

Public Thresholds

Experimenting with Public Value Creation through Spatial Interventions in Public Buildings

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Collective
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Partners



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Content

01

Introduction

Matthias Ballestrem

09

02

Program

24.03. - 28.03.2021

15

Experiential Conference Map

Marta Fernández Guardado, Tim-Simon Meyer

24

Methods for Reflection for Design Driven Research

Ignacio Borrego, Ralf Pasel, Jürgen Weidinger

62

What Kind of Reflection Should We Look at?

Jo van den Berghe

70

Methods of Reflection in Design-Driven Research: The Contextual Map

Matthias Ballestrem, Marta Fernández Guardado

74

Reflection in DDr at the Faculty of Architecture and Design, NTNU

Markus Schwai

78

The Key Issue and Its Many Facets

Roberto Cavallo

82

Reflection on Originality, Relevance and Rigour in Design-Driven Doctoral Training

Tadeja Zupancic

86

04

Particular Cases

Invited Lectures

93

Dialogue on 'Particular Cases'

Mona Mahall, Christoph Heinemann

94

Negotiating Ecologies

Cornelia Escher, Lars Fischer

98

Proxies, with a Life of Their Own

Iman Issa

100

On Making

Hillary Sample

102

03

Reflection in DDr

Workshop and Position Statements

37

Methods of Reflection and Reflection of Methods in DDr and DDDr

Marta Fernández Guardado, Tim Simon-Meyer

38

Reflexive Design

Margitta Buchert

46

Reflect on Reflections

Kathrin Wildner

48

Nested Perspectives on Design Driven Research

Claus Peder Pedersen

50

Reflexion About Drawing as a DDDr Tool

Edite Rosa

54

Dismantling, Reassembling, Composing Anew

Fabrizia Berlingieri

58

05

Exhibition Venues

Deichtorhalle, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe and Galerie der Gegenwart.

105

Extended Abstracts, Artefacts and Papers

Contributions of the Presenters, PhD and Doctor
Candidates

Immersive Experiences in Social Shared Spaces Audio/Visual Artistic Research in European Immersion Labs Adnan Hadzi	116	Artefacts of Design The Significance of Analytical Drawings in Design Driven Research Eva Sollgruber	212
Cooling Cities Innovative Water-Based Cooling Systems in the Era of Urban Heat Adrián Moredia Valek	124	Tessellated Material Systems A Workflow towards Designing Surfaces with Distinct Kinematic Properties Felix Rasehorn	220
Learning from Dementia Villages Examining End-of-life Care Spaces as XXI Century Collective living Types Alberto Genua	132	Archrypt The Time Capsule as Design-Driven Method for the End Times Gianluca Croce, Mariacristina D'Oria, Valentina Rodani	228
Underground Hubs Interiors: Design Quality Effect on User Experience Amath Luca Diatta	140	Temporary Urban Space Limits an Possibilities of the Integration of Temporary Urban Interventions in Public Spaces Ivana Krmpotic	236
Community Based Ageing in the Land of Homeowners Ana Belcic	148	Internal Colonization in Montalegre in Architectural (Re)valuation Jóni Teixeira, Edite Rosa	244
It Depends on the Lens Film as Experential Teaching in Architectural Design and Design Representation Anita Szentesi	156	Computational Design for 3D Printing Concrete - Case study Learning Labs with Students at the University of Ljubljana Jurji Licen, Tadeja Zupancic, Tomaz Slak	252
J for Jewel Annelies de Smet, Johan Liekens, Nel Janssens, Manon Persoone	164	Design Strategies Relating to the Perception of Ownership, Porosity and Property Boundary Kaja Delezuch	258
Nonhuman Approaches to Wool in Design Practices How Can a Practice-Based Design Research Help Understand Other Entities? Berilsu Tarcan	172	Expose and Assemble The Poectic Narrative as a Design Principle Kristina Maria Szeifert	266
Investigating the 21st Century Emerging Approaches to Practice Codification of Architectural Epistemes, from Discourses to Practices Claudia Mainardi	180	See Beyond Thought Spaces of Contemplation Lena Ehringhaus	274
Under Construction A Real-World Fiction Daniel Norell, Einar Rodhe	188	Public Thresholds Experimenting with Public Value Creation through Spatial Interventions in Public Buildings Mar Muñoz Aparici	282
Los Angeles Fragments of four Ecologies Daniel Springer	196	Presence, Presentation & Representation Between Model Making and Mediation of Material in Architectural Practice during Covid-19 Mara Trübenbach	290
Hacking the Sacred A Heterotopic, Auratic Library of the Sacred Dirk Bahnmann	204		

