

## **Elia – Location Aesthetics**

### **Theme - Economy/ Culture**

#### **Title: Embracing Conversations around ‘Social Objects’ -**

#### **How this is Reconfiguring Design Education.**

##### **Abstract**

In Ireland there has been a narrow focus on getting our economy in order so we can create a decent society. Surely a more pertinent question is ‘How do we unleash the potential of society to....articulate clear collective values and therefore generate sustained prosperity? (Irish Times Nov 2013)

This paper will explore how design becomes reconfigured, towards articulating these collective conversations, in the light of participatory culture. Our media and designed environments, infrastructures and artefacts have been overly positioned towards consumption, distribution and product (Lievrouw) - a closed system. Design practice, education and research need a focus on an enquiry that increasingly allows voice, participation, and creativity for whom we design with and for. This perspective reflects Umberto Eco’s ‘The Poetics of the Open Work’ in which he states that the ‘open work’ is ‘unfinished and the author (*insert artist, designer*) seems to hand them on to the user, more or less like the components of a construction kit’. This paper will explore situated practice, arguing that designed artefacts act as ‘social objects’ thereby providing reflective conversation for citizens’ involvement and agency in locally situated context.

At Dublin Institute of Technology, our art and design programs are working increasingly on inter-disciplinary projects that activity explores ways of increasing agency in the public realm of our towns and cities, for its citizens. Students were asked to engage with the meaning-making potential of the situational and social aspects of place. This paper explores a case where ‘social objects’ in the shape of situated, contextualised social media can connect citizens and communities. They are ‘unfinished’ narratives offering communicative and socio-technical affordances within cultural settings. Using this case-study we will explore design affordances needed for participation.

Prospectives of scaffolding (Sanders), infrastructuring, (L.Star in Binder et al.) and meta-design (Fishcer, Giaccardi) will be explored in context to this case, questioning what this means for designer and participant. How do we design for participation?

**Key words:** participatory culture, social objects, art and design education, meta-design, digital media

##### **3 statements/questions for discussion**

- What happens when we put the tools rather than the object of design in the hands of the citizen?
- How is design education being reconfigured in the light of participatory culture?

- How can a 'mass' view of society give over to a locally situated, socially contextualised focus in cultural settings?

## Introduction

At the core of society today we have social technologies that mediate much of everyone's everyday life. The social web is characterised by an 'architecture of participation' (O'Reilly). Publics are shaping and creating their own content – writing, videoing, photographing. They are being facilitated more and more through the development of social media tools on the Internet. Regarding a reconfigured 'participatory culture' perspective 'digital tools enable anyone, anywhere to go through his or her practical life, observing the social environment through new eyes – the eyes of someone with agency to interject thinking, a criticism or a concern into the public debate' (Jenkins et al., 58).

This has implications to a changing philosophical positioning of what designers do - what they are as professionals. We are changing from a culture of one, where designers designed 'for', (the audience) to one where they need to be designing 'with'. 'The processes of design, the management of the design process, are changing radically. Egos and silos are coming down. Participation is expanding, tools are widespread and everyone wants to play' (Nassbaum in Binder et al, 2).

Designers have viewed what they design as separate, objective, technological objects in an economic frame that privileges product and consumption. The voice of the designer has been dominant. There has been a clear division on what the designer created, made and how the audience consumed, or read this work. There is a need to question this division – can we connect designed 'things' and their audiences - so there is a more equal partnership in this communication landscape? Can socio-technological tools allow us to see what we design now, more in the light of object/ product/ artefact as inherently 'social'? Nina Simon describes 'social objects' as 'the engines of socially networked experiences, the content around which conversations happen' (125). Within this frame, design can perform a more supporting role, enabling conversations around socio-material things.

This paper will attempt to understand the practice of designing within a participatory culture. An articulate active public requires a design profession that allows them to have more ownership of their own design problems/conversations. This is a design that is emergent, open and more democratic. The questions, to be explored, will be done from a perspective of design education. What would such a design project look like and what is the role of the designer in a more dialogical, participatory space? How is the idea of designer, or the position of design education, re-framed from traditional roles held? What are the new affordances the designer needs to be cognisant of? In an attempt to better understand the complexity of design being performed as 'social object', I will locate this conversation between - a student case study, my own experience as a design educator and on theoretical perspectives presented. I wish to explore designed objects that are situated as unfinished beginnings that enable interactive, participative connections for stakeholders in their environment/place.

