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2018 **DESIGN** EDUCATORS **RESEARCH** CONFERENCE

Designing sensorial dialogues

Keywords

tangible and Intangible materialities, processual design, embodied sketching, experiential knowledge, visual and non-visual design research, multimodal techniques, staging



Figure 1. Workshop-performance 'Staging a smelly atmosphere' and public discussion. Swedish Research Council's annual symposium on artistic research 2017. Stockholm University of the Arts. Stockholm, November 28-29, 2017.

Doing Design Research

Designing with volatile, invisible and intangible materialities need experiential methods. Through the experimental format suggestive of “through research” (Frayling 1993) in our previous collaborations, we proposed various experiential set-ups and working scripts that were directed by our constant dialogue (Figure 1). We want to investigate further the potentials of designing through the speculative and embodied method for design research.

With this proposal, we are addressing the “doing design research” for the experiential forms through our project. Our interest is to investigate ways of designing with the invisible and intangible materialities, such as light and smell, since these are experiential qualities, it is best explored through doing. The workshop proposed is aimed at opening up questions to design spaces with such atmospheric materialities through the low-tech explorative and speculative way.

We seek for experiential forms that go beyond graphic and model forms in spatial design. What are the processes, methods and materials to design with intangibles through the tangibles? For instance, designing with tactile surfaces of textiles through a smell, sound or light set-up, referring to our workshop-performance *staging a smelly atmosphere*, we touch the “three principle types of experiential knowledge: explicit, tacit and ineffable” (Biggs 2004, 6). The interactions with the materials become the tacit component, smells are the ineffable (Reason 2003) and the interpretation along with the representation of the practice is the explicit knowledge that is generated through our collaboration.

Background

We relate to the emerging design research that highlights the performative and processual dimensions of design practice and research (De Visscher, Boussard & Vareilles 2016) as well as the embodied ideation ways, which are actually difficult to convey (Tomico, Wilde & Vallgård 2017). When working with intangible and invisible materials, visual methods become redundant. However, when allowing embodied and experiential research methods together with the visual methods, there is a dialogue between the tangible and intangible materialities.

Through the practice, the dialogue emerges. "I shall consider designing as a conversation with the materials of a situation." (Schön 2003, 78) In this case, it is not just about the verbal dialogue between design researchers in cross-disciplinary settings, but also the design process that allows materials and the ambient conditions to encounter each other in unexpected and unpredictable ways. It is also about the dialogue between the researcher and the materials in the space. As argued by Dyrssen (Dyrssen 2010, 223-239) "Staging explorative experiments use invention, intervention and discovery as the main driving forces when setting up and actively examining specific situations. This may reveal the unexpected, repressed or hidden, and it trains the researcher in rapidly switching between associative and systematic thinking, to develop an intuitive precision and different types of logic."

How does a researcher approach spatial design research with diverse materialities? What questions open up? Agreeing with Helgason (Helgason 2016) on speculative approach that initiates dialogue when working through different perspectives from various disciplines (Mitrovic & Šuran 2016), this workshop combines visual and non-visual design research methods that demonstrate a speculative approach to spatial designing. Also, creating atmospheric set-ups/models through the materialities that are invisible and intangible for

spatial designing, we use design as a tool as suggested by Dunne et.al to create ideas (Dunne 2013).

The common thread within any of the design fields is the visual methods of working. Due to application of different materials and different outputs, these methods vary and perhaps lead to creating boundaries within the disciplines. However, as Mitrović (Mitrovic et al 2016) argues that multidisciplinary/transdisciplinary thinking would allow to open up the dialogue and question these borders within the disciplines with a speculative practice (Mitrovic et al 2016). Can these dialogues become a design method or a communicative tool?

Workshop concept and aims

The explorations within this workshop proposal deal with the visual, olfactory and tactile senses. Through dynamic spatial arrangements with “textile artefacts” the intangibles become materialised. For instance, light effects obtain tangible boundaries in relation to surfaces in space (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Visuals from explorations with light - surface interactions (indoor and outdoor).

