Parameters vs. Values: Towards a Relational Construction of Space

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Short Communication

Relational Urbanism has focused on the research about how digital tools of design and representation can push the design discipline for architects, landscape architects and urbanists as distinct culturally situated praxis. We question concepts around the generation of design parameters and values and how different tools can bring these into a relational fabrication of space time and value.

If we look at these two definitions together we can see that both parameters and values are relative. The main difference between them is that while parameters relate to systems, values relate to individuals. Also, while parameters can be coded and easily transferable, values are more linked to what it has been called "Tacit" forms of knowledge. Tacit knowledge, as was defined by Polanyi in the 70's is that knowledge that can be transmitted but not necessarily codified. In other words, it relates to forms of knowledge where one knows more than what we can tell. This is a term that has been used to coin the type of knowledge generated in the "creative" industries and where designers have a central role in its production.

What we think that designers can bring into discussions on value within the urban project is precisely their capacity to master, manage and productively engage with the tacit dimension behind the formation of value. This gives designers a prominent position within this permanent discussion, negotiation and struggle which is the relational fabrication of Space Time and Value in the urban environment. This is what we call a relational approach to design and what we have been developing are tools to explore how far we can push it. We call these tools Relational Urban Models.

These are digital toolkits made of design and analytic models where uses can interact with spatial proposals and understand the consequences of their actions in other domains. They can include parametric design components, database analysis and optimisation engines to allow flexible workflow targeted to a particular urban context.

In the case discussed below the tacit dimension was more important than others. The model, which combined physical design, digital capture and parametric tools, was used in order to obtain information from the final users of the space (in this case the skaters) but also open up a series of related discussions that were essential for its insertion within a wider context (relationship to other play areas, surveyance etc.).

The projects consisted in the design of a skate park and play area in Ballyfermot, West Dublin. Knowing of the potentially contested nature of any intervention in the public space, the competition was organised in two stages with a consultation process between them. The purpose was to try to address local concerns (visual of concrete bowls, potential noise impacts and issues with anti-social behaviour) before the proposals were finally drafted. The model discussed in this article was part of this consultation process.

For this case we tried a hybrid model consisting on a sandbox toolkit combined with digital capture. Further work was later carried out in order to bring the data captured into a parametric model. The sandbox toolkit allowed non expert designers to explain the types of geometries they were interested about. Using spheres, rulers and angles, BMX users were able to generate options for ideal combination of bowls, half pipes, spines and other landscape features where they could play tricks. A simple Kinect sensor would capture 3D data as well as image which could be later processed and fed into the master-plan.

The results of the consultation and usage of the model proved to be invaluable for the design process. On the one hand, BMX users and skaters, which initially were not willing to give feedback into the design team, saw the session as an opportunity to express them and make some form of wish list. What was interesting is that the level of specificity in the design conversations went far beyond what could have otherwise been possible. The design team learned about tricks, particular features and combination of movement that were later incorporated into the layout.

Coming back to the argument made before about the types of knowledge, the tacit quality of the design model allowed people to express and communicate far more efficiently that with any other means. It opened conversations on geometry, layout and affect that otherwise would simply be non-existent. This had a secondary effect in that the attitude of other members of the public also changed and different discussions with other groups (or domains as we have called them previously) such as parent, neighbours took place much more fluidly. This gave the designers clues about issues of safety (requiring location of play areas in close proximity to road), diversity of play (adding soft landscape bowls for younger kids) amongst others.

What came apparent from the experience of this project is that, given the right tools, people are likely to "jump into" design and be propositive. Those design proposals are a rich source of information for design teams as they embody the values and aspiration of final users while giving them a sense of ownership. Being able to define, frame and encourage that design experience so that it is productive for all parties is a skill that we argue should be apprehended by architects and landscape architects. What we are experiment in projects like this is to what point digital tools help foster this new form of thinking about design.

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