

**From disruption to innovation: "protestivals" and design activism**

Margus Tamm looks at how community protests trigger innovation in living environment design.

*"The show is over. The audience get up to leave their seats. Time to collect their coats and go home. They turn around. No more coats and no more home."*

Василий Розанов, Апокалипсис нашего времени (The Apocalypse of our Time, 1917–1918)

Every innovation creates disruption. Even if the benefits from change are great and clear, changing the *status quo* takes effort; some things need to be replaced, some skills relearned. It is not easy to leave the comfort zone, even if that comfort zone is not that comfortable in the first place.

It goes both ways – disruptive events also tend to breed innovation. Take, for example, the recent global quarantine: everyday life in the whole world was disrupted, put on hold. But at the same time, what one could see in online design and architecture forums, zines and blogs... was not a hiatus but an explosion of creative discussion: proposals – both practical and utopian – about how to redesign the world and how to cope with this new challenge.

Disruptive events trigger innovation because disruption changes the landscape: what once was familiar is no more. Disruption creates the space of the unknown, which yet needs to be domesticated. Time to design some new homes and some new coats! Innovation and disruption, thus, are genuinely connected.

When we think about social disruptions, we mostly think about chaotic accidents. But there is also a long and glorious history of crafted and designed disruptions, meant to trigger societal innovation and a better future. Let us talk about protest events, activist interventions in the public space.

What is protest? Protest is an initial part of communal life in a free society. Why does protest exist? Protest, for a society, is constitutive. Protest functions as a driving force that keeps social structures versatile and at the same time constantly advances the fresh

negotiation of agreements and compromises, of new allocations or redistributions of rights and privileges.<sup>1</sup>

Protest events are essentially disruptive as they challenge normalised practices, systems, modes of causation. In addition to disrupting, protest activism always reveals, unveils, or frames an issue: injustice or wrongdoing, but it may also frame better alternatives – it may be generative. Successful activism often becomes a "norm".<sup>2</sup>

Employed in a good fight, protest activism has the power to trigger innovation. To illustrate this thesis, I will now introduce a couple of examples that focus on protest activism and generally fit within the rubric of sustainability, which emphasises the goal of long-term thriving and well-being of human and ecological systems.<sup>3</sup>

### **Curb-cut revolution**

A curb is (usually) a concrete block that protects the pedestrian footpaths from cars. The curb is an essential element of safety design in the streetscape. Beneficial design – but not for all. For example, for people using wheelchairs, the curb literally creates unsurmountable obstacles, greatly diminishing their ability to safely navigate the public streetscape. The building block becomes a built-in blocker.

There is a simple solution: a curb cut into a footpath where it meets an intersection of streets. The first curb cuts were built in the 1930s but remained a novelty – most cities didn't have any. Although disabled people's groups demanded them, authorities were reluctant. It was seen as a noble but ultimately unreasonably extensive solution for a rare problem, or even worse: in terms of a zero-sum game, something that would benefit few at the expense of many. Therefore, the situation dragged on, and people with limited movement abilities remained excluded from much of the streetscape.

Until, in the heat of the 1970s civil rights movements, disabled people's rights activists took the matter into their own hands. In a guerrilla-style street action, they started to smash the concrete curbs away with sledgehammers – to create the cut they required.

The first reaction by the authorities was: this is vandalism! It was denounced by city officials; the police started investigations, and sanctions were announced. Sure, the police chasing wheelchairs didn't look pretty. No good PR could come from this. But what can you do? The authorities have to protect public property.

Yet public opinion started to change – the thing is that soon after the sidewalks were "vandalized", the benefits of curb cuts began to be realised by the wider public. These "vandalised" street curbs actually turned out to be quite a good design idea: for wheelchairs,

sure, but also for parents with strollers, for consumers with shopping charts, tourists with heavy luggage, rollers, skateboarders, cyclists, monocyclists... and not to mention the potential billions of toes and shoe tips that were spared from accidental stubs against concrete blocks thanks to these gently cut curbs.

What was first seen as an extremist act of vandalism is now a design in everyday use as an obvious civic good. And we also got a metaphor – the curb-cut effect – which says that when we create circumstances allowing those who have been left behind or excluded from participating and contributing fully, then everyone benefits.

The lesson of the curb-cut effect is now widely employed in design, for example, in digital interface and interaction design.<sup>4</sup> The curb-cut lesson now helps build more user-friendly environments, both physical and digital.

### **Freedom park**

Here's another example, this time from the Tallinn cityscape. Freedom Square (Vabaduse väljak) is a flexible, multifunctional public area, a popular meeting place that hosts various public events: concerts, parades, open-air screenings, etc.