## **.A City is its People**

Dublin City Council published 'Your City, Your Space, a Dublin City Public Realm Strategy' that laid out as its aim - to increase agency and active participation in the public spaces for the city. The council entered into a number of initiatives with Dublin Institute of Technology regarding projects and conversations around this topic.

One such project involved under-graduate students being asked to examine this as a visual communication design question – could they use the affordances of digital media and communication design to facilitate the public's voice, ideas and critic into the spaces they inhabit and use every day? Within a 'participatory culture' this perspective is the beginning of an acknowledgment that people are experts of their own lives, having agency in choosing how and what to be in the world (Hagen, Robertson, 34). This concept of empowering stakeholders - frames a new way to consider communities and how we design for/with them. We first need to acknowledge our audiences 'for the opportunities they offer rather than their problems; their capabilities, rather than their needs' (Hagen et al, 34). To consider human beings, neither as consumers nor as passive users, but as active subjects.' (Miettinen, Koivisto, 54)

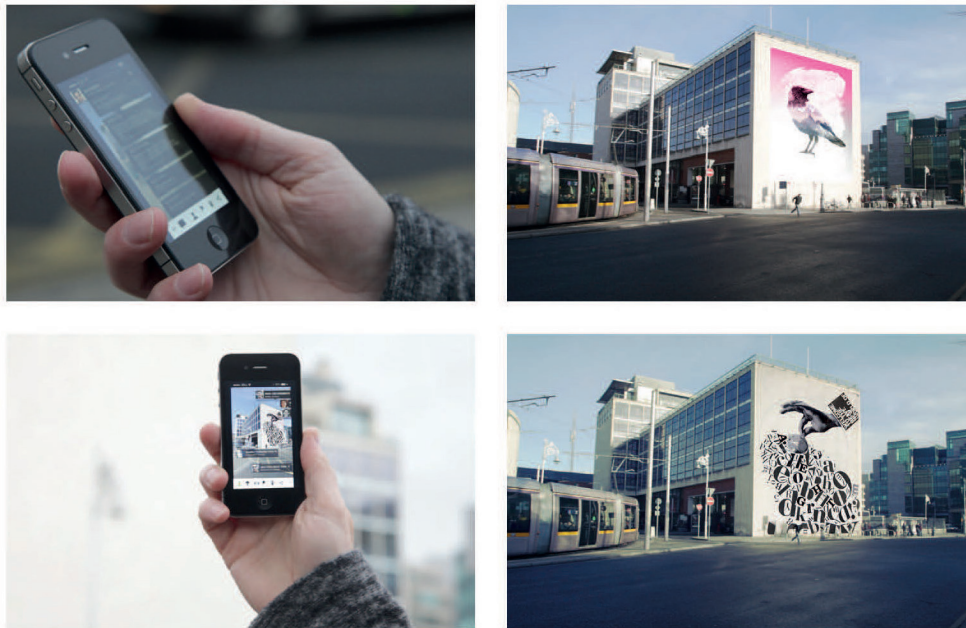


Fig 1.0

### **Student project - 'SPACE for your Imagination'**

This project 'SPACE' (fig1.0) (Afanasjevs), which I will focus on as case-study, is an individual final year undergraduate project that grew out of the initial team projects, outlined above. The student sets out, as design strategy - to map out, link and connect art, technology and communities in Dublin City. The aim of this design project was to 'invite the inhabitants of the city to take part in active participation in re-thinking, re-creating public space in the environment around them' (Afanasjevs).

'Design is moving out from the studio into places and spaces people interact and live in (Hagen, 6).' This project considers the environmental and architectural setting as canvas and conversation for environmental/visual art - to be curated and created by the community involved. The success of this project would be measured by looking at engagement with the city as 'social object'. The 'Space App' (fig 2.0) is built on the idea of augmented reality (AR). The user has access to a database of community contribution with an ability to share or add to, content such as video, image or sound. Interested participants are invited to view other people's posts – comment and share. The app has sections where the user can take a tour, moving around a map that they tag and comment on, marking what is important to them – thus enabling them to see what has already been posted and where. The user, in this community, can take part by publishing their own artworks online and create their own gallery. There is a section 'visit events' letting the users attend a workshop or simply arrange a meeting with other participants of the project. This project takes into account levels of engagement by the public.

