

## Notes on in-situ Full Scale Experimentation and the Design Professions

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In the north american academic context a *workshop* is different from a paper session in that it is simply an opportunity to exchange ideas and to raise questions among colleagues who can bring to bear in their discussion various points of view and experiences otherwise unavailable.

This is the expectation I have with respect to this conference as a whole and to this meeting in particular.

The question I would like to present, and discuss if possible is the following: Is in-situ full scale experimentation a viable alternative to laboratory experimentation?

What are the *social*, and *historical* contexts to this question?

I am a research-architect teaching environment-behaviour theory to undergraduates in a non-professional environmental design program in a university which has staked a claim to *social responsibility* by making its academic resources available to the community at large for the study and solution of various problems: socio-economic, juridical, environmental, etc..., and by recognizing this activity as research.

To the extent that this activity brings to bear on community problems an articulated theoretical and methodological framework, it can be said to constitute a critical *culture making* process as opposed to a non-critical *culture living on*.

(We could also describe the difference as "norm elaboration" vs "norm application".)

I wish to make this distinction because it has direct bearing on the relationship of culture and the activity of design.

The tenants of culturally responsive design will too often define culture as a given, rather than as continuously elaborated, and the intentional dimension of design as limited to precedent application; this, in apparent contradiction with the principle of criticality and choice used to explain the variability of formal response to environmental conditions... for the question never asked is: choices between what?

What does the process of design do if it does not provide an opportunity for virtual choices and for critical choice making?

*Conceptually* then, design as a projective activity is an integral part of culture making, and not just a receptacle of cultural information, and full scale experimentation, as a method of design, is an opportunity for making *real time* rather than *virtual time* choices.

*Historically*, my involvement with full-scale experimentation has been tied to what I would call *typological modification* in response to the socio-functional contradictions of an acute care hospital having become a living environment for chronic patients.

The first case was a chest hospital whose patient committee contacted me in order to develop for them an assessment of their global environmental needs and scenarios for possible environmental change.

After presentation to the hospital board of directors of a neo-alexanderian approach, which they understood much later, we proceeded with general bi-lingual consultations with staff and patients, aimed at revealing the practices, problems, values and priorities tied to the hospital setting.

After we had identified three major areas of intervention, discovered their appropriate patterns and developed possible setting changes the administration took our report as justification for a funding request and thanked us for our services.

When we submitted for their approval a research project to be funded by the federal government and which entailed the design, building and evaluation of a prototypical careliving unit, they finally understood what the alexanderian approach was all about.

To the cry of "you are taking over the house" they balked.

We had evidently crossed the threshold of *real time* since the research proposal meant that the hospital would have had to function experimentally and share its locus of control... we had touched the *political* nerve of the institution!

Since we had built a certain scientific credibility and social credit, they agreed to let us develop, build, install and evaluate a prototypical personal storage system.

I will not discuss the particulars of the projekt except to say that it included a space modulation dimension and was, as all prototypes are, expensive to build.

In spite of our design mainstreaming efforts we were

told thanks but no thanks...we had run out of social credit!

The second case follows a slightly different scenario in terms of content and procedure; it is also current, and at the stage of project formulation for funding.

In this project we were, again, contacted by the patients committee of an extended care hospital for severely handicapped patients (all of whom on wheel chairs), to help them with the assessment of their environmental needs concerning community life and in the evaluation of the planning potential of the hospital building.

Using David Chapin's socio-spatial grid of security, instrumentality and competence the leisure staff on the committee performed an independent evaluation of their present facilities under use while we did the same on our side, with an expected complementarity of results; theirs being more technical and ours being more situational.

We were slowly beginning to elaborate a shared "pattern language" when the administration moved in to broaden the consultation process and formalize it with the creation of a hospital wide coordinating committee.

This had the effect of legitimizing the project while recuperating its control...a fair bargain.

As the programming of the facilities developed we identified a need for fine scale informal activity space modulation that could be solved thanks to a mobile shelving and storage unit. This struck a favorable response with the leisure staff and we immediately proposed that a prototype be built and tested in the existing facility... faced with a two-on-one situation the administration agreed to it and the project is on the board and at the funding application level.

On the strength of these two experiences dealing with full scale experimentation at the interior design scale, we took the opportunity of a departmental mandate to develop continued education courses for the Quebec association of interior designers to propose to that association a research seminar on full scale experimentation in collaboration with Birgit Krantz and Elizabeth Dalholm of the Lund laboratory.

We worked with them on a research design concerning the office horizontal working surface.

We felt we had developed quite a good double edged, pedagogical and research, methodological protocole using a comparative straight paper work vs paper work and face to face work and an intergroup designer user cross checking procedure; this was to no avail as we

met with insufficient registration to warrant the holding of this four days, self-financing seminar.

I think, with hindsight, that all the reasons we thought of to explain this failure: length and cost of seminar, long term applicability of content, bad seasonal timing, etc...left aside what appears now as the deeper motive: we had consciously set to question and investigate a sacro-sanct design "standard"....i.e. what designers usually *start with* to design "around" or "with", rather than question.

I think Birgit and Elisabeth had foreseen this when they suggested we experiment with a whole office reception setting.

Whereas the hospital cases failed or succeeded because of a tenuous socio-professional political dynamic, this failure seems to have been caused by reason of professional culture.

The account of these social, conceptual and historical contexts leads me to the following definition of the terms of the question concerning *in situ full scale experimentation and the design professions*:

*in situ*: The socially pre-ordained location of any activity. (provides experimenters with real context and variables... including the unexpected ones!)

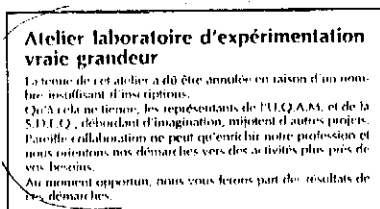
*full scale*: The "natural" scale of things i.e. the world around us is at full scale. (the holding of an experiment in a "natural" setting can have traumatic consequences if one begins to realize how artificial that setting really is!)

*experimentation*: An artificially created situation using well defined and controlled variables for the systematic observation of their interaction. (re. IN SITU for the unexpected variables!)

*design*: The activity of projecting the physical configuration of the material means needed to achieve human goals subsuming the process by which the performance of the configuration is evaluated. (the social and political dimensions of that process can be threatening particularly if they are constitutive of a corporate body of experts... i.e. the professionals!)

*professions*: Socially instituted bodies of expert practitioners accountable to society for the control of the expertise and practices of their members. (re. *design* for the possible socio-political contradictions)

#### Formation continue: ce qui mijote...



A BIT OF HISTORY!

