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CONTACT URBANISM

PLAY AS CREATIVE DRIVER FOR A CROSSDISCIPLINARY SPATIAL DESIGN PRACTICE

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Fig. 1: PariPassu, 2006

> ENGAGEMENT IN FACE OF DISRUPTIONS

At a time when increasingly communities are responding to the fears of an uncertain future by protection against, distancing from, and exclusion of the foreign, which at some point manifests in the organization of the territory, the built and the lived environment – this research works on the opposite hypothesis:

How can the intensification of contact with unfamiliar situations, which is by nature destabilising, favourably stimulate spatial transformation and constitute a ground for nurturing a culture of urbanity?

We understand urbanity as the art of exchanging, of conversing, knowing how to negotiate and balance personal and communal needs from within the places we inhabit

METHODS & MATERIAL

This is a design driven doctoral research in architecture grounded in the complexity of real phenomena encountered as a practising architect, urban designer, and educator over two decades.

A selection of cases - project experiences produced with the experimentally led design practice called Polimorph - where play is used as a creative engine to maintain an open and inclusive design in the face of disruption are examined through an iteration of reflecting on, reflecting in, and reflecting for practice¹.

TabulaRosa, an urban game in seven productions (F) / three participatory design commissions: Architecture & Disability, allowing stories to be written before walls are being raised (Etrepagny, F); Ecohamlet Le Champ Foulon, a co-housing project for a sustainable village extensions (Saint-Cyr-en-Arthies, F); / Memorial Park (Bobigny, F) / Exploratory protocols / MMT house (Montreuil, F).

The research focuses on the temporal dimension of designing processes, the grounded dimension of designing situations of interaction and the role that tangible things play within such spatial settings, to identify the conditions that facilitate participants to creatively engage in intercultural exchange and allow or hinder a creative development to pivot to a higher level of specification.



Fig. 2: Collaborative design tools utilized in Architecture & Disability (top), in the Ecohamlet project (below), from left to right: Ce qui nous transporte (mapping of the footprint of practiced territory); Menu au Choix (exploration of thoughts about a territory); Odyssée de l'Espace (mapping of material phenomena in a territory); TabulaRosa, urban game (speculative design tool); Urban Walk, Spatial Installation; Material support for Re-configuring, Project Blog; Making-Of video documentary.



> SPATIAL TRIAD - A METAMODEL FOR THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE AS A SOCIALY SHARED REALITY

Following Henri Lefebvre's concept of the production of space as a spatial triad between the perceived, the conceived, and the lived space and mapping spatial formation processes as a continuous oscillation between them, makes it possible to perceive relations between seemingly distinct and fragmented phenomena.

RESULTS

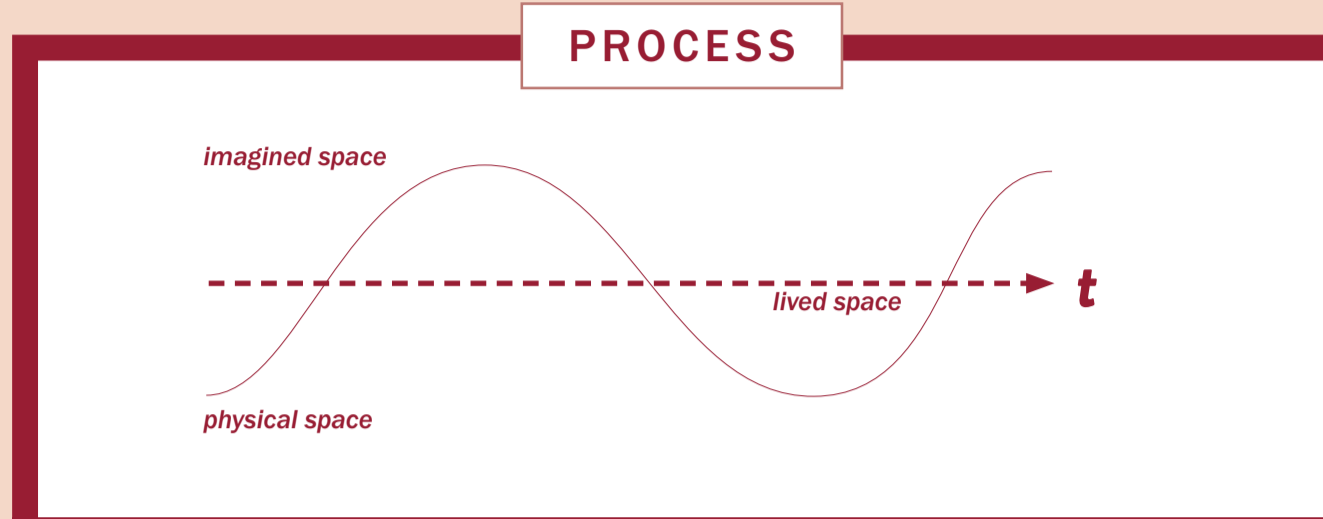
It reveals that in the liminal state of contact, giving space to play, in its different significations, enables us to apprehend divergent positions and to stimulate a profound transformation in the way we perceive and shape our living environment.

