Participation as a Critical Strategy for the Reexamination of Interior Design Curricula

Introduction

During the summer of 2011, Tel Aviv's public spaces became a new habitat. Hundreds of people camped along Rothschild Boulevard in a protest for spatial justice, demanding affordable housing and an end to the privatized economic system. The tent-filled urban space became home to a charged mélange of ‘domestic,’ social and political activities, with ad-hoc open kitchens serving food alongside debates and group discussions. Domesticating the public urban space changed our perception of it and enabled performative acts in which common or private activities construct identity. Electronic media further amplified the participatory nature of the debates, offering an open platform for multiple voices to express opinions and engage broader audiences. We believe that this new form of participatory discourse and activism offers a new framework for re-examining and challenging the prevailing conception of interior design curricula as a force field.

This paper addresses participatory design through the concept of design activism and the capability approach, both of which are emerging fields of research and practice in planning and design. Referring to the connection between design and activism, Fuad-Luke (2009) notes, ‘Participation emancipates people by making them active contributors rather than passive recipients;’ it is therefore ‘a form of design humanism aimed at reducing domination.’ The capability approach places human capabilities at center stage on issues of justice, equality, development and quality of life (Nussbaum 1988; 1992).

Two concepts emerge from interior design analysis utilizing a participatory approach: haptic experience (Jacoby-Volk 2010) and redesign (Latour 2009). Leveraging the unique position of interior design as a discipline that relates to the scale of the body and which is grounded in tactile and sensual experience allows for the assimilation of a participatory dynamic, redefining interior design as a new force for active engagement. Design ‘is never a process that begins from scratch, to design is always to redesign’ (Latour 2008:3).

This paper demonstrates how the Designers' Clinic serves as an apparatus for applying design activism within interior design curricula. The Clinic nurtures the weakened community by activating the capability approach as a subversive act to develop the wellbeing of community members. Actors are faculty, students, graduates and designers from all fields who wish to use the Clinic's platform as an effective tool for change, initiative and activism. The designers engaged with the Clinic create a model of synergy between design practice and academia. This shift promotes research and aims at formulating a critical view of the role of designers and design in and for the community, and the role of academia and its involvement in the urgent social, urban and environmental issues currently on the agenda.

Design activism and the capability approach

A broad interpretation of design, in any significant activity, is aimed at creating a product or process that changes a given environment or organization. Participatory design is ‘an attitude about a force for change in the creation and management of environments for people. Its strength lies in being a movement that
cuts across traditional professional boundaries and cultures’ (Sanoff 2006:133). Sanoff elaborates that environments work better when citizens are active and involved and not passive consumers. As noted above, Fuad-Luke (2009) holds a similar view: referring to the connection between design and activism, he underlines the emancipatory power of participation which transforms people from passive recipients to active contributors. This connection, he asserts, generates a kind of ‘design humanism’ which aims to reduce domination.

In order for citizens to be active contributors to changing their environment as individuals and communities, their needs and values should be considered both from a theoretical point of view and as a tool for action. We believe the capability approach, pioneered by economist and philosopher Amartya Sen and philosopher Martha Nussbaum (Robeyns 2005), may serve as a deliberative framework and as a means for addressing these issues. This approach places great significance on people’s freedom to choose their own values and their own way of doing and being. It can be seen as an alternative for participation which is usually perceived as instrumental, as ‘an efficient and cost-efficient process that enables design interventions to be responsive and well maintained through time’ (Frediani and Boano 2012:203).

