
Baby Steps or Stage Dive into a Critical Design Dialogue

Mahdis Aliasgari

Lighting Design Collective (R&D
department)
Carrera de S. Jerónimo, 16,
28014 Madrid, Spain
mahdis@ldcol.com

Brendon Clark

The interactive institute of Sweden
Isafjordsgatan 22/Kistagången 16
Box 1197
SE-164 26 Kista, Sweden
brendon.clark@tii.se

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Abstract

This paper puts forward the early, practical actions “in context” that can begin to sensitize, orient, expand, and constrain design dialogue at the outset of a design effort. It draws a case of “breaching experiments” in “non-places” to concretise intervention and dialogue. By presenting a design case, we will explore what it takes to provide a “first approximation” of interventionist participation into the context of future interactive / responsive interventions.

Author Keywords

Breaching experiment; non-place; provotype; ethnographic research; social interaction

Introduction

Today, architecture and urban design are moving toward more flexibility and smartness in space. The new technologies allow designers/architects to impose new layers of aesthetics, information and interactivity in built/designed environment. HBI can potentially create meaningful interactions not only between space and users but also between users.

The importance of understanding patterns of social relations and creating urban spaces which support

these different patterns has increased due to the individualization of society. But how and to what extent can designer/architect 'test the water' before designing the final interactive/responsive spatial intervention?

There are countless ways of starting a project initiative or an inquiry into a space of potential change. Fueled by conceptions of design as a "reflective conversation with design materials" (Schön 1992) and modes of ethnographic research focusing on the emergence of valuable questions through engagement in the field site, there is a question of how and when to make the first move or take the first step. What can provide a "first approximation" of interventionist participation into the context of future interactive / responsive interventions? What practical actions can initiate a critical dialogue in context?

An increasingly common starting place for design explorations is through direct involvement "in context," such as ethnographic studies or indirect user studies such as versions of cultural probes. The ethnographic tradition as initiated in anthropology has some very practical actions that support the overall endeavor worth re-visiting, before exploring parallel practical actions for of a greater interventionist nature.

There is a strong distinction between conducting "ethnographic" interviews to understand people's world view, and participating in activities with people in the context of their lives. The Malinowskian model of "participant observation" (Malinowski 1932) propelled anthropologists out of their comfortable speculative chairs, commonly referred to as armchair anthropology, into interaction with people in context of their lives.

An ethnographer learning to participate in an unknown context has a practical orientation to it that provides a sensitizing introduction to the reflective neophyte – in the terms of Lave, providing a "way in" to the practice of doing fieldwork (Lave 1982). What is practical "way in" to a critical design practice?

In the 1960's, Harold Garfinkel, the father of ethnomethodology, introduced a set of tutorial exercises for exploring social norms that have come to be known as 'breaching experiments'; A breaching experiment is a purposeful and more or less calculated intervention into ongoing social activity, to reveal often taken-for-granted social norms.

The idea behind 'Breaching Experiments' is quite similar to what Mogenson (1992) proposed for IT systems design as 'Provotyping' to argue prototypes which their discussion. In other words, 'Provotypes' can expose "current problems, calling forth what usually is taken for granted". This differs from how designers use (industrial) prototyping, as a way to improve the design of a future product or service. However, the beauty of Garfinkel's tutorial exercises was their simplicity and accessibility to young students of sociology.

Crabtree (2010) explores the introduction of technology to use context as "breaching experiments" due to rather advanced technical concepts that, such as wearables, that were developed divorced entirely from contexts of use. The re-purposing into use therefore can benefit from being framed as breaching experiments. In contrast, the purpose of this paper is to explore much more modest, rough and simply created material interventions into everyday contexts as baby steps into critical design practice. The purpose

revolves around the effect upon the entirety of the designer's iterative design processes

function is not necessarily proving or testing theories/design, but to provoke reflection and

Case: Intervening in Non-places

We draw on a set of early explorations of a study, by one of the authors, focusing on interactive lighting design to enhance the quality of "non-places", a neglected category of spaces in urban design. 'Non-places' as defined by French anthropologist Mark Augé, are spaces that do not create a sense of place when people pass through them, due to their lack of originality and personal relevance (Augé, 95).

