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SCALING EXPERIMENTS IN URBAN SPACE – AN EXPLORATORY FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we outline an exploratory framework that attempts to capture different types of scaling practices in urban space. "Scaling" in this context is understood as a concept that involves a temporary intervention in public space that negotiates agency among human and non-human actors. The aim of this framework is to assist curators and researchers in conceptualizing site-specific interventions or exhibitions in urban contexts.

Keywords: Urban Space, Urbanism, Scaling, Design Experiments, Design Research

INTRODUCTION

The starting point for this article is the methodological considerations regarding a site-specific exhibition in the city of Kolding during the Nordes2021 design conference. Along a route through the city, eight sites have been selected as locations for design experiments that negotiate *matters of scale*. These sites include urban spatial objects such as a bridge, a bench, a narrow path; or sites along the river and the harbour, that involves different types of flora or urban wildlife, such as rats, ducks and marine animal species. So far, a call for intervention proposals at these sites has been launched. Based on an analysis of existing experimental work in urban space and typologies for citizen participation, an explorative framework capturing different types of scaling practices in public space, is introduced. The aim is to provide design curators and researchers working in urban space with a theoretical outline that helps organize engagement and participation among different human and non-human actors.

CONCEPT OF SCALING

The concept of scaling in this context, is understood as a program that involves a (temporal) occupation of a city site (a territory) and an intervention that negotiates agency among human and non-human actors. Humans can be the citizens or stakeholders experiencing the intervention (as maker, spectator, participant, living being). Non-humans may be the urban spatial objects, infrastructures, pathways or specific (non-human) elements that connect to the intervention itself, involving for instance waste, pavement-stones, water, temperature, light or darkness. In this conception of scaling, we are proposing a scalar relationship between the city as site and the living beings/humans who act on or experience a specific site. The design intervention can be translated into a form of scaling strategy. The exploratory framework we introduce, assists in making combinations of urban practices and design/art strategies visible and thus broadens the general understanding of scalar relationships.

The research questions we are posing ourselves in this paper is: How may urban interventions give (allow or deprive) agency of the "actors" that constitute a specific site? How may design interventions in urban space be operationalized and translated into a form of *scaling strategy*?

THEORETICAL OUTLINE

THE CITY AS CONTESTED SPACE

The question of who has the "right to the city" (cp. Henri Lefebvre) and the ongoing debate on how to build socially sustainable cities that engage and inspire its residents is a recurring and urgent theme in design research (DiSalvo, 2010; Fuad-Luke, 2013; Markussen, 2020), urban activism (Harvey, Borasi & Zardini, 2008;

Mayer, 2009; Purcell, 2008; Brenner et al., 2012) and within the experience economy, which advocates for creative city policies (Florida, 2002). The city as contested space has different and conflicting agendas that determine public policies. The overall aim of neo-liberalism is to shape attractive business climates and to optimize conditions for investment capital – with the argument that this will foster growth and innovation (Florida, 2002). Within this model, business determines public policies, and questions concerning social justice, equality or environmental issues are downgraded (Harvey, 2005). David Harvey argues for a more humanized and participatory agenda in terms of how we experience, value and collaboratively “make” the city. Quoting sociologist Robert Park’s definition of *what a city is* Harvey suggests that the city cannot be separated from our social lives, aesthetic values and desires for how we want to live. We “are the city” – so to speak.

The city is man’s most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart’s desire. But if the city is the world which man has created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city, man has remade himself.

Robert Park (1967, pp3)

As a counter-movement to the neo-liberal approach to governing and managing the city, citizens around the world have increasingly become engaged in public movements with a social or cultural agenda, e.g. the empty-space movements, which aim to occupy abandoned buildings in order to provide affordable housing; vegetable gardens maintained by local residents; sub-cultural festivals that strengthen the community or the establishment of alternative economies through sharing, lending or gift-practices. The agenda for this type of practices is a sustainable life for all city residents.

THE CONCEPT OF AGENCY

The agency paradigm, emerging in sociology since the 1990s, investigates the integration of structure and action theory (Sewell 1992). It explores the options of individuals to enact power and free will within the structures of society. Linked to the concept is its correlation to approved actors who can act out the agency. According to Latour (2005) “actors” in a network may consist of humans (living beings, people or animals) as well as non-humans (materials, things, events, places). They all have “agency” to act. Latour suggests that some humans or non-humans authorize, permit, allow, enable or forbid actions – and some do not. In allowing that things and materials as well as living beings may have the ability to mediate or configure certain forms of citizenship participation, the concept of agency can be used to inform our discussion on how human and non-humans are interrelated in the

city and how urban interventions may allow or deprive agency of the “actors” that constitute a specific site. The deeply integrated social aspect is like a grammar that guides social actions. Thinking with ANT (the Actor-Network-Theory) thus means that new objects and interventions may lead to a renewed repertoire of social ties (see Latour 2005, pp.233).

