Design in the Middle: A New Approach to Collaborative Socio-political Design in Conflict Areas

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Abstract: Design in the Middle gathered together, for the first time, a group of designers and architects from around the Middle East/Euro-Med region in an extra-territorial place where they could engage in dialogue and perform collaborative processes over the course of one week. Working in five transdisciplinary groups, they generated alternative near-future scripts and design proposals to address challenges relevant to the Middle East, such as borders, religious diversity, migration, water and food sources. To enable large-scale collaborative teamwork, the project’s design curators, two educators from the Middle East, applied an experimental methodological approach they coined “Problem Probing,” a composite toolbox carefully incorporating diverse design practices and mentalities. The paper will present the composition of the first workshop, elaborate on the project’s methodological and theoretical framework, and discuss its contribution to our future thinking about the socio-political role that design can claim as an instigator of public discussion outside the design realm.

Keywords: socio-political design, design thinking, speculative design, design fiction, Bruno Latour, problem-probing

1. Introduction

In March 2017, a group of participants from around the Middle East/Euro-Med region gathered and worked together for the first time. The Maxxi National Museum of the 21st Century Arts in Rome hosted them, providing an extra-territorial space, where they engaged in dialogue and performed collaborative processes over the course of one week. The participants formed five transdisciplinary groups, each focusing on generating alternative near-future scripts and design proposals to address challenges relevant to the Middle East, such as borders, religious diversity, migration, water and food...
sources, information mobility and cultural exchanges. The objective of the workshop was to restore the conditions that allow civil imagination to thrive by creating a framework in which the participants could imagine diverse and yet-to-come forms of governance, coexistence, ownership, and alliances.

The ongoing Design in the Middle (DitM) project is led by Maria Alicata, an Italian curator with a special interest in participatory projects in art and design, and senior art and architecture curators from Fondazione Maxxi serve as advisors. Working in close collaboration, the methodological approach of the workshop was conceived by two design educators from the Middle East who have vast experience in academia, cultural endeavors and commercial practice, as well as first-hand knowledge in design thinking and user-centered methodologies. Fueled with an urgent impulse to act in light of the deteriorating situation in the area, we constructed this methodology in order to test assumptions about the active role that design can claim as an instigator of hope in conflict zones. The goals of the workshop were multiple: to ignite and rehabilitate the fragile civic imagination of the participants through the conception of alternative near-future scenarios, while eliciting a wide range of design proposals, from the imaginary to the applicable. Therefore, an experimental methodological approach was applied, which we coined “Problem Probing.”

To enable large-scale collaborative teamwork of total strangers, the composite approach carefully incorporates diverse design practices and mentalities, such as speculative design, collaborative design, design thinking and ideation processes. The theoretical background that led to the formulation of this experimental project stems from Bruno Latour’s radical call for an inclusive political philosophy that takes into account the artificial realm in moving toward an object-oriented democracy (Latour, 2005). Latour (2008) concluded his widely cited lecture for the Design History Society in Cornwall by posing a challenging demand to the crowd: “Where are the visualization tools that allow the contradictory and controversial nature of matters of concern to be represented?” (p. 13). The project aims to articulate a possible answer to this thought-provoking appeal, challenging the role that designers could claim in an object-oriented democracy.

This paper will discuss the composition of the first DitM workshop as a case study and will focus on three main aspects: the composite methodological approach that incorporates diverse design practices to facilitate a public design action in conflict areas; the theoretical framework that was articulated as a possible response to Latour’s call to designers to "draw things together"; discussion of the project’s contribution to our thinking on the socio-political role that design practices can claim as an instigator of public discussion outside the design realm.

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* To learn more about the articulation of the new human right to "envision and shape one’s future without having to perpetuate a machine of oppression and rights violation," see Azoulay's revision of human right's discourse in her essay *Palestine as Symptom, Palestine as Hope*, Critical Inquiry 40 (Summer 2014), University of Chicago.
2. Toward Collaborative Socio-Political Design Probing: A Composite Methodological Approach

Formulating the methodology for the first DitM workshop demanded a careful examination of existing approaches. Though we are experienced with design thinking and ideation processes in commercial practice, and with social, participatory and speculative design practices in academic frameworks, we quickly recognized while constructing the workshop that there is no existing "off-the-shelf" approach that encompasses the diverse goals of the project.