Utopian Imaginary of Urban Peripheries in the Context of the Anthropocene ´ s Cultural Concept Marcus Kopper, Martin Roth	300
Practicing Reflection as a Design Studio Collective Matthew Crabbe	308

Re/Cutting Belgrade's Dis/Continuities on Screen/s Miljana Nikovic	316
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------

Abandoned Space and a Post-Socialist City Transformative Potential of Former Industrial Sites in Skopje Mirjana Lozanovska	324
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------

(Re)Architecture Three Issues for Reconstruction Pietro Brunazzi	332
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------

The Concept of Copy in Arts and Its Application in Architectural Projects Rebuilding Proposal of Villa Deliella in Palermo Pietro Quattropiani	340
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------

Ambiguity in Context of Image, Sign and Recollection Roland Poppensieker	348
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------

Sensation and Weight A Study on the Drawing of Richard Serra Rui Grazina	356
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------

Playing with Fabric Design Research Reflections on Colour, Materiality and Texture in Architectural Projects Sandra Felix	364
---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------

Designing Preservation Multi-Scale Architectural Project as an Integrated Tool to Tackle Territorial Fragility in the UNESCO Management Plan of Villa Adriana e Villa d'Este Sara Ghirardini	372
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------

Need Based Clothing Design How females affected by breast cancer articulate their individual lingerie needs and how these can be implemented into design Silke Hofmann	380
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------

Beyond the Divided City Policies and Practices of Defining Common Space through the Review of Spatial Development in Skopje Silvija Shaleva	388
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------

Creative Suburbia? Sinan Mihelcic	396
---------------------------------------------	------------

Ariadne's Thread A Drawing-Based Methodology for Literature Review Rui Barreira, Susana Campos	404
------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------

Multi-Storey Housing as a Place of Work Tamara Relic	412
----------------------------------------------------------------	------------

Territorial Machines and Integrated Circuits Taufan ter Weel	420
------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------

Movement and Drawing Improvisation Scores in Architectural Design Wiktor Skrzypczack	428
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------

Adaptive Renovation Research of Traditional Dong Dwelling in China Xiaoyun Liu	436
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------

Scientific Committee

Names and Affiliation of its Members

Data and Numbers

The Event in Figures

Public Thresholds

Experimenting with Public Value Creation through Spatial Interventions in Public Buildings

DDR Statement

Architecture is a unique field because it is only fully experienced once built. However, using design tools in programmed experiments helps to extrapolate the learnings to architectural design practice. In this project, design-driven methodologies serve as ideation, experimentation and reflection tool. First, the research combines written and graphical resources to extract research questions that will materialize into design premises or prototypes. Experimentation will combine design, social sciences or visual art's tools to map extensive material and immaterial actor networks. Testing design prototypes and reflecting upon them using tools like drawing, mapping, collage, photography or model making will display research conclusions. The reflection on these observations could lead to process iterations and eventually form a base of non-prescriptive propositions for public building design.

