

Southern manners in northern lands: Design interventions for *autonomía*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the concept of autonomous design, as proposed by Arturo Escobar (2012, 2017a, 2017b) and inspired by the global South, can inform socially engaged design practices in the North. The concept of autonomy is approached from a *southern* perspective, not (only) from a geographical standpoint, but in understanding autonomous design as a relational practice that supports the self-realization of communities. We will inquire what the potentialities and limitations that a southern approach to interventionist practices in design can have in supporting autonomous processes are. In *northern* literature, autonomy is often seen as counter to interventionist practices in design. However, a southern perspective can give insights into how autonomy and interventions in design practices can inform and complement each other and we will develop this argument through a reflection on 'building' Non-Alignment. Furthermore, by presenting a project we have been involved in during the last two years, we will illustrate the process of developing a *southern* approach of interventions in northern lands, and discuss the influence this has had on a local autonomous process.

Keywords: autonomous design, design interventions, southern epistemologies, non-aligned movement, participatory design, participatory action research.

Introduction

In his first explicit incursion in design writing, Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar begins by positioning himself in regards to design¹. In the text, entitled *Notes for an ontology of design* (2012), he begins by clarifying that he is not a design theorist nor a practitioner, yet his work has been inextricably linked to a type of praxis which he will present in this particular text and later writings, namely autonomous design². In such framing, he stresses the need to question the role that capitalism has played in the devel-

opment of design (2012, p. 5), which must be understood in its relation to a "patriarchal capitalist modern/colonial world system" (Escobar, 2017b); a system, in turn, interlinked with the 'rationalistic tradition' that sees the body, the mind, the soul and the world as separate entities and which prioritises rational (scientific) knowledge over any other experience of/with the world (Escobar, 2012, 2017a).

His scrutiny of the philosophical structures that support design is also attuned with other authors' critical approaches. A recurring example – cited by Escobar himself (2017a, p. 63) – is Papanek's critique to industrial design, as

¹ Similarly to Escobar's positioning, we feel it is important to make explicit our own positioning within this paper. This text is a convergence of three different perspectives: one from the Global North and two from different latitudes of the Global South, working as colleagues in Belgium. Being *southerners* working together with *northerners* in the north, we constantly question what implications our experience and manners have in the practices we engage with to deal with certain issues and contexts. We see the southern perspective as an asset that brings to light other ways of doing and thinking (in design), and such awareness is a first step for developing a southern design practice (Gutierrez, 2015; Escobar, 2017b) in northern lands. De Sousa Santos uses the south as "a metaphor of the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism at the global level, and a metaphor as well of the resistance to overcome such a suffering" (Sousa Santos, 2012, p. 51). So even if we use our geographical origins as departure points for such a discussion, the path will take us to the several souths present in the world, also in the north.

² In the title we used the Spanish word *autonomía*, following the CFP and understanding that, as it will be argued on the text, *southern* understandings of *autonomía* have substantial differences with northern connotations of autonomy. In relation to the practice of *autonomous design*, Escobar himself translates it as such in English-written texts (Escobar, 2012, 2017b).

he labelled designers a “dangerous breed” (Papanek, 1973, p. 14). Resonating with the rationalistic tradition focused on *separation* scrutinised by Escobar, Papanek criticises the over-specialisation of design: “[...] the main trouble with design schools seems to be that they teach too much design and not enough about the social, economic, and political environment in which design takes place” (Papanek, 1973, p. 281). Fry (1999, 2008) has further elaborated on these arguments by accusing commercial design of being a “defuturing practice”, which accelerates the devastation of our environment and therefore takes “futures away from us and other living species” (Fry, 1999).

Fry himself proposes an alternative paradigm based on a relational understanding of the world, presenting it (relationality) as “a way of thought which is not based upon cause-effect relations, but on correlative processes and structures” (Fry, 1999, p. 13). This proposition attempts to overcome the rationalist tradition by referring to a world intricately correlated, not only between people, but also with other living – and non-living – entities. This responds to Escobar’s call to question the philosophical bases of design and aligns with his argument for *relational ontologies* as understanding “things and beings as their deep correlations, without which they cannot exist” (Escobar, 2017a, p. 147). For us, relationality represents moving away from defuturing design approaches, and contributes to our exploration of alternative design practices where, instead of designing products (such as objects, buildings, cities, etc.), designers deal with building new relations between people in the city, as well as nurturing existing relations. This resonates with what is defined in the Participatory Design (PD) discourse as acknowledging the ‘relational expertise’ of designers – as they are not only able to recognise the existing knotworks and networks of relations (Bodker *et al.*, 2017), but also to orchestrate and nurture new ones that might contribute to the development and sustainability of a given project (Dindler and Iversen, 2014). It is important to note that the propositions of Fry and Escobar are posing essential critiques to a certain (rationalistic) view of the world and see relationality as a more appropriate paradigm, while in PD relationality is referred to as a skill of designers. However – speaking with one foot in the south and one in the north – we consider this resonance helps in understanding the relevance of the proposals of autonomous design in the global north.

In his scrutiny of the aforementioned rationalist tradition, Escobar also questions the neglect of the study of ontology (Escobar, 2017a, p. 178), which refers to ways of *being in the world* (different to epistemology, which looks at ways of *knowing the world*). He follows with an argument for *ontological design* as “one possibility for contributing to the transition from the hegemony of modernity’s One-World ontology to a pluriverse of socio-natural configurations” (Escobar, 2012, p. 3). Escobar presents the notion of *ontological design* as a means to overcome the rationalistic tradition. In such framing, he references Willis (2006) and Winograd and Flores (1986) outlining that everything designers produce – even the most seemingly innocent artefact – defines to a great extent how a society will be organised (summarised in the dictum “everything we design,

designs us in return”). The concept of ontological design and its relevance to our argument for autonomous design will be further clarified later in the text.

