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Facilitating Spatial Negotiation:
a pragmatic approach to understanding public space

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Abstract

The workshop 'Facilitating Spatial Negotiation', which took place as part of the 'Past, Present and Future of Public Space' International conference on Art, Architecture and Urban Design that took place in Bologna (2014), promoted by City Space Architecture, demonstrates a pragmatic approach to understanding how public space can be realised. The method of collaborative painting is employed within a participatory practice that adopts tactics from spatial agency and critical spatial practice. First, this paper provides a descriptive and visual insight into the discussion between six participants on the topic of the street as a public space, in light of the Social Street movement. Then, it sets out how the session can be understood, through analogy, as a creative exercise in performing a common space. By reflecting upon this event through the framework of participatory practice, the focus is on how conflict is revealed and negotiated within the group. Two instants of conflict are discussed, which raise the critical question whether people are, in fact, interested in working together towards the production and use of common space. It is suggested that the implications of this workshop are twofold. First, a truly public space cannot be realised if the principles of common space are not adopted within the process of its negotiation. Secondly, the finding of a common language in the process of negotiating public space is crucial to this process. The painterly approach offers a shared visual forum, but ultimately the use of any facilitating medium depends on people's responsibility to participate.

Keywords: participatory painting; public space; conflict; spatial agency; critical spatial practice.

Introduction

How to realise a truly public space? Instead of using abstract theories, this alternative contribution in the form of a workshop offers a more pragmatic approach to answering this question. The workshop 'Facilitating Spatial Negotiation' took place as part of the 'Past, Present and Future of Public Space' International conference on Art, Architecture and Urban Design, held in Bologna, promoted by City Space Architecture, on the 26th of June 2014, and sought to provide the opportunity to actively engage participants in the discussion of public space. The provision of a platform for an interactive sharing of experience and opinions is in contrast to the conventional conference model which is based on a unidirectional knowledge exchange from speaker to audience with scarce time for a negotiation. The workshop's underlying idea is that prior to producing a physical public space, the interests of space must be negotiated to elucidate the public good. By realising such a different kind of event, the hope is to contribute towards a better understanding of the nature and characteristics of public space. So, how can an analogy be drawn between the workshop and public space, in order to arrive at a better understanding of how a truly public space can be realised? Such an analogy can be found on two levels: the first is a question of how public space was discussed, and the second of how public space was performed within the session. First, this paper sets out the methodology and theoretical context, followed by a summary of discussions held within the session and accompanied by visual documentation of the workshop. Then, the paper proceeds to provide a critical reflection on the modes of communication contained in the session, and finishes by stating the implications of this workshop.

The conference workshop was organised in collaboration with the representatives of the Social Street movement. Social Street started in Bologna, with the aim to create a social network between residents in the same street, in order to make sharing of expertise and knowledge possible and to pursue collective projects of common interest. The goal is to reap all the benefits of greater social interaction between neighbours. At the early stages of Social Street, however, there were still questions as to the realisation and impact of this social movement. For this reason, the topic 'your street, your choice' became the point of departure for the workshop. The invitation to participate in the one and a half hour session was taken up by five conference attendees. As an artist-researcher, my role in this workshop was primarily as a facilitator, with certain objectives: to give participants equal time and space to contribute; to acknowledge differing and co-existing positions and to provide moments of reflection on the process. However, just like the other participants, I was also an active participant in the conversation, contributing situated knowledge as a citizen.

Methodology and theoretical context

The workshop was undertaken as part of an interdisciplinary practice-led doctoral research project, which explores how contemporary painting practice can become an agency-based strategy in the architectural design process. The workshop employs the method of painting and adopts certain tactics from spatial agency, as explained in more depth in 'Painting Architecture: Towards a Practice-Led Research Methodology' (Mlicka, 2014). In this research project, painting is more than just a medium or mode of (re)presenting: it is a critical and engaged practice which has the potential to have a transformative effect. The method of collaborative painting is employed for the particular advantages it offers above other tools and mediums concerning facilitating collaborative

thinking. First of all, this method has been developed to improve accessibility and participation. The large dimensions of the canvas sheet, laid horizontally on a table, enable all participants to contribute to the conversation visually, thereby literally giving form to their ideas. This visual 'forum' functions as common ground on which to accumulate ideas, juxtapose arguments and construct shared goals. The relatively low-skill method of painting enables participants to communicate without jargon and is more accessible than the exclusive high-tech tools being developed today. Secondly, the medium-specific qualities of painting make it possible to reflect a diverse range of perspectives, for example through the rich choice of colours. More importantly, the medium makes it possible to create layers, so that ideas can be built upon and changed. As a flexible working method, it uses a variety of tools and techniques, making different forms of expression possible. Finally, the method of painting enables participants to focus on the process of sense-making, rather than the production of a physical outcome. No attention is paid to aesthetic decisions or creating a finished artwork or design. Instead, the act of painting slows down the conversation, giving people the opportunity to consider and listen to others. Taken together, the simultaneous use of a visual and a verbal language can provide a platform for a more democratic mode of communication.

