

RESOCONTO AL RIENTRO DELL'ESPERIENZA DI SCAMBIO 2011/2012

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Testo

1 Introduction

The PoliMi-Parsons exchange program aims to promote and enhance educational and cultural opportunities by permitting each institution to send students to study at the other institution in support of the relationship between Parsons and Politecnico di Milano through the DESIS-USA Network. In July 2011 I was selected with 2 other students (Yaprak Büyükteoman and Matteo D'Amanzo) from PoliMi to participate in the program. We got the opportunity to join the MFA Transdisciplinary Design program in Parsons, from the end of January to May 2012.

The purpose of this report is to describe the learning activities that I was pursuing during my stay in New York, and to give a general feedback on how the program developed, with insights gained and recommendations in the end.

I explain the learning activities both in school and outside of the school. The in-school activities are defined by the courses specified in the learning agreement, with the biggest emphasis on my thesis project. In the meantime, I think it is important to present all the other learning activities that New York offers since those are the ones that indeed added to and broadened my experiences.

2. Academic Learning Activities

2.1. Elective: ICD Networks: Service City

Enhancing public services interfaces

Faculty: Lara Penin

Overview

In this course, services were explored within the Public Sector in NYC, with the principle that services are a critical vector to materialize the social innovation phenomenon.

We were working with the Public Policy Lab (PPL, a design agency dedicated to improve the design and delivery of public services) to generate potential improvements in the mechanisms for engaging with the NYC Department of Housing Preservation & Development (HPD).

Students were working in small groups, organized around specific topics, exploring the co-production approach of services with high emphasis on optimizing existing resources.

Group work

My team was focusing on the Division on Neighbourhood Development (DNP) Field Offices. As the field offices are understood as the main physical access to services and interface with the community, our question was: "How might we re-define the engagement with the local community focusing on the field office experience so to update the public's perception of the

agency to match its current role?"

The assessable tasks included activities both inside and outside class; readings, research work, interpretation of the findings, developing service scenarios and service prototyping. During the course we had organized field trips to HPD and DNP offices. We had lectures with people from PPL and HPD. Also with Ezio Manzini about "Social innovation and service co-production to improve services in the city, and with Francois Jegou about service prototyping.

Reflections

I enjoyed this course, I think it had a good balance between passive and active activities (lecture parts and studio work parts). In addition, it offered the opportunity to try out and prototype for real how service design for the public sector functions, which is a very valuable insight. In fact, this was the first project I participated in that was designed for the public sector. In the meantime, I found it hard at the beginning to thoroughly see through the goals that were set up and to understand the whole structure of the sector that we were operating in, but I think this struggle came by the nature of the topic itself - the NYC Department of Housing Preservation & Development is just too big and complicated. Also, being a complete foreigner to the American housing system was an obstacle that I had to overcome.

Another interesting part for me was that Service City was an undergrad course. The common teamwork thought me a lot about how to operate or manage group work at a different level. Nonetheless, in the end we had a successful project, that went through several iterations and altogether it was a very meaningful experience.

2.2. Independent Study: Product-Service-Systems

Thesis Project

Faculty: Christian Schneider

Overview

The Independent Study got incorporated into the Transdisciplinary (TD) Thesis Project course. When we (the exchange students) arrived, the TD students were already selected to form the 4 thesis groups, based on the similar aspects of their topics or goals.

We could freely choose a group that we liked, although since the working methods were different for each group (highly defined by the character of the Thesis Director) that we couldn't comprehend in the beginning, the choice of group was merely accidental (at least for me).

I got into the group conducted by Christian Schneider.

In Parsons, graduating students start to work on the research part for their thesis project one semester before the Thesis Project course, so by the time we joined the groups, they were a lot ahead of us. Even though it was clear and well understood that we have different timelines and deliverables, the expectations were quite big. Moreover, the highly competitive environment of an American university was also pushing us to do our best and try to keep up with the others.

Studio work

Studio time was organized into one-on-one critiques with the Thesis Director, along with group critiques during the course of the semester. While the majority of the course time was to be comprised of independent work, students were meeting at regular intervals to share and review each other's progress as well. Because of the strong emphasis on collaboration in the TD, we had to identify external stakeholders, partners and communities who were integral to the success of the projects.

There was one mid-term presentation, and one final, at the end of the semester, where the full faculty, student and invited guests were participating to give feedbacks and advices on our project.

