Design for Social Innovation

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Reflections on the case of ReTuren,
an upcycling station in South Malmö.

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Introduction

Based on the reviewing of a ten weeks experience in the field of social innovation and participatory design, this essay presents a few observations and outcomes that emerged from this case, using supporting and relevant references. We will first take a brief look at the context in which the project was established. Then we will dive into the different opportunities we found and strategies we discovered as the project unfolded, through two selected directions presented here. We will finally conclude with some thoughts that raised from stepping back as well as outputs that can be useful to keep in mind for participating in that particular kind of project, and reflections dealing with issues on a higher level.

Designing in the context of ReTuren : an upcycling station in Malmö

Through this essay, we will consider an upcycling station in Lindängen, ReTuren as the case on which we contributed and focused on. Lindängen is an area in the South of Malmö which deals with several issues (security, unemployment, waste handling). Led by VA SYD (the company handling waste in Malmö), and in collaboration with STPLN (makerspace in Malmö) and researchers at K3, this initiative tries to go beyond having a better waste handling. Indeed, it also attempts at developing the place as a meeting place by engaging people around upcycling and repairing activities. Our task as designers was therefore to explore future possibilities for ReTuren. We dealt with several concerns and made observations when we arrived. For instance, as ReTuren was about to open when we arrived, people commited in the project didn't had already settled routines, which made it somehow tough to imagine what could work better, or how to improve things at first sight. We also noticed that there were different viewpoints from collaborators on the project, coming from a gathering of people from various backgrounds (waste handling, creation, research, environment). This means that the collaborators do not necessarily have the same approach and goals but this also makes it richer and exploratory. A focus point in our study was to find the best way to connect with the different people and actors in Lindängen but we noticed that an important network was already existing in this zone.

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Noémie Nicolas
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Giving a voice as a start

One of our first approach and one that lasted during all our process was a question of getting stories, and primarily to 'give a voice' to people in Lindängen. By that we mean of course that we had firstly to understand the context by asking questions to local actors in Lindängen (in ReTuren but also people from various associations, civil servant) in order to get the 'history' of the area from different point of views.

If getting these opinions was necessary, we wanted to collect inputs not only from main actors, but also from people living in Lindängen, by including them in our process. The case of Malmö's Living Lab (Emilson 2014) was particularly relevant, as the practice of the designers is focused on "collaborative design processes" and building "long-term relationships" with stakeholders as a basis of an in-depth understanding, and to explore more things with them. Even if the duration of the project was short, we wanted to build a collaborative basis that would led the continuation of the project. For instance, one of the experiment revolved around using the place as a platform of expression during open events. This acted as a start for us to identify issues by ourselves but also to get an idea of the interests and wishes of Lindängen. This was also a way to introduce ReTuren as a particular place for citizens, a place that listen what you are able to do, what you are scared of and what you wish for. Moreover, one of the experiment was also to show what the place is meant for by collecting stories from people, by asking people for stories of used objects from close relatives that made them happy. By this means, we suggested that in the place stand used objects that could also make them happy and that if they were inclined at giving things, it would also make other people happy.

These experimentations showed pros and cons, the latter coming from the difficulty to manage the breaking of the rules, and also groups of people that tends to take up all the place from other groups. Some examples in Design for Sharing (Light 2014) showed indeed that even a little tentative has to be settled with care and supervised by someone, which we effectively noticed. We for instance had many experiments with expression tools that both revealed agressive or topic-unrelated messages. This is a part of free expression and representation of a voice, but this also means that that kind of initiative can be a magnet for excesses and need a form of supervision. Moreover, ensuring a fair repartition in the collaboration remains an hard task, as some groups and people can take over (Light 2014).

It is also difficult to use these data as a characteristic sample representing all the population in the area but it remains a good source of qualitative inputs on people wants and needs, which is important in the context of an area that bases most on its initiatives on citizen shoulders. It is also already the achievement of a goal of the project, showing to people that they are taken into consideration in the evolution of the project. In attempting to describe our

status, which has to be redefined and considered on a new angle when talking about social innovation (Manzini, 2015), we found in this case our place as designers as intermediates between Lindängen and ReTuren, acting as supporters of both entities' messages.

To open possiblities, we extended our 'giving voices' to things in addition to people. In a repertoire of possibilities for ReTuren, we added stories and gave life to waste in the street and second-hand objects in ReTuren. We therefore prototyped little interventions about adding a layer of story to make things more interesting, attractive, valuable and to be considered with care. Early prototyping made us realize ways that should be given up and ways that deserve to be taken further (Emilson, 2014) as well as dilemmas it can raise (Emilson, Hillgren, Seravalli, 2011). We for instance were confronted to issues such as how to produce things and possibilities without producing extra waste, which would be a real nonsense in this context. One of the other dilemmas is to open possibilities but to make propositions that stay aligned with the context and culture (Light 2014).

