DESIGN THAT KEEPS DESIGNING: DESIGNING FOR PARTICIPATION

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Designing for participation; communication design; co-authorship; human-centred design.

INTRODUCTION

Fashion City was a project undertaken as part of the Melbourne Fashion Festival, a citywide celebration and promotion of fashion and the fashion industry in Melbourne, Australia. Fashion City explored alternative ways that the public can engage in the festival. In contrast with the common activity of watching fashion parades and viewing garments on display at various exhibited locations, Fashion City asked the public to define their own interpretation of ‘fashion’ for Melbourne. The team of designers created various design artefacts in order to encourage, curate and present the interpretations submitted by the public.

In creating Fashion City, the designers discovered insights into the transformations required in the designer and in design thinking in order to participate in such projects. Beyond the technical skills required to complete such projects, what became most interesting were the insights that the project allowed into the established paradigms for participation in design. The discussion in this paper draws on literature on participatory design and human-centred design and applies this knowledge to critique the project in a communication design context.

The authors do not claim that Fashion City utilised an accepted method of participatory design. Discourse on participatory design emphasises the direct involvement of selected ‘end users’ during the design process (Schuler & Namioka, 1993) through a variety of consultations. It should be made clear that members of the public, the ‘target participants’ for Fashion City, were not consulted during the initial design process. Instead the project explored processes that attempted to design for
their participation. By exploring how communication designers can design outcomes that enable content creation by intended audiences, the authors reveal the ambiguity of where and how design processes begin and end. This is discussed further in one of the lessons learnt and knowledge generated through this exploration.

The authors of this paper, themselves members of the Fashion City team, have undertaken critical reflection on the process and outcome of Fashion City. As a practice-led design research project, which employs a cyclical process of action and critical reflection to generate design knowledge (van Schaik 2003), the project became a valuable site to explore concepts of participation in communication design projects. Critical reflection was undertaken as this paper was written, which revealed new issues, challenges and assumptions within communication design practice. These valuable insights have been summarised as lessons learnt.

Firstly, in Lesson one: Design for participation potentially has no ending, the discussion engages with a broader understanding of participation and what participation can bring to a design project. Critical questioning challenged when and how participation can potentially occur, as well as redefining a design process as never-ending. This reflection started to define a process of design that the designers were not familiar with previously. Rather than a monologic process of communication, the project explored a dialogic process that had the potential to continuously evolve, capable of surprising, informing and stimulating all participants, including the initiating designers. This led to an understanding of de-centralising the designer and the designed outcome as key concepts to designing for participation.

Secondly, in Lesson two: Requesting participation – a limited form of co-authorship, the discussion critiqued the limited way that the design teams invited the public to participate. Fashion City revealed the importance of critically assessing a design team’s unspoken assumptions and how it was unintentionally embedded within a project. The paper asks how multiple forms of participation could increase participation in the project, and how a broader definition of participation could affect the design for participation process.

Lastly, in Lesson three: Design for uncertainty, not certainty, the paper reflects on what has come to be defined as ‘participation’ in participatory design. It discusses ignoring, misreading and breaking the ‘rules of participation’ as forms of participation that often go unnoticed or are seen as irrelevant. Including these forms as participation has led to the understanding that uncertainty and happenstance are critical aspects to allow for, and even encourage, when designing for participation.
These lessons are discussed in more detail following the project description of *Fashion City*.

**Project description and background**

*Fashion City* was a collaborative project undertaken by seven postgraduate design researchers at RMIT University, Australia, who were also active communication design practitioners. *Fashion City* was part of the Melbourne Fashion Festival (26th February – 4th March 2006), one of the largest fashion events in Australia.

