolitical operations and participation in a local scale.

The project of STOPD itself and its supporting artifacts dialogue with a critical design approach. Critical design takes a critical perspective to design concerns, often challenging the expectations of the audience and provoking different ways of thinking about the object (in a broad sense) and its surroundings. It brings a dimension that goes beyond problem-solving and sees design as a means for opening debates. Critical design usually explores the technique of creating scenarios of possible futures, which extrapolate the present and suggest new realities.

PROJECT SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

In summary, I started by questioning how design can be an opening process, facing the contemporary conditions; then I propose infiltration-opening as a method for opening; STOPD becomes an embodied agent of infiltration-opening in a specific context; and there are artifacts that create the universe for the project to exist.

At the end of the day, STOPD is a project that deliberately lives between fiction and reality. More than that, it depends on both aspects: it can't exist as a real organization, or it would lose its criticality; and it can't be only fictitious, or it would lose its grounds. It is a story permanently latent. As such, we could call it a *situated fiction*.

It is a fiction because the subcommittee is a *plausible unreality*, as it exists non-existently. While there are some odd moments, it has a coherent internal framework. It is also situated, since it is engaged with an everyday situation of the city agency. By situating it within a specific context, it becomes possible – not only in terms of the real, but also of the imaginable. At the same time that it is constrained by the reality of the organization, it uses its everyday restrictions not only as a means to pretend a sense of legitimacy and credibility, but also as an opportunity to connect to speculative and unexpected realities. It infiltrates the reality.

There is an inherent tension in this story. STOPD is not something that could easily exist, something that would make our lives obviously better. In that sense, it would have been be an actual proposition, a reality that only needs articulation and resources to happen. There is risk in imagining such an agency in the government. It is almost an absurd idea, returning to the discussion of experimentation and opening as an end. The tension lies in the reasons why we both want/need and fear the existence of STOPD – and why the answers might be the same for both sides.

On the one hand, the government exists to mitigate uncertainty and guarantee social stability. Its organizational structure is designed to achieve the closest possible to a safe consensus. In that situation, it is hard to imagine an agency that has temporary

operations and public dissent in its title and reasons for being. It embraces uncertainty and instability, acknowledges dissent as a natural and healthy attribute of a democratic society, and doesn't see the traditional quantitative indicators of progress necessarily correlated to success.

On the other hand, there is a social desirability in making the uncanny subcommittee happen. It is an interesting reconciliation between people and their representatives. More than that, it offers a way of making it safe to dissent – while today dissent and activism are words that, in their common use, are strongly associated to radicalism and angry people. It encourages experimentation and failure as part of daily micropolitics. It is a self-critical component in a major system of social authority. Finally, it is itself an embodiment of the idea of uprising inside a highly controlled structure. It becomes the Trojan horse, Badiou's political event.

ASSESSMENT

Facing the challenge of evaluating such open-ended project, the assessment was in qualitative terms, by engaging in conversations with people from the context of NYC Mayor's Office, and documenting evidences of shifts of thought. The context is essential here, since infiltration-opening is inherently site-specific.

As entry points of the conversation, I shared the materials produced about STOPD (video-documentary and report of operations). I considered a measurement of success when people started imagining *what if STOPD existed*, and then discussing implications, details and controversies.

Some of the responses included this own idea of speculation about the existence of STOPD, as said Genevieve Gaudet, from NYC Office of Operations: "You take this solid institution that is the Mayor's Office and apply this new layer, making us question if it is real – or rather imagining what would happen if it was real."

It not only stimulated imagination, but also reflection about the actual constrained situation in the organization: "Sometimes you come across a constraint that is so powerful that it actually percludes you from being able to implement a solution from within the system, something that would actually be beneficial, but STOPD is a loop that goes outside government, is filtered through the actual stuff of the world, gains much more momentum, and then comes back to the government."

Conversations also orbited around the intrinsic tension in STOPD's proposition in relation to the context: "The word dissent is a red flag in the government, because it means challenging the status quo. And people here are afraid to change." (Carlos Martinez, NYC Department of Parks and Recreation)

Finally, Jorge Luis Paniagua Valle, from NYC Mayor's Office of Appointment, brought the prefigurative aspect of the proposition as one of its main strengths: "The project operates somewhere in-between government and community, and its biggest value comes from being ephemeral."

In a small scale, I believe the project was able to engage a design stimulus with a real context. The subcommittee became some kind of working principle of the theories studied. The combination of this working principle with institutional artifacts and a pretended body of work validates the values and model of society that it proposes in the first place. In a more abstract level and through this specific example, the project opens discussion and imagination about new approaches to government, dissent, and agency over the city.

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