



PLATE

Product Lifetimes And The Environment

3rd PLATE Conference

September 18–20, 2019

Berlin, Germany

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Hector, Philip; Jalas, Mikko: **Turning utopias into material: the case of an open space for experimentation in Helsinki**. In: Nissen, Nils F.; Jaeger-Erben, Melanie (Eds.): PLATE – Product Lifetimes And The Environment : Proceedings, 3rd PLATE CONFERENCE, BERLIN, GERMANY, 18–20 September 2019. Berlin: Universitätsverlag der TU Berlin, 2021. pp. 325–329. ISBN 978-3-7983-3125-9 (online). <https://doi.org/10.14279/depositonce-9253>.

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Universitätsverlag der TU Berlin



Turning Utopias into Material: the Case of an Open Space for Experimentation in Helsinki

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Keywords: Materialized Utopia; Experimentation; Lab; Open Space; Humble Design.

Abstract: With an increasing number of open laboratories for cultural and technical experimentation in place, questions arise regarding how and with what effects they come about, what they mean to those who partake and how they organize themselves in order to satisfy those involved. Recognizing the way that these spaces reach of alternative technologies and alternative ways of being we conceptualize them as materialized utopias, which are fragile socio-material arrangements. Rather than articulating grand utopian or ecotopian alternative societies, we look at materialized utopias as the gradual tweaking, probing and fixing of things. We elaborate on this with the study of “*Test Site*” a campus-based open space for experimentation in Helsinki designing with matters such as soap, compost or wood. We show that the thriving of this space is dependent on purposeful misunderstandings. However, its hybrid character being open to different interpretations does not only help to spur momentum but by the same token also leads to tensions internally as well as externally. Materialized utopias are then bound to be compromised, but in the best case scenario, turn unproductive anxieties into productive care taking of the socio-material surroundings. As the site is in the making, materials and events function as checkpoints and create legitimacy.

Introduction

Frying oil turned into nice-smelling soap or urine turned into tomatoes into Bloody – these are some of the things happening at an experimental site next to the Aalto University campus. They underline current tensions between what sustainable forms of life appear to request and what the current technology and political regimes can deliver. Sustainability narratives thrive on the idea of radical ruptures between what is and what should be, informed by utopian thinking including classics such as Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1978) and contemporary movements such as transition towns. By speaking of materialized utopias we want to highlight approaches where rather non-futuristic and quite mundane activities of design and production such as creating soap from waste oil and setting up a collective to continuously engage in such practices are meant to fix parts of the present rather than fully abandoning it.

Open spaces, as well as other forms of utopia, raise questions of the relations between individuals and the collective and those of recruitment and organizing. In this paper we

ask the following question: What are the barriers for participating in and materializing utopias in the everyday? The paper draws on the ongoing study of a campus-based open space for experimentation in Helsinki since its preparation phase in January 2018. To answer the questions, we make use of interviews with members, participatory observation, field notes and data from the internal communication channels. We argue that sites for such gradually tweaking the present are utopias. However, since they are open in terms of agenda, rules and outcomes, they are hybrids and highly fragile. In order to stabilize, the role of material and designing with it therefore become essential as checkpoints.

Open spaces as materialized utopias

Utopianism offers several propositions and analytical distinctions for the study of open spaces. Firstly, as Karl Mannheim has suggested, utopian forward-looking thinking is what keeps societies alive (Mannheim 2013). Utopian promise stems from the recognition that we do not live in the best of possible world. Hence, deliberate efforts to think beyond what is reasonable, possible and ‘real’ may be particularly relevant for sustainability and has

contributed to ecotopian thinking (Callenbach 1978). With our notion of materializing utopias we want to add to these distinctions a notion of radical modesty and highlight arrangements which are not premised on abandoning the present but rather reworking it. Be it activities of fixing and mending, self-build or permaculture, these are activities combining elements of quite mundane and non-futuristic kind.

Concurrently with such activities of fixing, repair and do-it-yourself, a host of spaces dedicated to technical and cultural experimentation have appeared. Amongst others they have been described as fab labs (Hielscher and Smith 2014), open workshops (Lange 2017) or shared machine shops (Dickel et al. 2014). While some are initiated as part of academic research projects or showcase new means of urban governance, many appear to be self-initiated by small groups of people as reported in the case of open workshops. These initiatives driven by civic collectives exemplify new modalities of innovation, production and needs based consumption (Lange and Bürkner 2018).

There has been a wave of real life experiments, situated in the wild, therefore not aiming at producing general valid knowledge but at exploring specific cases and adopting generic technologies locally (Jalas et al 2017). They exemplify semi-protected spaces, premised upon welcoming failure and irritation as part of learning, and being productive in terms of new ideas, knowledge, artefacts and practices. Hence, Lange and Bürkner (2018) conceptualise such spaces as assemblages, where actors, materials and tools link together in changing constellations. What is interesting in the open labs is open-ended, imaginative, and footloose propositions which are developed in there and how this is qualitatively different and complementary to traditional science organization rather than competing with it.

