

ON DESTRUCTION IN DESIGN

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Sometimes to build something new you have to destroy what exists. We learned what should have been this obvious fact of existence through our collaboration with a group of 7th grade middle school students that we enlisted in a civic design project. The students were nominally tasked with designing new spaces for inter-cultural communication and public reflection on the small island our university campus shares with a small residential community in the middle of one of the most capitalized urban landscapes in the modern world. Why did it take a group of young middle schoolers to help us as design researchers recognize the significance of destruction as a design move? How can we use this experience to inform our discussion of politics in design, where the interesting question is not whether a design has politics or not, but what politics a specific design proposal does manifest (in this case, the destruction of an artifact), and how such acts can help surface the underlying tensions within a society or community? These are some of the questions that we probe in reflecting on this episode from the perspective of design.

The context for our story is Roosevelt Island - a narrow strip of land situated in the East River between the boroughs of Manhattan and Queens in New York City. This island is home to a small residential community of around 12,000 people, along with Cornell Tech, a graduate campus of Cornell University focused on applied sciences and technology, where we both work. While Roosevelt Island was originally designed as a mixed income community, as with many urban contexts, it has experienced significant demographic and material change in the last twenty years. This includes not only the construction of our campus, but of several residential buildings on the north and south end of the island catering to more upscale and “professional” residents. These changes have generated a decidedly mixed reaction from longer-term residents, who are an eclectic mix of older adults, international diplomats, subsidized housing residents and a significant disabled population.

We discussed some of the history of this community, and how several of our collaborations were and are shaping its emerging relationship with the

new campus in an earlier workshop paper [1]. In this short piece, we reflect on a specific interaction that occurred during the course of a participatory design workshop that we conducted with middle school youth. This workshop was the result of a several months long collaboration with a social studies teacher from the island middle school. In the collaboration, we used the method of oral history to investigate the meaning of home from an intergenerational context, by having students interview their parents or other family or community members about what the word “home” meant to them. Sharing these oral histories in class and on a website created rich opportunities for social and intercultural learning within this diverse urban classroom, which included students with parents from more than a dozen home countries.

At the end of this collaboration, we invited some of the students to participate in a summer internship with us on campus building on the observations from this project to design better civic spaces on the island for intercultural and community dialog. We wanted the students to use their observations from the oral history project to design new spaces that support the kind of intergroup learning they all had experienced in class. Instead, with one exception, the students all started to design various kinds of entertainment, shopping and recreational complexes. While this in and of itself was not surprising, a particular aspect of one design did stand out.

One of the groups had proposed destroying the Octagon, a luxury residential building at the north end of the island, to make room for one such multi-use youth attraction. This was where one of the students (the one that had conformed to the plot and proposed designing a new intercultural learning center) lived, and also where one of us (the professor) lived at the time. When we reminded the students that their task was to build something new, and that there was plenty of other space for their sprawling complex to be located (like on a floating barge in the middle of the river), they agreed that this was a possibility, but persisted in their demand that the Octagon be destroyed.

When pressed on why this was so important to them, the students criticized the building’s “really rich” and “exclusive” vibe, adding that it took up

Roosevelt Island, New York USA



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way too much space (including the pool / garden complex in the back and the tennis course in the front). In addition, many diplomats and other international workers lived in the complex, who did not have to pay their own rent because their embassies or missions paid it on their behalf. In short, the Octagon represented everything they didn’t like about the island - privatized allocation of space, socio-economic inequality and a cultural divide between the high income foreign diplomats and other kinds of residents.

Why were we initially so shocked by this proposal, when it was the one that generated the most discussion, and surfaced important underlying tensions within the community? Our reaction was nothing compared to what happened when the students presented their ideas for feedback at a session with members of the local senior center. These residents, many of whom represented this international community on the island, or were long-time local residents active in the historical society and other civic groups, reacted agonistically and immediately when presented with this idea of destroying the Octagon. One of them responded that if we should destroy anything, we should start with/on our own campus!

What lessons are there to be learned from this tense, often confrontational and seemingly chaotic civic encounter? How does “Design for Provocation” actually manifest in real-world social contexts, with their multiple agendas and real conflicts around land use, resource allocation and inter-cultural dialogue? These are just some of the questions that we probe and reflect upon in a

forthcoming article that discusses this project and its outcomes in greater detail [2]. In this shorter piece, we'd like to use the remaining space we have to reflect on the implications of this incident for the practice of design.