Through drawing, sketching on paper, digitally or through scale models, it is difficult to grasp the intangible aspects of the space and their interactions. However, what if we are able to explore, represent and articulate aspects like smells, light and colour through an embodied sketching, i.e. doing research by performing, staging with chosen materialities? The traditional spatial ideation techniques are challenged in this way through the immediate interactions with dynamic spatial arrangements here taken as atmospheric setups. Thus,

allowing to integrate diverse shifting environmental conditions (for example changing lighting of a room, adding moisture or changing temperature), characteristic bodily movements and a variety of material props. In addition, we not only consider the more distant frontal or top view but also the exploration of the inside and around (various perspectives in 360°) in order to understand the atmospheric interactions of space and the “atmospheric expressions” that emanate. This is an opportunity to explore the potentials of designing with such analogue atmospheric setups in the context of the computer-assisted design, HCI and AI. To be able to articulate the unseen and unrealized atmospheric qualities that require other senses than only visual but also the multi-sensorial inputs that would bridge this knowledge to the latest technology for the meaningful outputs.

With this workshop we invited the participants (designers & practitioners) to a speculative approach to explore and negotiate the non-visual materialities of a space. And to indulge in designing the sensorial dialogue with the body, materials and space. The participants were expected to explore through embodied sketching using tangible (textile textures) and intangible materialities (smells and light) of the materials and space respectively. Taking a speculative approach the participants had to create and discuss the experiential set-up. Our main claim for the relevance of this method and multimodal research display was that it enables participants to explore and discuss how designers arrange and express the intangible materialities as a part of the ideation process. In addition, that such exploration can trigger a dialogue between materials and the designing environment.

Workshop outcomes

The workshop was attended by design researchers, designers (graphic and communication), writers, educators, a new media artist and a cine-ethnographer. With this diverse mix of participants, the explorations using the intangible and invisible materialities for spatial design concepts made for an interesting workshop. The materials to be explored in this workshop were smell and light for spatial design research. The materials and set-up was new

to all of the participants, however, they were highly intrigued and motivated to explore these materials. There were two groups formed; one group had a focus on the smells and the other group focussed on the light (Figure 3). Both the groups had textile materials that were either treated with smells or had inherent smells and were light reflective or light emitting, respectively (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Two 'workstations' with textile materials.



Figure 4. Two groups explore the given materials through the set-ups

The group focussing on the smells started exploring the smells of different materials at hand (Figure 5), and created their own understanding of this material through the iterative

process of combining the smell materials in layers or creating a pattern by placing these in a certain sequence. The group speculated on the ambient conditions, like air, that would add movement to the smells in space. They created an experiential set-up with a narrative of *Smellengers (Scavengers) hunt*. The concept was focusing on the olfactory sense, as they provided olfactory stimuli to bring about the associations and memories through selected smells which in turn would trigger the imagery/visuals in the mind even if the visual stimulus for these situations was missing.