The approach to the methodology which informed the workshop is built upon two types of practices: spatial agency and critical spatial practice. These practices share many characteristics despite originating from the disciplines of architecture and the arts respectively. Spatial agency indicates a shift away from a focus on the architectural product towards a situated and embedded praxis which is conscious of, and works with, its social, economic and political context (Awan, Schneider, & Till, 2011). This different approach to architecture is based on the fundamental idea that architecture is dependent upon others at every stage of its development (Till, 2009). Thus, instead of spatial thinking, I employ the concept of spatial negotiation that necessarily takes place between people. A critical spatial practice is situated between the disciplines of art and architecture, investigating their modes of operation while drawing attention to the wider social and political problems (Rendell, 2006). Such investigation can use creative means, such as painting in this case, to facilitate and reflect upon how things are done. This research project harnesses the process of painting to engage people in the negotiation of space during informal meetings.

Critical, agency-based spatial practices employ various methods to transform space and to engage and empower people, while remaining critical of their own approach and aware of the entire context of existing relationships, networks and processes. One such tactic is participatory practice, which provides a relevant framework for the analysis of this workshop. As a participatory event, the workshop's goal is to take the differing perspectives about public space to a new level by creating a common space in which (situated) knowledge can be discussed. Based on previous sessions, I have defined such a process through four stages: sense-making, confrontation, negotiation and collaboration. The essence of this process is to reveal conflicts, which is an opportunity for self-critical reflection that potentially sets in motion a process of transformation. Transformation is understood here as going through a certain process to arrive at a point that is fundamentally different from the starting point. This might be manifested inchanges in social relationships or a change in the way that space is produced. The approach of instigating a conflictual space builds upon the larger debate in which participatory practice is criticised for pursuing a consensus-based culture. Consensual participation, it is argued, results in stasis and perpetuation of the status quo (Miessen, 2010). A transformative

participation, on the other hand, is developed from within the context of the given situation instead of through the application of abstract professional knowledge from the outside (Till, 2005). Therefore, the underlying question raised in this paper is to what extent the process of participatory painting can excavate conflicts existing in a specific situation and in addition, whether it can set in motion a transformative effect.

The Discussion
The first issue brought up in the group was related to the difficulties citizens face when asking for help, when help-seeking isseen as a weakness in our culture. It raised a further question as to whether people who have questions or are in need of help turn to their neighbour or rather tend to use the internet. We discussed how finding local solutions results in certain patterns of relationships (fig. 1), and the role of a Social Street therein. A schism appeared between the arguments based on an academic, if not purely scientific approach, and the more grounded approach stemming from citizens' own experiences and observations of urban relationships. This gap was further widened by the tendency of participants to talk *at*, rather than *with* other participants. In this respect, the invitation of participants to paint their argument made it possible to replace long monologues with shorter exchanges. Nevertheless, the incompatible levels on which the question of social relationships was addressed resulted in a rupture of the discussion into two parallel conversations.
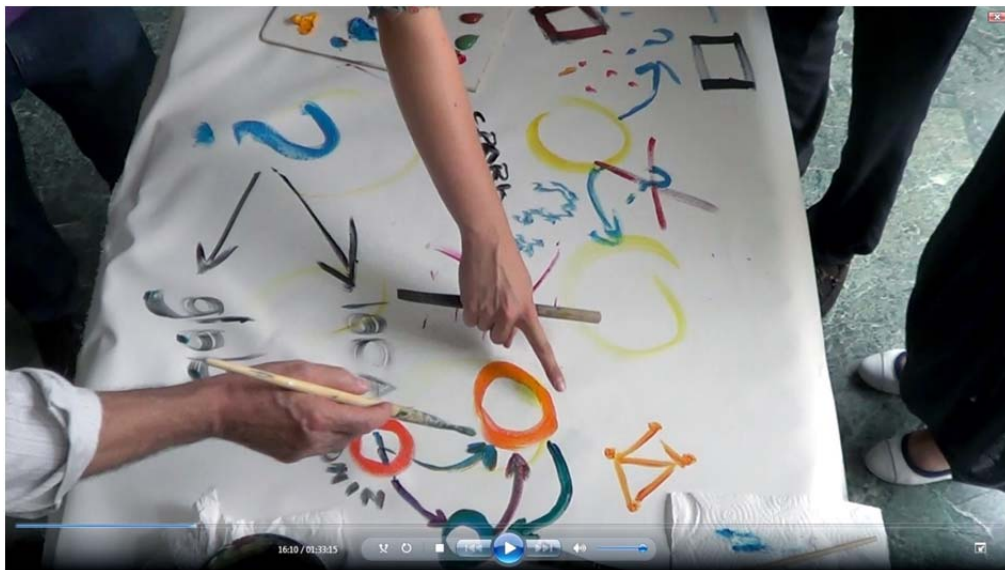