From engagement with peers and users to conference presentations, every part of the research project contains a design perspective: define the question, propose possible answers, test them with appropriate tools, reflect on the results and—if necessary—iterate. Furthermore, reflection is the guiding thread connecting the design and research by evaluating every step before taking the next. Presentations during CA²RE+ conferences will exemplify this approach to collective exploration following the scheme objective-premise-experiment-observation-reflection by establishing the desired outcomes, logging the developments, reflecting on the input received and turning it into a new hypothesis. During spatial experiments, civic engagements will sharpen the scope while keeping a clear research purpose in mind.

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Extended Abstract

Keywords: public space, public values, threshold

Abstract

In current times, which are dominated by uncertainty and change, the limits of public and private realms are in a continuous definition. As a condensation of the public sphere, public buildings have turned into thresholds, into active public sphere agents that can motivate behaviour and, as a result, produce public values. Public buildings designed for values should be created as unfinished processes instead of objects, leaving room for socio-spatial change and value dynamics. This research will use design-driven methodologies to show how spatial interventions in existing public buildings can incite public values. Connecting buildings and theories will highlight knowledge gaps leading to working hypothesis tested in experimental spatial interventions. Consequently, and as a case study, the experimentation phase will explore the public role of makerspaces within libraries. A co-creation process, conceptual design and prototyping of spatial solutions will highlight findings on the effects of design decisions and interventions in the public sphere of the future spaces of literacy.

PUBLIC THRESHOLDS

Ambivalent thresholds

Public space is born from a contradiction: it is defined by opposition and it exists because the contrary –private space– also exists (1). According to the notion of *liquid modernity*, modern times are characterised by uncertainty, insecurity and unsafety caused by capitalism's social effects and the incapability of the public administration to counteract them (2). In an environment where reference points are ever-shifting, boundaries between public and private space are uncertain and continuously liquifying flooding or retreating from other realms. Public building design faces the challenge of integrating ambivalence and change in buildings that act as *thresholds*, as border zones bridging physical, digital and social constraints.

Public buildings are an intentional condensation of civic aspirations serving the *common good*– a shared collective interest (3). They are inert agents of the public realm which absorb the public sphere, filter it through a membrane (construction) for a specific purpose (programme) and convert it to contributions to the public sphere (values). Often, public buildings and spaces have been alienated from each other, designed as

independent entities neglecting their shared edges because of the practical division between Architecture and Urbanism. Designing public buildings transdisciplinarily beyond the division urban-architectural, object - space, indoor - outdoor, technician - client, would make space for public value creation turning public buildings into public sphere catalysts for better urban conditions.

Buildings motivate behaviour and behaviours create human values. Human values are negotiated socially by the ambivalence between *good* and *bad* in the public realm, our “space of appearance” (4). “We are moral because we live in uncertainty” and it is by continuously having to choose between good and bad that humans build their values (5). As a result of the dynamic definition of public values and the common good, public buildings became thresholds between apparent opposites (private and public, indoor and outdoor, individu-

Experimenting with Public Value Creation through Spatial Interventions in Public Buildings

al and collective, physical and digital). Designing spaces that incorporate this opposition could allow values to develop, evolve and transform together with space. Public buildings must embrace their ambivalent nature while providing the infrastructure for citizens to appear, interact and dissent embracing the uncertainty of their own values.

Designing for uncertainty

Designing buildings for values urges to embrace uncertainty and change as variables for an architecture that “creates conditions and provides possibilities” (6). Spaces that facilitate human interaction by designing deliberately unfinished but permanent structures and solutions that maximize spatial possibilities and group dynamics. In public buildings, it entails designing the threshold's membrane porosity by introducing technical solutions for actual and

probable civic uses that will influence the public sphere through social values. Public values in public space have been extensively researched through human-centred methodologies from Urbanism (participation, placemaking, action research). However, the part of public space that is contained by public buildings is commonly only researched theoretically or designed without theoretical support. There is great potential for architectural design to incorporate design methodologies for values to its tools by bridging theory and practice.

