

Speak your mind

Designing for participation in public space

Simeon Atanasov
IDM, Malmö Högskola
Munkhättegratan 30B,
21 456, Malmö, Sweden
+4672 7131615
simeon.victorov@gmail.com

Nuanphan
Kaewpanukrangi
IDM, Malmö Högskola
Östra Fäladsgatan 40B,
212 24 Malmö, Sweden
+4672 7129988
paepu.ido@gmail.com

Camilla Ryd
IDM, Malmö Högskola
Södra Förstadsgatan 61,
214 20 Malmö, Sweden
+046735412505
camillaryd@gmail.com

Bilgenur Öztürk
IDM, Malmö Högskola
Rönneblomsgatan 6A Igh
1405, 212 16 Malmö,
Sweden
+046764287577
bilgenurozturk@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Public places are one domain for dialogue and participation. This paper discusses how participatory design methods apply to designing for marginalized groups in society. As students we carried out this design project with a case from the city of Malmö and The EU initiative PERIPHÈRIA, with the aim to create an interactive concept for a soon to be built public activity area in the Rosengård district, Malmö, Sweden. Public places have historically been associated with men, and in Rosengård public after school activities such as football practice is dominated by boys. Therefore, we wanted to empower young girls to participate and express their minds. This paper discusses the outcome of using participatory design game and a prototype as communication tools, between designers and participants. Within the field of participatory design we argue that to be able to advocate the perspective of marginalized groups, designers need to consider their roles in a greater infrastructure in a Living Lab of stakeholders and be reflexive about your representation of the groups you are designing for.

KEYWORDS

Participatory design, Design games, Place-specific computing, Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

One main goal in a participatory design agenda is to empower marginalized groups (Björgvinsson et al, 2010, p.3). Participatory design has its roots in designing for workplaces, together with the skills and knowledge with which people carry out their workday in a specific local setting. In this paper we explored how these design methods can be applied for interactive concept development in a public place, to empower young women in a peripheral neighbourhood. First, the paper will situate the case together with a brief description of our design concept. Second, it describes the outcome of participatory design game and the testing of a prototype. Third, the paper discusses the meaning of interacting with a microphone and recording your own voice. Finally, it addresses the role of being a designer within an infrastructure of a Living Lab, conceptualizing and representing a peripheral neighbourhood and its inhabitants.

THE SPEAK YOUR MIND PROJECT

We developed this project as students at Malmö University in Interaction Design Master's programme. The purpose was to explore the field of embodied interaction and participatory design, with a case as a part of a sustainable urban development project situated in Rosengård, Malmö, in collaboration between the EU PERIPHÈRIA Project (1) and the City of Malmö. The PERIPHÈRIA project, concentrating on smart cities, focuses in Malmö specifically on "The Living Neighbourhood". Our brief was to design an interactive, place-specific concept in "The Activity Area" for young people, which is going to be built in the heart of the Rosengård district. Generally speaking, "Place—Specific Computing is not about designing for place, but becomes part of the continuous construction and reconstruction of place, supporting established social practices but also adding to the potential to shift meanings and interactions so that places can develop in new directions." According to Jörn Messeter, "Place-specific Computing is about designing *in* place." (2000, P.39)

From a place-specific perspective, we struggled with conceptualizing this "activity area", situated in Rosengård. Participatory design has its roots in designing for workplaces as the Utopia project (Ehn 1988, in Björgvinsson et al, 2010) – but how to design for a public place in a neighbourhood with 22.000 inhabitants where the majority of the inhabitants have a foreign background (2)? Björgvinsson et al described the socio-material conditions for young people in this neighbourhood as migration between the periphery and the center of Malmö and Swedish society, which in return leaves them marginalized and with no opportunity to express themselves. (2010, p.3) Public places has historically been associated and dominated by men (Caine & Sluga 2000). Currently, many of the after-school activities for young people in Rosengård are dominated by boys and for different reasons there is a problem to attract girls. Therefore, we were asked to consider the equality aspects and design to include and foster the participation of young girls at this activity area.

THE CONCEPT

From documentation of previous workshops, we learned that young women in Rosengård had asked for a place to have coffee and socialize. We had the initial idea to make a voice triggered coffee-maker, that would start to make coffee for friends having a conversation around it. The ritual of drinking coffee with friends creates a certain social setting. Therefore, this idea later became embedded in our concept, since we wanted to create something that would stimulate young girls and boys to go to the activity area. In its final stage, the “Speak your mind” concept included the ability to record your own message on a topic, get coffee in return, listen to a new perspective on the topic - a recording done by another user. We were considering several possibilities of connecting the system to a local radio station or to other coffeemakers in the office of local politicians.

FROM GAME TO PROTOTYPE

To explore how to create dialogue in public space with a participatory design approach, we created a participatory design oriented game (figure 1) to gain a deeper knowledge base for our project. We chose to make a game, hoping it could be a method for participants and designers to imagine what could make sense in this context. Since we also wanted to explore embodied interaction we wanted to get a glimpse of what kinds of interactions like signing or dancing that could be motivating and fostering for young women to participate. The main aim of the game was to let the participants create scenarios about how they would use our concept in the activity area. It had to be played by two or more players and after the scenario was generated, they would have had to reenact it. Since this activity area is going to be public, we tried to meet both girls and boys in the age 16-24 in Malmö, so we did a series of spontaneous workshops at RGRA (a grassroots hip-hop and radio-studio), Rosengård library, Media Gymnasiet and a cafe.