When linking design to the capability approach, one important issue is the emphasis on real empowerment and improvement of people’s lives. Oosterlaken (2009) reviews this connection between capability-sensitive design and participatory design through the work of Nieusma (2005) and the work of Frediani (2008) and argues that this connection can be made by paying attention to user participation in design processes with less emphasis on the inclusion of marginalized perspectives. One example of an industrial design engineering project that empowered people and improved their lives was the design of tricycles for the disabled in developing countries (Oosterlaken 2009). The tricycles are hand-operated vehicles suitable for riding long distances with bad road conditions, and for the transportation of goods. Another issue raised by applying the capability approach to design is the fact that design cannot be seen as neutral in terms of process or product, that it is inherently value-laden. The design process of the tricycles and the design development of the bicycle itself (Oosterlaken 2009) are good examples of object transformation involving moral issues. Bicycles were originally designed for young and adventurous males and not as a form of transportation; they were intentionally not designed to be safe or easy to use. Only when manufacturers saw the business opportunities of selling to women and older men was the design altered completely, and bicycles became both safe and a common form of transportation. Yet not only should the product be seen as inherently value-laden but the designers too.

Oosterlaken (2009) stresses the fact that a better application of the capability approach in design should also address issues such as design methods and the social and ethical dilemmas of the designer. We believe these dilemmas should be addressed in at least two spheres: through the education of designers in preparing them for encounters with future clients and communities; and through practice by creating frameworks to facilitate the understanding and sharing of dilemmas which are constantly changing over time. In order to enable capability-sensitive design to be part of design practice and to facilitate the emergence of a new participatory format, it is crucial not to differentiate theory from practice and to find ways in which theoretical ideas could go hand in hand with design projects.

Most research on the capability approach and design is related to industrial design and engineering and less to interior design. If we look at interior design in a similar way, we see that only when we change our notion of interior design from a lifestyle practice to a wellbeing practice grounded in human dignity and human rights (Buchanan 2001), only then will new opportunities emerge.
Interior design – haptic experience through re-design

Our conception of interior design and interior space must change so it becomes accessible, understood and viewed from the perspective of the wellbeing of individuals and the community. Interior space should be viewed as critical space, as interiority and as ‘other’ space, through the notion of the *haptic*. Interior space in this sense is not architecture’s inside,¹ nor is it the binary between the inside and the outside; rather, it is the folding of these two concepts together. Critical thinking about the public space should encapsulate interiority as *haptic knowledge*² that provokes design questions which take into consideration habit, use, materials, events, human experiences and questions of identity. It is the human dimension that folds the optic and the *haptic* together and generates this unique knowledge.

The optical appropriation of space is bound to the contour of objects, meaning the architectural way of perceiving the space – asking ‘what is the plan,’³ looking from an oblique point of view. Interiority reduces the distance from the surface, binding to materiality and texture. This reduced distance, enabled by haptic closeness, opens a new field for an action to be taken, an opportunity for a shift from contemplation to praxis by being performative.⁴ We are moving from the singularity of the architectural envelope to the multiplicity of identities of the interior space. This allows us to perceive identity in a far more fluid and dynamic way than traditional approaches; it is precisely our actions and behavior inside the space that constitute our identity.⁵

In other words, perception of the constructed space is always engaged with performative acts in which common or private activities construct identity. These activities are accumulated over time by repetition in space, while the subject's manner of action and potential for change is embedded in this repetition.⁶ Through the critical concept of the haptic, interiority and the design process relate to broader social and cultural practices in which the interior space discourse is embedded. The haptic, which is both a visual experience and praxis, conjures up space through transformation, duration and temporality. It allows architecture and the interior space to be perceived as a sequence of events and multiplicity rather than a singular articulation. In this sense it is the affective experience of a surface rather than a singular point of

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² According to Benjamin, ‘buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception – or rather, by touch and sight.’ Optical appropriation is bound to the noticeable contours of objects in an expanding space while haptic appropriation is regarded as attachment to the surface, the materiality and the texture. As Benjamin says, ‘For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation’ (Benjamin 1996).


⁴ Neil Leach’s concept of belonging refers to Judith Butler’s approach of ‘performativity,’ which relates to the way the subject acquires his/her identity. It is precisely our actions and behavior that constitute our identity and sense of belonging (Leach 2006). We also connect with another sense of the term, as in J. L. Austin’s concept of *performative* utterances. Performatives operate in such a way that the saying of it makes it so; it is the action that is executed in the statement itself (Austin 1962).