The project's main goal was to bring designers from conflict areas in the Middle East together for the first time, and to ignite their civil imagination by speculating together on alternative near-futures for the region. In our search for methodology, we first turned to speculative design, which offers, as described by Halles (2013) in his provisional taxonomy of Design Fictions (DF): "a discursive space within which new forms of cultural artifacts (futures) might emerge" (p. 2). While drafting the full five-day workshop, we quickly turned to other design-thinking practices in order to compose a cohesive framework that would facilitate collaborative processes. We assumed that a structured framework with a tight and coherent methodology was vital to ensure that the participants, coming from neighboring countries that are deeply involved in active conflicts, would be able to immerse themselves in the process. Constructing the framework, we soon found ourselves thrown into methodological disputes, critically reflecting upon existing practices and confronting intriguing questions, for which we had no simple answers. Thus, although the phrasing of a new
methodological approach was not one of our initial goals, in order to facilitate this kind of collaborative design experiment we had to answer these open questions.

2.1 Scaling-up speculative design

The idea of using design fictions to negotiate the complex relationship between theory and practice has attracted growing interest during the past decade (Coles, 2016). In an introduction to a special issue of Digital Creativity on DF (2013), Halles describes the notion of DF as a "speculative turn" within contemporary design practice (p. 1) and recognizes its capacity to be both a means of representing and a mean of intervening. In their paper on "Advanced Design Practices for Sharing Futures," Celi and Fromia (2015) further develop the ethics of DF, highlighting the dialectic space that designers occupy in DF, both as creators and as mediators: "between the world that is and the world that could be" (p. 2). In their view, DF represents a practice that enables design to become a tool for public engagement and intervention in the "processes of social sharing of the future" (p. 6).

The term Design Fiction was defined by Sterling (2013) as "the deliberate use of diegetic prototypes to suspend disbelief about change." While the terms speculative design (SD) and DF are often used interchangeably, Dunne and Raby clearly underline the main ideological and methodological differences between the two approaches in their book Speculative Everything (2013) (p. 100). They claim that since DF grew out of the technology industry and is closely related to science fiction (as Bleecker (2009) states (p. 8): "Design fiction is the cousin of science fiction"), it is more engaged in the creation of videos and images for circulation on the Internet than in crafting stand-alone objects. While one can argue about the accessibility of Dunne and Raby's objects as unmediated real-life thought experiments for large and remote audiences, their approach does differ from DF ideologically. The strong emphasis that DF puts on technological futures renders a practice that Dunne and Raby deem to be "rarely critical of technological progress and border on celebration rather than questioning" (2013, p. 100). Since we are less interested in the technological dimension of DF, but instead in the socio-political dimensions of co-generating and sharing alternative futures, we share Dunne and Raby's understanding of speculation as a way to "unsettle the present rather than predict the future" (p. 88). We find special interest in their ideas about design as a catalyst for social dreaming (p. vi), and particularly in the enticing invitation of the UMK Project (2013) for designers to become engaged with large-scale social and political issues.

Although they differ in their ethical objectives and representational means, the DF and SD approaches do share some similar aspects: They all depart from a fictional verbal construction of reality, materialize in props rather than prototypes and act deliberately upon the viewer's imagination. But there is another similarity central to our discussion: They also share a degree of opaqueness when describing the actual design process. We know quite a lot about the point of departure, and we can analyze the tangible results and try to evaluate their impact, but we have very little access to the process that takes place in between. While we obviously don't expect SD to construe its nuanced working processes as IDEO Cards (2003), we believe that its vision of large-scale social dreaming calls for some guidelines. We identify a tension here between the highly individual character of DF and SD conception and visualization processes, on the one hand, and their legitimate ambition to make a large-scale impact, changing the way we think about design and the role of designers, on the other hand.

In his review of Speculative Everything, Sterling questions the nature of the relationships that this practice produces: "Does 'critical design' have 'users' or an 'audience?' Does it have 'patrons' or a 'viewership?'" and its objectives: "whether its main concerns are, or should be, functional
prototypes, diegetic special FX, speculative online videos, design-museum dioramas, or performance art and/or experiential happenings." Thus, although UMK inspired us to launch our own thought experiment (and, in doing so, it really proved its potency to act upon the imagination), at some point we had to confront two major open issues, and turn to other sources in order to compose our version. We can express these concerns as two open questions: Could SD opt for diversified outcomes, ranging from the fictional to the applicable, without losing its unique position outside the marketplace, thanks to social platforms of sharing and funding? How can SD move beyond the notion of users or audiences toward active participants, or in other words, is it possible to translate SD into large-scale collaborative processes?

Figure 2. The Digital Dunes group created a platform for data portraiture, a tool that raises awareness and promotes social cohesion (Photo: Flavio Scollo).