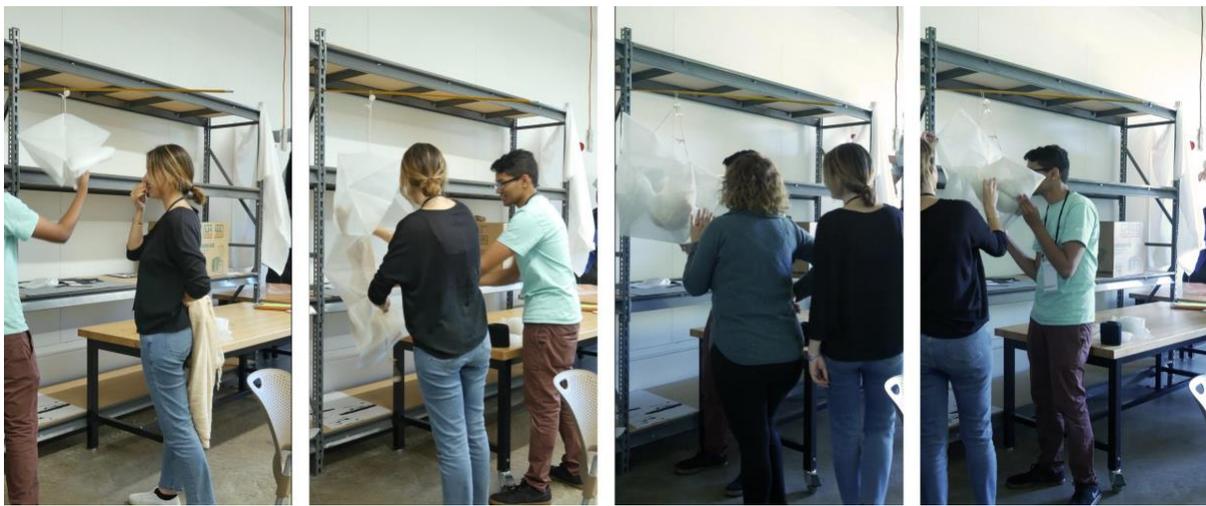


Figure 5. Group exploring with smells.

The concept developed by this group speculated on smell acting as a trigger to other senses, especially the visual sense. Chosen smells by the group helped them correlate with their own certain memories. Even in absence of any visual stimuli for this memory, they could recall a detailed imagery and visuals triggered upon smelling. This speculative concept fits into the the aim of the workshop in that the experiential knowledge through the smells in a spatial design set-up creates a sensorial atmosphere (Figure 6) and the dialogues in the form of nostalgia, connection to a space and time from the past memories.



Figure 6. Presentation of the set-up with smells.

The second group, focused on light as the main element, to create atmospheric expressions, the sensorial dialogue essentially happened between the designers and the experiential setting they built (Figure 7). The group worked in a synergy in a particularly expressive way. In a short time given for the explorations they combined textiles with different properties and distinct light sources, through rapidly sketched shapes and structures and with little verbal communication on what the setting was supposed to be about and look like. The emerging remarks were about the unfamiliar material surface qualities, textures and effects. The key element of the installation got the name of the *robotic light arm* or the *probe*. It was meant to be manipulated, in contrast to the rest of the structure that was a static arrangement of textile surfaces and other light sources. The group also explored with layering of materials in relation to varied depths of the installation. The outer layer surrounding the setting—a semi-transparent fabric wall—was given distinct perceptive qualities by adding a coloured filter on one area. The setting got an allusion to a puppet theater: the group mentioned the messy playful aspect of it and invited others to

animate it with the light arm (Figure 8). During the exploration, light sources would be put in different places, turned on and of, thus creating shifts in the surface expressions. Therefore the dialogue between the setting and the ambient conditions was also present, however not much pronounced, as the ambient lighting situation did not suggest several modes.



Figure 7. Group exploring with light.



Figure 8. Presentation of the set-up with light.

At the end of the workshop, both the groups created an experiential set-up each: olfactory artefacts and visually stimulating artefacts in relation to light, respectively. Through doing these explorations in a three-dimensional form while dealing with the different materialities, the concepts brought in diverse viewpoints of each participant.

Workshop participants were expected to get an understanding how to capture and demonstrate the embodied research process through the performative workshop format. We also invited them to experience a method to tackle sensorial aspects of spaces (light and smells) in a design process and to use multimodal techniques to explore, represent and design varied sensory expressions.

By emphasizing the experiential knowledge through the tangible and intangible materialities at the forefront of designing, the research process becomes more situated. Usual ideation processes start with the concept proposals and essentially verbal and visual communication. Participants could bring in their individual ideas in a dialogue through this experiential setting to support the narrative. Which, in turn, helped them rephrase and have another perspective in putting their concept forward. We can summarize that this performative-workshop methodology has a potential to be a part of the ideation process within the design research.

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