⁵ As Beatriz Colomina notes in her article “Battle Lines: E. 1027,” ‘The horizon is an interior. It defines an enclosure.’ This concept gives new meaning to the idea of interior space (Colomina 1996).

⁶ See Butler 1997.
view situated at a distance, on the outline or the gestalt. The haptic grants an intimate immersion with surface, a new ‘closeness’ to matter and texture. In this sense it is the interior space which becomes a critical space and an ‘other’ space.

The power to change the existing state of interiors through participation starts with our perception and experience and must continue with the way we perceive the act of design. Latour’s perception of design is always to redesign (Latour 2008:4). In 2008, University College in Falmouth held an international conference entitled ‘Networks of Design’ (Latour 2009). Bruno Latour was the keynote speaker, and he pondered what design might mean at a time of crisis. At the beginning of this article we noted this time of social and spatial crises around the world, and suggested it generated opportunities for care and change. Latour (2009:3) proposed we replace the concept of design with that of revolution: design constitutes a cautious and modest revolution, above all defined by care. This revolution is not the revolution of modernization and progress; it is neither heroic nor hubristic – thus design practice is an antidote to grand illusions and certainties. As Latour puts it, it is ‘radically careful or carefully radical’ (Latour 2009:6).

Design ‘is never a process that begins from scratch’ (Latour 2008:3); it is never ‘to create ex nihilo.’ The theory of action has arisen because every single thing is being redesigned, every detail of our daily existence – from food, cars and houses to travelling and cloning. The dimension of the task is amplified by ecological and social crises; this means the act of design is taking over public consciousness.

Latour defines design care by various parameters – the humility of planning, attention to detail, craft and skill, as well as artificiality and shifting transitory fashions (Latour 2009). By humility of planning, he refers to the fact that in contrast to building or construction, design in general and interior design in particular constitutes a real practicality of dealing with materials, events and the functions of everyday life. Attention to detail is not heroic; it is a design skill of mastering the craft, whether new or traditional. The concept of ‘making’ something is thus deeply modified: to engage in thought during the making means to design. This shift opens the way for individuals and communities to share their experiences, values and habits in order to freely participate in re-thinking and re-designing spaces.

The participatory approach – interior design curricula

Interior design has undergone significant changes in the process of consolidating and establishing itself as an independent discipline. Contemporary designers and educators operate in a field of diversity and multiplicity. Participatory design offers the potential to add a performative and social dimension to the practice of interior design through new forms of engagement at all stages of the design process, from conceptualization to realization, by assimilating processes and products. Leveraging the unique position of interior design as a discipline that relates to the scale of the body and which is grounded in tactile and sensual experience allows for the assimilation of a participatory dynamic, redefining interior design as a new force for active engagement. This force introduces new feedback mechanisms, performative acts and a range of shared dynamics. New forms of engagement, within the field of interior design, should be established through a coherent development of its curriculum.

Interior design curricula, as opposed to architectural curricula, should be viewed as flexible systems which engage the multiple voices of all actors involved: students, teachers, courses, departments, industries and the community. Kathleen Graves (2008) refers to the development of a curriculum as a bottom-up process and emphasizes that all aspects should be analyzed not as separate entities but as an interconnected set which must be viewed simultaneously in order to build a comprehensive system. We believe that viewing the curriculum through participation in general and the notion of capability in particular enables the development of the curriculum as a mechanism that expands and explores its capabilities. The significance
of adopting the participatory design approach when developing interior design curricula is that this allows for synergy between the process and the product within the educational system. This approach generates a range of possibilities for curriculum decision-makers and teachers alike in shaping the future of interior design as a force field.