Informed by relationality – seen as a perspective that understands the world as deeply interconnected – and the proposition of ontological design – which invites us to look at the impact that design enacts beyond the object – Escobar (2017a) argues for re-directed design praxis. He calls for a reorientation of design towards autonomy (Escobar, 2017a, 2017b), understanding the resulting practice (autonomous design) “[...] as a design praxis with communities contributing to their realisation” (Escobar, 2017a, p. 317). His argument for the development of autonomous design as a relational practice triggers a wider debate on the role of designers in society. In this framework, ontological design should not be seen as a practice in itself, but as a lens to investigate design, a necessary groundwork to build an autonomous design practice.

Autonomous Design

In his elaboration on the notion of autonomy, Escobar (2017a) highlights the concept of *autopoiesis*, as described by Chilean biologists Maturana and Varela. In rough terms, autopoiesis refers to the capability of a system to produce and maintain itself (Maturana and Varela, 1980). This does not mean that systems (e.g., living organisms) exist in a vacuum, without any relation to their context; the environment and other systems structurally affect a given system, but there is a basic organisational unity that is auto-produced and self-managed. Escobar (2017a, p. 301) further illustrates this concept by discussing different social (afro and indigenous) movements in Mexico and Colombia: communities need to produce and govern themselves, as well as define the rules for their functioning and, based on such an autopoietic process, establish relations with other systems (other communities, the government, the territory, etc.). This exemplification of autopoiesis is crucial for understanding Escobar’s call for autonomy as differing to northern understandings of autonomy, especially within design practice, which assume it from a perspective of the ‘autonomous designer’, working enclosed in his studio and isolated from the outside world (Glăveanu and Sierra, 2015). Countering this approach, autonomy in this text should not be seen from an individualist perspective (the locked-down autonomous designer), but from a communal perspective (the capability of a system to govern itself, and in relation to the others). Such positioning suggests approaching autonomy from a southern perspective (Glăveanu and Sierra, 2015).

In addition to this debate on autonomy from different traditions of thought, Escobar discusses a critique posed by poststructuralists to system theories (sources of studies on autopoietic processes), in which they argue that such theories are aimed at control and organisation (Escobar, 2017a). However, Escobar points out how “post-structuralism deconstructs too much, yet doesn’t reconstruct enough” (Escobar, 2017a, p. 297) and suggests how propositions on meshworks and assemblages, as well as complexity theory (Escobar, 2017a), contribute to nuance such positions. The latter, in particular, provides insights

into how systems can act as a whole without totalising, hence understanding the complexity of systems and the interaction of their parts. Such understanding suggests exploring the potential of systems to produce new articulations that lead to self-organisation. It is therefore important to acknowledge and understand these critical stances in relation to the notion of autonomy: that which sees autonomy as individuality and that which warns of control and totalization; yet it is also important to point towards the alternatives suggested by Escobar (autonomy from a communal perspective and systems through a lens of complexity theory), in order to explore the potential of autonomous design. According to Bonsiepe (2012, p. 58), a good example of how design can contribute to autonomy (from a collective perspective and without aiming for control) was 'Project Cybersyn'³, where principles of biology – like autopoiesis – were applied to build a cybernetic system that would allow nationalising the Chilean economy, and therefore emancipating the country from international corporate control.

Interventions

In order to better illustrate how the approach of autonomous design can inspire and inform design and research projects, we will look into the practice of *intervention*. Design is an inherently interventionist practice: the designer is seen as an expert who enters a context not his own (being an institution, a company, a community, etc.) and acts as someone that knows what is to be done (Manzini and Coad, 2015). In this section, we deconstruct the concept of design interventions and discuss what are the potentialities and limitations of a redirected southern approach to interventionist practices in supporting designers aiming to foster the autonomy of communities they are working with.

The word *intervention* comes from the Latin *interventio*, meaning to "come [in] between" and suggesting an external actor entering an alien context. It is therefore more common to hear about interventions in the context of international geopolitics (outward), rather than on a local, municipal scale (inward). On a State level, such inward interventions take the form of regulations, taxes, subsidies and other controls attempting to insure the fair distribution of wealth; on a municipal level, actions may take the form of concrete infrastructural works (paving a street, fixing a street sign, expanding a sidewalk, etc.), changing or introducing new regulations (use of public space, mobility, housing, etc.) or the realisation of big urban renewal projects (Calderón Salazar, 2017).

Within our initial explorations of interventionist practices, we were first of all confronted by the connotations of the word itself, particularly its use in international geopolitics, where states decide to militarily intervene in an-

other country (such as the US intervening in Iraq). Design scholar Jerry Diethelm makes a call to critically examine the metaphors used in design practice and research, amongst them that of intervention. Diethelm argues that "intervention as a colonizing metaphor in designing isn't, of course, as disastrous as the kind of foreign intervention that was the invasion of Iraq, where the intervening power "didn't know Shiite from Shinola", but it is a form of foreign intervention nevertheless" (Diethelm, 2016, p. 169). He presents a contrasting vision to design intervention as "sovereign autopoiesis", where the inhabitants of a given context are responsible for the organisation of their own life, without any external interference. The vision of intervention presented by Diethelm, influenced by geopolitics, is closely associated with the northern idea of autonomy from an individual perspective (the lone agent intervening in the alien context).

However, exploring other ways in which intervention is understood can help us examine its potential relation and contribution to autonomous design practices. Mouffe has made calls for designers (and creative practitioners at large) to "intervene directly in a multiplicity of social spaces, in order to oppose the program of total social mobilisation of capitalism" (Mouffe, 2010), favouring interventionist stances as acts of resistance. In Participatory Design (PD), interventions are seen as design experiments that allow designers and researchers to make contact with – and get direct feedback from – actors they are working with (Anastassakis and Szaniecki, 2016). Interventions then manifest a will of designers to 'enter the real world', mainly represented by 'getting out of their studio'. Thomas Markussen has spoken about design interventions in the framework of what he refers to as *design activism*, where they are understood as 'direct actions'⁴. Such interventions, he argues, "invite active engagement, interaction or simply offer new ways of inhabiting [urban] space" (Markussen, 2011). Design interventions can also be understood as *dispositifs* to place oneself in, and begin to understand, a given context (Anastassakis and Szaniecki, 2016; Huybrechts *et al.*, 2016). In this way, they can be seen as design experiments that do not necessarily enter a context to disrupt its functioning, but rather to ask questions, position a researcher or designer within it and to bring forms of public engagement a step further (Binder *et al.*, 2015; Halse and Boffi, 2016).