Eva Brandt argues, that scenario oriented design games have inspiration from “Forum Theater” and “The magic if” techniques, where the players would actively recreate the scenarios, which in turn would create a discussion around the different possible changes in them (2010, p.59). After testing the game, we found out that this also requires the “ideal” participants - ones that are invested in the design process. With little time to gain the participants trust, we realized that putting them in the role of actors and requiring them to play out the scenario was impossible. Also, we learned that in our quest to find what made sense to young women (and to young men) we had left the design decisions solely to the participants. From the perspective of wanting to design for dialogue in a public place, we observed how the game became a tool to simply start a conversation between us as designers and young women and young men in Malmö.

Patterns, that emerged while testing the game, informed our decisions further in our design process. Our first prototype was a box with a handheld microphone (figure 2). We wanted to test the threshold and the motivation to speak your mind in a public place. Additionally, we thought that microphone was one of the

key physical properties of the prototype and the machine would detect two participants to collaborate with each other somehow while having a “conversation” about “the future”. A timer would fill up, and they would get a “new perspective” as a gift in the form of an origami.

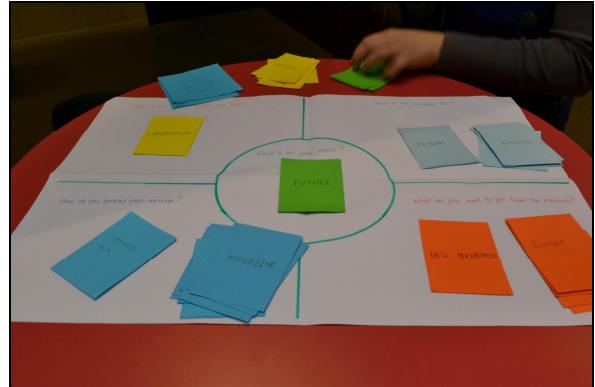


Figure 1 The game included cards split into five categories and a game board with five corresponding questions.



Figure 2. The first prototype, environment at workshop and origami.

PERFORMANCE AND EMPOWERMENT

During the testing of the prototype, we observed the figuration of two young women having a conversation together using the microphone. Interacting with a microphone can potentially be an empowering experience, especially if you know that you are able to share your message with others. In our prototype we only had one microphone and the conversation between the young women turned into more of an interview. But maybe two microphones



Figure 3. A scenario, describing the use of the final prototype.

can be more equal than discussion on empowering. Being heard can be empowering, but it can also be intimidating. For instance, a microphone can make people self-aware and worried where the content will end up. Our perspective in long term is to keep the system alive in one spot with a variety of topics by giving local youth a chance to improve the habit of expressing and spreading their ideas.

Hansen and Kozel hoped that taking part in their project “Placebo Sleeves” could be an intervention, that could influence the participants experience of their daily life (2007, p.212). Likewise, we hope that after girls experienced having control of their own voices, they would be aware of the value of their perspectives during their daily life.

DISCUSSION

With an ethnographic approach, it is problematic to think about this neighbourhood as a homogeneous sphere. With Messeters (2009) notion of place it might also include the intentions of the stakeholders within the infrastructure of the Living Lab, urban planners working with development in the district, the politicians supporting with funding, scholars with special areas of interest, and even our intentions as design students. We as students became a part of this conceptual “place” as actors trying to understand it and design for its future. Therefore, we also need to consider our roles as designers and our position in this infrastructure. In many ways we were as much influenced by other stakeholders as our concern about how to empower young women in Rosengård.

What influenced our process was the main goal of the City of Malmö to attract young women to come to the activity area in the

first place. From the PERIPHÈRIA projects point of view, we were encouraged to add the agenda of creating a channel for young women to empower them to speak their mind. To “Speak your mind” in a public place, has strong political implications, a desire that vaguely has been articulated by young women in Rosengård, as well as it has been articulated by representatives from the city of Malmö.

Truth be told, we had problems with getting access to young women in Rosengård. To be able to make any design decisions we were still trying to find something that could be considered “true” in this context. Ultimately, when making these workshops on the spot, we were limited when making deeper interpretations of the patterns that we saw. The motivations and the issues that concern “them” were still hard to decipher. Compared to ethnographic fieldwork, the game did not give us material to make a thick description (Dourish 2004, p.59). At this point the risk of creating stereotypes from your target group appeared, to make it fit your concept, when we had a small sample representing the whole. In our case we tried to be aware of this by talking about “girls” or “young women” and needs in common, but also phrase is as “girls that like coffee” or “girls that wish to get a new perspective”. Still, this is on the level of representation, a stereotype could also be embedded in the system, by focusing on the needs and the desires to interact, fostering and hindering certain ways to interact and motivations to interact before others.

CONCLUSION

This design process has taken a participatory approach with a place-centric perspective. We wanted to design a system to allow young women to speak their mind in this public activity area, and

design a system that hopefully would include and foster a channel for young women to express themselves in the Rosengård district. In this process, participation, conversation and dialogue have gotten closely intertwined; in workshops, in the public place, in the neighbourhood and as a key interaction in the concept. A few conversations on the street cannot truly be considered participatory design. In order to implement this, these participations as dialogues need to be continued, to further inform us how to create a channel for young women to express themselves. As interaction design students, it is difficult to predict the long term effects your design would have on a social structure. And even a resourceful infrastructure of a Living Lab, it is a risk to reproduce the already existing conditions and social structure in this place.

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END-NOTES/FOOTNOTES

¹. *Read more about PERIPHERIA - Networked Smart Peripheral Cities for Sustainable Lifestyles*
<http://www.peripharia.eu/about-peripharia/>

². *Statistics from City of Malmö*

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