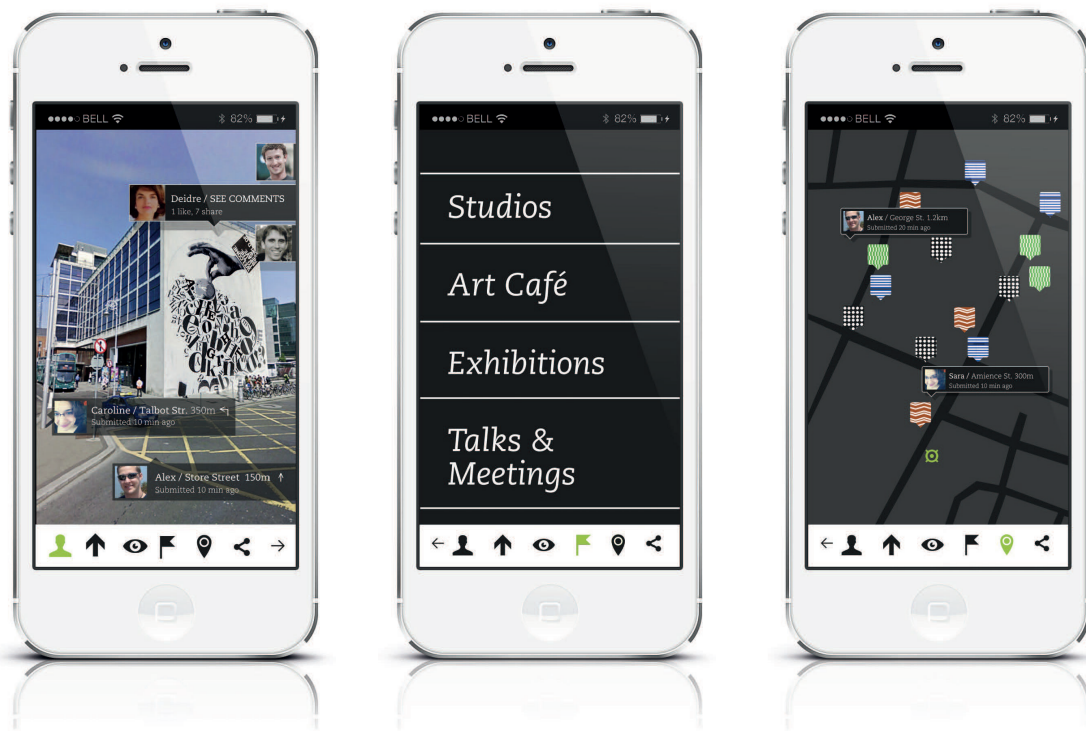


Fig 2.0

'Everyone has a sphere where they feel comfortable exerting agency' (Jenkins et al, 157). Not all participation is about creating and making but also critic, appraisal, comment and sharing/spreading ideas are valued as part of this project (Jenkins). There are multiple levels by which the user can engage. This AR function allows a lens to be used in situation, around the city at various locations to reveal artwork, curated and created by this participating community.

This digital space (the app.) acts as mediation tool... 'as designed artifact, it does not 'represent' but acts as material 'presenter' (Bjogvisson et al.). The use of social technologies allows the city to be performed as social object, as a conversation piece. Wenger characterizes participation as a possibility of mutual recognition suggesting a process of 'taking part in relation with others' (56). These mediating functions, on the 'SPACE' app facilitate connection and relation. This awareness of the role the designer can play in society is articulated well in the student's own design document.

'Designers are involved in social activities by helping explore our experience and expand ideas. I would like to look at this issue from another perspective – that everyone can be a designer and take part in creating an environment that he or she imagines.' (Afanasjevs)

This discussion, so far, has established that the designer must have greater recognition of the voice of citizen. If through the use of social technologies the publics we design for, have greater access and knowledge in creating, sharing and critiquing the text, I will explore strategies that the designer needs to be mindful when designing with an active audience. How does a designer establish a project that facilitates greater participation with the audience through action and connection?

### **Setting the scene**

The language being used in relation to designing for a more active, participative audience suggests a construction site which connote creating a space, but one not yet finished – platforms (Simon), scaffolds (Sanders), infrastructuring (L. Star) and building blocks (Manovich). These perspectives, including, that of meta-design (Fishcer), have convergent characteristics when viewed in light of design practice for participation. These characteristics encourage users to be actively engaged as creative extensions to the artefacts given to them. (Simon, 127) Fishcer points out that real creative production in meta-design is 'interaction'. 'Designing the design process' is centre stage. This means that creating the technical and social conditions for participation in design activities is as important as creating the artefact itself (Fishcer, Giaccardi, 6). This is design as 'performing and emergent'. Susan L. Star refers to 'infrastructuring' – as an activity that is relational and becomes (L. Star in Binder et al., 172).