But it wasn't always like that. From time immemorial, it used to be a gated car park instead. And from time immemorial, there were promises by the city planners to turn this car park into a pedestrian area. Alas, these promises just never managed to materialise. Until one day... enter the Prussakov Bicycle Community.

One morning, while the parking lots were still mostly empty, a group of youngsters entered the area. They were on foot or on bicycles, some carried flowerpots or picnic baskets. At the entrance, they took a parking ticket from the unmanned ticket-machine and then chose a place to park their bicycle or beach towel or flowerpot.<sup>5</sup>

When car park attendants asked them to leave, they replied that they had the right to stay as they had tickets. The police were called to resolve the situation. They arrived but also realised they didn't have any legal grounds to intervene, as everyone had tickets.

Then the question arose that maybe this was unsanctioned protest, which then would have been illegal. But no, the youngsters replied that they were not protesting, just having a picnic. And there is no law against a picnic.

And a picnic they had. The whole event lasted a full day, the media took notice, and the car park was soon surrounded by journalists and camera crews, reporting about this entertainingly bizarre spectacle. The media obtained catchy, joyful images and comically clumsy attempts from city officials to downplay the situation. The parking picnic became the

main news of the day and evoked a remarkable amount of feedback and media discussion about the problems of public spaces and pedestrian access in Tallinn.

The lack of public spaces in Tallinn and misuse of Freedom Square had been acknowledged and discussed by professionals for a long time, but this "picnic" helped to bring the problem and the possibility of alternative solutions to the attention of a wider audience, thus adding much to the public pressure for the city government to finally get their act together and transform the car park into a public square. Which, as we now can see and experience, really is for the common good.

### **In conclusion**

Dysfunctional, unjust or missing public policies, even if acknowledged, are often perpetuated by institutional inertia and lack of public imagination. Here disruptive activism comes in handy.

As we saw from the examples above, constructive design innovation can be triggered by disruption and public protest. Seeing open conflict as a useful social resource follows the long intellectual tradition of antagonism; in the wake of social/participatory design movements, this philosophy has also gathered some momentum in design thought.<sup>6</sup>

The main task and challenge is to transform the space of antagonism into a space of agonism, not to be faced with the friend-enemy relation but with competing "adversaries".<sup>7</sup>

When looking at design innovation in the context of wider societal innovation, such as the history of democratic civil rights movements, public protests can offer us some help. Much is written about grassroots activism in re-appropriating or "occupying" public spaces for the needs and demands of the local community. As the policy managing of public spaces most figuratively reflects the society as a whole,<sup>8</sup> one can equate the public space with the public sphere and summarise:

- Effective spatial/societal innovation can only take place in a dialogue between the community using the public space/sphere and the authority managing the public space/sphere.
- Dialogue becomes necessary and possible through conflict, which highlights the constituent but hidden boundaries and restrictions in this public space/sphere.
- Once the restrictions are visible, they can be negotiated. Then the *utopian* space becomes possible.

Through the symbolic spectacle of dissent, public activism can shake off the *status quo* and open the space for a new negotiation and competing visions. And if compelling enough, it truly can change the living environment for the better. From disruption to innovation, from dissent to design. From a walled space of exclusions and inclusions into a shared space of pluralism.

*Margus Tamm is an interdisciplinary designer, artist, writer, lecturer and cultural critic.*

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<sup>1</sup> Basil Rogger, Protest. The Aesthetics of Resistance. Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2018, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Ann Thrope, Defining Design as Activism. Submission to: Journal of Architectural Education (<http://designactivism.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Thorpe-definingdesignactivism.pdf>).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> See: Elizabeth Petrick, Curb Cuts and Computers: Advocating for Design Equality in the 1980s. – Design Issues, Volume 35, Number 4, Autumn 2019.

<sup>5</sup> A similar artistic/activist happening, whereby parking lots were transformed into a temporary leisure area, first took place in 2005 in San Francisco, and was organised by the Rebar Group. Called "Park(ing) Day", it has now become a yearly tradition. – *M.T.*

<sup>6</sup> See: Carl DiSalvo, Design, Democracy and Agonistic Pluralism, Design and Complexity. – DRS International Conference 2010, Montreal, Canada (<https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/drs-conference-papers/drs2010/researchpapers/31>); Erlin Björgvinsson, Pelle Ehn, Per-Anders Hillgren, Participatory design and "democratizing innovation". Malmö: MEDEA, Malmö University, 2010; Thomas Markussen, The Disruptive Aesthetics of Design Activism: Enacting Design Between Art and Politics. – Design Issues, Volume 29, Number 1, Winter 2013.

<sup>7</sup> See: Markus Miessen, Chantal Mouffe, The Space of Agonism. – Critical Spatial Practice 2. London: Sternberg Press, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the well-known writings on the production of space by Henri Lefebvre.