

FINDING FUTURES: A SPATIO-VISUAL EXPERIMENT IN PARTICIPATORY ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

The Finding Futures Project explores innovative ways of deliberating the future of cities through an emphasis on embodied spatio-visual engagement with urban landscapes. The first instantiation of the project – which took place in Lisbon in 2011 – is reported through a discussion of the project’s background, methods and outcomes.

The urban landscape is both unimaginably complex and taken-for-granted to the point of invisibility. It teems with intensive technological infrastructures – electricity, water, transport – and is mediated by mundane technologies from walking shoes to sunscreen. Considering the future of the city requires at least two imaginative leaps: we must first learn to see the technological achievements that operate behind the scenes; and, second, we need to consider the kinds of futures that are emerging in the engagements between technologies, people and cities.

As scholar-practitioners, we are committed to thinking about the future of our cities, and the role that emerging technologies will play in them, in ways that are both radically participatory and able to speak to urban policy-making. We are interested in the ways that participatory urban planning can enable transformation [1] and, like a number of other researchers, we believe that deliberative fora need to move beyond an emphasis on the discursive to incorporate “idiosyncratic, sensorial and embodied forms” [2, 3]. The Finding Futures Project is the first stage of a longer-term

programme of activities which will situate deliberation on the future of a set of US cities within the specificities of their geographies and which will highlight the role of affective, aesthetic, and embodied experiences in that deliberation. Finding Futures was therefore an experiment in how participatory engagement with a particular urban environment can be sensitive to its visual and spatial character. Its emphasis was on the development of a new gaze, attuned to the aesthetics of the future city, which might foster new forms of deliberation.



Fig. 1: Finding Futures participants take photographs as they walk through Lisbon. (Photo © Alice Benessia)

The project

The Finding Futures Project was co-located with a European Commission workshop on ‘Science in a Digital Society’, and took place in Lisbon in May 2011. It took as its starting point William Gibson’s notion that ‘the future is already here, it’s just not very evenly distributed’ [4], asking workshop participants to search out the impacts of the past and present upon the future of the city during a two hour walking tour of the old industrial district along the river Tejo. During the walk participants were asked to be attentive to “what these pasts might become ... Spot signs of the times ... [Identify] the future breaking through” [5] and to take digital photographs (on smartphones or cameras) capturing these moments. The images were then uploaded to the photo-sharing website Flickr, tagged with ‘lisboafindingfutures’ and either ‘past’, ‘present’ or ‘future’, and expanded using a caption explaining participants’ thoughts, memories or associations as they took the photo.

Importantly, this was not the end of the project. The work culminated in an installation view of the three streams of images, with each stream – tagged ‘past’, ‘present’, or ‘future’ – projected onto a separate screen. Using a customised version of the JQuery plugin ‘Supersized’, participants’ photos were pulled from Flickr and shown in a slideshow that simultaneously rolled the image’s cap-

tion across the bottom of the screen. The installation ran for several hours at the end of the ‘Science in a Digital Society’ workshop and involved the creation of a space where participants – and other workshop attendees – could wander around the screens, spending time watching the flow of images, reading the captions, and discussing the effect. What had in many cases been a rather solitary activity thus became a collective one, within which a shared vision of Lisbon’s futures was constituted and critiqued through the streams of images. The display of the photographs not only hagiographed the individual experiences by which they had been created, but allowed contrasts and hesitations to become clear. A single pathway through a particular city could be understood in an infinite number of ways [6]. While the affective affordances of the images was obvious – they prompted, for instance, rapt attention, humour, debate, and poignant meditation – they also re-worked notions of geographical space through the representation of the same city path, doubled and tripled through participant understandings of urban temporalities.



Fig. 2: Watching images and captions scroll through the final installation. (Photo © Gretchen Gano)



Fig. 3: Another view of the installation setup, showing an image caption scrolling across the screen. (Photo © Gretchen Gano)

Reflections

Finding Futures was an experiment in taking time to look at the city: can we notice its technological skeleton and



Fig. 4: The mundane or ‘ugly’ was a key focus of participants’ images, rather than Lisbon as beautiful or historic. The caption to this photo reads: *In 2050 oil drums will all have rusted away and oil will be a vague memory.* (Photo © Finding Futures Project)

implicit temporalities, and does such noticing open up new possibilities for participatory engagement? We were interested, then, not only in what the project suggested about Lisbon but also in participant experiences. How successful was the process in opening up new forms of deliberative reflection? In the rest of this article we offer some observations on the outcomes of the project.