Collaborations

Soon after the beginning, I started to collaborate with Chris Piuggi, a graduating student from the Design & Technology Masters program in Parsons, an expert in hydroponic technology. He helped me to frame my research work, to reach out to other experts and guided me through the design process. I had support from the Faculty as well, Lara Penin and Scott Pobiner were both giving me guidance and advices that always helped me to move on when I was stuck with my project. In the meantime, I asked Alessandro Confalonieri to be my Thesis Advisor from PoliMi, and he assisted the development of the project through Skype meeting and regular reports by email.

Reaching out to... New York

Besides the studio work and the academics, the major part of my inspiration came from the possibilities offered by New York; people, places, events, lectures, workshops...

The Thesis Project

My project shaped step by step, with the contribution of all mentioned above. I investigated and utilized precedent, contextual, and field research to shape design questions, involving multiple stakeholders in the research and design processes. I envisioned, prototyped and test concepts.

The project is not finished yet, I have to identify a final model and strategic outcome, that I can discuss with the PoliMi faculty after arriving back to Italy.

Abstract - The Cultivator Project: for indoors urban farming

The Cultivator Project aims to expose the potential of urban agriculture and the growing movement of local food production that has the power to substantially benefit our cities - and ourselves. The goal is to enable people to become an active participant in local food systems, with the purpose of producing goods within your own home for personal use and for small businesses that can potentially scale-up.

In order to facilitate this process, a toolkit and manual is being designed for helping people to build household aquaponic systems based on low-budget solutions so that everybody can use it.

Aquaponics is the method of growing crops and fish together in a recirculating system. It is the most sustainable food source in the world; no traditional farming equipment is needed, a minimal space is required, while fish and fresh vegetables are growing in a continuous, sustainable system. And the output is 100% organic.

The project is a proof of concept, on designing urban systems for ecologically supportable, conscious, contemporary lifestyle with emphasis on the implementation of reused objects, a model where household furniture adopts to the functionality of food production, transforming into a productive aquaponic system.

Reflections

Being in New York City and working in Parsons gave me the advantage of exploring this exciting city, enjoying its benefits while working on the project. Also I learned a lot watching how students in Parsons work together and support each other. Their professional attitude and persistence showed me a role model and set up a point of reference for my future works. It was not easy to fit in and keep up with the pace - everything is possible but you have to go for it all by yourself - but in the end I think I achieved much more in such a little time that I would have done working in any other place. The only things I wish would have been different if I could have prepared more prior to arriving to the US. To arrive there with a more defined concept that is ready to be developed further, and to be able to choose Thesis Group more deliberately.

2.3. Intensive

Overview

The Intensive was a one-week Charette that was divided in 3 mini-workshops and a one-day symposium. It was held right after the thesis presentations, at the end of the semester. It functioned as a wrap-up of the whole program, with lectures and different activities to come together for one last week before everything finishes, and to celebrate the first graduating class of the Transdisciplinary Design graduate program.

Activities

Monday, May 7

Launch Pad Workshop: *Turning projects into business plans*

Special guest: Emily Lutzker, Openinvo www.openinvo.com

Emily Lutzker and professors from Parsons were sharing their experiences on how to realize projects from ideas and businesses from projects.

Tuesday, May 8

Speculative Ethnographic Methods Workshop: *New methods of understanding people*

Co-hosted with Vyjayanthi Rao and students from Anthropology

Special Guest: Annette Diefenthaler, IDEO

Annette Diefenthaler, from Human Factors at IDEO was presenting what is behind the human-centered design methods that IDEO is applying to the design projects. Two juniors accompanied her, Jackie from Experience Prototyping and Simon from Business Design. After their lecture, we were discussing ethnographic research methods vs. anthropology methods and how the two fields can help each other, together with the anthropology students.

Wednesday, May 9

Performance and Collaboration Workshop: *Improving collaboration while developing creativity*

Hosted by Roger Manix (rogermanix.com)

This was the most surprising and fun event during the week.

Roger Manix is a professor and lecturer at Stanford, Parsons, NYU... he is holding workshops to coach people to be more effective communicators. He is using body movements ("Anatomical Storytelling") to explain how collaboration and creativity is happening (or is blocked) at the work-flow.

Thursday, May 10

Future//Working//Lunch//Shop

Invited guests were working collaboratively with TD students and faculty to identify recent and newly emerging skills that designers must have to thrive in a dynamic global environment.

Over lunch, through small group exercises participants were inventing future capacities that will transform design practice. I was in the group with Nicola Twilley, co-director of Studio-X NYC, and we were speculating on how obesity will drastically affect our future in many ways.