The project set out to explore how the people of the city of Melbourne, Australia, could express their relationship between themselves, the city and fashion. To link in with the Melbourne Fashion Festival, the project used a metaphor of fabric, sewing, weaving and stitching to thread together the disparate experiences of the city as one traverses through it. The project took as its foundation the stance that the ‘city of Melbourne is fashion’ and what concepts of ‘fashion’ could be revealed and defined by the city’s inhabitants. Rather than the usual passive viewing of ‘fashionable’ garments, the designers collaborating on *Fashion City* explored what might happen if they invited the public to take an active role in defining ‘fashion’ – whether they are garments, attitude, atmosphere, history or the colour of Melbourne. The designers used a process of framing and curation in order to achieve this. In this way the project aimed to generate alternative definitions of fashion, and to some degree, democratise how the Melbourne Fashion Festival promoted ‘fashion’. The designers on the project did not know what this redefined fashion would be, and were motivated by curiosity and excitement of what could be revealed through the project.
Fig 1. Fashion City website

These motivations translated into a series of provocations and interventions that were aimed to encourage and ‘frame’ the participation of the people of Melbourne. The website (www.fashion-city.org/) (see fig. 1) was designed to engage people in the project and collect and incorporate submissions from the public. Maps containing guided walks were distributed around the city. These used random devices or themed trajectories to provide starting points and ‘ways in’ to the project. These devices were designed to initiate the generation of personal reflective thoughts. The maps (see fig. 2) were not intended to be a ‘how to’ guide to walk and explore the city. Instead, they aimed to be the start of a conversation to be continued by others – to trigger exploration, curiosity and discovery.
Fig 2. Fashion City guided walks ‘On a full moon night’.

*Fashion City* used these prompting devices to invite the participants to write stories and take photographs and upload them to the *Fashion City* website. Participants chose from a list of email addresses to ‘tag’ their submitted work thematically. The available tag words were predefined by the designers (*grand, path, dash, strand, reveal, pink, black, fashtastic, hello, shiny, clear, worn, dark, voyeur, woolly, detail, pattern, in, out, fake, blank*) and formed one of the curatorial strategies of Fashion City. Once uploaded participant submissions were incorporated into the *Fashion City* visual stream (see fig. 3).
Fig 3. Still from Fashion City visual stream.

The *Fashion City* programmed ‘structure’ generated a complex, multi-authored visual stream beyond the control of any one person – a whole formed from disparate parts. The visual stream never repeated itself, instead constantly shifting and re-combining; yet its core was pre-defined and curated by the project instigators. The programming, which structured the visual stream, was conceptually and philosophically concomitant to the aims of the project. It created a dynamic framework which generated itself ‘on the fly’ based on a simple algorithm. The algorithm provided containers for expression and juxtaposed and overlaid these containers. It incorporated the individual submissions and mixed them together, using the predefined tags to maintain a thematic base. Thus the structure enabled the re-presentation of the submitted material and, as such, provided a way to visually weave the manifold participants’ perspectives of Melbourne as ‘a city of fashion’.

This visual stream was displayed on the website as well as the atrium screen at Federation Square (see fig. 4), the main public gathering place and arts hub of Melbourne. Initially, the team of designers seeded the visual stream with their own images collected from their own initial investigative walks. It was intended that these first round of images would quickly be overwhelmed by the publicly submitted images.
An experimental approach in a communication design context

The *Fashion City* project differs from commercially focused communication design projects in which clients’ messages are dominant and communicated in a monologic form to a target audience. The designer’s role in this context is perceived as service-provider. The designer's role is to clarify the client’s message and convey it to ensure that it engages the audiences’ attention according to the client's intentions. The usual intent is to establish positive and favourable responses to the communication content. *Fashion City*, however, significantly differed from the dominant mode of practice due to the absence of a commercial ‘client’ and the subsequent lack of economic imperatives. This allowed the designers to experiment with forms of communication that enabled the public to become co-authors and to push the concept of ‘democratising fashion’.

To begin evaluating the success of the team's intentions and critique the project, to understand 'what it did' and learn from this process, the authors listened to the feedback from the public and critically reflected on the outcomes of the project. Lessons learnt from the critique and reflecting on the project, are discussed in the following sections.
Lesson One: Design for participation potentially has no ending

Typically, participatory design emphasises a method of designing in which emerging designs are developed by iteratively involving users, designers and project stakeholders in the design process. As stated earlier, Fashion City did not undertake a participatory design process in this accepted definition. Members of the public were not involved with the team of designers in considering and constructing the various facets for design engagement. This paper seeks to challenge and broaden the accepted views and methods of participatory design and suggest how participation can, and does, validly occur at later stages of the design process. If Fashion City is viewed as an example of a continuous design process that potentially never ends, the definition of participation and participatory design can begin to change. Compared to how designing is usually perceived to ‘finish’ once an outcome is produced, disseminated and released from the control of its various co-creators, Fashion City as a design intervention is an anomaly. The team envisaged from the inception of the project that Fashion City was a design process that had no ending. The designers could be described as ‘gestating’ the Fashion City project from its concept to its initial structure. The project began its ‘real’ life once it was ‘released’ into the world.