All designs produce values, either by design or by mistake. This doctoral research explores how spatial interventions in public buildings can incite public value dynamics in contemporary urban contexts. The research departs from a review on public space and buildings notions acknowledging as research sources both literary and built examples. Pulling the thread between design cases and written concepts will extract relevant notions and approaches highlighting ways of bridging theory and practice. The built and literary references will create a selective mapping to support the theoretical hypotheses with design examples and design propositions with conceptual notions as a base for experimental action (Fig.1).

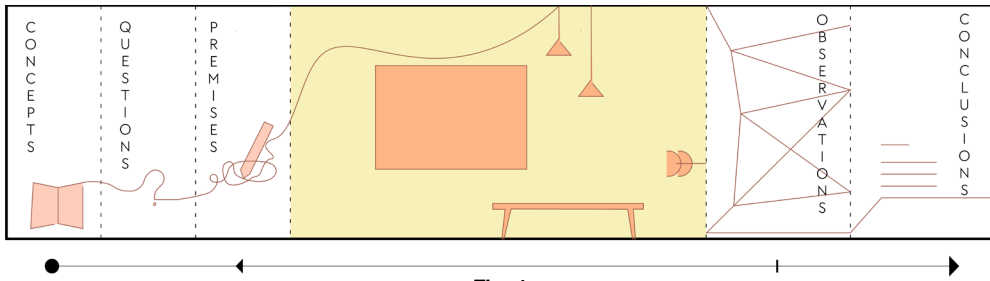


Fig. 1

Public thresholds will be investigated as a spatial and conceptual network, by complementing text with drawings, words with objects, books with buildings. For instance, analysing SESC Pompéia Centre in São Paulo (Fig.2-4) as an adaptable and multi-purpose threshold connecting the public and private realms shows designers can make room for public values without overlooking design duties. These values are introduced by use, not determined by design, and space's adaptability favours value dynamics through time. This example leads to finding the book "Theory of Architectural Practice" by Lina Bo Bardi that highlights a need for theorising about practice and practising from theoretical convictions.

In a reverse example, reading "Public Space? Lost and Found" drives attention to Theaster Gates's practice of bringing Art and Culture to communities of colour by turning derelict buildings into self-organized spaces to build civic values (Fig.4).

Exploring the concept of time in design for value dynamics appears the work of Bryony Roberts. An approach where art, craft, movement and materials are combined into temporary interventions to transform values such as political involvement or social integration. Her temporary works are more than a "happening" since they were designed with the intention to ignite behaviour, strengthen communities and activate value creation



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

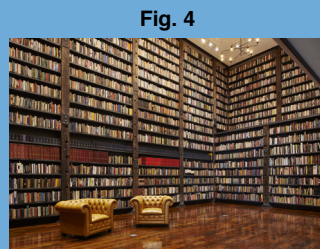


Fig. 4

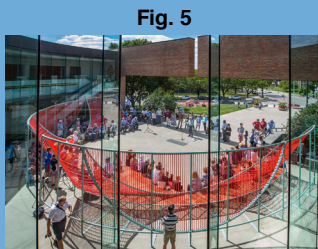


Fig. 5

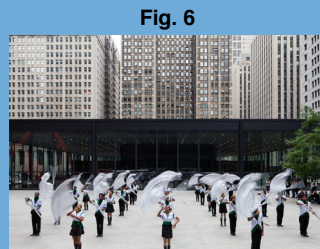


Fig. 6

beyond the designer role (Fig.5-6). Apparently disconnected, these examples share some being designed as unfinished processes integrating aesthetics with use and understand architecture and programming as dynamic entities hosted within a threshold, an umbrella for interaction.

This research's design is to engage in a 'back and forth' exercise between ideas and actions, speculations and precedents establishing the elaborate network linking public space, buildings and values. Mapping connections between theory and practice, public design for values and built examples shows a knowledge gap on the issues of time and scale. Can temporary interventions affect the public sphere? If so, how can it be measured and designed for? Can the results of temporary interventions be extrapolated to public building design public buildings?