Traces of interventionist practices can also be found in Participatory Action Research (PAR) practitioners in Latin America, most notably of popular pedagogue Paulo Freire, who saw intervention as an ethical imperative: "my role in the world is not restricted to a process of only observing what happens but it also involves my intervention as a subject" (Freire, 1998, p. 52). PAR assumes that by engaging with the communities a researcher is working

³ Project Cybersyn was a programme initiated by the Socialist government of Salvador Allende in 1970. The project aimed at developing a system to nationalize and manage the whole of Chilean industry and economy, and for it the Chilean government engaged the British cybernetician Stafford Beer, as well as Gui Bonsiepe to design the interface of the system and the operation room (OpsRoom). The project could indeed be seen as an autonomous design endeavour at a large scale (national), as it aimed at developing a system that would give the Chilean economy a certain level of autonomy, without having to depend on external forces (it is important to mention that the US had imposed tough measures on Chile in the framework of its 'war against communism'). The whole programme came short of being in operation, due to the military coup d'état staged by Pinochet in 1973.

⁴ Direct action is a (usually non-violent) tactic undertaken by social groups or movements as means to resist a ruling hegemony or to propose a different vision on a specific aspect of society. Such actions can take the form of sit-ins, strikes, protests, etc.

with, he/she is building worlds as much as inquiring into them, which represents a shift from an epistemological stance (wherein the goal is to understand a subject) to an ontological perspective (wherein our *being-in-the-world* is transformative). As such, a practitioner/researcher becomes an active participant in the process, where he/she does not study a context from a distance (as in traditional sociology), but from within it (Fals-Borda, 1985). Escobar has also recognized PAR as a fundamental influence in the development of his ideas (Escobar, 2007), while also representing a "radical critique to positivism in social studies, coming from Southern epistemologies" (Gómez Obando, 2017, p. 149). This evidences how intervention has been explicitly studied in PD, but it has also been a central characteristic of PAR studies, most notably in the Global South.

Southern manners for intervening

When looking at design interventions from a perspective of autonomous design, we can understand their relational potential (as opposed to only their disruptive quality). Still, speaking in terms of interventions makes clear that the designer does not attempt to be neutral, but reveals his/her position in different – possibly conflicting – voices. Such awareness of the intervening processes designers engage with, demands understanding the kinds of power that they enact. Poynor frames the power exercised by design as "soft power", in contrast with the "hard power" held by "politicians, civic leaders, plutocrats and even crime bosses" (Poynor, 2012). Poynor calls for designers to embrace their (soft) power as public communicators, wherein their role is to convince, change behaviour and influence opinion, but he also warns that this cannot be done by imposition. Instead, he recognises the suggestive power of design to show alternative paths. The perspective of *hard* and *soft* power resonates with Holloway's differentiation of *power over* from *power to*. Holloway refers to *power over* as a top-down exercise of power, where an already powerful agent enacts power over a powerless one, and can be seen in Poynor's perspective as *hard power*. On the other hand, *power to* refers to the possibility of an individual – or a community – to enact their capabilities: "whereas *power to* is a uniting, a bringing together of my doing with the doing of others, the exercise of *power over* is a separation" (Holloway, 2002, p. 29); *power to*, then, can be seen as a representation of soft power. Escobar recognizes in Holloway an important intellectual theorising autonomous practices (2017a, p. 317), making his stance on power relevant for our text.

If we were to transfer this distinction to interventions, we would frame those of a military or economic kind as representations of *hard power/power over* being exercised (by a powerful into a weak agent), hence as *hard interventions*. This approach could also be seen as characteristic of the rationalistic tradition scrutinized by Escobar and which we associate to a northern approach to design interventions. In contrast, these can be understood from a southern perspective on autonomy. In contrast, design interventions can be understood from a southern per-

spective on autonomy and seen through the lens of *soft power/power to*; in such an approach, instead of aiming at radically disrupting the intervened context, interventions may contribute to nurture relations and processes. This understanding of interventions is important, as it avoids dichotomising design interventions or presenting them as counter to autopoietic processes (as Diethelm suggests) and instead proposes how situated non-invasive interventions can in fact support endogenous processes.

A southern perspective on interventions (as soft and non-disruptive) can also be informed by what Arturo Escobar, citing Spinoza *et al.* (1999), refers to as *skilful disclosing*:

This ontological capability to 'make history' – to engage in conversations and interventions that change the way we take care of ourselves and of things – can be revived, as Flores and his co-authors suggested (Spinoza et al., 1999). The witty and effective disclosure (skilful disclosing) of new possibilities of 'being in the world', however, demands an intense engagement with a specific collectivity, instead of the so celebrated 'distanced deliberation' or the 'decontextualized understanding', characteristic of a considerable part of science and the debates on the public sphere. It demands a different type of attitude stemming from living in a place and having a commitment to a community with which we engage in pragmatic activities around a shared concern or around a disharmony (understood as a central concern within a community) (Escobar, 2017a, p. 130).

Understanding design as a practice of skilful disclosing, suggests working to make visible elements, issues and potentialities that would be otherwise invisible, therefore allowing imagination of different futures. In describing the role of designers as "trigger of publics", Huybrechts *et al.* (2016) take a similar approach: from such perspective, designers engage in "committing dialogues", contributing to disclose new attachments representative of certain publics, but also sustain and deepen the existing ones. Actions functioning within such processes (of skilful disclosing or committing dialogues) can be seen as soft interventions that, instead of disrupting a context and imposing a world-view, activate aspects of the community and allow for different initiatives to flourish within.