Openness can be understood as a free access to the means of production as found in the majority of fablabs (Lhoste and Barbier 2018), but also as less hierarchical, egalitarian structure, and trust. Regarding the supposedly flat organisational structure, Lange and Bürkner (2018), in their study on open workshops in Germany, point out that power imbalances are present, and what is more, ironically, readily accepted by the practitioners. To be more

specific, the founders or amateur experts within the space can even unintentionally create hierarchies and regulate access (Toombs 2016). At the same time, there are also various practices of mutual material and social support, which are claimed to be signs of emerging post-growth modalities (Lange and Bürkner 2018) and might be conceptualized as repair work on a communal scale (Hector 2018).

We next turn the focus to the organizing principles of the sites and in particular on what kinds of organizing work is done with the notion of design. Here, the practice of open spaces indicates a more humble design practice of tweaking existing reality, fixing material and building collectives.

Humble design

Utopian thought is part of design theory and practice since its formal origins at the end of 19th century. The rise of modernism by the 1920ies located design as central means to support social change on a grand scale. The supposedly mass-produced products of functionalism were hoped to deliver quality to everybody, while social housing in the form of new building blocks provide the cocoon within designed settlements. In the second half of the 20th century the paternalistic take of modern design was critically reflected upon and became gradually substituted by research into specific, situated user needs (Dorrestijn and Verbeek 2013). For Drukker (writing at the turn of the 20th century) this period (60ies and 70ies) was the final chapter of socially engaged design, replaced by the decorative and ironic elements of postmodernist aesthetics (Drukker 2004). Others have argued, that the critique of rational, unified progress exemplified by postmodernism still puts forward utopian ideals, namely that technologies can after all mediate the multiple ways of people living their life (Dorrestijn and Verbeek 2013).

Across these epochs, design was intricately linked with utopian thought reliant on some form of technical mediation. This mediation took different forms from highly functional to more metaphorical ones. Specifically with respect to the less functionally driven aesthetic of early postmodernist design, we see parallels to contemporary developments of speculative design and design fiction. Here, not solutions but issues are foregrounded and made explicit with the help of designed artifacts (Auger 2013).

Graphical illustrations as well as more immersive three-dimensional settings shall help to point to future(s) often far ahead in time. No matter if they depict the future infrastructure of living and commuting, or provoke in the form of seemingly functional, everyday objects, they make use of an essential component of utopian stories. The new and distant needs to be connected with the old and familiar (forms) (Sargisson 2007). The weaving together of presence and future as well as the level of technological sophistication might however take different routes as shall be explored in the following.

In collective sites for experimentation, new but also old, forgotten practices are explored and made available to others through designing digital but also physical and social infrastructures (Hector 2018). Thus, while they embody hopeful and partly hyped visions of a better future, they appear to be much more pragmatic. What we refer to here, is the use of rather mundane activities, tools and infrastructures in order to materialize parts of utopian futures in the presence. Compared to earlier utopian designs they are not endpoints in the sense of products delivered to users, but ongoing experiments, premised on relative broad accessibility. Most strikingly, when thinking of the ad-hoc and DIY approach, design in this context often starts with what is at hand rather than conceiving something complex no matter what resources it will take (Jencks and Silver 2013). Comparing these characteristics with other forms of design discussed above we suggest to referring to this as humble forms of design

Methods

For this study, the first author has conducted 4 semi-structured interviews with members (three of them involved strongly in three of the 6 projects each and the fourth joining for some of the meetings and workshops) of the initiative lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviews focused on question regarding the forming of the project, the internal and external relations as well as everyday organization. Furthermore, both authors have participated in the monthly meetings of the initiative throughout the year 2018 as well as in three special events, from which they have collected field notes. These events were the planning meeting, the official opening day and the building of the dwelling. Internal

communications have been organized through a whatsapp group which was recently substituted by a slack channel. The first author has accessed these digital pools in an ongoing manner for purposes of participating in the initiative as well as this study.

Case Test Site



Figure 1. Photoshop visualization by one of the students.

'Test Site' is an open space located on the campus of Aalto University in an outer city district of Otaniemi in the greater Helsinki region. This outdoor space was set up at the start of 2018 by students who were interested to explore low-tech, frugal innovations for sustainability, and is funded and planned to exist for a minimum of two years. From the beginning the exploration was planned to target both infrastructure such as water, energy and sanitation, food, soil health and food production issues, material circulation, but also exploration on organising events and creating learning opportunities for sustainability. Key to the set up was the will get out of the classroom, out of theory and conceptual thinking.