Figure 1. Video still from conference workshop on 26.06.2014, after 16:10 minutes.
Source: Video documentation by Agnieszka Mlicka.

The discussion shifted to public space as a field of conflicted interests, adding a second layer to the painting (fig. 2). On the one hand, public space was described in terms the interest investors have in it based on its financial value. On the other hand, it was addressed as physical space that can be used by citizens. The presence of Social Street was invoked to incite an active use of public spaces to prevent the prioritisation of the financial value. Another participant argued that the problem is the external control of space. This division between citizen control and administrative control over public space

is visualised through two opposite fields: the municipality and the public. The setting out of this polar opposition as the third layer of the painting proved beneficial to the continuation of the discussion, because it was pointed to when clarifying or positioning arguments. It also revealed problems in the verbal communication related to linguistic misinterpretation, since the session was conducted in both English and Italian. Whereas 'public' was understood as physical public space by the Italian speaking participants, it signified the public understood as people for the English speakers. Accordingly, 'public' was replaced with 'people'. One participant also asked to replace the written word 'comune' (meaning municipality) with 'public administration' (fig. 3). Having clarified these terms, it became possible to continue thinking on the same level about possible bridges between the two fields.

Figure 2. Video still from conference workshop on 26.06.2014 after 20:50 minutes.
Source: Video documentation by Agnieszka Mlicka.

While discussing approaches like urban acupuncture and micro interventions, two new questions emerged: how can we make people open their doors again to connect to others and what can the public administration do to improve the social impact on the street? The latter question resulted in a disagreement as to where Social Street's responsibilities lie and its opportunities are, and to what extent such a movement needs money, space and time. On the one hand, it was argued that things can be achieved without the public administration but on the other hand it was argued that a close relationship and collaboration between the people and the public administration is necessary. The conservative structure of Italian bureaucracy was criticised and the idea was brought up that a third actor could be useful to mediate between these two bodies. This is marked with the yellow circle in the centre of the painting (fig. 4). More crucially, the problem of passivity is brought up: people appear disinterested in engaging with others. While there are many followers on Social Street's Facebook page, very limited numbers actually attend the events.

Figure 3. Video still from conference workshop on 26.06.2014 after 37:24 minutes.
Source: Video documentation by Agnieszka Mlicka.

We discussed whether a Social Street could be more effective through the use of incentives, such as shop discounts for local residents, incentives with the potential to change the mentality of staying indoors. Incentives could encourage the public to socialise more, in order to create a sense of community. This could fundamentally change Social Street itself, from merely a virtual platform to a movement in public space. Alternatively, people could be nudged to socialise in public spaces by offering some form of play. While this was an interesting proposition, it was not developed further in the conversation. Finally, the discussion returned to the question of whether Social Street's representatives could become mediators between street residents and the public administration (fig. 5). Although the opinions were divided, there was a clear tendency to keep Social Street as a virtual platform for the locals.

Figure 4. Video still from conference workshop on 26.06.2014 after 55:04 minutes.
Source: Video documentation by Agnieszka Mlicka.

Figure 5. Video still from conference workshop on 26.06.2014 after 01:04:04 hours.
Source: Video documentation by Agnieszka Mlicka.