Before discussing our own experience of an interventionist practice and reflecting on it from the perspective of autonomous design, we will discuss our understanding of the relation – and conflicts – between autonomy and interventions, by looking into a specific example on a transnational scale. We will do so by introducing a particular debate on the role of architectural practice in the history of global movements – one dealing with the idea of 'constructing' and 'building' Non-Alignment (Sekulic, 2012; Kulic, 2014).

The architecture of the Non-Aligned Movement

We can better understand how interventionist stances can contribute to autonomous processes, by looking at

the specific example of a global exchange in architectural practice that took part within the Non-Aligned Movement⁵ in the second half of the 20th century. In particular, we refer to the role that Yugoslav architects and social corporations played in the process of 'constructing' or 'building' Non-Alignment (Sekulic, 2012, 2015; Kulic, 2014) and reflect on the possibility of understanding these practices as simultaneously interventionist (by coming from the outside to improve functioning) and autonomous (by fostering communities' self-realization and management).

Within the ideological framework of NAM, concrete actions were taken by its members to establish a fair economical exchange of knowledge, goods and labour between the member countries, as a counterpoint to the global market dominated by the confronted powers of the West and the East and a 'third way' different from capitalism and socialism⁶. Construction companies⁷ from Yugoslavia became important actors in this economic network, quickly developing strategies for entering the large new markets in Africa, where their skills in modernising the built space were highly welcomed. Although most of the work by Yugoslav companies can be framed within the realm of international instrumental modernisation (Sekulic, 2012), the architects nevertheless approached their assignments from the position of cooperation, and never as a colonising power (Sekulic, 2015). It is important to note a nuance here, however, as cooperation is presented as the opposite of colonisation: in an interview included as a preface for the newest edition of the book *Autonomy and Design*, Escobar (2017a) presents three different models of cooperation: assistance for development (e.g., the World Bank), cooperation for social justice (e.g., Oxfam) and cooperation for autonomy. We understand NAM fitting in the second category, and therefore still seen as an outside agent intervening with a certain idea of 'development'. However, most of the projects (realised by one specific company, Energoprojekt) were deeply engaged with the local context, appropriating its aesthetics and construction techniques, and thus functioning as interventions while fostering autonomous processes to a certain degree. This was brought about primarily by the fact that the architects had to learn how to plan for a tropical climate and living conditions drastically different from their own. This pushed their work not only to being informed by interactions with local communities, in the spirit of equal exchange and solidarity, "but also to develop comprehensive new planning tools customized to the specific location they were working in" (Sekulic, 2015, p. 28) and therefore to remain relevant after the architects' departure from the site.

The practice of Yugoslav architects in non-aligned territories could thus be understood in line with De Sousa's

call for 'sharing voice' (Sousa Santos, 2016), by sharing knowledge and setting the base for future development; in providing infrastructure, expertise and skills transfer, power was not given from above, but shared by an equal peer in an act of solidarity. The architecture of Non-alignment produced planning and building tools, opening space for new articulations of design that supported self-management without imposing control. Unfortunately, the length of construction processes and the political instabilities⁸ in some of the NAM countries often didn't allow for the research and planning process to be tested and carried out as it was envisioned. However, we understand the significance it had in instigating a transnational architectural collaboration between different countries of the global south, bypassing the apparent opposition of autonomy and intervention, as a valuable historical contribution to the discussion on autonomous design.

Case study: De Andere Markt - Southern manners in northern lands

In order to better illustrate how the aforementioned southern manners have shaped a specific approach to interventions in a northern context, we will zoom in our experience working on a research project in Genk (Belgium) for the last three years (2014-2017). Genk is a small city in the east of Flanders, historically rich in coal. The discovery of three coal sources gave birth to the settlements that compose the city today. Propelled by the extractive industry, the city experienced a steady growth (demographically as well as economically) in the first half of the 20th century, which set the stage for the migratory flows that established the reputation of Genk (still present until this day) as a multicultural city. At the end of the 1960s, operations in most mines in the region started to slow down (the coal price had plummeted and labour cost had been steadily increasing), resulting in the progressive closure of most mines, including those in Genk. The process of absolute closure of the mines would take over 20 years, the first one closing in 1966 and the last one in 1988. To avoid a scenario of crisis, city authorities attracted the car manufacturer General Motors to open a Ford production plant in the city in 1968. The mines that were still active and the new Ford factory positioned Genk as an important economic player in the region. In mid-2012, however, Ford announced a progressive decrease in its operations, reaching its absolute closure in December 2014 and impacting the city with the loss of 4000 direct and 4000 indirect (subsidiary industries) jobs.

It is precisely in this context that we started to study the potential of design interventions in/for participato-

⁵ The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was formally established in Belgrade in 1961 by representatives of Yugoslavia, India, Egypt, Ghana and Indonesia. NAM, as a project of alternative globalization (Kulic, 2014), attempted to establish a new, third alliance based on solidarity among the post-colonial countries of the global South and the refusal to accept the dominant hierarchies of the Cold War bloc division. It came about as a request for a different distribution of global power, which would enable the underdeveloped countries to activate their political role and self-manage their economic and cultural progress. The President of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito was highly engaged with NAM, on one hand, with the aim of gathering allies in the global South and thus strengthening the specific geo-political position of the country. By doing so, NAM was seen on the one hand as a platform for articulating the Yugoslavian ideology of unity and self-management on a global level, while on the other hand for arguing for the progress of the decolonized world.

⁶ The strategy of non-alignment into any of the two confronted powers represents the conviction – particularly present throughout the global south – of avoiding dualist perspectives. Such was also the case of the 'third cinema' movement, which emerged in Latin America in the 60s as an alternative to the two main powers controlling the film industry: Hollywood and European cinema. Furthermore, the third cinema movement saw movies as a vehicle for social change and activism.