Understanding the creative potential of play to cope with disruptions and to engage in a shared environment with the other, human and non-human, leads to the development of a conceptual framework and practice of urban and architectural design that considers the transformation of space as a dynamic system of relations.

The framework of dynamic spatiality intertwines situatedness, pluralistic representations and actions in time, into one irreducible entity. Specific instruments, protocols of action and relational objects and techniques of staging, rhythm and providing grip are implemented in spatial design practice to do both, engage projects while remaining sensitive to fluctuating conditions. Architecture thereby proves to be a means for creating situations from where urbanity can be practised, and transformations can occur.

KEYWORDS

Creativity, Design Driven Research Practice, Dynamic Space, Ecology, Embodiment, Enaction, Play, Relational Design, Rhythm, Situatedness, Spatial Affordances, Spatial Triad, Tacit Knowledge.



PRINCIPLES FOR MAKING A CREATIVE PROCESS PROGRESS

1. INTERTWINING A MULTIPLICITY OF PERSPECTIVES, AT LEAST THREE

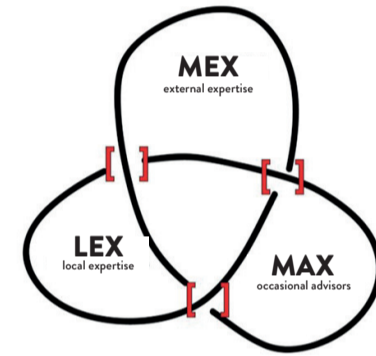


Fig.: connecting three types of participants' profiles (local expertise, external expertise and additional third parties, whose momentary input turns out necessary or beneficial.

> IDENTIFYING GAPS

Relating a diversity of viewpoints, allows to identify gaps, incongruencies on personal and interpersonal level. For instance between what a person is saying, what a person is doing and what is factually there; what is perceived in a situation depends on who is looking or from which position it is looked at and what is signifying to the observer; people who look at the same factual situation don't necessarily see the same thing. To promote the circulation of information between different participants, tools and techniques for exchange are implemented at the crossing between them.

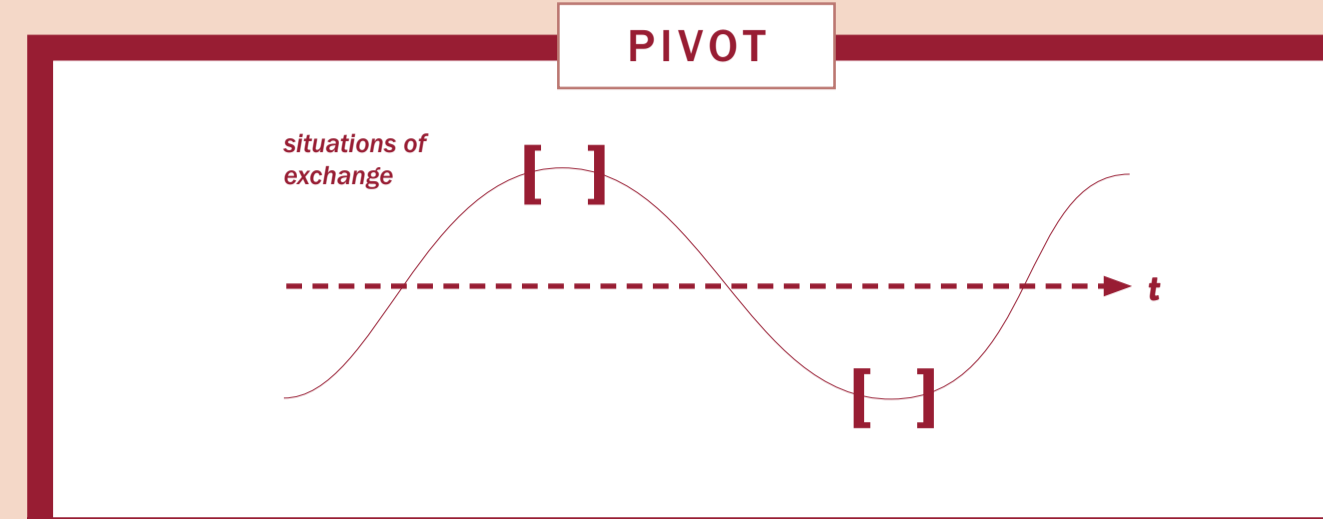
Identifying where and how mismatches manifest themselves, verifying and adjusting misinterpretations, recognizing trends leads to a deeper understanding of the stakes and the means to respond to them.