Friday, May 11

Wrap-up

A day to sum-up the happenings during the intensive and also the first two years of the TD program.

Reflections

This one week of many different and exciting activities put a beautiful closure for the semester, the thesis works and for the program itself. It was as well a perfect way for networking with professionals from the industry. A way to say good-bye, and moreover, to encourage students to go on with confidence and enthusiasm. I think it would be a great custom for our PSSD program to adopt too.

3. Non-Academic Learning Activities

Overview

One of the greatest things about New York is that you can always find resources that gives you motivation to go after your interests. Events, lectures, shows, talks - you just have to be able to manage your time. I mostly tried to select and attend those events where the topic was somehow related to my thesis project to get inspiration from different disciplines.

LECTURES

January 31

DESIGNING MEANINGFUL PUBLIC SERVICES

with Margherita Pillan

@ Parsons Desis Lab

In this lecture Margherita Pillan was presenting some service design projects for discussing the approach she had adopted in search of participatory solutions actively involving citizens and public institutions.

January 31

DESIGN AND DARK ENERGY

with John Thackara

@ Studio-X NYC

It was an open brown-bag lunch discussion with John Thackara, sustainable design expert, who was talking about design and dark energy, edible architecture, the sustainability of smart cities, and much more.

February 10

CREATIVE MORNINGS NYC

with Charles Renfro

@ Creative Mornings

Charles Renfro was presenting his latest works, mostly talked about the redesign of the High Line, that he served as a Design Partner for.

Charles Renfro is a Partner at Diller Scofidio + Renfro, a 75 person interdisciplinary design studio that integrates the performing arts, visual arts, and architecture.

Feb 17

THE TRANSFORMATIVE ECONOMY: Post-Criticality and Transdisciplinarity

with Ronald Jones and Rolf Hughes

@ Parsons

Talk with Ronald Jones and Rolf Hughes about their research on the epistemologies of practice, design theory and interdisciplinarity. They were also presenting their work with the Experience Design Group in Konstfack about Future Forecasting and System Thinking.

Rolf Hughes, Professor in Design Theory and Practice-Based Research at [Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design](#).

Ronald Jones, Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Konstfack, University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm, Sweden.

March 01

URBAN RESEARCH GROUP CONVERSATIONS

with Geoff Manaugh and Mary Mattingly

@ Eyebeam

Eyebeam Fellow Mary Mattingly was presenting her project; the Flock House project, that is a group of migratory, sculptural living systems built collaboratively from reclaimed materials that merge with the pre-existing urban infrastructure.

The moderator was Geoff Manaugh, author of the influential architecture blog BLDG BLOG and director of Studio-X NYC, the founding node in Columbia University's network of advanced research laboratories exploring the future of cities.

March 02

“DOMORROW”: where design and futures meet

with Nik Baerten

@ Parsons

Nik Baerten was presenting how design methods can be employed in both the analytical and the creative process of future scenarios and their assessment. Guided by a series of examples taken from Pantopicon's body of work, he illustrated a range of insights gathered about the exploration of future scenarios that can enhance many design processes.

Nik Baerten, a knowledge engineer, co-founder of Pantopicon, the Antwerp-based studio for futures exploration and envisioning, where he assists both public and private organizations in exploring long term challenges through alternative future scenarios.

March 20

PRACTICE MAKES PRACTICE - Mary Flanagan + Christopher Robbins

@ Parsons TransTalks

Mary Flanagan and Christopher Robbins, both are artist and innovator, were in conversation dedicated to explore design's capacity to investigate, disassemble and re-frame the political, economic and social forces that define our everyday practices.

March 27

KAOSPILOTS: International Development and Design Education

with Simon Kavanagh

@ Parsons

Introduction to KaosPilots' educational model and how they “increase the bandwidth for creativity, innovation, and risk in education”. I was very excited about this lecture in particular because I was always interested in how KaosPilots work.

April 10

David Boyle on Co-Production: A Preventive Welfare System

with Michele Kahane, Edgar Cahn and Ezio Manzini

@ Parsons Desis Lab

David Boyle was lecturing about how the ideas of co-production, developed in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, have been brought into the debate in Britain. He was explaining what happened when the National Health Service began using these processes, and how that affects to future of public services.

April 12

URBAN FOOD AND URBAN ECOSYSTEMS RESEARCH

Three talks by the TEDC Post-Doctoral Fellows: Peleg Kremer, Kristin Reynolds, and Sanpisa Sritrairat

@ Parsons

Peleg Kremer - Social-Ecological Urban Systems: A Spatial Perspective

Using the example of NYC vacant lots, she was presenting the use of spatial analysis and a place-based approach to the application of social-ecological systems as a planning and decision making tool in urban spaces.