⁷ Sekulic (2012), in her analysis on the work of the Energoprojekt company, describes how these companies worked as 'social corporations' competing for work in the country and abroad by offering the full service of design and planning, as well as complete construction work.

⁸ With the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the war in Yugoslavia, the Non-Aligned Movement was gradually transformed into an obsolete and mainly pro forma alliance of southern countries.

ry practices⁹ in Genk. Having arrived to Belgium's 'motor city', largely organized around the emblematic Ford factory and its vehicles, was an important facet. The context helps further illustrate the aforementioned concept of ontological design, as it can be clearly exemplified with the vehicle: the designed object (the car) and its process of production (assembly line) have determined most aspects of society in the 20th century, from how the urban environments were built to our daily lives (think of the 9-to-5 working day). Tony Fry would present the car as the clearest example of how *the designed designs*, even beyond the intention of the original designer (Fry, 2008). Having arrived to a post-Fordist city, it was crucial to understand the paradigm present in the context, but it also became evident that it was important to put in place alternative practices – which we see as emerging from our southern manners – in order to repair the social fabric in the city. In Genk, the private company of the mines – and later Ford – dominated the public life of the city from the beginning of the 20th century. Without these large economic players, there was a need and opportunity to re-imagine the city.

Intervene to embed ourselves in the context

The act of entering a context not our own required for us to critically examine *how* we wanted to intervene. Close to our vision on design interventions as non-disruptive, we were further inspired by southern approaches of PAR wherein researchers contribute to bringing about the political awareness of the subjects of a community (Flores-Kastanis *et al.*, 2009). For us, this was essential, as our main goal was not to 'solve the unemployment issue of the city', but to allow the citizens to reflect on the transition in place and the role they could eventually play in it. To embed our research in the context of Genk, we set up a lab in August 2015 – after a year of negotiations with the city authorities – called De Andere Markt (DAM) – 'The Other Market' in Flemish. DAM is located in a shop front in the neighbourhood of Winterslag, home to one of the former mining sites of the city. PAR became then a southern approach for us to intervene in the city and to begin rethinking the relations between designers, citizens, the private and public domain.

The choice of focusing on the issue of 'work' had to do with the moment that the project started (right after the definitive closing of the Ford factory), but it also aimed at responding to the lack of alternative approaches in dealing with issues of work (organisations would only deal with the aspect of *employment* and access to it¹⁰). In structuring the lab, we did so as a 'living lab', estimating that the theme of work was an issue that demanded to be researched in a participatory way outside the walls of a university or city council, and also to be explored within a physical space that would allow for long-term engagements (Björgvinsson

et al., 2010). The shop-front that hosted the living lab also became a way of intervening in the context and, by doing so, embedding ourselves in the everyday life and practices of the neighbourhood. By intervening in such a way, we were appropriating *northern* methodologies of PD, while at the same time assuming the *southern* manners representative of PAR. Moreover, this approach is in line with what Escobar terms 'skillfull disclosure' as an instrumental practice for autonomous processes, which is only possible by living in a community and sharing their concerns (Escobar, 2017a). From the beginning of the project, we produced different interventions and actions that contributed to nurturing local processes, as well as kick-starting new ones. For this paper, we focus on the first series of interventions and their contribution in exploring a specific case study within the lab, namely *FunghiLab*.

Intervene to understand

Even though we attempted to put into practice a relational approach to interventions, our arrival in Genk was nevertheless a disruption of sorts, as we were entering a context not our own. Aware of our position, instead of immersing head-on to propose and produce actions and projects, we devised the first series of interventions as a means to "place ourselves in – and explore – the context" (Anastassakis and Szaniecki, 2016). These interventions made use of an adapted cargo bike with a printing press mounted to it (Figure 1), and consisted of driving to different neighbourhoods of the city and encouraging people to discuss the theme of 'work' by speaking about their capabilities. During the interventions, we would go in different public spaces with the bike and a sign asking: "*What are your (other) skills?*" a question intended as an icebreaker and conversation starter. Throughout the conversation we would collectively summarise our interlocutor's capabilities in a sentence, which would be immediately printed in an A2 paper with which he or she would be portrayed. This process aligns with what Huybrechts *et al.* (2016) frame from the perspective of the designer as a *trigger of publics* engaging in committing dialogues and such "interventions [as] a first means to get to know the people, organizations and informal initiatives" (Huybrechts *et al.*, 2016). The portraits of people and their skills were displayed online, as well as in the living lab space, in order to make visible the capabilities present in the city. This process set the first basis of what we consider the main resource and asset of the project today: a (local) network of people, organisations, spaces, skills, resources and tools, resonating with Terranova's notion of distributed networks as "abstract machines of *soft control* that represent a diagram of power that takes as its operational field the productive capacities of the *hyperconnected many*" (Terranova, 2004, p. 100). This approach, highlighted by Escobar (2008, p. 275), supports our approach to intervention and build-

⁹ The case we present has been made in the framework of TRADERS, a research project looking at the role that artists and designers can play in participatory processes within the city, and of which *intervention* was one of the lines of research and one of the authors of this paper one of the Early Stage Researchers.

¹⁰ This was clearly evidenced in a meeting organized by the city's municipal authorities, where different organizations dealing with 'employment' were present sharing their activities and achievements, evidencing that their central focus was facilitating access to jobs for unemployed people. We certainly understand the importance of their work, but also consider it necessary to devise creative strategies that tap into the capabilities of the citizens.

ing of networks as an exercise of soft power, and reinforces the perspective of the network as an entity gathering its force from the capabilities of its actors and their intricate correlations.