Experimenting with values

Value intangibility makes evaluating design effects in the public sphere elusive with common desk research tools. For this reason, this doctoral research will employ design methods to test design solutions for public values through case studies. Literature review findings and case studies will constitute the point of departure for designing transposable small-scale experiments. Experimental interventions will place citizens, urban narratives and civic spaces at the centre to show how public buildings can be designed towards value production for the common good (Fig.7).

Like laboratory research, spatial experiments are proposed as a scalable research tool of which results can be extrapolated to the object of research, public buildings. The experiments will consist of controlled interventions that

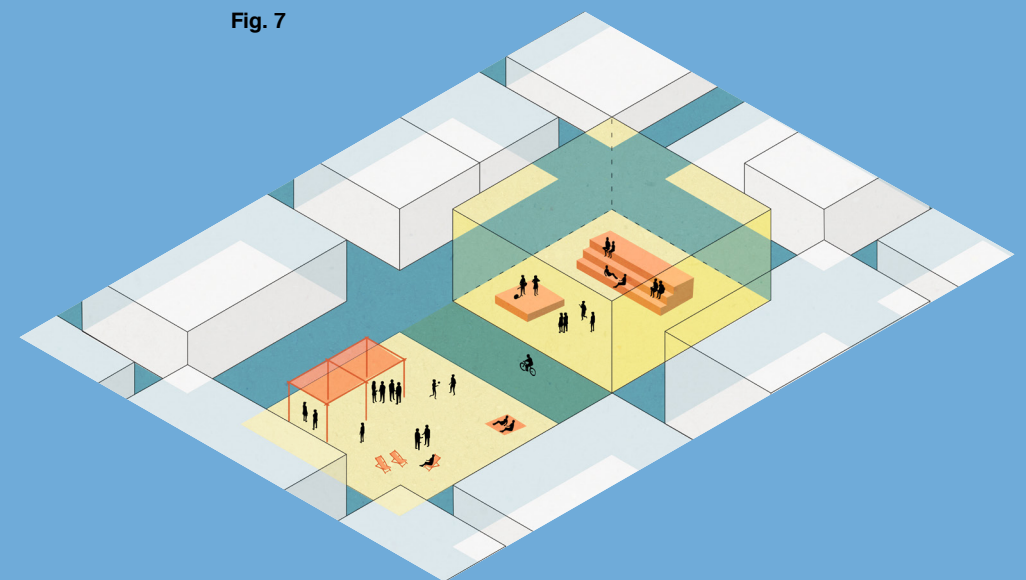


Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

aim at testing ways of “opening up” existing structures by introducing infrastructural “disruptions” grounded by civic processes (). Experiments will integrate social science (interviews, questionnaires), action research (workshops, meetings), artistic (performances, exhibitions) and architectural tools (prototyping, visualising) to broaden the scope towards transdisciplinary application.

The first experimental probation will revolve around makerspaces in Libraries as a public space for the construction of social values. Together with the National Library of the Netherlands and Hogeschool Rotterdam, I will coordinate the co-creation process and prototyping of four makerspaces in different urban contexts and intended social values. The processes will mobilise collective intelligence towards enlarging programme and spatial possibilities for specific pub-

lic values such a digital literacy or social belonging. Infrastructure and material interventions developed from industrial design, material science, library science and architectural design expertise are expected to affect the public values around the library and civic context.

Comparing the real and expected results with feedback from the involved actors will direct the self-assessment and reflection process. Reflection and iteration will outline the project's contribution to the body of knowledge: non-categorical proposals for architectural design of how design can facilitate public value creation in public buildings. The research is envisioned to prove how– when supported by theoretical analysis and civic engagement– design interventions in existing public buildings can influence the values relating a space with its urban context.

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Figure 7. *Conceptual Scheme on Designing Public Thresholds*.

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