> COLLABORATIVE DESIGN TOOLS:

- According to the state of a project's development we distinguish,
- Tools for assessing an existing situation to establish what is at stake:** mapping material phenomena in a territory (*Space Odysseys*), mapping how a territory is practised (*Ce qui nous transporte*, & *Ideal and Nightmare day*); mapping representations, ideas and thoughts about a territory
 - Tools for speculation and playing out alternative configurations** (*Urban Game TabulaRosa*, *Material supports structures*, *Fictionwriting*)
 - Tools for engaging spatial interventions and preparing feasible action** (experiential prefiguration in form of *Urban Prototypes*, *Walks*, *Spatial Installation*; *Sound or video-installations*, *Collective drawing up to scale 1:1*)
 - Tools for consolidating collective achievements, living archives** (*exhibitions*, *booklets*, *artefacts*, *social media*, *Making-Of video documentary*, *Carte Sensible*)

2. COUPLING OF DIVERGING AND CONVERGING STIMULI

By coupling of two complementary means of diverging and converging propulsion, - namely action protocols to open up exploration and relational objects, for the restitution of intermediate achievements, - we get a grip on progression, even if we cannot predict where exactly the interaction will take us and what it will produce. The first engages action, the later transposes and returns a selection of choices into a comprehensible, sharable format that can be manipulated. If there is a breaking up this complementary couple of diverging and converging impulses, the designer cannot ensure creative development, the progression of a creative process might get out of control.



SITUATEDNESS FOR GETTING HOLD OF DISSIPATION

3. GROUNDING INTERACTION IN REAL SITUATIONS

> DILEMMA ACCELERATOR

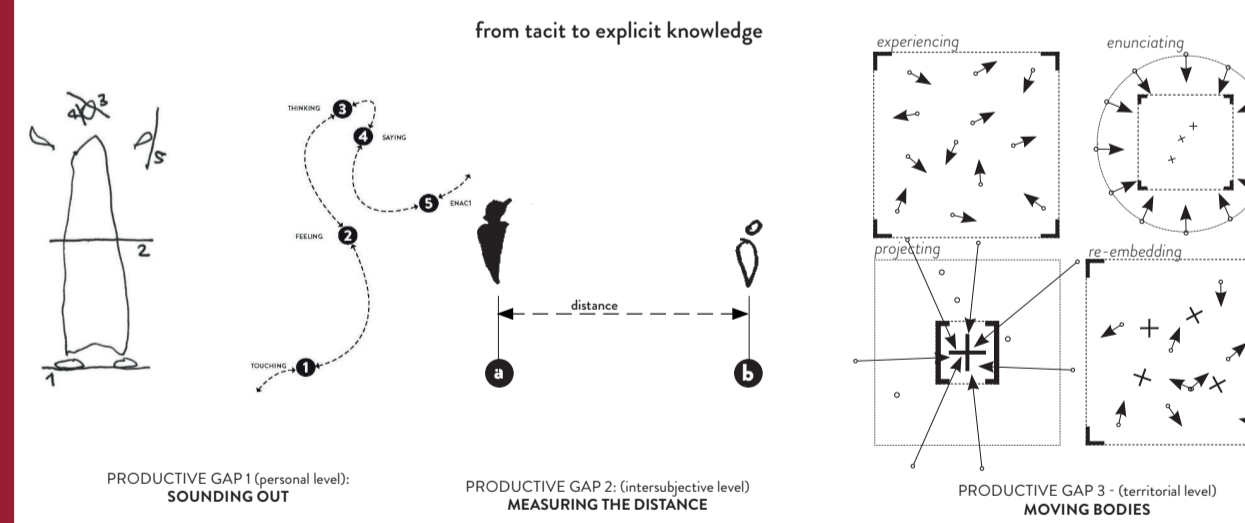
Contact with an Other, whether it's a strange object, an unfamiliar situation, or an unknown person, leads to stumble, a decentering, a shift in perception. Such a cognitive gap confuses our frame of reference, for a moment we hesitate how to interpret the discrepancy, we suspend decision making, it causes uncertainty of action. A Dilemma accelerator is activated.