Many daily activities - like waiting in places of transit or shopping in supermarkets- take place in non-places. To simplify, people tend to behave in 'non-social ways' in such spaces (Kim, 2012), although they are potential contexts of sociality. Here, we highlight the early explorations into public bus-stops as non-places, with special attention to interaction between people, materials, and environment. The explorations began with observation, "hanging out" in and around bus-stops to get an initial sense of common behavior. However revealing observation and opportunistic interviews "in context" can be - and we believe it is a very productive starting point - we propose that the subtleness of participant observation, particularly in non-places, only reaches so far the desired critical dialogue in context.

Under the premise of seeking the smallest material interventions possible to trigger a critical dialogue for exploring interaction between people and material, we

introduce a set of rudimentary material breaching experiments.

Breaching Experiment n.1

Breaching experiment n.1 aimed at exploring potential engagement and social interaction at a bus-stop'. The experiment consisted of three sections placed on the glass wall of a bus stop to investigate three possible types of engagement (picture 1). The researcher spent 4-5 hours to create and set it up and it was conducted for approximately 19 hours total, with the researcher present for 5 hours.

Result Summary

Approximately 550-600 people were at and around the bus-stop (the number is estimated based on the researcher observations). In total, 19 people filled the gaps of the sentences (Section 1). 5 people wrote about the person next to them (Section 2), and 12 people (5 couples and 2 friends) played the game (Section 3). There were many people watching others (approximately three times more than people who directly engaged in the experiment).

Section 1

Almost everyone read other's sentences before writing theirs and there was a tendency to copy the same theme as the first sentence. For example almost half of the sentences by the participants were about food/people that they love, since the researcher wrote, "I love ice-cream" at the beginning.

Section2

The seemingly most provocative section had the least participants and did not lead to interaction between the people who wrote something and the people standing



Picture 1

Sec.1. A poster filled with repetition of an incomplete sentence: *I'm.....and.....*

Sec.2. A blank page with a sentence on it, requesting people to write something about the person next to them; possibly a stranger.

'Write something about the person next to you!'

Sec.3. Blank tables for playing XO (tic-tac-toe), commonly a two-person game.



Picture 2

A box (25*20*15 cm) was attached, at the eye level, on the glass wall in the middle of the bus-stop, in front of the seats. It was covered with a colorful pattern and a small hole on the left side of the front, which made it possible to take a look inside the box which was covered with almost the same colorful pattern as outside of it.

A color changing LED, hidden on the right corner of the box made the patterns gradually appear/disappear based on the color of the light. There was a sentence "Look inside the box but think outside the box" on both front and back side to make people curious.

next to them. Two people were observed writing, and in both cases people next to the participants did not notice it, since they were occupied with their mobile phones. Actually one of the comments is exactly about this: "Haha! (they're) busy with their smart phones."

Section 3: No one asked a stranger to play the game. Couples and in one case two friends were the only group of people who played XO game. But their conversation and laughing (which was quite louder than 'norm' for a bus-stop) had obviously some watchers among the people at the bus-stop and also led to a couple of short conversations between the players and others.

Breaching experiment n.1 not only surfaced an array of potential considerations and challenges, it marked an entry point into dialogue with the context of "non-places". Considering the simplicity and roughness of the experiment, it was quite striking how much it revealed between it and the actual design intention.

Breaching Experiment n.2

(Total duration: 3 hours)

The second experiment was more related to the design pre-concept and aimed to reveal how a quiet mysterious / surprising object can affect people's behavior. It took 6 hours to create and set-up and ran for 3 hours, with the researcher present all along (picture 2).

Approximately 150 people were at the bus-stop in total, 19 people looked inside the box (eight of them, after watching others/the researcher doing that), 3 people took a picture of it (without looking inside of it) and

around 30 people noticed it by themselves or while following others, looking inside or taking picture.