These perspectives are about 'deliberately designing indeterminacy and incompleteness into the infrastructure with unoccupied slots and space left free for unanticipated events and performance yet to be' (Binder et al., 173). If we go back to the analogy of the building site, that this language suggests, we are also asking who we 'scaffold' experience for, to be involved in the building and construction. In effect passing the stakeholders the tools for this engagement. There is a design that happens at 'project time' (in this case the digital media website and mobile device by the student). The affordances of composition, layout, typography, colour and functionality are carefully considered and set down, by the student at 'project time'. The 'incompleteness' in participatory design is a space for the audience to design at 'use time' – which would include the audience's appropriation,

remediation and critic of the project once released. Design activity is reconfigured to happen - throughout the lifecycle of what is designed (Hagen, 2). These extended design phases dissolve the boundaries of who designs and who uses. L. Star, when discussing 'infrastructuring' - echoes these temporal characteristics, in the activity of designing that is more 'verb' than 'noun'. 'Infrastructuring is more a 'when' than a 'what', reaching beyond the single event (temporal) and any one particular site (spatial). It is not reinvented every time and it is embedded in other socio-material structures (L. Star in Binder T et al.,.172).

The focus in design education has been one where solving a design problem was central, where decisions lay firmly with the designer – a closed system. This change in emphasis is not just to include the voice of stakeholders but also to amplify and enter into a designing partnership with them. There is recognition that aesthetic experiences are grounded in everyday life situations and owned by those who experience them. So, in effect, doing and experiencing are not separate (Binder et al. 10). Participatory design replaces the monologue with a conversation, giving back ownership to the 'experts of these everyday aesthetic experiences'.



Fig 3.0



Fig 4.0

### Logos in Design – there but not there

'Space', dissembles the elite, singular logo or identity, no one statement or mark can represent the diversity and experience of a situated community. Identity is only activated through negotiation and association. Wenger sees objects as an array of relations – they do not exist in and of themselves, they are preformed and emerging.

Conversations around 'social objects' happen, then, in 'in-between' spaces. Fishcer and Giccardi refer to a design that 'aims to support existing social networks, and to shape new ones' (21). They are a system of relations that people experience and negotiate – the 'sensing', 'emotioning' and 'affective' activities in-between (21). The social, according to Latour's notion is 'fluid and visible only when new associations are being made.' (Latour, 79). Therefore 'social is nowhere in particular, as a thing among other things, but may circulate everywhere as a movement, connecting non-social things (Latour, 107). With regard to the student project - 'Space', it doesn't center on any of the artifacts as closed finished design objects - the touch points of this project, are not, essentially social in themselves. The focus here is not the 'Space' App, nor the website. Our concern is not critic of the posters (fig 2.0, 3.0), nor the environmental graphics displayed (virtually or physically) in situ, on the side of a building in the city (fig 4.0). The 'thingness' of the objects is acting as connectors, mediating conversations, preforming as links - networking. They are about the traceable associations. The performing aspects of these design things are what happens in-between – the conversations they spark. Aesthetic sensibility is not in and of the object, but here the aesthetic is the critic or feeling engendered – the activity of, the audience, discussing, making a decision or an appraisal – their 'sensing', 'emotioning'. This becomes the performing social object.

'Space' embraces this potential for conversation as open, unfinished design through the suggestions of places in the city as sites for creativity and critic by the audience. This acknowledges Schön's,

perspective of design as 'conversation with the situation/place'. The designer's job now is to 'scaffold' this conversation for the audience so they can be fully engaged in this conversation, for them to listen to the situations 'back-talk' (Schön). They, the audience become integral partners in the situational meaning making of place. Who the participants will be and the way they appropriate 'the space' must be left partly open. This is design as 'facilitator', a design practice grounded in what Wenger called situated activity in communities of practice. 'Existing content and form are borrowed, adapted, sampled or remixed to create new expressions, new relationships and new content (Liewrouw, 122). This designer must be open to the actively engaged user, re-appropriating, remediating, taking ownership, so that the space performs as conversation. The tools of communication have been passed on.