Interestingly, under certain circumstances, participants don't fall back to habitual responses, a repression of conflicting perspectives does not kick in immediately. A reframing of issues, a in the words of Nigel Cross, a co-evolution and a conceptual bridging between a problem space and a solution space occurs.

> COPYING MECHANISMS

- We observed three copying mechanisms which draw upon the spatial environment
- Sounding Out
 - Measuring the distance
 - Moving the body

When participants are not locked into a fixed position, when they are not pinned down to a defined role, when they are not assigned with whom or what to relate to, they use the environment to cope with discrepancies in perception and uncertainties in action. When participants are given leeway, they rather keep exploring, switching positions, trying out a range of perspectives to figure out from where they want to look and speak out until they find a configuration that gives sufficient hold for making decisions.

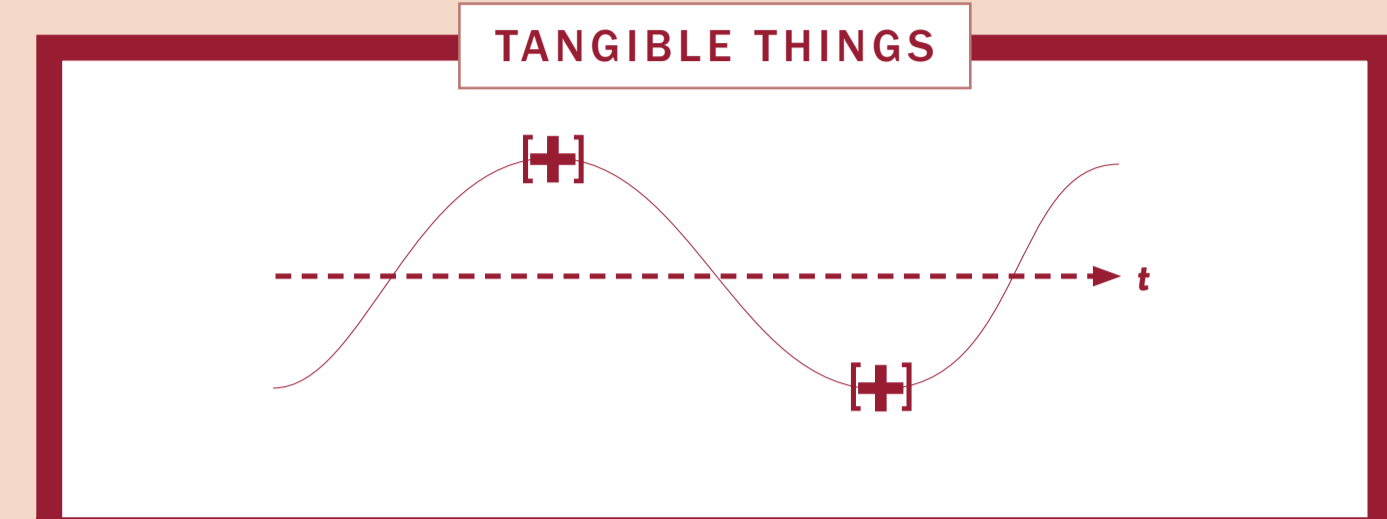


4. DIVERSIFYING MODES OF INFORMATION EXCHANGE & GIVING LEEWAY FOR GROPING

Embedding exchange in real situations counterbalances the risk of dissipating. By making resistance tangible, boundaries turn into transformative triggers, objects of resistance can be turned into incentives for change, IF groping is enabled and time provided.

Intermingling three channels of knowledge acquisition (learning through direct experience, learning from being among others and witnessing other person's experience, transmission of expert knowledge) and giving leeway for selfadjustment.

Ideologies and legitimacies fade into background, they do not vanish but are transcended through the practicalities of a given situation. Subjects of resistance appear in tangible objects.