2.2 Re-cultivating design thinking

There is no one corpus of knowledge that can be described as “design thinking” theory. This creates tremendous confusion in practice and theory in both fields, as Kimbell clearly states in her extensive review of the field: "Even on a cursory inspection, just what design thinking is supposed to be is not well understood, either by the public or those who claim to practice it" (2011, p. 288). Nonetheless, most “design thinking” practices share a few elements that can help clarify this question. In an earlier publication, we identified seven phase components, which we described as the 7D of design (Tarazi, 2008, 2012):

1. Plow – creating a project “design brief” by using creative tools of questioning the conformity in the field (creating mind maps), and “turning the ground” using the sharp “plow” of questions.
2. Seed – checking the “genetics” of the product or service, and the “epigenetics” in several design research tools such as “observations,” “benchmarks” and more.

3. Sprout – design ideation, through several techniques and methods such as brainstorming, couple ideation session and design meditations.

4. Bud – generating design concepts and visualizing them into a preliminary “mockup,” “demo” or “early prototype.”

5. Flower – detail design through proof-of-concept and repetitive design prototyping through validation processes with the users and stakeholders.

6. Fruit – design for implementation through production or service creation, encompassing thorough and deep practical aspects.

7. Harvest – design for launching and creating the platforms (such as branding and social dissemination) that will penetrate groups of users, participants or customers, and make an impact on the world.

2.3 Probing problems

In the process of “Problem Probing,” we simultaneously use five dimensions based on the “5 intelligences” (Plasma, 1998) (Penza, 2015) and the 7D “design thinking” process (Tarazi, 2012): the Knowing dimension, the Dream dimension, the Empathy dimension, the Ethical dimension and the Reason dimension. Problem Probing works in the following way:

1. The Knowing dimension (Plow and Seed): Comparing what you think you know and the actual case. An antidote to “Post Truth,” the Knowing realm aims to thoroughly question a specific territory, examining what you believe to be true, and then contemplating whether these beliefs might be based on false assumptions. Creating new knowledge together with the team, based on an exchange of viewpoints, and then re-examining this too.

2. The Dream dimension (Sprout): Creating what you would wish to see in a “half dream” state; it could be a different reality, without constraints of geopolitics, finance, economics or regulations. And then you can show it in the most compelling and charismatic way.

3. The Empathy dimension (Bud): Being able to render and persuade in an emotional way the wish you have for yourself and your loved ones, and exercising empathy for the “other.”

4. The Ethical dimension (Flower): What you will not do, and wish others not to do. What you stand against, and will not want to see in the future.

5. The Reason dimension (Fruit and Harvest): What can be implemented from all this as a “startup” in reality, and why. Validating it with others outside the circle of the group and testing it, to see what comes back.

3. Representing matters of concern: Latour and the politics of things

So far, we have looked at the methodological framework composed for facilitating a collaborative socio-political design process. In this chapter, we will step back to examine the theoretical impetus that prompted the formulation of the project and hopefully will more clearly explain the suggested
shift from thinking about design in terms of "solving" to the more cautious "probing." Since this short chapter cannot encompass the richness and depth of Latour's thought, as practitioners, we will focus on a close reading of the challenge Latour posed to designers: to find the tools that draw things together (2008, p. 13), and the implications for every aspect of the design process: What are the issues at stake? How can we represent them? And who should take part in this process?

In his lecture to the Design History Society in Cornwall (2008), Latour reviewed five connotations that are often associated with design (usually as disadvantages), such as modesty, attention to detail and its remedial nature, and in a radical move, re-evaluated them as advantages. Through this lens, even what is considered the weakest trait of design – its superficiality and its relation to shifts in fashion and tastes – is re-assessed as endowing design with a relative nature that makes it an antidote to modernist modes of action, "to hubris and to the search for absolute certainty, absolute beginnings, and radical departures" (p. 5).

Among the five connotations, Latour marks the inherent ethical dimension of design as a decisive advantage and extends the question of design to politics. In the exhibition catalogue From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik (2005), he borrowed the term "object-oriented" from programming to introduce the concept of an object-oriented democracy that will connect us to each other with the issues we care about, our worries and concerns (p. 4). Instead of the German word "Realpolitik," used to describe a positive and materialistic matter of fact, Latour coined the neologism "Dingpolitik," exploring the level of realism that can be achieved when politics is no longer limited to humans, but instead incorporates the many issues to which they are attached (p. 31). By re-appropriating the ancient word "ding" that designated a certain type of archaic assembly, Latour restored the degraded notion of objects, which had been ejected from the political sphere long ago. The "ding" or "thing" meant the issue that brings people together because it divides them (2005, p. 12). In using the term “Dingpolitik,” Latour describes a politic body comprised not only of people, but also thick with things, like technologies for gathering, meeting and cohabiting.

