Mobilizing for community building and everyday innovation

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents and discusses two co-design projects that deal with societal issues of community building and everyday innovation in the municipality of Copenhagen. The research projects explore a collection of designerly approaches, here referred to as a design laboratory. The general aim is to establish an open platform, or infrastructure, for community building and everyday innovation. We argue that a key constituent of this approach is to engage stakeholders and participants in mutual mobilization around issues of collective concern. We conclude the paper by discussing the implications of this approach as an intentional strategy of democratization.

Author Keywords
Design research, mobilizing, community building, everyday innovation, design laboratory, democratization, participatory design and social technologies.

INTRODUCTION
Democratic innovation, as we will position it in the following, is a process that supports social and cultural communities in their efforts to affect and build their own future. This also implies a delegation of the democratic intentions with which the designer engages in the project. Here the act of mobilizing becomes a key issue, because social, cultural and everyday innovation can only take place where the act of mobilizing is continuously performed and distributed among stakeholders.

One way of mobilizing for social and everyday innovation is to provide networks of diverse stakeholders with an infrastructure, or a platform, by which appropriate devices and processes for staging dialogues and developing socio-material innovations can unfold. In the projects presented here this undertaking is situated within the conceptual frame of the design laboratory. As a specific framing of designerly interventions, the design laboratory aims at mobilizing participants into long-term relationships. The results are co-created design outcomes, that directly affect the participants’ own life situations.

In a larger scope this approach to design research belongs to the tradition of Participatory Design (PD). It is a tradition that strongly denotes the democratic co-operation between researchers and diverse stakeholders, in all phases of the design process. What has often been referred to as the Scandinavian tradition of PD, traditionally emphasized empowerment and democratization in the workplace, e.g. involving workers whose jobs would otherwise be replaced by technology in the development of sustainable solutions [8, 10]. Today the ubiquity of technology and access to new media has gradually shifted the focus of PD research projects from workplace orientated activities to public spheres and everyday life. This shift has been described as a movement from “democracy at work” to “democratic innovation”[3:41]. If we consider the intentions that drove early PD research projects forward, namely the distribution of authorship and power to those affected by new design proposals and solutions, it becomes clear why a movement from workplace orientated research activities to the less organized and more heterogeneous public sphere, pose some challenges and raise some questions. First of all the design field is vaster and some of the networks that occupy this space will by definition be more porous, than those contained in the structure of an organization or workplace. This means that the mapping of the design-field in itself is a different task to begin with. Secondly the question of what to design and who to include in the design process is fundamentally open and constantly negotiable. PD research activities situated in this highly volatile landscape, intersect and negotiate boundaries between numerous grassroots initiatives, existing organizations and research funding requirements, to mention but a few. Here the mobilization of stakeholders takes on a central meaning.

INFRASTRUCTURING
Following Bruno Latour [9] innovation can be seen as the activity of connecting humans and non-humans. The notion of infrastructuring [5], initially developed by Leigh Star, becomes particularly useful in conceptualizing this assemblage: “An infrastructure, like railroad tracks or the Internet is not reinvented every time, but is ‘sunk into’ other
social-material structures and only accessible by membership in a specific community-of-practice” [5, p. 5]. In the process of mobilization, the design laboratory works as a platform from which to engage and sustain participation in the design process. The activities are located within, or with close proximity to, the everyday lives of the people involved in order to delegate ownership and enable adaptations to concrete life situations. As a result, the primary aim of the design process is not to design an artifact per se. What is being designed is first and foremost an infrastructure with the ambition and potential of self-supporting continuance after the design project has come to an end. What entails from this approach to designing and mobilizing is, that the design situation and the use situation merge into a mutual interdependent network of relations. The reason for proposing infrastructuring as the object of the design instead of a device is a consequence of a shift in focus towards creating possibilities for the social, cultural and everyday innovations that are already being crafted by people as they go about their every day lives. Innovation thus is no longer about the novel and spectacular, but instead about hacking into the actual conditions of living in a mundane yet complex world.