FRAMEWORKS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND EXPERIMENTS IN URBAN SPACE

During the last decades several typologies of citizen participation have been developed, such as Arnstein’s ‘Ladder of Participation’ (Arnstein 1969); Crawford’s ‘Key Dynamics of Shared Urban Practices’ (Crawford, 2011, Fig. 1) or extensive models inspired by these (e.g. Iveson, 2013).

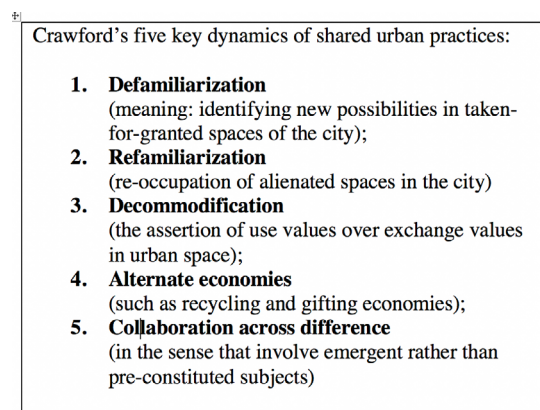


Figure 1: Crawford’s Key Dynamics

Whereas Arnstein’s model is divided into degrees of citizen power, tokenism and non-participation, Crawford’s model consists of five key dynamics that suggest identifying new possibilities in taken-for-granted spaces of the city; re-occupation of alienated spaces in the city; the assertion of use values over exchange values; recycling and gifting economies; and involving emergent rather than pre-constituted subjects.

We have been inspired by these models for several reasons. First of all, distinctions like these are useful for understanding degrees of citizen power (Arnstein) and temporary urban spaces as sites for citizen participation (Crawford). Secondly, they represent early attempts to understand how government and local authorities circumvent the concept of “citizen participation” and how the relationship between those in power and the “powerless” can be defined in terms of roles (Arnstein). Thirdly, they attempt to capture various DIY practices, urban experiments and initiatives in the city (Crawford, 2011). These examples of ‘every-day urbanisms’ and experimental projects represent different perceptions of “what the city is” and how human and non-human actors may interact in urban spaces. In the context of design, these frameworks are yet to be operationalized.

We wish to draw upon these theories to further explore art and design approaches as means of scaling practices. These approaches enact shifts in power between different human and non-human actors (e.g. “makers”, citizens, objects, things, sites). In the following, we will discuss strategies of scaling through a number of exemplars all of which can be categorized as urban projects, interventions, design experiments or works of art in the urban space. Through these exemplars we will reflect on agency and the various roles that may be assigned to human and non-human actors.

EXEMPLARS OF CONTEMPORARY INTERVENTIONS IN URBAN SPACE

DOWN-SCALING AS STRATEGY

Works by Slinkachu or Sprinkle Brigade (Fig. 2) provide agency to insignificant elements of the street, such as tiny things, trash, lost items or dog waste. The citizen is encouraged to be the mindful observer, paying attention to the value of tiny, almost imperceptible changes in the urban scene.



Figure 2: Miniatures by Slinkachu (left), “Law and order” by Sprinkle Brigade (right)

The first proposed strategy concerns the concept of “down-scaling”. As a strategy, it can be translated into a conscious attempt to minimize, simplify and deliberately reduce complex contexts into smaller worlds or entities that offer a different (sometimes humorous or ironic) perspective on the “big world”.

Down-scaling can take the form of physical re-scaling of different (not prioritized) elements of the street converted into microworlds that reflect the universal sense of being overlooked, forgotten, lost or somehow alienated in relation to the “real” world. However, down-scaling as a strategy can also be converted into activities that are purposefully “slow”, e.g. inspired by “down-shifting” or as projects inspired by micro-economies such as Illac Diaz’s DIY Solar Light Bottle experiments made from recycled waste, for citizens living in slum-areas. Down-scaling includes making things small, slowing things down, or adding value to seemingly insignificant and inferior elements of our environment.

SCALING THROUGH PERFORMATIVE DISRUPTION OF “NORMALITY”

Urban interventions by Mark Jenkins (Fig. 3) use the street as a “scene” for performative happenings by adding agency to everyday elements in the city and turning public city sites into unexpected (crime) scenes.