The Performance

The second approach to reflecting on the workshop is one that considers how the discussion took place. Through an analogy between the workshop and public space, some insights can emerge as to how such a common space can be realised. If the painting (fig. 6) is understood as a site on which relations are produced and played out (Donszelmann, 2009), it can provide certain clues as to how the session developed. In particular, it can function as an indicator, illustrating if, and how conflict played out between participants. Two types of conflict can be identified in the session. The first conflict was the incompatibility between approaches to discussing social relationships. Whereas some of these attitudes were visualised through small diagrams, they remained isolated points of view. There was no visual negotiating taking place, reflecting the lack of mutual questioning and listening within the conversation. Visual negotiation can be discerned when, for example, participants work together on one image by layering ideas and using contrasting colours. In the first iterations of this painting, the visual concepts were neither in direct confrontation nor in constructive contribution to other ideas, even if they might have been responses to previously mentioned concepts. They existed on a different level of engagement with the topic of public space. Within the verbal communication, the participants talked past each other and parallel conversations were conducted to avoid confrontation. This problem of parallel conversations revealed even more systematic problems concerning how disciplinary boundaries create barricades against interdisciplinary collaboration. As has been observed in the discipline of architecture at large (Till, 2009), there was also a tendency in this workshop to maintain a hierarchical relationship between the professional as 'the expert' and the citizen as 'layperson'. Instead, a more productive common space could be achieved if participants acknowledged that they are simultaneously expert citizens as well as citizen experts (Till, 2005). Without this attitude, negotiation is evaded rather than invited.

Figure 6. Photograph of the collaborative painting from the conference workshop on 26.06.2014.
Source: Photo documentation by Agnieszka Mlicka.

The second conflict was revealed during discussions in relation to the question as to where Social Street should be situated between the people and the public administration. The low density of the painting at this stage reveals that participants were disengaged from the process, leaving the table for periods of time or turning their attention elsewhere. This disrupted the discussion and made constructive negotiation unsustainable. A number of images were painted out of time with the conversation, for example when participants returned to the table and started painting without joining in the discussion. On other occasions, whilst one participant was engaged in the act of painting another participant would attempt to take over the conversation, instead of allowing the discussion to slow down and in doing so make time for listening. As a result, it was difficult to bring the discussion through the four stages of sense-making, confrontation, negotiation and collaboration. In particular, what was lacking was a more critical self-conscious reflection on the participatory process. The conflicts were touched upon, but could not be played out without the full involvement of the participants.

A shared concern arises by comparing the way that public space was discussed and, through analogy, performed in this workshop: are people actually interested in socialising in or through a public space? Within the conversation, this question emerged as a fundamental problem to both Social Street and the existence of public space in cities. In regard to the process of creating a shared space through collaborative painting, there was both limited contribution and a limited capacity to negotiate. At the end of the session, there was no sense of having reached a higher or different level of understanding. If public space means connecting people with each other, then the way in which public space is negotiated must reveal the willingness to connect by way of listening, asking and talking.

There might indeed be a need, as noted in the session, for incentives or nudges to bring people together. In this workshop, collaborative painting was utilized as such an enticement to work together. While this might not be a preferred or familiar mode of creativity for all involved, participants need to take responsibility to *participate* (an active form as opposed to merely being a participant) if they want to realise a truly public space. After all, a public space without a public remains a blank canvas.

Conclusion

What are the implications of this pragmatic approach to understanding public space? There are two suggestions that I would like to make here. First, a truly public space cannot be realised if the principles of common space are not adopted within the process of thinking about public space. Without the willingness or ability to reach out to others and communicate in a constructive way there is no opportunity for a common space. This problem has been theoretically approached through three modes of proactive participation: attitude, relevance and responsibility (Miessen, 2010; Till, 2011). Such an ideal framework for participation, however, leaves unsolved the question of how to accomplish this in practice. This leads to the second suggestion, that to achieve a mode of communication which enables people to work together towards a common space, a shared language must be found. This means a shared language not only in the linguistic sense of arriving at the same interpretation of words, but also in terms of disciplinary language by discarding jargon, and in terms of how participants might address each other without a haughty attitude. If participants do not make an effort to meet each other on the same level, there is a limited likelihood of achieving a common space.

The workshop was a creative exercise in performing such a common space, with the painterly approach offering a common language. Firstly, this is because painting as a visual medium remains isolated from the problems inherent to verbal communication, such as jargon or linguistic issues, providing a secondary visual layer to develop ideas. Secondly, it is an unfamiliar medium to most participants so there is no schism between experts and laypersons, opening up ground for an equal platform for participation. The quest for a common language does not, however, mean that consensus is sought. Rather, it means that participants can: commence upon making sense of their differing perspectives; confront these differences and reveal the points of conflict; negotiate solutions and alternatives and finally, arrive at a point of a collaborative effort towards the new goal. Nevertheless, as the Chinese saying goes, if the wrong man uses the right means, the right means work in the wrong way. The way that painting is used as a means for facilitating spatial negotiation ultimately depends on the intentions of all participants. The workshop as analogy for creating public space implies that it is a challenge for the local community to use the street proactively, especially at a time when it is easier to communicate through Facebook than face-to-face.

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