**SENIOR INTERACTION**

The design laboratory is a way to frame the process of participatory inquiry, and can be conceptualized both as a organizational tool, that helps structuring open and complex design assignments with many stakeholders, and as a sort of programmatic design research practice, that stresses the interventionistic and experimental aspect of design research [1]. The Senior Interaction project (SI) [http://seniorinteraktion.dk/] is one example of a co-design project that is staged and framed within the design laboratory. The project focuses on societal issues of community building and social everyday innovation with groups of elderly citizens in Copenhagen, Denmark. Stakeholders explore technology, social media and new services that can support the seniors in extending and maintaining their social networks. The diverse range of participants span from senior citizens, researchers and project participants from service sectors, design companies, and technological industries, to employees from the municipality of Copenhagen. We as design-researchers deliberately engage these stakeholders in common design dialogues from the very beginning of the process. We try to make ideas and proposals tangible from the start, e.g. by trying out quick sketches, and tangible props to support the dialogue and prototyping of scenarios. The aim is to stage common envisioning of shared possibilities. We perceive this as a way of rehearsing the future [7]. These designerly interventions can also be seen as a way to mobilize and to create fruitful connections between the different resources in the project. To sustain these emerging connections and collaborations, the next phase of the project is to move these experimenting design encounters into the seniors private homes, activity centers, and on to their favorite public places. As the design laboratory expands to different local sites, we are also distributing agents that can further mobilize new networks, which have not been part of the project from the beginning.

**Infrastructuring among the seniors**

When we explore future possibilities we focus on the ingenuity of the seniors and other stakeholders in the process. Only half way through the project period the outcome of the process is still indefinite. We deliberately keep proposals open for long stretches, but in all phases we focus on infrastructures to support the emerging of small things and new connections that are build. To sustain new openings and collaborations we use new media and social platforms such as Facebook. By gently introducing the seniors to the idea of continuing the dialogue on Facebook, a platform some already use in their everyday lives, we try to nurture the seeds that have already been sown. We can compare it to the concept of cultural probes [6], in the sense that the seniors participate in their own space and time. This provides a space for collaboration for everyone, as well as an asynchronous dialogue, were people can contribute when they wants to. The support of an online platform creates an extended space for thoughts, questions and discussions from everyone interested in participating in the project, during and between the design encounters [7]. In projects like the SI the participants do not necessarily belong to the same community. The SI Facebook group can therefore provide an extension of the design encounters and thus support the feeling of affinity to the project among the participants.
Another example of how we work with building and sustaining possible infrastructures in the SI project is the new concept of a bus trip, devised by the municipality of Copenhagen. The destination of the bus is a shopping center. The idea is that the senior citizens invited to take part in the bus trip, are enabled to do their own shopping, instead of having a caretaker doing it for them. The bus trip can be seen as a social-material frame “for controversies, ready for unexpected use, opening up new way of thinking and behaving” [5, p 1-2]. We consider the bus trip such a frame, open for different possibilities of appropriation. The seniors can for instance use it for social interaction or clothes shopping. At the same time, it captures a new way of thinking services for seniors. That the municipality is not just delivering services for citizens, but rather co-producing services with them. This is an approach that goes hand-in-hand with our approach in the SI project. The infrastructure we try to build must adapt to the life-worlds and evolving ecology of devices [5]. The idea is to mobilize the seniors from within their own life-worlds, by providing a structuring principle for an ever-evolving ecology of devices, e.g. the bus, timetables, city routes. As stressed by Ehn, infrastructuring, however, can never be reduced to and only be supported by a technical platform. Designing infrastructures involve the situation it is going to be ‘sunk into’ and includes human and non-human actors of the assembly [9]. Therefore, our engagement in design encounters with diverse stakeholders must always start with the participants’ everyday life.