'Through participatory projects design can more readily establish platforms for social interaction. The give and take between user and designer becomes on-going conversation. Conversations lead to connections, connections lead to community' (Armstrong, 17). 'This is the designer as community builder. They are adding value to and are valued by a public through establishing platforms for social interaction' (17). Meta-design sees both professional designers and potential users as designers. The success of designing for participation will depend on how open designers are to this inclusion, at use time, of other voices - mediation and articulations.

This becomes a new positioning for design, one step back, as facilitator, where citizens are allowed appropriate cultural artifacts for their own derivative works and discussions. (Jenkins). The philosophical positioning of designer in participatory culture is one where control and outcome must be open, emergent and set free. 'The search for order, rigor and pattern is by no means abandoned, it is simply relocated one step further into abstraction, so that actors (audience) are allowed to unfold their own differing cosmos (Latour, 23). With the users voice more involved in this design conversation there needs to be a 'celebration of the unpredictability of responses – enjoying the serendipity of a process-orientated work (Armstrong,15).

### **Commodity becoming cultural resource**

If our discussion about how we design for participatory culture spoke about the scaffolding and facilitating the active users voice, then also there needs to be a reconfiguration and position change in the economic models they work within. Lévy describes overlapping spaces where a new 'knowledge space' overlaps a 'commodity space' (Lévy P. in Delwiche, 3). We see this tension described, on the one hand, as a 'gift' culture, set against a 'commodity' culture, questioning where meaning and value reside when different systems are placed on media - its circulation and ownership (Jenkins et al.). Jenkins, aptly, considers the language of curation 'which, he feels, creates value, not through buying and selling of commodities, but through critiquing, organising, displaying and exhibiting artefacts. Could, through questioning where the audience place value on their media/text, help us to move away from this binary tension of commodity versus cultural resource? We need to see knowledge creation

and meaning making, not as a product - boxed off and owned, but as cultural resource (Jenkins, 201). Regarding design education we need to address the cultural and economic tension, recognising the space where a designers voice can articulate - facilitating a conversation within participatory culture.

The, so called, gatekeepers of content in digital and social technologies have been dismissive of what audiences and participants roles, can be, in creating and sharing content. The corporates try to create boundaries and restrictions for the stakeholders, from becoming true partners, in media creation and sharing. Jenkins quotes Lewis Hyde - 'To convert an idea into a commodity means... to establish a boundary of some sort so that the idea cannot move from person to person without a toll or fee. Its benefit of usefulness must then be reckoned and paid for before it is allowed to cross the boundary' (Jenkins, 105). There should be concern if the economic interests of companies are determining the terms of cultural participation (238). Jenkins cites centralised and corporate controlled models of curation represented in the 'app' market around iPhone and iPad. (242). The guiding principle for transforming commodities into cultural resources are openness, loose ends and gaps that allow viewers to read material through their own experiences and backgrounds.

We have a more connected, collected and active society than ever before. There needs to be more recognition of their agency in how the affordances of digital media provide powerful new ways to participate as citizens and society members. The fluidity with which digital media moves and spreads can provide a catalyst for our reconceptualising of value - not as a transaction that is solely commercial and commodity orientated. Value and meaning is, instead, what people want to share, and comment on, having situational and cultural resonance in their own lives.

Design, as a profession, can support voices of communities and individuals by facilitating a framework for those voices to be more amplified. The profession will move to a much more, 'setting the scene' role – that of facilitating voice, where the tools for participation need to be passed on to the audience, for optimal engagement. Design, is happening now, more in a dematerialised digital state which frees it up from the hard limitations of medium (Armstrong, 122). This provides an opportunity to set our position as communication designers that are inclusive of our social relations and spaces that resonate as sites for conversation, for engagement.

Umberto Eco speaks of our western aesthetic tradition that had been tied to the idea of the 'work' in the sense of personal production, thereby having ownership, existing as material artefact. (Eco,13). Our legacy medias, especially print technologies, have advocated for so long – copyright, ownership, control and 'thingness' (you can hold the book in your hand). Now the emphasis becomes, Latour's, traces in-between. Participatory culture exists within the realms of digital media – where associations, connections and a dematerialised text reign. This is not an ode to the technological wizardry of digital media, change is not about altering the technological infrastructure, but by shifting our social and cultural practices around media (Jenkins, 161).

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