In this paper we demonstrate the potential of developing a new format of teaching and learning that challenges the relationship between the practice and education of interior design. In presenting the following case study, our principal purpose is to instigate a discussion. The new teaching format and case study constitute an original and pioneering step in applying the concepts of the capability-sensitivity approach and the haptic experience. These concepts serve as a thread, linking undergraduate studies, graduate studies and other platforms, promoting activism, engagement and innovative thinking from all key actors, among students, teachers and members of the community.

**Participatory case study – the Designers’ Clinic and Speed Design**

The Designers’ Clinic is a unique platform positioned between design practice and academia, and aims to bring together the fields of design and the world of social involvement. It is a bottom-up/top-down design approach based on community participation in both planning and design processes. The Designers’ Clinic operates as a flexible axis between various formats of academic degrees and platforms of design practice.

The Clinic operates simultaneously within the curriculum via the studio classes and educational workshops and outside the curriculum through enterprises of students, faculty members, graduates and external practitioners. The various programs promote social design and entrepreneurial knowledge through research and participatory action on various scales. In addition, the platforms focus on establishing ties with the community and on identifying changing values and needs that constitute the wellbeing of various communities.

The Speed Design event took place in Jaffa (the less privileged old Arab quarter of the Tel Aviv conurbation), in the Peila cultural and art community space (Figures 1-3). Sixty top interior designers and architects took time off their daily practice to come and assist community members in their various design and planning needs. The premises are comprised of 700 square meters of open-plan space. At 16:00, 60 interior designers and architects were seated at tables with empty chairs in front of them, waiting for something to happen. It was an awkward moment; nobody knew if community members would be active actors and participate, or stay outside. We the organizers and the participants realized that one cannot manage the community; one can only open doors by invitation.

**Figure 1: Brochure with instructions on taking dimensions which was distributed in the community**
At first, slowly but surely, a variety of people entered, whereupon they were registered and the rules were explained to them. An hour later, the space was packed with people such as families from Jaffa, single people from Tel Aviv, and people from small businesses in the area. Some came with scraps of paper on which they had noted the dimensions of their apartments, others came with architectural plans, highlighting the furniture within the space, and still others came with iPods (Figure 4). Some brought photographs stored on their cell-phones or hard copies. The designers worked with every bit of information they received and were happy to use it productively.

People were ecstatic and moved from one consultant to another, receiving design solutions and plans of their living and working spaces. Architects with different specializations referred people to their colleagues. Food and beverages were served by local community restaurants and stores. It felt like a big festive happening and many people called their friends to come and participate (Figures 5-8).

Figure 3: Speed Design – Amiad Center, Peila, Tel Aviv-Jaffa

Figure 4: Speed Design – a plan prepared by a resident for the event
Reflexive processes demand continuous actor participation. After the event we sent the designers a questionnaire of four questions: Did you feel you were able to assist the participants and offer examples? Did community members come with sufficient documentation for consultancy? Did you feel that the momentary nature of the process could be problematic? What is your feeling as a designer or architect about the entire process?

All the designers agreed that the process had enabled them to help each and every one of the participants, regardless of the design problem and regardless of the information brought to the table. Responding to the second question, one architect said, ‘Some of them came with homemade creative paper templates of their home furniture and others wanted advice on how to build their dream home illustrated by a little handwritten doodle.’ Responses to the third question were varied. Some said highly specific problems were easily solved in a way that enabled the participant to take the solution straight to a building contractor. Others suggested the process should remain as a proposal only and further developed. Some participants asked for a business card so they could continue to develop the initial proposal. Responding to the fourth question, one designer said, ‘The entire encounter was a promotional event for the professional field of interior design and people felt that our asset – our professional experience and knowledge – can generate positive change to the wellbeing of inhabitants of all kinds.’ Another architect wrote, ‘The possibility of such
a quick and accessible interaction is not only productive for the taker but is also a highly liberating experience for the giver... The moment the issue of money is taken out of the equation, the whole process of running after clients is transformed and liberated from all constraints.’