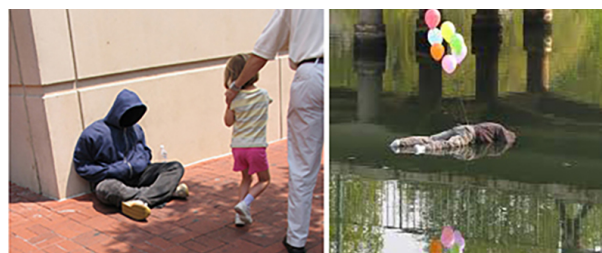


Figure 3: Works by Mark Jenkins in Washington DC and Malmö

Jenkins often uses realistic objects or life-like characters, and these non-human actors are assigned the role of provoking confusion and sometimes concern among citizens passing by. The citizen thus becomes an involuntary, instant and (emotionally) unprepared participant, who unknowingly becomes part of a staged situation. This approach works with scaling by using strong performative elements to disrupt existing properties in urban space and to integrate the human body or human activity as part of the intervention. This strategy aims to create controversy and raise awareness of various issues normally ignored by the public (e.g. food waste, poverty or suicide among young adults). Disruptions range from causing slight surprise to more serious feelings of worry, uneasiness or anxiety.

SCALING THROUGH ACTIVISM

Public interventions by Sarah Ross, Hermann Knoflacher, Santiago Cirugeda or project Park(ing)Day (Fig.4) provide agency to citizens by challenging the law. This may be approached by re-occupying alienated spaces in the city (the work of Ross or Knoflacher) or by setting up time-based projects that allow use value over exchange value, as in Taking the Street by Cirugeda or project Park(ing) Day.



Figure 4: Above “Archisuit” by Sarah Ross and “Gehzeug” by Hermann Knoflacher. Below: Taking the Street by Cirugeda and project Park(ing) Day

In these types of urban inventions both the citizen and the “maker” are framed as part of an activist action, critical voice or protest against the system. Agency is given to citizens by empowering people through non-human objects designed to reform sites in the city (e.g. benches that force us to sit in certain ways) and make them more accessible, or through actions that temporarily activate sleeping places, playgrounds or social hotspots.

This approach to scaling concerns the more activist and political aspects of urban interventions; who has access to the city? Activism as a strategy aims to re-claim and democratize the city that has been alienated due to ideals of economic growth and commodification of culture. It ranges from massive and extensive actions that aim to influence policy-making and change the law - to minor activism and small-scale interventions that seek to “bend” the law.

SCALING THROUGH CO-DESIGN

In urban projects such as “City Garden” by Bureau Detour, “Library of Things” by Jewell, Adjaye and Duggan or “Urban Animals and Us” by Jönsson and Lenskjold (Fig. 5) agency is given to citizens through ‘making’ activities. “City Garden” experiments with the building of communities in alienated spaces of the city; “Library of Things” builds mobile local libraries and experiments with lending, recycling and gifting economies; and “Urban Animals and Us” experiments with collaboration across differences. The latter examines the ‘terrain vague’ between humans and wildlife by bringing urban animals (such as pigeons and gulls) into contact with the residents of a nursing home to experiment with new forms of collaboration and shared agencies (Jönsson & Lenskjold, 2014).

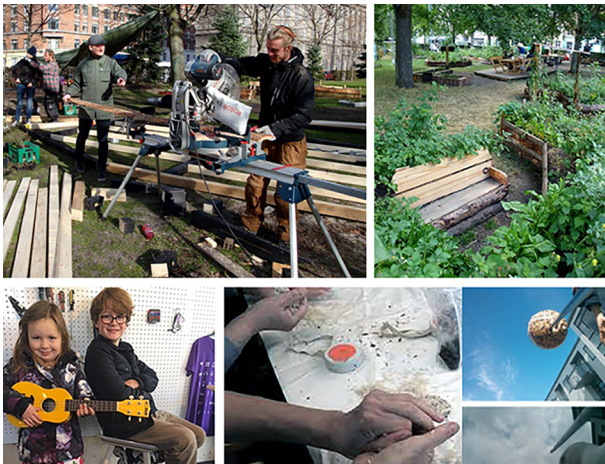


Figure 5: Above “City Garden”. Below “Library of Things” and “Urban Animals and Us”.

In all cases the participants become “collaborators”; they take part in the making activities and thus take responsibility for the project’s outcome. ‘Making’ activities in these cases may consist of building community gardens (as in “City Garden”), repairing used household goods (as in “Library of Things”) or in the making of birdseed balls (as in “Urban Animals and Us”). This approach to scaling relies on co-design activities and workshops with local residents. Co-design as a strategy aims at building sustainable communities through citizen participation with the purpose of bringing together people and resources in local neighbourhoods. Projects range from ‘making’ activities with simple materials and confined design tasks to more complex workshops involving a high diversity of technical skills, know-how and external collaborators.

SCALING THROUGH IMAGINING THE IMPOSSIBLE

Johannes Vogl constructs imaginative experiments in urban settings and speculates about the concept of outer space; the design duo Adams & Itso experiments with radically different ways of living and constructs a secret home in an empty ventilation space under Copenhagen Central Station (fig 6). Both interventions attempt to construct images of future realities or opportunities as opposed to present realities. Agency is given to citizens through the staging of a speculative future and by making the participants engage in a game of make-believe mediated through, for instance, light beams (Vogl) or an inhabitable prototype (Adams & Itso).

