The politics of place: processes, outcomes and the implications for HCI research

Chiara Rossitto

Department of Computer and

Systems Sciences.

Stockholm, Sweden

chiara@dsv.su.se

Abstract

This paper discusses how philosophical accounts of the politics of place can help discuss the role of civic projects – as opposite to mere digital technologies – in fostering the labor and social forces that produce and construct places. This poses epistemological and analytical challenges for HCI research including for instance, the empirical and design implications deriving from specific conceptualizations of the politics of place, and foundational questions of what constitutes HCI research.

Author Keywords

Politics of place, participation, information infrastructure, ICT.

Introduction

HCI research has long been concerned with the philosophy of place, and with the analytical and design insights that different theorizations can provide. Foregrounding issues of embodiment and agency [10], felt and lived experience [1][16], past work has focused on how interactive technologies transform the human experience of place by enabling new encounters with the world, and possibilities to act within it [2][4][13][14][15]. Nevertheless, CHI turn to civic technologies and the political [9][11][12], to local initiatives and socially-engaged practices [3][5][6] calls for a renewed interest in place. There is a need to develop a better vocabulary and analytical lens that can help HCI researchers talk about the long-term impact and meaning of civic projects in relation to the specific places they are bound to. This is a twofold move. On the one hand it connects to the role of localities in shaping subjects, initiatives and the very environments that contextualize them. On the other hand, it presupposes an understanding of how civic and community-led initiatives are appropriated locally, while

transforming the places they are bound to. This means acknowledging that technological interventions are just a phase of broader and longer processes and that it is, therefore, paramount to account for what precedes or follows HCI projects locally.

Philosophy and the city

The French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre describes the appropriation of urban spaces as a fundamental right of its inhabitants [7]. Drawing on Marxist philosophy, appropriation is for Lefevbre a form of de-alienation that is necessary to re-orient the city towards the production of cooperative social relationships. This presupposes collective ownership and management of space based on the participation of local inhabitants, with their multiple and contrasting interests. Appropriation interweaves with participation and the inhabitants' realization of their active, social connections that enable them to claim the city and gain control over it. The right to the city is a spatial understanding of *politics*, in that groups and social classes can renew the city by outlining and producing alternatives. As such, it tightly connects to what Lefebvre defines as the conceptual triad of spatial practices, representation of space and representational space [8]. *Spatial practice* relates to the social space, the forces of production and reproduction, and to the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation. The *representation of space* is conceptualized space, the space of planners, urbanists, and social engineers who conceive the dominant space in any society. Representational space is instead the space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users. Together this triad characterizes space as the social construct of prevailing

forces, yet leaving room for the "creative" labor that shapes cities through contesting political and social actions.

Changing form and meaning: From an interactive performance to a participatory mural

In a previous CHI publication [15], I have introduced Haemon, an interactive performance where audience-citizens' participation was mediated by a dedicated mobile application. Readers are invited to turn to [15] for a detailed account of the socio-technical setup of the performance, the methods whereby it was studied, and of aesthetical and political qualities that characterized the audience-citizens' participation. Inspired by a wave of protests that had occurred in an economic challenged suburb in the north of Stockholm (Sweden), the performance intended to provide an alternative view of this suburb and its habitants. The performance integrated the narration of the story with elements of audience participation, whereby audience-citizens could share their comments and personal reflections. This created a dialogue on personal experiences of justice, truth, social change, and their relations to very specific localities. Audience-citizens could share their reflections through the dedicate mobile app, where comments were stored and shared with anyone using it. The performance was experienced on a subway train, symbolically taking the audience from the city center to the suburb. In the end of the narration, a number of these text entries were selected and chanted by a choir that was located on the main square of the suburb in question (Figure 1).

About a year and a half after this study, I accidentally discovered, in the neighborhood in question, a mural

Figure 1: the choir chanting a selection of the text entries shared by the audience during the subway journey

Figure 2: The choir in Haemon represented in the mural

Chiara Rossitto is Associate Senior Lecturer of HCI at the Department of Computer and Systems Sciences, Stockholm University. She has extensively worked with issues of technology-mediated mobility, cultural and social appropriation of place, and place-making processes. Moving between phenomenological and more political theorizations of place, she is interested in the interplay between the political qualities of place, the design of information infrastructures, and people's participation in local initiatives.

representing the choir (Figure 2). It is the size of 3x3 meters, and is part of a broader collection entitled "Local Heroes". It is beyond the length of this paper to recount how the mural came to be, the different actors that were involved in the process, and the forces and motivations underlying them. Here it will suffice to mention that the mural was the product of a collaboration between a local, stately-owned building company, an NGO specialized in community murals, and various groups of local inhabitants. The goal of the initiative was to enhance the socio-economic value of the neighborhood through participatory art, and it was the local residents' suggestion to include the performance as part of the mural. It was, in fact, valued as an important moment of local history, when local women had stood out by performing in the choir.