Latour concluded his lecture in Cornwall, putting forward a challenge to designers to devise the tools that could represent, in the widest sense, the conflictual nature of things, and to capture what modernist innovations have always disguised: "Objects have always been projects; matters of fact have always been matters of concern" (2008, p. 13). To conceptualize designers as partners in the process of making things public by portraying their controversial nature, we must move from thinking about designers as "bridges" between industry and consumers, or as "translators" of advanced technologies. Instead, we should re-assess design’s potential to "draw" assemblies of humans and non-humans together using diverse mental and material "drawing" tools, in order to offer political disputes an overview "of the difficulties that will entangle us every time we must modify the practical details of our material existence" (Latour, 2008, p. 12). Moving from drawing objects to things, from matters of fact to matters of concern, requires a new mentality from designers and a deeper understanding of the ethical implications of their interventions in every aspect and dimension, from the mundane to the battlefield.

Gathering around matters of concern calls for a different terminology that will resonate with the cautious and mindful nature of the process. By replacing "solving" with "probing," we move away from the hubristic notion that design can solve problems. Probing represents the different way we look at problems and processes. Problems are not a pre-existing given that should be neatly defined; solving is only one possible result of the process, but not its ultimate and sole goal. In probing, we look at the beginning and the end of the process as cyclic: The bud and the flower stages employ a
wide range of possible results, which in turn should go into the world to prod, gain feedback, find audiences, raise funds and so on.

Finally, we want to look at the word together. Latour’s re-appropriation of the term *ding*, with its double meaning as both the assembly and the divisive matters of concern that call for assembling, allows us to interpret together as a collaborative procedure. In a recent discussion of the tradition of participatory design, Binder and colleagues (2015) argue that co-design practices may be a valid response to Latour’s challenge. They suggest that just as ANT-oriented sociology replaced “the social” with a socio-material collective of humans and non-humans, design must replace the "object" with *thinging*, a crossing point between "parliamentary" processes of collective decision making and "laboratory" practices of collaborative material making (2015, p. 154).

In their reinterpretation of design collaborations as democratic design experiments, Binder et al. look at recent developments in speculative design and design activism that explore how design may invoke controversies through the things produced. They describe this as "a deliberate staging of controversial matters, of which its audiences must collaboratively make sense" (p. 160) and identify the difference between participatory and speculative design not so much in the programmatic ambition, but rather in "the boundaries set around the laboratory of (participatory) design experimentation." Building on the participatory tradition, they push forward the boundaries and envision a collaborative, inclusive and interventionist design research program (p. 162). Thus, although projects like UMK do offer valid visualization tools that reflect the conflictual nature of designed objects, they gather people around them only in the aftermath. We see this as a limited version of collaborative gathering around matters of concern, and share the quest to remove as many boundaries as possible to facilitate involvement in the process of making things public from an earlier stage in the process.

4. Design in the Middle’s first workshop: Results and initial conclusions

After mapping academies, studios and design weeks in the Middle East, 30 designers and architects were invited by the Maxxi Museum to participate in the workshop. The list of participants was very diverse, including junior and senior designers and architects from all over the Middle East/Euro-Med region, students and designers from the Middle East who are now studying or working in Europe, and a few European social designers and entrepreneurs who are actively involved with the issues at stake. Since most of the groups cannot meet in their countries of origin, due to travel bans or regional conflicts, a viable hosting place was crucial. The MAXXI Museum in Rome, a center for experimentation in the fields of art, architecture and design, was planned by the late architect Zaha Hadid to challenge the concept of a museum as merely a place for “exhibiting” items. Hadid explained: “The idea was to move away from the idea of ‘the museum as an object’ [...] It’s no longer just a museum, but an urban cultural center.” As such, it’s a very appropriate venue for an experimental project like DitM, which aims to build bridges across national and professional borders and definitions, and continue Hadid’s experiment with the museum as a function.

Hosted at the museum’s Guido Reni room, an educational space usually used as a conventional conference room, DitM was the first workshop in the format of an active studio environment in this space. The spacious room completely changed its character and function for a week, divided into two

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http://www.arcspace.com/features/zaha-hadid-architects/maxxi-museum/ [accessed November 17, 2016]
areas: a studio environment and a public space for discussions and presentations. Tall yellow wood elements on wheels divided the space into intimate working corners, serving both as “moving walls” and as multifunctional presentation boards. The yellow elements referenced desert tents, and when grouped together, they functioned as a dynamic wall that could be assembled and disassembled.