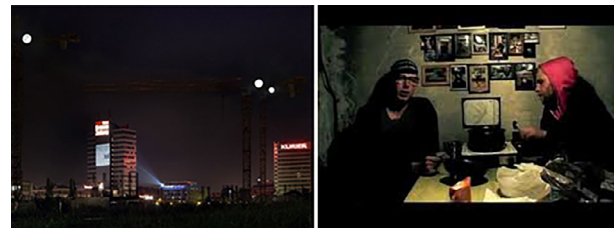


Figure 6: “Five moons” by Johannes Vogl (left), “Small house at track 12” by Adams & Itso (right)

“Five Moons” is meant to be experienced at night when citizens wander through the city and turn their gaze towards the stars. The work of Adams & Itso is to be experienced after the intervention itself, and here the citizens are encouraged to follow the traces left behind, and the maker’s journey into the urban jungle. In both cases, the maker is assigned the role of ‘travel-guide’, who leads the participant into imaginative futures or unknown territories. The participant thus becomes a co-traveller, who has no direct influence on the purpose of the journey, but who can be mentally or physically drawn into the speculation through different means. This type of strategy thus brings the notion of fiction and speculation in terms of experimenting with future

scenarios through imagining the "impossible" or "unthinkable". Scaling in this category can be used to experiment with our conception of the world as we think it may evolve or what we believe the future may contain. At one end of the scale we may have purely speculative proposals or utopian/dystopian thought experiments (e.g. materialized as models or images) and at the other end para-functional objects, working prototypes or entire inhabitable environments.

EXPLORATORY FRAMEWORK

Inspired by these exemplars, we propose an exploratory framework informed by Crawford’s model – with an additional vertical list of dimensions that includes scaling in terms of strategies (the number of strategies being non-exhaustive); down-scaling as strategy; scaling through performative disruption of normality; scaling through activism; scaling through co-design; and scaling through imagining the impossible.

These strategies can be diagrammed as a framework (Fig. 7) as a means of exploring the dynamics between shared urban practices and applied strategies of scaling. By inserting the strategies of scaling into the framework we are able to provide the following overview:

Key dynamics of shared urban practices	Strategy of scaling →				
	Down-scaling	Performative disruption	Activism	Co-design	Imagining the impossible
Defamiliarization (identifying new possibilities in taken-for-granted spaces)	Sprinkle Brigade	Mark Jenkins		Buro Detour	Adams & Itso
Refamiliarization (re-occupation of alienated spaces)			S.Ross H.Knoflacher		J. Vogl
Decommodification (the assertion of use values over exchange values in urban space)			Park(ing)Day S.Cirugeda		
Alternate economies (such as recycling and gifting economies)	Illac Diaz			Library of Things	
Collaboration across difference (emergent rather than pre-constituted subjects)				Animals and us	

Figure 7: Exploratory Framework of Scaling

The framework allows free combinations of different vertical and horizontal features broadening the understanding of scaling. For instance, by looking at the horizontal line involving the key dynamic “defamiliarization” we find projects that try to define new possibilities in taken-for-granted places of the city – sites we do not think about, sites that are “just there”. In reforming these sites, quite diverse scaling strategies are used; Buro Detour takes on the role as facilitator and sets up co-design meetings with local residents in an attempt to create a new shared space. The Sprinkle Brigade patrols the streets of the city looking for animal

waste that has been left behind and transforms these “unwanted items” into sophisticated and humorous micro-worlds. Adams and Itso ponder a different future in a "hidden" space under Copenhagen Central Station, which has not been used for years and thus prototype a radical new way of living. Jenkins uses the city with all its everyday elements as a stage for his performative actions. All these examples embrace the concept of “defamiliarization”, however with different design strategies, to scale narratives about the city, and its engagement of human and non-human actors.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

By scrutinizing art and design work in urban space strategies of scaling and key dynamics of shared urban practices have been combined into a preliminary model. Accounting for scaling strategies offers an expansion of the repertoire of urban designers and curators. For the Nordes2021 exhibition, this work will be used to understand the proposals from a theoretical perspective and to better understand the dynamics that these proposals could reveal during the exhibition in the city of Kolding: How would they challenge the dominance of certain human or non-human actors in the urban context? What scaling strategies and key dynamics are at stake? Linked to these questions are the surrounding dialogues that are required to move an exhibition concept forward. In our case, dialogue with local and national authorities (e.g., the municipality, the administration of the railways, the harbour management and private proprietors) has been an essential part of the project. Not only to secure site access but also to negotiate intervention possibilities and constraints. The review and production process will lead to further levels of dialogue, possibly enabling, preventing or altering the realization of certain proposals. These levels of dialogue will further inform our understanding of scaling strategies.

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