Despite a low profile start, the *Test Site* initiators have collected support from and created diverse interests among the University campus management, from teachers in the field of sustainability, researchers working on innovations for sustainability and the business development and start-up actors at the campus. As of this moment there are 5 projects on the *Test Site* (Pee-osk, Garden, Solar Disk, Eco Soap Toolbox and Community Shelter) and the frequency of members visits of the site during the summer season was around 1-2 times a week.

Dates	Actions
Fall 2017	A handful of Creative Sustainability (CS) MA students begin to look for support for different project ideas Head of CS MA Programme and Sustainability liaison of the university had discussed sites of display for the work related to sustainability
January 2018	Open call for students to propose activities results in over 30 proposals
April 2018	Physical area designated
May 2018	Official opening of the site with 4 projects
November 2018	Exhibition at university with 6 projects put forward by 18+ regular collaborators, coming mainly from the CS MA programme with background in design, engineering and business.

Table 1. Timeline.

Discussion

We see different interpretation among the actors inside the Test Site. Similar to FabLabs, also the case at hand is neither a living room, workplace, nor scientific laboratory (Kohtala and Bosque 2014) and represents something different to all members. Therefore, the implementation of such spaces in itself appears to require experimentation and trial and error (Hector 2018). When achieved, open-endedness of the agenda and any results of it, might render them interesting to different groups of people and different purposes (Akrich et al 2002). Here, activities and artefacts of open spaces can be brought into networks by purposeful, partial interpretations and even purposeful misunderstandings. Indeed, when looking at the initial “Call for proposals” for the *Test Site*, it clearly attracts more people if you talk about hybrid, experimental spaces where the outcome could be almost anything as long as it fulfils some criteria such as excluding hate speech.

However, the open-endedness also brings problems. This includes overcoming frustration related to obstacles, slow pace of progress and

the difficulties living up to the ideals of the open space discourse. Quite clearly, notions and experiences of efficacy seem to require clear leadership and management of the activities. Different than Lange and Bürkner’s observation of assemblages, our own empirical analysis hints at more ordered spaced organised around visionary leaders, who introduce and push ideas about projects or events (Lange and Bürkner 2018).

The flipside of open-endedness further appears in the difficult negotiations between different actors both regarding external as well as internal relations. When potential newcomers do not really know what the initiative is about, this highlights one important point about such experimental sites. Often neither the purpose nor the rules are clear – unlike say a football game – they are continuously in the making. Therefore, the discourse of open-ended, imaginative and latent places needs to find material forms and get articulated in real outcomes as Kohtala (2018) suggests for maker-spaces. Hence, the great joy for example when a pile of compost soil arrives at the *Test Site* as a product of a large scale centralized municipal operation and delivered by a commercial service provider. This pile of soil functions in several ways. Firstly, it allows the students to implement the gardening project and thereby adds to the overall site. Secondly, it underlines that they have reached a certain level of visibility and credibility, if these actors work with them. Much the same can be said about the sustainability event in which the site was displayed as the recent successful impact of the school.

The site responds to the anxiety of the impasse of sustainable consumption and represents utopian thinking in its attempts to imagine, articulate and practice social life. Despite diversity of participants and their understandings of the place, the rhetoric of openness indicates that these spaces facilitate trust, respect and aims of participating individuals. Ideally, some of such spaces may turn unproductive anxiety of individuals to inspired collective action, be it growing food, making soap, building shelter, find support for the initiative or decide about the name and look of the place.

In contrast to bold, spectacular and visionary design, open spaces are compromises themselves. These tamed utopias are not fixed spatial utopias as earthly heavens, even when good for temporary relief. In the *Test Site*, projects like the Peeosk (using human urine to produce food) or the Eco Soap (using waste cooking oil to produce beautiful objects), turn ideas which appear radical to the majority into practice. The projects implicate the body, bend and blend politics and, as we have suggested, come out of the humble design attempts to reconcile human existence with other beings and sustainability. They are, however, also communities of innovation-in-practice, which seek to produce the component parts of sustainable forms of human life for broader use in the society (Smith et al. 2016). By the same token, they are not completely estranged and do not demand by far as much time as e.g. intentional communities require (Sargisson 2007).

To continue this thought and to be very blunt, the cases seem not to be able to deliver their original, radical utopian aspiration and might even be bound to “fail” in this sense. Still, they can continue to exist and deliver something. Acting out your ideals is utopian in the sense of the forward-looking society of Mannheim. Different to the strict, modernist narratives on future, open spaces and particularly the modest, humble design and trial and error in there, can be thought as a new, postmodern modality of engaging with our material surroundings.

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