Fostering new articulations

The first series of interventions (involving the bike/printing press) served us to introduce ourselves in the city, as well as to begin inquiring on the issue of work. Having intervened in the context from a southern perspective of PAR – hence as *soft interventions* – it was clear that our goal was never to attempt solving a problem (unemployment), but rather to problematize the reality of the people from the community and therefore encourage them to assume a position in the transition the city is going through. Moreover, the network resulting from the first series of interventions did not impose 'a' vision on work; instead, it attempted to set the basis for different initiatives to flourish by means of encouraging new articulations and nurturing the existing ones. By organising such interventions, we attempted to activate certain sensitive elements in the context, and build a platform for longer-term collaborations and engagements; it is important to disclose, however, that at the time we were unaware that our work had similar characteristics to the approach of autonomous design¹¹.

Within our interventions in Genk, our initial concern was making visible the capabilities of its citizens, approaching design as a practice of skilful disclosure (Spinosa *et al.*, 1999) and the designer as a trigger of publics (Huybrechts *et al.*, 2016). It is precisely in this respect that we consider relevant to refer to *southern manners* (Calderón Salazar and Gutiérrez Borrero, 2017)¹², as to situate our thinking and doing. In such positioning, we recognize – together with Escobar (2016) – the importance of the epistemologies of the south as a path to open space for different (Sousa Santos, 2012) approaches for our research and practice as designers, as well as resist the



Figure 1. Interventions.

universalization of knowledge. Furthermore, such deliberate framing (southern manners) is grounded on relational ontologies, which prioritize experiences of the world that expand beyond the rationalist tradition scrutinized by Escobar (2017a).

To further illustrate the functioning of such interventions *vis-a-vis* the proposition of autonomous design, we will describe one of the projects that emerged out of the network resulting from the first series of interventions: FunghiLab. From the 1st of October of 2016 until the 9th of January of 2017 in Genk, took place an exhibition that aimed to explore new modes of production in cities and the role that artists and designers could play in them. As a local actor engaged with the issue of work, DAM was invited to take part in the exhibition in collaboration with local designer and researcher Ben Hagenaars, and to use the location (C-Mine) as a production space. We saw the exhibition as an opportunity to build upon our local network, as well as to tap into the existing capabilities in the city. Moreover, being an exhibition of un-finished projects, favouring experimentation and a laboratory-approach at the location, it presented a perfect opportunity for us to prototype some of the ideas emerging from our work thus far.

With that in mind, we began a process of mapping the flows of resources of Winterslag (the neighbourhood where the living lab is located in) in order to find opportunities of action. Such an approach was inspired by the principles of the circular economy, but it also resonates with Escobar's critique of "conventional economy" for "completely forgetting that the economy is about flows of matter and energy" (Escobar, 2017a, p. 45). As a result of this process, we detected a considerable amount of coffee grounds being wasted every day in several cafes located in the adjacent street of the lab¹³. Looking at the map of skills collected and visualised through our first series of interventions, we also found a repeating pattern of capabilities related to the production of food (from cultivating to composting and from cooking to conserving). By taking into account both human (skills, stories, opinions, etc.) and non-human (of context, climate, raw and waste resources, etc.) aspects we deepened our approach in line with Fry and Escobar's perspective of relationality.

We invited some of the actors to openly discuss and brainstorm the possibility of articulating their skills in a collaborative project, seeing ourselves as an actor that would support the process, rather than lead it. At the first gathering an interest arose in developing an initiative for growing mushrooms locally, which responded to our observations of the excess of coffee grounds (being these an ideal substrate for growing mushrooms). We saw this as an opportunity to re-weave the social tissue affected by the industry closures from a relational perspective and led us to start, together with a group of four local citizens (who named their group 'Fungimama'), the project FunghiLab as a laboratory for testing and prototyping a system for growing mushrooms out of local waste and materials.

¹¹ It is important to note that the project was not conceived from a perspective of *autonomous design*, as we were not aware of Escobar's proposition then; however, in reflecting on the project in retrospect we can find insights for the continuation of such an approach.

¹² In an epistolary article written between Calderón Salazar and Gutiérrez Borrero (2017) and presented at NORDES 2017, they expand on the concept of a 'southern design practice', influenced by Boaventura de Sousa Santos' seminal work *Epistemologies of the South* (2016).

¹³ In an immediate testing experiment, we went around the cafes on Tuesday midday to collect coffee grounds, normally being trashed, and managed to gather 12kg.

Staging knowledge (FunghiLab: Preliminary stage)

During the first meeting, we analysed the mapping of flows in the neighbourhood and the skills collected (via the first series of interventions) to structure the collaborative project, which would run through the 100 days of the exhibition. In order to *lay the groundwork*, we collectively mapped our knowledge and ideas of the process of growing mushrooms out of coffee waste. During a follow-up workshop, we collectively mapped and structured the resources, tools and people related to the project. We later materialised the resulting network in an outline map milled in two wooden boards joined together (242*242cm), progressively updated it with the different elements and connected these with thread (Figure 2). Besides the spatial component, we also defined the roles and actions necessary for the subsequent stages, and visualised them through a flowchart, which was taken as a timeline to follow the process. The two outcomes (resource, tool and actors map and process flowchart) evidenced our soft power as designers and our skill to map knowledge in a visual way, while still allowing us to learn new insights in the process.

Positioning ourselves and the others (FunghiLab: Stage 1)

The production process was structured around three stages: (1) collecting waste resources (coffee grounds, hay, organic waste, etc.); (2) preparing the mixtures, growing and harvesting the mushrooms; and (3) collectively designing a sustainable continuation of the project. For the first stage, we began by designing and building a module – which was subsequently mounted on a XYZ Cargo bike¹⁴ – as a tool to collect the materials and resources around the city and its surroundings. The choice of using a bike was a deliberate one, as it allowed challenging the dominance of

motorized transport in the city. We also designed a series of labels to mark the buckets (upcycled from used sauce containers donated by *fries* shops) with information on the proportions of resources that would be used in each mix. This meant taking a position regarding the context and project, and deciding to kick-start the process with our design skills. But instead of imposing our expertise, this was done to explicitly encourage the community members to take on an expert role by being more vocal about their skills and knowledge: Wim, one of the citizens involved in the project, started to further research mushroom farming and shared his insights with us; another actor involved, Katrien, assumed a role of advertising and reaching out to other potentially interested parties; and Gerarda, became the main supplier of tools for the process. By inviting them to make a poster with our printing press, in which they defined their role in the project, the process was further strengthened. The posters and the portraits where all pasted on a wall of the working space, having a visual cue of the participants and their roles (Figure 3).