Our first point relates to the Flickr image stream created by the project (publically accessible through visiting flickr.com and searching for ‘lisboafindingfutures’). The images displayed are strikingly mundane, even ugly; capturing, for instance, parking meters, trash on the street, or dirt-encrusted taxi stands. They resist the valorisation that photographing the city – and indeed imagining the future – often entails: rather than the historic and heroic, the primary focus is on the small-scale, the contingent, the grubbily quotidian. While some participants struggled with the tension implicit in taking this approach in a city famed for its beauty – describing the path the tour took as “barren”, for instance – the images reflect the project’s interest in the power of the taken-for-granted in shaping the future. The image stream thus re-presents a pathway which is utterly familiar in its composition of globalised signage, streets and urban detritus while at the same time effecting a destabilisation of what is typically celebrated or ignored.

Many participants also emphasised that this destabilisation extended to themselves, in that the tour had allowed them to experience the city in a new

way. The requests that the project made of them – to move along a particular path, looking as well as seeing, whilst keeping the notion of the future in mind – enabled, as hoped, a gaze attentive to mundane urban infrastructure and its temporalities. In talking to participants it was clear that there was something qualitatively different about this new way of looking; a transformative change of perspective for both residents of and visitors to Lisbon that at times amounted to a gestalt switch [7]. The quote below, for instance, is illustrative of the ways in which participants accounted for this new gaze:

“...I suddenly had to look at the city in a different way. I think it helps to train the eye, and also it trains the mind to listen to the spirit, and instead of just technically looking at images you’re trying to feel what they are telling you, and suddenly walls make sense and signs make sense and a little plant growing out of concrete makes sense. There’s a story suddenly that arises.”

Here the city, through the ‘training’ of the self, becomes newly coherent, something that “makes sense” as part of a “story”. Note also that this is not merely a *mental* leap, but a process that encompasses “the eye ... the mind ... the spirit ... you’re trying to feel what they are telling you”. The gaze that Finding Futures fostered did not act only on the city, in other words, to open up new understandings of its temporalities, but also upon participants themselves. New emotional and spiritual connectivities are

forged through learning to look, as another person put it, “with fresh eyes”.

This is not to say that the project operated in a homogeneous way upon its participants; in fact, many also emphasised that the experience was one of experimentation and self-definition. The snapshots taken, uploaded, and finally viewed via Flickr of the future in the city were a contingent mix of the possibilities of the landscape, the interests of participants, the social and affective relations that developed through the tour, and the social technologies of the project. As with any deliberative process, happenstance played a role in shaping the final outcome. Participants described a number of ‘accidents’ which operated to co-construct their experience: they forgot their camera so had to work with a partner; a personal work interest became an obsession that structured all of the pictures they took; the tour’s timing at the start of the ‘Science in a Digital Society’ workshop meant that they chose to treat the activity as an icebreaker. Finding Futures, though designed with a particular purpose in mind, did not operate as a rigid model for engagement with the city but rather as a theme to be invented and re-invented by each person involved. Ultimately, participants agreed, one had to *do* the project to understand it; to “let go ... let the experience tell me”. As such it was construed in terms of creativity and improvisation and as a collaboration with a particular landscape at a particular point in time. And, as such, its ‘outcomes’ are only partially captured by the Finding Futures Flickr stream. The project is present here, certainly, but it is also inscribed upon the bodies of participants, the cameras and devices they co-opted, and, finally, upon the stuff of the city itself.

References and Notes

1. Leonie Sandercock, *Towards cosmopolis: planning for multicultural cities* (New York: J. Wiley, 1998).
2. D. Hemment, R. Ellis, and B. Wynne, “Participatory Mass Observation and Citizen Science,” *Leonardo* 44, No. 1 (2011), pp. 62–63.
3. Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000).
4. See <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/William_Gibson>
5. The full guide to the walk is available at <<http://sci-ict.jrc.it/?p=29>>
6. Kevin Lynch, *The image of the city* (Boston: MIT Press, 1960).
7. Alexander Bird, “Thomas Kuhn” in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2011 Edition). See <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/homas-kuhn/>>