

### **Urban interfaces in participatory city planning**

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In the discourse on participation in urban design and city planning, urban interfaces are often referred to as ways to initiate citizen participation on issues related to the city in the spatial context itself. In the current city landscape we often encounter urban interfaces that display data on the city, such as speed of cars, and allow some basic input from the citizens, such as pushing a smiley button to express appreciation about a service. In this article, we will discuss a case in which several urban interfaces were developed to engage in participatory ways with citizens, policy makers and private and public organisations on the future development of a partly unused railway track in Genk. In this case the researchers wanted to do more than to pass on data or allow citizens to express consent. They wanted to give form to environments that allow for a critical exchange of qualitative data on the city.

To discuss how the interfaces that were developed in this project, allowed for a critical exchange on qualitative data, we build on Drucker who defines an interface as “not so much a ‘between’ space as it is the mediating environment that makes the experience, a ‘critical zone that constitutes a user experience (Drucker, 2011, p. 10)”. She sees the interface as a field of discourse, allowing interpretative activities within spatial dimensions of a landscape, instead of a flat map. She also defines navigation within this space as way-finding: the one who navigates does not try to grasp the whole, but responds to cues that meet on their path. In this navigational experience two realities meet, namely the perspective of arts and humanities where ambiguity and uncertainty are important and the engineering perspective in which efficiency of the navigational experience is priority. Because the researchers in the described project in this article, aimed to give form to urban interfaces that mediate participatory engagements in city planning, we confronted Drucker’s definition with how Bishop defines the role of participatory art. Inspired by Rancière (2007, p. 278), Bishop (2012) sees the role of participatory art as ‘mediation’ between maker and public as the common production of objects, words, images and situations that connect and activate people, but also divide them, leaving room for observation, experiment, openness and pluralism. To summarise both definitions, urban interfaces can allow a critical and qualitative exchange in participatory city planning as mediating environments between designers and diverse individuals and groups in the city that allow them to navigate and produce common objects, words, images and situations that connect, activate and divide them. This article critically discusses this definition in relation to one of the urban interfaces that was designed in the case study, a low-tech urban interface that was exhibited during one year in a shopfront in the city.

### **Design for and in public spaces as a relational practice**

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In this paper we investigate “what does designing for and in public spaces mean?” through a qualitative research with six researchers in design. These researchers were all seeking to explore ways in which designers can engage in the public space with different participants, such as citizens, policy makers, and private partners. Our research method focused on qualitative inquiry as a way to interpret the relations among people, data, and contexts, relations in which the designers are acting. Concretely, through our inquiry we approached the design projects as assemblies, and therefore the inquiry process entailed recognizing the intersection of different concerns by people that get aligned by and shape the research activities. Our early research activities - through thematic analysis and relational maps- focused on understanding relevant actors, relations among them and with the design projects the interviewees were working on. The analysis of these data informed the interviews with designers, where we explored what means to design for and in public spaces through main three themes: the understanding of public space, the enactment of participation and the distribution of agency. The methods and detailed results are part of the rest of our contribution but the answer to our general question can be summarized as follows: to design for and in public spaces is a relational practice characterized by a multiplicity of interests to be aligned, in relation to the specific political economy, and drawing upon existing social relationships.

### **Participatory methods of future-making in design and heritage**

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This paper presents the background, current findings and possible outlooks of a research project that is interested in the participatory design of urban heritage futures and looks into the tools and methods which can make this process, and the overall discussion on spatial planning of heritage sites, more public and tangible by including a multiplicity of different voices.

One of the main goals of the research is to develop a set of qualitative methods that support a wayfinding process by different actors involved with a specific heritage issue, which helps them travel through the complex design space created by different actors who bring inside their opinions, narratives and visions for the future site. As this space becomes more complex, it is more difficult to navigate between all the constituents – the “things, artifacts, or ‘representations’” (A. Telier, 2011) of the design object which “reflect the perspectives of different