Connecting with others (FunghiLab: Stage 2)

For the second stage, we organised a series of workshops to design and build two elements necessary for the production process: a *laminar flow cabinet*, necessary to mix the resources (inoculation) in a sterile environment; and a cabinet to store the buckets containing the mix under the right conditions (temperature and humidity) for their fructification stage. Both activities served as moments to engage citizens outside of the initial core group who had other skills, not necessarily related to mushroom farming, but useful for the workshops. Such was the case of Ief and Jan, who contributed to the workshops by lending their time and construction skills. By organizing the workshops, we were offering a platform, as well as taking up the role of co-designers: instead of taking the expert role, we were reaching out and inviting other experts to participate in the workshops (Huybrechts *et al.*, 2016). Parallel to our con-

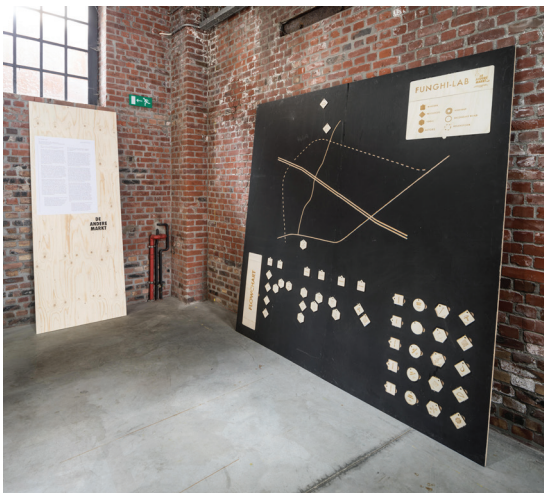


Figure 2. FunghiLab map.



Figure 3. Wall of roles and skills FunghiLab.

¹⁴ The XYZ Cargo bike (<http://www.xyzcargo.com>) is an open source bike designed by Danish collective N55. Several bikes were built and used by the local design school for a previous project and were donated to DAM for the FunghiLab project.

tributions at this stage, the collective had taken charge of most of the actions for growing the mushrooms, supported by the map and timeline we had previously collectively produced. This stage saw us connecting our previous actions with the rest of the group, by using the process flowchart as a tool for self-organising labour.

Sharing our voice (FunghiLab: Stage 3)

During the third stage, approaching the end of the exhibition and collaboration, we organised an open day aimed at introducing the initiative to the citizens and garnering local support for continuing the project. We provided our skills to make a poster to promote the event, but the members of Fungimama were the ones who took the initiative to organise the space, receive the people and pitch the project. The event drew great attention of the local citizens, press and policy makers, resulting in an event with over 60 visitors. After the event, Fungimama was offered a space to continue the project and contacted several potential clients and partners. The new space, offered by the city authorities, allowed them to continue experimenting with the production of mushrooms from different local resources for eight more months, after which they stopped their collaboration. However, the eleven-month long work (three months with us and eight by themselves) produced an important exposure of the project in the city, putting the spotlight on the issue of work through non-conventional means and highlighting the potentialities present in city. Similar to the NAM experience, instead of pretending to 'give voice' to the rest of the citizens – which would reproduce colonialist patterns and therefore represent a northern approach – we wanted to share our voice with the rest of the group, assuming a southern perspective (Sousa Santos, 2016). In this stage we attempted to provoke new connections and foster an autonomous process of self-organisation.

Discussion

The discussion on NAM represents a large-scale example of how interventionist stances stemming from a principle of solidarity can support autonomous processes, while our experience with DAM and FunghiLab represents a small-scale case to reflect on the process of intervening as designers from a southern perspective and how this supported a process of autonomous design. This is not to say that we take for granted such a concept and its relevance to the context where we worked, but it now provides us a retrospective to reflect on how a southern approach to design interventions can support autonomy within communities – also in the global north. Even though we were entering the context with a relational approach, we were nevertheless intervening. But by intervening from a southern PAR perspective (via the living lab) and devising 'soft interventions' based on our southern manners (the printing press and the cargo bike), we were sensibly embedding ourselves in the community as active participants, instead

of studying the context from a distance or drastically disrupting it. Such an approach allowed for activating aspects of the community that were not necessarily evident, and provoked new articulations and connections between actors, tools and spaces in the city. This also supported the emergence of the spin-off project (FunghiLab), inviting experts and devising tools for producing new elements.

Even though most of the members of Fungimama had already expressed their intention of starting such a project, our intervention represented an opportunity for them to take a leap forward and test their ideas in a defined timeframe and a specific space. Moreover, the process of FunghiLab showed how we made use of the network and resources mapped and collected throughout the first series of interventions; this supported the self-organisation of the collective and we see it as illustrative of how a southern approach to interventions can nurture autonomous processes. While being unacquainted with Escobar's proposal for autonomous design when we began the project, our southern manners influenced the way of intervening and enacting our power as designers, therefore allowing us now to reflect on them from such a stand-point.