THE NETWORK LABORATORY RESEARCH PROJECT
What we until now have described as the design laboratory is in the following project rephrased as the network laboratory. It grows out of the same tradition, and is one way to approach the complex work with infrastructures of democratization and innovation on the border between public administration and public sphere. It is a way to organize co-design meetings, typically staged as workshops where different stakeholders meet over matters of concern to explore future possibilities slightly protected from outside intrusion. But the network laboratory can also be understood as a certain way to engage with the world. The Network Laboratory research project is situated in three local cultural administration units (LCAU) consisting of public libraries and cultural centers, at three different local sites in the municipality of Copenhagen. The aim of the project is to explore new ways of community building with local networks and grassroots movements, and to include new groups of citizens in the everyday life and projects of the LCAUs. The inclination for this is an increased focus on user-driven innovation in the public administration in Denmark. Public libraries and cultural centers in Denmark are traditionally based on the idea of democratization. That every citizen should have access to knowledge, cultural experiences and should be given the opportunity to be part of the local community. It can be argued that this political program traditionally regarded democratization and inclusion as an enlightenment project, that could help ensure the stability of local communities, but there seems now to be an emerging shift of paradigm, where the public libraries and cultural centers try to direct themselves towards rehearsing the future with local communities rather than for local communities. What we want to do in this project is to investigate ways to organize participatory innovation and co-design, and to sustain this way of working with the local communities beyond the project period. We approach this by staging a laboratory at each of the three local sites. We prototype the laboratory as a platform for participatory inquiry by doing cultural work with employees from the LCAUs and different local communities. We look for ways to organize, mobilize and sustain the collaborative cultural work. This program in a sense can be seen as a top-down initiated endeavor that wants to work bottom-up with local empowerment and community building. The municipality of Copenhagen wants to engage with users, citizens, communities and networks to build strong communities that actively participate in local development and democracy. But they also want to provide better and more efficient services for less money, and they want their cultural institutions to be visited by many people in order to secure future funding. The question of who to include in the design process therefore becomes central. In spite of the overall broader political programs and innovation policies that usually set design research programs like this in motion, it is evident, that there are always different local and central agendas at stake, and therefore the task of meeting the program we set out from becomes a complex matter.

Grassroots activist started “Bolchefabrikken” / “the Sugar Factory” in an abandoned factory building, as an autonomous and user-driven cultural center. It has caught the attention of the municipality of Copenhagen who seeks new ways to engage citizens in cultural activities.

One example of this is the mobilization of cultural workers in the LCAUs. Not every librarian and cultural worker sees
the Network Laboratory project as the answer to the future challenges of the LCAUs. To some of them the core task of the organization is to provide services for the local community, not doing cultural work with them. They don’t necessarily want a greater number of people to visit the library, nor do they want the library to expand beyond the physical building that more or less contain the library services today. To them the library is a public space with a certain quality to it, something that cannot be found anywhere else in the public arena. The quietness, the slowness and the invitation to come there, and do absolutely nothing, is exactly the core quality that yet another project is now staged to threaten. Because we want to sustain the Network Laboratory project as a platform and infrastructure of innovation also after the research project is over, we cannot easily disregard these cultural workers and librarians matters of concern. If we exclude their voices from our maps and accounts we certainly run the risk of becoming yet another project.

CONCLUSION

As we have argued, mobilization may be carried out by providing infrastructures for everyday innovation and through designerly interventions, such as the design laboratory. But these approaches still leave aside the question of how, and to what effect, this engagement can be seen as strategies of democratization.

Mobilization in this understanding differs for the description of mobilization presented by Rinku Sin [12], as one of several types of activist work, by which large scale efforts to engage the public (marches, petition signing, etc.) is carried out as singular events, without expectations of continued involvement by the participants [4].

The long-term relationship with participants and un-hierarchical structure of the design laboratory, on the other hand, ideally evoke a shared responsibility among the stakeholders to take part in the mobilization across individual interests and competing agendas. The delegation of power through participation are is a core democratic principle in the participatory design tradition, but the shift from the conditions of a workplace inside a stable organization to at fluid intersection between administrative and public space poses new challenges in terms of the conditions under which a strategy of democratizing is made possible. Björgvinsson et al., following Chantal Mouffe, have suggested placing the vital democratic force in public space to the “agonistic struggle” [3,11], between “opposing hegemonic projects that can never be reconciled rationally” [11, 207: 3]. A somewhat similar conception of democratic vibrancy, though at a different scale, might be said to take hold among the stakeholders in the projects presented in this paper. The collective mobilization may in this way be seen as continuous re-negotiations between opposing matters of concern and alignment around a common goal.

An important dilemma facing the designer, as the central tenant of the democratic process, is what to do with potentially important stakeholders, who for some reason fall out, or are unwilling or unable to become included in the project. Should this be seen as a reason to question and readjust the initial program, and how far is it possible to stretch the project, still upholding cohesion among the existing stakeholders?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank all participants from the Senior Interaction project and Network Laboratory project for whom we owe the examples and experiences, which we would like to bring to the workshop discussion, reflection and action!

REFERENCES