Kristin Reynolds - Participatory Research as Food Systems Pedagogy and Scholar-Activism: Collaborations with Two NYC Urban Farms

Urban agriculture is an increasingly popular activity, and practitioners continually innovate new. This presentation discussed participatory research collaborations involving NYC urban farms and students in two Environmental Studies courses at The New School, which were designed

to achieve both pedagogical and action-oriented outcomes.

Sanpisa Sriไตรrat - Restoring Urban Ecosystems Services: The Million Trees NYC Reforestation

Million Trees NYC is an initiation for further forest restoration around NYC to enhance the benefits of urban forests as the growing population and urbanization is threatening these ecosystems. The presentation discussed the application of environmental sciences to better understand plant-soil-human interactions.

April 20

Simon Sinek

@ Creative Mornings

Talk by Simon Sinek, ethnographer and visionary thinker, about his work teaching leaders and organizations how to inspire people, with a goal to help build a world in which the vast majority of people go home everyday feeling fulfilled by their work.

April 25

CRADLE TO CRADLE - BEYOND SUSTAINABILITY

with PROF. DR. MICHAEL BRAUNGART

@ Parsons

Dr. Michael Braungart was presenting the design concept Cradle to Cradle, based on the Intelligent Product System (IPS) developed by Braungart's company EPEA (Environmental Protection and Encouragement Agency).

WORKSHOPS

March 6

SoftWalks: Designing a living City

Workshop by Bland Hoke and Howard Chambers

@ The Hort NYC

I attended a collaborative one-day design workshop hosted by the New York Horticultural Society, which aimed to re-imagine sidewalk sheds to benefit the community and the surrounding environment. The premise was based on Softwalks, a research endeavor from TD students Bland Hoke and Howard Chambers, "to prototype a modular horticulture system designed to reduce greenhouse gases, particulate emissions and storm water runoff – green goals established by the City of New York."

During the workshop, after a series of lectures about urban green design, we were looking at ways to make the semi-permanent structures more environmentally friendly; to green the gray infrastructure.

<http://vimeo.com/39655809>

<http://www.citysoftwalks.com/>

March 31 - April 2

BIOMODD [NYC4]: Build Your Own Bioreactor

Workshop by Angelo Vermeulen and Katherine Moriwaki

@ Parsons

This workshop is part of Biomodd [NYC4] art project which will be installed at the New York Hall of Science in September 2012.

During the workshop we learnt how to build our own green algae bioreactor. We built contraptions that boost algae growth using simple, and mainly recycled and re-used materials such as aeration systems, lights and glassware. The algae was sourced from different locations throughout NYC during a field trip. We were learning as well about such topics as basic plant biochemistry, photosynthesis, and the use of algae as biofuel and food source. Angelo Vermeulen was giving an overview of how he has been using green algae in different art and technology projects the past 10 years. Katherine Moriwaki was introducing us different

DIY electronics initiatives by Parsons students and faculty, and their potential for integration into custom bio-systems.

<http://www.buildyourownbioreactor.net/>

4. Conclusions

The five months spent in New York was one of the best spent times so far in my life, I profited from it in every way and I believe this experience will considerably contribute to my professional life. I am very thankful for the opportunity to work together with students and professors from one of the greatest and most recognized design schools of the world. It was an exceptional possibility to discover New York, to make connections and new friends.

I wish I could have arrived to Parsons more prepared for the thesis work but I understood that this exchange program (as well as the Transdisciplinary program itself) was a first “prototype” when we had to deal with unexpected issues that were coming up during the journey.

For this reason, I share some recommendations that I believe could be useful for the future candidates and for the refinement of the program. We had some difficulties in the beginning (and in the end) with the bureaucratic issues - and even though when everything seemed fine and done - we had to realize that for example we have been illegal during the whole stay (because we had not enough credits to fulfill the requirements of our visa status).

This problem was solved easily and fortunately we didn't have any inconvenience caused by it, still, these issues should be supervised more carefully. There could be one person who is responsible for both the departmental and the institutional topics, who understands and knows well how Parson's system works. As I mentioned above, it would be also helpful to arrive to Parsons with more understanding about what exactly are the requirements that the exchange student has to accomplish towards Parsons and for Politecnico, by this I mean a more structured plan for the thesis work.