It is important to note the considerable contextual differences between Latin American communities, from which Escobar was inspired for his proposal of autonomous design; and communities in Genk, where we have been working in the last years and have inspired this paper. In Latin American (indigenous, peasant, afro) communities, struggles have been strongly attached to narratives of resistance within a *territorio*, and their fight for autonomy has deep roots in their resistance over control of ancestral territories, both by state and private interests (Sandoval et al., 2017)¹⁵. However, and far from attempting to propose totalising theories or analysis, we consider it important to explore – and reflect on – the potential alternative paths for design (as is autonomous design) and suggest how they can contribute to our practice and research. It is from such an understanding that we acknowledge the relevance of Escobar's proposals for autonomous design, also within a Nordic context:

From an autonomous design perspective, it is crucial for external designers to deeply understand the political project of the movement (not necessarily share it in its totality, but understand it), and submit design interventions and co-design processes to the same principles to those to which the movement submits his actions (Escobar, 2017a, p. 322).

As previously explored, Escobar's take on the ontological capacity within a practice of skilful disclosing (in which we engage with a community by embedding ourselves in its everyday life and sharing their concerns) as well as the conditions for an autonomous design process (in which interventions of designers external to communities ought to be submitted to the same principles as those of the community) can be insightful ideas for design practitioners and researchers around the world. In our trajectory with the case

¹⁵ In indigenous and peasant contexts, the term *territorio* is wider the Anglo word 'territory', as it is anchored in history and not only geographically bound. However, for the remit of this paper we understand territory as "the spatial reference of interventions aimed at place-based development" (Sandoval et al., 2017).

we have described, the first series of interventions served as a way to better understand the context and allowed for the project (FunghiLab) to follow the principles and values of the community, something also characteristic of the projects realised in the context of NAM. Furthermore, in order to play an active role within the community we had to first position our practice in their everyday life by embedding ourselves in the neighbourhood via the living lab. This evidences how certain PD practices, however originating and evolving in the global north, can share characteristics with southern approaches of PAR and Escobar's proposal for autonomous design. These perspectives are therefore useful for us to inquire into the potential of design interventions in participatory processes, as they present an important vantage point from which to foster the self-realisation of communities.

However, our intention by presenting this case is not to reaffirm our position with a new conceptual framework (autonomous design), but to critically examine our trajectory and propose valuable reflections for the design and research community. As part of this critical analysis, it is inevitable to question why Fungimama stopped their collaboration eight months after the end of the exhibition and our collaboration. The network we were building through the first series of interventions – and which was visualized in different maps – served as an important resource to bring different people together and allow them to self-organise and kick-start the project; however, there was little incentive for the group to continue using the network, falling short as a tool to assure its sustainability. This observation led us to begin developing a tool to make visible and usable the networks present in the city, as well as the ones created by different initiatives (as were our first interventions). Such tool is now on an early development process, but it is illustrative of how we can take valuable lessons from our experience and transform them into a potential asset.

But even if the initiative did not continue to this day and neither can nor should the impact of the project be evaluated in quantitative ways (in terms of jobs or money), we do see the trajectory as an example to discuss how a southern approach to interventions can contribute to autonomous process, as well as suggesting potential shortcomings and limitations. Moreover, having all the process visible (in the shop front, but also in the streets and the exhibition) allowed for a wide range of citizens to reflect on their position in the work scenario in transition that the city was – and still is – going through. The way the issue of work was dealt with within the city represented a one-world vision and authorities responded to it by focusing on jobs and facilitating accessibility; through our process, we explored a pluriversal approach, where different types of articulations would allow for different perspectives and voices to emerge.

Conclusion

This text builds upon Escobar's scrutiny of the rationalist tradition and uses his proposition on autonomous

design as a lens to critically examine our experience with DAM and FunghiLab. In doing so, the text also presents an illustrative example of how his ideas can take shape in design practice and research in the global north, challenging the incumbent notion of PD. Within our analysis of interventions, we found in PD valuable resources to frame our proposal for *non-disruptive interventions*; however, stemming from a northern tradition of thought, PD stances stay short in suggesting how interventions can contribute to autonomy from a southern perspective. Even though some stances of PD are interwoven within the argument of the paper, these are subsidiary to the central idea of autonomous design, acknowledging that – if well there might be coincidences and resonances between both notions – we find the latter a more appropriate approach for our examination and consider this paper an initial contribution to the growing discussion about autonomy and design.

Even though we can understand the relevance – or even urgency – for disruptive actions in some contexts (where unjust measures are put in place, for example), it was not the case in Genk¹⁶, where the situation called for another kind of action, having in mind our position as outsiders and our role influenced by our southern manners. Such positioning allowed us to embed ourselves in the context, so as to understand it by sharing its day-to-day life, instead of studying it from afar. Furthermore, instead of intervening as an alien power to impose a preconceived solution (northern perspective), our interventions aimed to activate aspects of the community and allow the solutions (plural used deliberately) to emerge from within.

However Diethelm (2016) presents design interventions as counter to autopoietic (therefore autonomous) processes, in this text we have attempted to nuance that position. Part of that nuance is brought about through what we have outlined as 'a southern approach to design interventions' influenced by a relational understanding of the world, and which, instead of aiming to drastically disrupt a context, it attempts to activate the potentialities of the community. Within Diethelm's scrutiny of interventions, he calls for decolonising design through an examination of the use of different metaphors. Following his call to decolonise design, it is important to understand one's own position and the power relations it entails (Mignolo, 2007), instead of erasing it. In that process, we understood that, as designers, we are always intervening. Therefore, we feel that instead of questioning the term or suggesting avoiding its use, we ought to favour a southern approach towards interventions that supports and strengthens local processes. Under this more deliberate framing, design interventions may actually become tools for supporting autonomous design practices.

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¹⁶ Someone might critically argue that in true fact there were socially unjust measures being put in place in Genk (the layoffs of Ford and lack of a systemic solution). Even acknowledging such a scenario (that could be controverted), the interventions we describe in this text make reference to ways in which we intervened in the community. A potential continuation of the project could involve the co-production of disruptive interventions with the community, which would have been irresponsible to do upon arrival, without the work we have done.

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Erratum: Incorrect Appendix removed from page 114..