Fashion City was a project that potentially had no ending. The project had the potential to evolve with time through people’s participation, inhabitation, disengagement or misinterpretations. Fashion City de-centralised the designer and the designed outcome. The project focus was no longer about the designers’ control, creation or input, nor the artefact itself. The designers and the designed outcome were only parts of the sum, a totality that was impossible to perceive nor useful to define. In doing so, the authors discovered that it provoked and created a process of design that they were not aware of or familiar with previously. Fashion City, as a research project, explored a ‘scaffold’ (Sanders, 2002) model within communication design practice – a model that allows participants to define the final form within a pre-defined structure. The ‘scaffold’ model is discussed by Sanders within a participatory design environment as a design framework that consists of tools, methods and languages that can enable users and designers to co-author and co-create communication activities. Sanders proposes this model as a form of co-design established from an egalitarian relationship between the designer and the user.

Fashion City was an experimental research project that explored participation as a
central value and objective. It broadened the collaborator’s understanding of participation and communication design’s relation to it. The project also revealed that this process can be risky, uncertain and confronting but it has the potential to offer designers new understandings about the nature of design and design for participation.

Lesson two: Requesting a particular participation – a limited form of co-authorship

Since the project launch, the design team received critical comments from participants who found Fashion City confusing. They didn’t know ‘what they had to do’. Their feedback revealed that it was too much effort for them to walk the streets, take photos and upload it onto the website – ‘so why bother?’ Possibly owing to this the project failed to generate a strong level of participation from the people of Melbourne. Despite the effort of placing maps in strategic locations around the city, sending press releases to various broadcast media outlets and staging a ‘launch party’, very few people (outside a committed circle) took part.

To a trained and practicing designer, the realisation that the public did not engage with the project as intended was a hard blow to take. The designers’ usual professionalism for creating quality work centres on prioritising, and to a certain extent, attempting to guarantee that the designed outcome will engage the desired audience. The reputation of a designer’s practice is often based on case studies in their portfolio that can empirically demonstrate that the client’s message was communicated successfully to the target audience. That Fashion City lacked evidence in achieving the intended engagement could be seen as a ‘failure’ in the project’s methods and outcomes.

This perceived failure and lack of evident engagement was a critical incident (Cherry, 1999) that enabled the authors to realise the valuable lessons hidden beneath this project. It became a turning point that enabled the authors to focus on the learning that came through exploring Fashion City as design research. This learning is not solely focused, as one might assume, on how to improve the project’s methods of public engagement, but also, on increasing awareness of the team’s expectations and assumptions that were brought to, and embedded in, the project.

The authors’ initial reflection revealed the expectations and assumptions by the design team that the public would participate in certain ways, fuelled by an allegiance to the project’s idealistic desires. However, upon reflection it is clear that the project
was very much at the periphery of mainstream design outcomes for the uninvolved, uninitiated passer-by. The public perceived the project as an oblique art project that was difficult to understand and participate in, other than to passively view the installation projection at Federation Square or online. In retrospect this reveals a significant shortfall in the design team’s consideration towards the public. Communication devices and strategies utilised in Fashion City came with embedded rules that involved several tasks to accomplish in order to be ‘included’ as a co-author. These tasks involved walking the city (with or without a map), taking photos, logging-on to the website and uploading images. There was a lack of considerations for including other forms of participation, such as an individual who simply explored and meandered the streets of Melbourne. In hindsight, Fashion City had embedded requests for participation that emphasised submitted materials to the website as a criteria for authorship. Co-authorship in this project context was framed by the content uploaded to the website. The public were not given choices in how and what they could author outside of the website. This limitation was reflected in the communication messages and mechanisms of Fashion City. The public was given two choices in this request – either join the project and follow the rules set by the designers, or be a spectator and watch from the sidelines.