Figures 3-4. The yellow elements referenced desert tents, and when grouped together, they functioned as a dynamic wall that can be assembled and disassembled (Photo: Flavio Sollo).
The five workshop challenges chosen for the first workshop focused on core issues in the Middle East. In order to stimulate the participants’ civic imagination toward alternative scenarios that go beyond the restrictions and limitations that current conditions impose, and to leave space for interpretations in the Seed phase, ambiguous, even enigmatic, titles were carefully crafted, offering multiple entry points, like "Digital Dunes," "Food Print" or "Core.ligious," broadly directing toward issues of data harvesting and mining, water and food sources, or cohabiting with religious disputes. The year 2020 in the near-future was attached to every title, aiming at an open-ended process, but without the risk of scenarios that indulge in futuristic and utopian visions. Since each subject has complicated and long histories, a two-stage working process was developed, online and offline. The online stage began weeks before the workshop convened. After forming working groups around issues, such as living with religious diversity or freedom of transition, the groups were invited to start their preparatory work via an online collaborative platform a month before the scheduled workshop.

Judging by the participants’ responses and the results of the first workshop, the approach of probing the future of the region stimulated enormous energy and enthusiasm, launching the groups on a voyage of discovery and creative work that is very rare in such gatherings. Instead of ruminating on the past, the workshop’s approach led the participants to look at the now in view of a desired future. We can say that the probing was successful: Most of the groups did not speak or think in terms of solving problems or developing objects. Rather, they focused on developing wide-ranging projects that tackle complex topics in a multi-dimensional approach.

The groups used the methodology as an open approach and needed little or almost no direction, and produced some astonishing results in a very short time. The Digital Dunes group created a platform for data portraiture, a tool that raises awareness and promotes social cohesion, underlining in a visual context the diversity of individuals as well as their commonality. Core.ligious developed a functioning prototype of an open-source platform for building trust and connecting people from different faiths and beliefs, aimed at fostering a respectful and open-minded community. The Nomadentity group used their title as a productive resource for a speculative proposal, portraying a near-future scenario in which Middle East traditions are persecuted in the West, and a new nanobiological system archives uncensored memories of cultural diversity. Food Print looked at the loss of diversity from another angle, envisioning cross-border grassroots actions to save biodiversity in conflict areas. Lost in Translation focused on lifelong e-learning through the concept of an evolving digital passport.

In contrast to the engaging dynamics and powerful results at the workshop, the preparatory online phase did not prove itself as an effective collaborative tool. The participation level was low and varied between the different groups, with no evident correlation between the online phase and the dynamics and results of the groups at the workshop. At this early stage, we assume that the difficulties encountered in the online phase reflect the fact that the online arena cannot replace the human-to-human encounter and full immersion in the process. Since preliminary research is essential, necessary modifications of the online phase will be introduced in future workshops. It is also interesting to note that despite the fact that most of the workshop participants are product designers and architects, most of the projects aimed to develop digital tools. This is another trend we can monitor in future workshops and further discuss in a future essay after sufficient evidence is collected.

The last workshop session was dedicated to discussion and ideas for future events. The next workshop is already scheduled and it will be hosted by State of Design Berlin in June 2017, where the results of the first workshop will be presented, and another workshop will take place. In Berlin, the Nomadentity challenge will be further explored by all participants, and according to their own fields
of interest, they will address a range of migration issues to encompass issues of uprooting and rerooting in a new environment. By facilitating future workshops in different geographical locations, we aim at growing the public impact of the project outside the design realm.

Our motivation to rethink the role that design, as an object-oriented practice, can assume in conflict areas was driven by our understanding that discursive practices, like conventional diplomacy, negotiations and talks, are failing again and again to reach innovative solutions to protracted conflicts. Instead, in this project we position design in the middle (in all senses), probing with "the degree of realism that is injected when [...] politics is no longer limited to humans and incorporates the many issues to which they are attached" (Latour, 2005, p. 31). Given the scope of objects, systems and structures that overpopulate, regulate and control everyday life in the Middle East, it is undeniable that designers play a dominant role in shaping its spatial and governmental dynamics – from designing the button on an e-voting device to the office chair on which policymakers sit while pressing this button. To conclude, responding to Latour’s challenge by committing to examine our position as designers in the politics of things, we wish to push the challenge a bit further and ask: Design always lends itself to policymakers' briefs, but can we reverse this process? Can design call for a different policy, and designers set the briefs? The first DitM proved itself as a first step in this direction.

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