

THE SNUG: A Conversation about Design Research. Imagining, embodying, assembling

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Figure 1 Conversation in a snug. Picture by John Fass

This set of Conversations centered around two different subjects. On the one hand we explored the radical imaginary, an idea which positions design research as a field of critical and imaginative thinking. On the other, we discussed how the idea of embodiment affects and alters notions of design research. These two Conversations took place in two different pub snugs, accessible through a micro-site that allowed listeners to choose and tune into one of them, or interact with them simultaneously, given place to an experience-conversation-mix-interference-assembly.



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According to convention the snug is traditionally a safe space for women, a place for reflection and measured opinion, part of the general tumult of social life, but separate from it – somewhere people can talk freely without fear of judgement or sanction. The Conversation will explore experimental formats and ways to engage in debates beyond traditional academic spaces.

Keywords: Design research; imagining; assembling; embodying

1 Organising questions

Can the radical imaginary open new spaces for struggle, contestation and creation of different politics? Can design avoid the pitfalls and morality that define thinking about the possible, the probable and the preferable and explore radical ways of thinking and doing in common?

Where does the radical imaginary live? Only in art and design schools or elsewhere? Radical politics, radical positions, radical actions, radical atoms, free radicals. The experimental, the provocative and challenging, the pre-conscious surreal, the activist, the provocateur.

The radical imaginary and the enclosure of imagination: increasingly design has considered imagination to be an individual trait. Something to be developed by the designer which will become a private asset. How can we design strategies to commonize imagination?

How to prevent imagination to become an individual escapist / utopian project and ground it in real and possible practices? How to avoid imagination as a moralizing tale about alternative futures and transform it into a collective tool to build better presents?

How can we institute radical imaginaries? Without materializing our ideas these become attractive but feeble dreams. Institutions organize and project shared values into the future. How can we design and build radical institutions capable of sustaining the radical imaginary over time?

1.1 Embodiment

What kind of bodies are privileged by design research? Which embodied experiences are we currently excluding? What are the cultural myths and metaphors that construct our lived and embodied experiences and how is that story perpetuated in design research? How does the plurality of lived experience manifest itself in design research?

We are placing human bodies, non-human bodies and their potentials at the centre of the Conversation and we suggest that design research should make room for more performative and symbiotic relationships between subjects and objects.

This necessarily involves going beyond dualities such as brain/body, thought/action, inside/outside of the body. We need to identify interfaces between bodies, systems, networks and corporeal processes: full hearted participation.

Embodied Design Research involves the inside and outside of the body. It requires interfaces between bodies, systems, networks and corporeal processes – but also an understanding of a great diversity of bodies: the insect world, the microbiome, the connectome; and truly designing for **plurality** in which nature becomes an active agent with which we need to enter into conversation.

2 The DRS2018 Conversation session



Figure 2 Embodiment Conversation seen from outside of the snug



Figure 3 Embodiment Conversation



Figure 4 Embodiment Conversation, full house



Figure 5 Radical imaginary Conversation

The aim of this Conversation was to explore alternative and experimental ways of engaging in debates and discussions on topics relevant to design research. In this case we discussed the importance of embodiment and the space and limits for developing a radical imaginary in design research. Two simultaneous Conversations were carried out in two different pub snugs in which a very limited number of people, due to special reasons, could attend. The Conversations were streamed through a micro-site designed for the event: <http://radicalimaginary.com>; this site allowed users to plug into one or the other Conversation or mix them and listen them simultaneously. The Conversations could be “assembled” or listened to separately. The site, also functions as an archive of the Conversation, allowing people to come back, listen to parts of it, or mixing it as they please.

The Conversation on the radical imaginary started with a provocation, suggesting the need for a more energetic and imaginative vigour in design research. Can the radical imaginary open new spaces for struggle, contestation and creation of different politics? To do so design must avoid the pitfalls and morality that define thinking about the possible, the probable and the preferable and explore radical ways of thinking and doing in common. We fear that imagination has become an individual escapist / utopian project, still, we consider that design can be an interesting space where to ground imagination in real and possible practices. That is why we discussed the need to explore strategies to commonize imagination, to think of it as a collective tool for building better presents.

The second Conversation, on embodiment, placed human and non-human bodies at the centre of the Conversation and suggested that design research should make room for more performative and symbiotic relationships between subjects and objects. We discussed about what kind of bodies are privileged by design research and what embodied experiences we are currently excluding. What are the cultural myths and metaphors that construct our lived and embodied experiences and how is that story perpetuated in design research? Opening up this debate involves going beyond dualities such as brain/body, thought/action, inside/outside of the body, identifying interfaces between bodies, systems, networks and corporeal processes, full hearted participation.

The Conversations were carried out in two local pub snugs: The Tom Collins Bar on Cecil Street and the Jerry Flannery’s on Catherine Street. Debating in such specific enclaves, had a dramatic influence on how the Conversations were developed. The first pub could almost fit eight people (some sitting on the floor), the second about 13. It was hot, we were cramped up, the air became stuffy, we faced constant interruptions and noise pollution. We also invited local storyteller and myth keeper Eddie Lenihan to contribute and disrupt the Conversation on embodiment.

The format defined the time of the Conversation, as after an hour it was too uncomfortable to continue, but also obliged attendants to listen closely as they were physically very engaged in what was being said. We were, literally, too close to avoid interacting with the rest of people in the room. The format also allowed attendants to explore spaces alien to the main congress, interacting with the city and learning about the function of pub snugs, a new type of spaces for international researchers.

In the near future we are planning to work on the recordings of the session, now on the microsite, signalling items and themes discussed, introducing references and links to specific projects and allowing listeners to interact visually with the Conversation. In this sense the site will be transformed into an interactive and visual archive of the Conversation.

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