The designers believed that the public would participate in the project because it was an oblique and interesting commentary on Melbourne and fashion. It was assumed that the public would embrace the opportunity to ‘turn the tables’ and produce their own ‘fashion of Melbourne’ as an alternative form of engagement to the usual passive mode of public participation. Perceived this way, the project was a ‘gift’ to the citizens of Melbourne. However, it was a gift that may have appeared arrogant, self-indulgent and incomprehensible to those citizens, who silently ‘gave it back’. The public voted through their silence that they would not accept this gift, irrespective of the project’s best intentions. This lack of participation revealed the necessity of actively maintaining and revealing a design team’s assumptions and expectations when embarking on design for participation.

**Lesson three: Design for uncertainty, not certainty**

Led by critique and reflection of the project, the authors have highlighted several questions surrounding the Fashion City team’s limited definitions of participation. If engagement is created in the desired audience using a tested and predictable ‘recipe’ for engagement, is it possible for the outcome to be a truly participative form
of engagement? If participation is based on an individual's free will, context and actions, can it really be guaranteed or even measured? Would such guarantee and measurements be based on literal and narrowly defined forms of participation? Furthermore, would the project outcome be disadvantaged, through this predictability, in its potential to become a generative research project?

These questions led the authors to re-think common expectations of the performance of design that evaluates success based on achieving desired engagements from audiences. ‘To design’ is often interpreted ‘to plan’ or ‘to provide a description’ (Cross, 2006). Designing is a way to fulfill a plan and to provide a description to the client and users of what is to be expected in the outcome. Designing, defined in this way, can tend to proscribe genuine opportunities for participation. However, designers cannot control the process of meaning-making by the audience, as it has many variables (Krippendorff, 2006). The meaning-making or sense-making can only occur when the audience has ‘met’ the designed outcome. It is highly personal, situated in the individual’s own experience and context. Audiences, as participants in the communication exchange, can then complete the message by bringing ‘their own expectations and interpretive practices to the exchange’ (Bush, 2003). Viewed this way, there is no ‘correct’ way for participation to occur – individuals can also choose to ignore or respond, or even misread or misunderstand the messages, as a form of participation.

When participation is often regarded as an active, physical and intentional form of engagement, suggesting notions that ignoring, misreading or misunderstanding are a form of participation may cause concern, especially in the participatory design community. Much of the literature in participatory design seeks to generate knowledge around methods of participation that require individuals to engage formally, actively and physically in the design process as a way to incorporate and explore their views of the world. Non-intentional, misdirected concepts of participation are conveniently omitted from participatory design case-studies. The authors argue that including the broader dimensions of participation that considers notions of ignoring, misreading or misunderstanding is a more ‘truthful’ reflection of engagement. Accepting this ‘truthfulness’ can be uncomfortable, but it can remind designers to genuinely respect individuals’ right to ignore, disengage and miscomprehend a designed outcome.

*Fashion City* led to a realisation that designing for participation also means designing for uncertainties. It is a process and outcome that surrenders to the ‘unknown’ and removing control. None of the stakeholders, designer or audience, knows what to
expect. Individual designers are required to lose control and become somewhat
disconnected from their envisaged solutions. Designing for participation requires that
the designer resist the urge to take control and instead embrace unpredictability and
happenstance. It is a position that many design practitioners will feel ‘contradictory’ to
their purpose and professionalism. In short, designing for participation and
uncertainty is a problematic view to hold and promote in the normative practices of
design.

Conclusion
The application of the understandings gained, both during the Fashion City project
and during the reflection upon the project, are ongoing. The designers who
 collaborated on the project continue to work on projects that engage the public and
involve public participation. Although the Fashion City can be seen as unsuccessful
on some levels, its effects remain within the design world and the world of public
participatory events. The upcoming Melbourne Festival includes a series of curated
walks entitled Walk this way (Melbourne International Arts Festival, 2009), utilising
personal mappings of the city which can be followed by participants. Fashion City
was a project rich in the learning it has offered to the authors and collaborators
providing insights into design processes and conceptualisations that are valuable
and significant. Designed outcomes that are ignored, disengaged or misunderstood
by potential audiences are often omitted from reporting in case studies. This reflects
the privileging of such case studies to report ‘accepted’ and ‘successful’ forms of
design engagement and audience participation. Yet there is much to be gained from
critically examining confronting and problematic scenarios of design that can enable
communication design practitioners and researchers to understand the complexities
of how design performs and exists in the world.

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