The Speed Design process and product

Community processes are long term and a great deal of patience is required in order to get positive results. The initial idea of Speed Design was borrowed from speed dating and was intended to create a quick and accessible process during which community members receive a response to their design problems in twenty effective minutes with a professional from the design field.

The various actors who create a network of communicating and acting include members of the academic design world, social activists and citizens, representatives of local authorities and others. The idea was conceived in the interior design department as an academic entrepreneurial agenda of continuous social responsibility. In the framework of undergraduate studies, two courses were involved in the development of the strategic plan and community strategies: The business class course and its students were responsible for all aspects regarding the business plan, from marketing, sales and sponsorship to public relations. The other course was a workshop that addressed questions of identifying communities and strategies for reaching these communities and their inhabitants. For example, the students discovered that a parent of one of the students is the principal of an Arab high school in Jaffa, and she distributed the Speed Design pamphlet along with the pupils’ semester certificate. Other students were involved in the project through their apprenticeship within the Designers’ Clinic.

Communities were approached by diverse actors from within academia. To our great surprise, the most accessible and willing community was practitioners from the field of design. It was as if they had been waiting for someone to call them to socially engaged activity outside their everyday professional life. In the questionnaire, many designers commented that they are already looking forward to the next invitation for a second Speed Design event. The challenge was creating a participatory community among the inhabitants of Jaffa who have been disillusioned by all kinds of facilitators. The solution was a bottom-up approach in which students went from door to door explaining the advantages of the project and instructing potential participants on how to get the correct information about their interior spaces. Another strategy involved initiating meetings with community activist leaders who promoted the idea within their neighborhoods. The local authorities could have played a key role in promoting the project and making it a long-term part of their social agenda in reacting to the social protests of the summer of 2011. Unfortunately, they only contributed by providing some publicity around the city before the actual event and taking credit for its success. Surprisingly, the media was a very willing collaborator, providing intensive coverage through radio and television and in the written press, promoting the idea and following the event.

Open discussion

Speed Design truly empowered all actors involved and improved people’s lives and wellbeing. During the process, all participants had to reflect on their habits and values, from residents and professionals to the faculty and students alike. In terms of process and product, Speed Design revealed the desire of all participants to be socially engaged and politically active. Jaffa, as a conflicted part of Tel Aviv, posed a challenge of cultural diversity to all parties involved. It was uplifting to see the various communities coming together to help solve immediate habituation problems and creating a platform for the future expansion of a participatory approach to design.
As noted above, haptic knowledge raises design questions which take into consideration habit, use, materials, events, human experiences and issues of identity. Through Speed Design, all these variables came to life. It is a haptic experience to be in interior design consultation while your three-year-old child is sitting on your lap or running around. Both sides – consultant and ‘client’ – are freed from business ties and open to the activation of all of their senses. This new kind of interaction between these two sides constructs the haptic experience and facilitates the emergence of new design.

As educators we are responsible for cultivating awareness of social and ethical dilemmas among future designers. Events such as Speed Design serve as a great catalyst for raising these dilemmas, allowing all actors to participate in the process and product and redefining their values and attitudes as responsible designers. One example of the change of values in the relationship between client and designer was manifested through the possibility of receiving a second opinion, which was one of the central rules of the Speed Design event. Usually, in the practice of design and architecture, a second opinion is considered unethical and is generally prohibited. This norm was challenged by the process and became part an ethical principle of both process and product. The recipient was able to acquire a multiplicity of ideas and designs for his or her space and thus construct a multiplicity of identities of the interiors.

We believe that Speed Design is an example of a powerful event able to trigger a new form of participatory discourse and activism. It offers a framework for re-examining and challenging the prevailing conception of interior design and the relation of practice and academia as a force field. Yet Speed Design is only one case study for the re-thinking of interior design curricula. We believe that this approach should be further investigated and developed into a network model of curricula that can act as a tool for innovation and development in the interior design field. This type of curriculum would ultimately create multiple communities of designers, educators and schools all around the world promoting an interdisciplinary and interconnected approach to interior design.

References


