ALTERNATIVE IMAGINARIES FOR THE SMART CITY: FROM PUBLIC VALUES TO URBAN SENSORS

An art- and design-led experiment in urban sensing technologies by [redacted] and V2_Lab for Unstable Media.

This version: January 21, 2021.

Background

The rise of the smart city as a dominant urban development paradigm has raised concerns about the public's capacity to make sense of the technologies and policies involved. Accordingly, most efforts to engage the public with the smart city tend to focus on "demystifying" urban technologies – opening up the technological "black box" for public scrutiny.

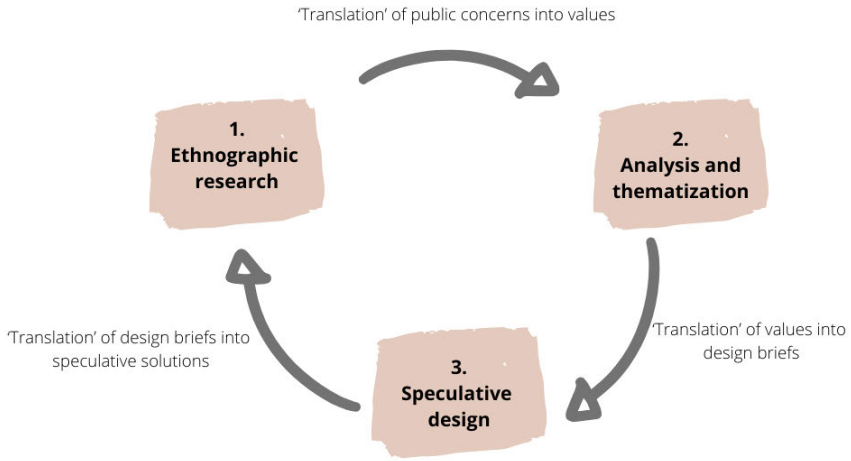
While raising the public's awareness of the technical apparatus of the smart city is an important task, we believe that it leaves untouched the more fundamental ideas and contexts within which urban technology is designed. Such ideas, sometimes referred to as social or urban imaginaries, have so far relied on technology vendors' view of the city as a complex machine: a set of interconnected systems that need to be controlled and made more efficient.

But what if instead of accepting the urban tech industry's push for optimization at all costs we asked the public how they see, feel and imagine the city and developed urban technologies from their viewpoint? Would the public's lived experience and perception of the city lead to different urban imaginaries and, accordingly, to a different understanding of what urban technologies *should* be doing instead of what they *can* do?

The process

To raise awareness to the kind of ideas used to advance the smart city, and to provide alternatives in terms of both imaginaries and technologies, we suggest three phases: (1) ethnographic research into how residents view their neighbourhood; (2) analysis, thematization and the creation of design briefs; (3) material speculation on future technologies (with or without the public).

Taken together the three phases offer an iterative process by which urban imaginaries are 'translated' into possible designs, and then reflected back to the community as a means to raise awareness and seed collaboration (see diagram below).



Pilot

The process and its different components were piloted during 2020 in two Rotterdam neighbourhoods, Bospolder-Tussendijken (BoTu) and Reyeroord, with the generous support of the municipality.

Expected outcomes

1. The project will help **raise public awareness to the smart city** not only as a set of technologies and policies but also as a set of ideas (or imaginaries). The project will also serve to seed a critical, concrete discussion about how the smart city can develop based on public values and needs instead of the prevailing logic of efficiency.
2. The project will **produce neighbourhood-specific images** of the smart city (in the form of speculative dashboards), providing the City with a better idea about how to pursue a smart city strategy that respects neighbourhoods' distinct characteristics.
3. The project will **provide a foundation for alternative technology development** paths, based on public values and not on the logic of efficiency and optimization. Whatever we develop will be placed in the public domain, thus allowing others to imagine and pursue even more possibilities.

The Team

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V2_Lab for the Unstable Media is an interdisciplinary center for art and media technology in Rotterdam. V2_ presents, produces, archives and publishes research at the interface of art, technology and society. Founded in 1981, V2_ offers a platform for artists, designers, scientists, researchers, theorists, and developers of software and hardware from various disciplines to discuss their work and share their findings. It aims to create a context in which issues regarding the social impact of technology are explored through critical dialogue, artistic reflection and practice-oriented research.

Contact