Making the infrastructure visible

With our first steps directed on analyzing the situation and getting local stories by working alongside ReTuren and by providing support for expression, in addition to the repertoire of ideas we built for ReTuren, we had the feeling to have a lot of content that could make sense as a basis for exploring new options. An underlying principle during our process was to map things, visible or not, firstly for us as a tool to understand the context and the infrastructure (the skills, the actors, different places in Lindängen, how is organized ReTuren) using inputs from ReTuren members and people in Lindängen. But it appeared for us that it was interesting to see how people from Lindängen would appropriate all this stuff. What about a tool for infrastructuring, a tool that would make any kind of potential connections visible ? As infrastructuring is a dynamic and continuous process (Emilson, Hillgren, Seravalli, 2011), making a 'finished' tool is merly impossible and even not desirable as it would only represent infrastructure at one point, whereas it constantly evolves due to different factors. We therefore attempted to create a tool with different types of printed elements such as groups of people, skills, interests, type of waste and various maps of places in Lindängen.

This tool turned more or less as a game needing rules and we tried out some differents tests with actors of ReTuren. These trials received positive feedback. We asked for instance to reconsider older projects from another perspective (if one thing had been different) or to imagine meaningful projects using a mixture of imposed words. A prospective direction of research would be to gather different actors from the area to evaluate if it can become a way to plan and manage future activities together.

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Noémie Nicolas
January 2016

Going further, the tool can even be a platform to develop an agnostic space. It means that if it can be a tool to agree on activities between different actors, it could also be a support not only to agree but also to debate on things, to reveal disagreement points and differing opinions.

We can say that by doing so we gave access to design tools to the actors, to foster thinking about how to create meaningful connections differently from what they are used to. However it is also delicate to completely give this status of designer to anybody. Even if nowadays we can consider everyone to be a designer in a way (Manzini, 2015), it remains that it might be hard to participate in creation activities for some people even if clear rules can guide the participants.

Thinking on the process : tactics & reflections

In hindsight, we can elaborate general tactics from this experience. Some are similar to other social innovation cases we already related on : aligning with the place and culture you're in, using existing networks (Light 2014), but also basic procedures we established quite naturally such as give time/take time in order to establish fairness and trust in our process. If it is really relevant to have in mind tactics from other cases to avoid repeating the same mistakes, it remains that it is mostly by doing that you realize how and why things work or not, also because each case is different.

On an other level and beyond tactics, we can re-read this whole experience through a political angle and ask the question of what is our role in that kind of context (and particulary that kind of area) : elaborate solutions or raise questions ? As stated in the first paragraph, by the willingness of 'giving a voice' and also by using a tool for debating arises the question of democracy. The way the designer chooses to orient the design process is already political, intended or not (DiSalvo 2010). It is then an orientation on either a 'design for politics' or a 'political design' which will make the difference regarding the essential aim behind the taken directions (DiSalvo 2010). The work of the designer can be in the first place to name things according to the reality and try not to have a too 'politically correct' vocabulary that can sometimes hide things and reality. There are indeed terms that can minimize an issue, people or group status and influence in a wrong direction the design process. Considering these issues that can seem at first sight disconnected from a traditional practice of design turns out to be necessary, meaning that new skills lacking nowadays for a designer might be fundamental tomorrow.

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Noémie Nicolas
January 2016

Conclusion

Being adaptative, giving time to understand, seeing beyond roles boundaries, could sum up some of what can be required when diving into a social innovation case. Considering what we leave as designers once the period of time allowed is over also seems crucial and it is something we took into consideration by thinking of objets and things that can stay and evoluate even without us. Designers don't need anymore to bring the final result but rather to outline solutions that users will adapt to their own need (Seravalli 2014). Choosing the right moment to effectuate the transmission is also something that need reflection (Botero, Saad-Sulonen). Indeed, these more long-term projects are hard to deliminate in time and investment, which make them also more interesting.

Complexity could finally be the word concluding this report. This being said, it is not a complexity that obstruct new possibilities and opportunities. Rather, even if the context, people, situations and solutions brought are complex (Manzini, 2015), it can be considered as something positive and rich. It also re-examines the current status of the designer, a status that become more complex and still remains to be defined.

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