Similar to the previous experiment, there were some people who were just following other's reactions, some of them stopped using their mobile phones for a short time or followed while there were talking on mobile phone. It also led to interaction between strangers three times.

One example was a lady seemed to be very excited about looking into the box. She turned to the researcher –without knowing that the experiment was a part of her research- and asked if the researcher has also looked into the box, later she mentioned: "One of the things I try to do everyday is to give myself a surprise and this was my surprise for today."

On the Process & Result

The breaching experiments provided different levels of insights, though there was similarities in both interventions, which expanded led to a greater appreciation of the "possible interactions/engagement" in this context. Following are the categories of the observed interactions/engagements:

- Direct interaction between people and the designed material, initiated by participants themselves.(Ex. Filling up the un-finished sentence/Section1, Breaching Experiment 1
- Direct interaction between the designed material, triggered by the researcher or other participants
- Indirect engagement with the designed material(Ex. Taking pictures of the box – in



Picture 3

A 'provotype' was designed and built by one of the authors, to interconnect and raise discussion about the findings from the experiments, the urban design theories and case studies discussed in the main study.

CoreSee is a responsive/kinetic charging station for places of transit as an "excuse" to examine triggering social interaction among the users of non-place.

Breaching Experiment 2-without looking it)

- Interaction between people, triggered by the designed materials (Ex. A stranger talking to a couple playing tic-tac-to game)
- Indirect engagement between people, triggered by the designed material (designed intentionally) (Ex. Sec. 2- Breaching Experiment 1)
- Indirect engagement between people, triggered by the designed material (Ex. People watching people looking through the hole on the box in Breaching Experience 2)

The intentional roughness in the interventions made it possible to explore spontaneous thoughts and hypothesizes by making small iterations during the study. This takes on a greater dialogic nature, not seek to test and prove, but rather to explore the potential and possibility.

For example, the researcher intended to perform the first experiment part by part, so that it became easier for observation. However, the fact that people at the bus-stop were hardly noticing the first section, led her to add the other parts, to make it more visible. By attaching Sections 2&3 on the bus-stop wall, more people looked at it but no one engaged until the researcher filled up one sentence in section 1 to see if it would possibly break the barrier of 'untouchedness' for people and activate them to engage. Both experiments showed this tendency to hesitate being the one taking the first step to engage in the experiments, but as soon as there were 1-2 engaging, more people felt encouraged to participate. Here there is a nuanced

exploration of the borders to the statement, "What attracts people most, it would appear, is other people." (Whyte, 1980, 98)

Based on the performed breaching experiments, friends and partners tend to engage more than others. It also raised the issue of how people who tend to show less engagement (ex. people who seemed to be busy with their phones) participated in interaction when they noticed there was something going on.

Overall, these experiments implied that an interactive design proposal for social interaction in the studied space –as an example of non-places- requires relatively limited level of 'interaction' –between people and material- in order to engage more people. This potentially creates triggers for people to interact with each other. A 'provotype' based on the result of the explained experiments as the next step toward the final proposal (picture 3). It is important to note, that while experiment n.2 began exploring conceptually, the design proposal of the 'provotype' did not have any explicit direct engagement with material as in these early experiments.

Concluding Remarks

Designers are not the only "players" in "design playground", especially when it comes to the interactive /responsive projects. Within the design process, from finding a "way in" to the design context up to the final stage, we orchestrate design dialogues with the users. These dialogues are even more important when it comes to interactive design projects.

By articulating the described case, we would like to emphasize that the smallest move or "disruption" in the

early stages of design process can open up space not only for exploring and understanding the design context, but also for raising speculative questions about the interrelation between people, material and behavior. As demonstrated in "breaching experiments" there is a critical nature intervention. Such practices could fruitfully provide a concrete ground for expanding and meaningful constraining of further design dialogues along the design journey of interactive/responsive projects.

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