In an earlier article, we discussed some of the challenges of doing civic design with youth [3]. Savvy youth easily see through the redundancy, performativity and fundamental apathy underlying most participatory and civic engagement initiatives. The stark inequalities and bewildering absurdities of the modern state are only too well apparent to them. They realize (maybe better than any of us) that the future presents itself as a set of compromises and zero sum games, where more highly capitalized and better resourced segments of the population (who are usually older demographically) can and will continue to receive more and more of the ecological and economic pie.

What are youth to do in the face of such daunting odds? How can they respond to the stacked deck they have been handed? Of course, by destroying what exists! The history of resistance movements includes such groups as the Luddites, who destroyed machinery as a way of safeguarding the expertise and dignity of working class professions, the Black Bloc, who use nonviolent physical destruction as a way of protesting social and economic injustice, and Punk Rock, which crystallized working class angst through the violation of musical norms around performance and expertise. Youth are often active members of these movements, if not the leaders of them.

Of course, destruction is also implicit in design. Every time we develop a new application, device, building, monument, infrastructure, and so on, we are displacing something (or someone) that existed before it. This displacement has real and material consequences, often as significant as the ones created by the "design" itself. There is a growing feminist movement advocating for our refusal to participate in racist, extractive and socially and environmentally harmful data regimes [4]. We believe that in addition to saying "no" to furthering these harms, we can make intelligent decisions about destroying some of those wasteful and malevolent systems that already exist. This may be especially important in the coming decades, given the decaying nature of so many of our public institutions and infrastructure, and our need to support degrowth and rewilding initiatives.

Given both the practical importance and rhetorical power of destruction in design, why is it so invisible? To us, this is an important theoretical question, answering which can help us fundamentally discern what design is and can be in the future. Maybe even more important though, is to ask the question of what we lose when we ignore the pedagogical and rhetorical power of destruc-

tion in design. Over our many years of working with youth, we have rarely seen them as engaged or have as much agency as when they felt that they had the ability to not only make new things, but also to make informed decisions about what is to be removed. As design practice confronts the many complicated, ambiguous and daunting challenges that we face as a society, the right to destroy needs to be recognized as a part of its collective arsenal.

References

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NEWS

SIGEnergy Everything

BY DOUGLAS SCHULER

I recently learned that part of my job as SIGCAS Chair was to weigh in on whether an "emerging SIG" should become an active SIG. In early November I was asked to look at the documentation provided by the emerging SIGEnergy. Everything that I saw was relevant and convincing: The potential and need for the new SIG was amply demonstrated. On the other hand, I had the smallest inkling that the SIG could have a bit more CAS sprinkled in with the energy. In general I want to encourage people in the technological world to consider the social world more strongly. It also seemed like a good opportunity to uphold the responsibility of being the chair of this particular SIG. At any rate, I took pen in hand (metaphorically) and wrote to the principals of the new SIG. Along with encouraging words, I made the basic suggestion that the connection of the social (and the environmental) could be made more explicit: I have found that putting that in writing at the onset makes it more likely to be pursued in the present as well as in the future. I also suggested that some SIGCAS members might like to be involved with the new effort. At any rate, the letter that I wrote and the gracious replies from Professors Keshav and Shenoy — including the possibility of a cross-SIG working group, an idea that is close to my heart, can be found at <https://sigcas/SigEnergy>.



NEWS

Smartphone Apps for Covid Vaccination Tracing

[CNN] "Several companies and technology groups have begun developing smartphones apps or systems for individuals to upload details of their Covid-19 tests and vaccinations, creating digital credentials that could be shown in order to enter concert venues, stadiums, movie theaters, offices, or even countries" (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/27/tech/coronavirus-vaccine-passport-apps/index.html>).

Ouster of Researcher at Google Draws Scrutiny

[USA Today] "Timnit Gebru says she was fired via email after refusing to retract a research paper that asked tough questions about a type of artificial intelligence, including Google's use of it... Some 2,000 Google employees signed a petition protesting the company's handling of the situation. Academic research called out Google on social media in a rare and widespread rebuke" (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2020/12/11/google-timnit-gebru-black-employees-diversity-sundar-pichai/3889402001/>).