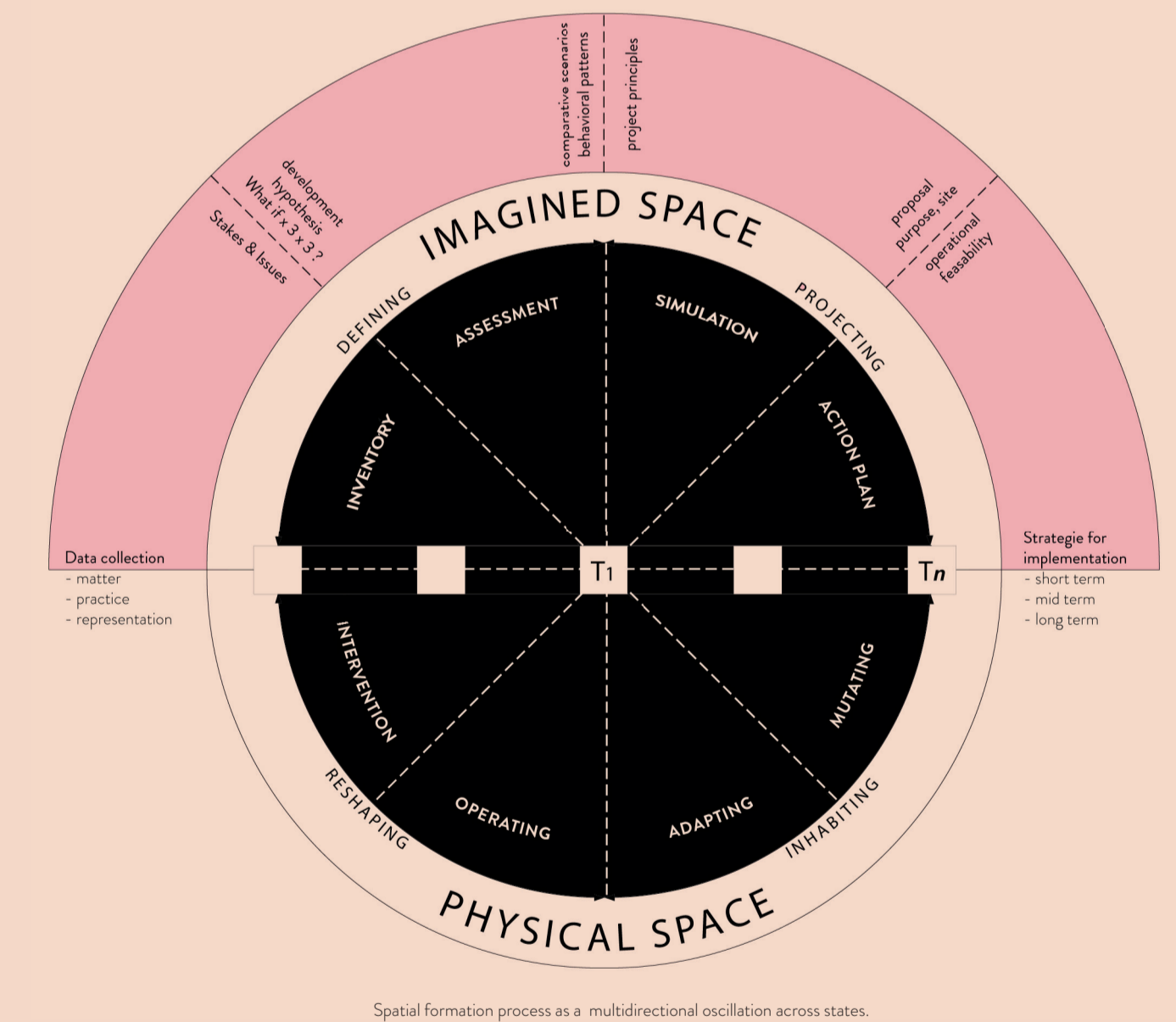
GRIPPING DEVICES FOR GETTING HOLD OF CHANGE

The extent to which one steps into an exchange depends on their capacity to relate to a situation.

Gripping devices, material affordances, and spatial affordances are more effective in arousing engagement, than, for example, mere representations, or wordings. In that, the value of material structures, by virtue of their practicality, literally providing grip have the potential to carry transformational action, which is all the more relevant in collective endeavours.

> EPISTEMIC ARTEFACTS

When diversity and pluralistic representations are key for refining interpretations of phenomena and countering the bias of observers, the tangible things are key for stakeholder engagement and creative interaction. They offer a grip to get hold of change



CONTACT URBANISM

It is a methodological framework in that it proposes a set of tools and techniques for inquiring, conceiving and practicing spatial transformation in a moving context.

It is also an epistemological framework from it proposes concepts for such a practice from the perspective of a dynamic spatiality.

¹ Archive case studies:



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