The appropriation of public areas and the politics of place

The mural could simply be regarded as a memory-in-place, as Casey [1] would call it. Nevertheless, understanding how the outcomes of civic projects creating new opportunities to act beyond the direct encounters with technology calls for a different perspective. Lafevbre's account of representational space [8] is germane here. The practices and social forces that connected the performance to the mural are actions giving shape to a specific urban area by illustrating alternative uses, and of how it can be re-appropriated and managed by its inhabitants. As such, these actions are political.

The production of the mural, and how it evolved from the original performance, points to the complex network of people that contributed to how it came to be. This includes the director of the performance, the

audience-citizens who participated in it, the choir members, but also the NGO, the housing company and the local residents who decided what the mural should be about. I refer to this network of people and their mutual social relations as an *ecology of contributors.* I use the term *ecologies of participations* to refer to the different ways each actor contributed to the process. I use the expression *ecologies of meanings* to indicate how the original meanings associated with the performance were appropriated and transformed beyond its original goals. For instance, the mural (figure 2) was also intended to contest the common bias that local women, associated with a particular socio-cultural background, lack the power to express their own voices.

Together, these ecologies illustrate how alternative spatial practices unfold over time, including the aggregation of various actors, forces and their capacity to act locally. Below I list a number of questions, emerging from this analytical focus, and that I would like to discuss during the workshop:

- What do we regard as the politics of place and what does it entail empirically? Power struggles, conflicts, democracy, participation and technological infrastructures provide different insights on the political nature of place. Are different philosophies of the politics of place needed and what would that mean in practice?
- When do we stop following a project and when (if, at all!) does it stop being CHI research?
- How is the researchers' role reconfigured? Is the detective labor of connecting the pieces of

civic interventions to past and post events, still CHI work?

- How are the boundaries between designers and community initiatives reconfigured by a long-term view on civic projects?

References

1. Casey E.S. (1996). How Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological prolegomena. In Feld S., Basso K.H. (Eds.), *Sense of Place*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

2. Ciolfi, L. (2015), "Embodiment and Place Experience in Heritage Technology Design", in Henning, M. (Ed.), V. 3: Museum Media, part of McDonald, S. and Rees-Leahy, H., The International Handbook of Museum Studies, London: Wiley-Blackwell, 419-446

3. Clara Crivellaro. 2016. HCI and Re-Making Place. PhD thesis. University of Newcastle, UK.

4. Steve Harrison and Paul Dourish. 1996. Re-place-ing space: the roles of place and space in collaborative systems. In Proc of CSCW '96. ACM, New York, NY, USA, pp. 67-76. DOI=http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/240080.240193

5. Christopher Le Dantec. 2012. Participation and publics: supporting community engagement. In Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '12). ACM, New York, NY, USA, 1351-1360. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1145/2207676.2208593

6. Christopher A. Le Dantec and Sarah Fox. 2015. Strangers at the Gate: Gaining Access, Building Rapport, and Co-Constructing Community-Based Research. In Proceedings of the 18th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing (CSCW '15). ACM, New York, NY, USA, 1348-1358. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1145/2675133.2675147

7. Henri Lefebvre. 1996. Writings on Cities. Wiley.

8. Henri Lefebvre. 1991. The Production of Space. Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

9. Ann Light and Yoko Akama. (2014). Structuring Future Social Relations: The Politics of Care in Participatory Practice. In Proc. of the 13th Participatory Design Conference. ACM Press, NY.

10. Jeff Malpas. (1999). *Place and Experience*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

11. McCarthy John, Wright Peter, Taking [A]Part The Politics and Aesthetics of Participation in Experience-Centered Design. MIT Press.

12. Patrick Olivier and Peter Wright. 2015. "Digital Civics: Taking a Local Turn." Interactions 22 (4): 61–63.

13. Chiara Rossitto, Louise Barkhuus, and Arvid Engström. 2016. Interweaving place and story in a location-based audio drama. Personal Ubiquitous Comput. 20, 2 (April 2016), 245-260. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s00779-016-0908-x

14. Chiara Rossitto, Cristian Bogdan, Kerstin Severinson-Eklundh, K. (2014). Understanding the Use of Constellations of Technologies in a Nomadic Setting Comput Supported Coop Work, 23(2), Springer 137-161. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10606-013-9196-4

15. Chiara Rossitto, Maria Normark, and Louise Barkhuus. 2017. Interactive Performance as a Means of Civic Dialogue. In Proc. of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '17). ACM, New York, NY, USA, 4850-4862. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1145/3025453.3025897

16. Yi-Fu Tuan. (1975). "Place: An Experiential Perspective." *The Geographical Review* LXV: pp. 151-165