

Minor Design Activism: Prompting Change from Within

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Introduction

As researchers and practitioners in the field of co-design, we are interested in design activism as a particular mode of engagement that denotes collaboration rather than persuasion. Co-design already has strong connotations to an activist ethos through its historical affinity with the more explicit emancipatory tradition of Scandinavian Participatory Design from the 1970s onward. In this paper we argue that some types of contemporary co-design practices embody a different form of activist agency—one that is experimentally and immanently generated only as the design project unfolds. First, the cases that we describe are delimited in a specific context—namely, the Danish public sector—and they use the co-design methods of the co-design research center at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Design. Second, the type of political engagement that this paper examines is one that is intrinsic to the design process itself, rather than being directed by a priori political teloi.

To begin a closer examination of such activist positions in co-design, we propose the notion of a *minor* design activism, inspired by the concept of *minoritarian* in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.¹ We describe a minor design activism as a position in co-design engagements that strives to continuously maintain experimentation. Through this ongoing quest for displacement and change, a minor design activism challenges attempts to stabilize the initial design program around already unified agendas.

A minor design activism is not restricted to certain marginal or non-commercial domains.² In fact, both cases discussed in this paper are firmly situated within public policy-driven initiatives. As such, a minor design activism distinguishes itself from more general assertions of activism in contemporary design,³ insofar as this kind of activism works *from within* hegemonic public institutions and agendas. From this structurally embedded position and through open-ended experiments, minor design activism seeks to challenge prescriptive agendas and to reconfigure group relations.

1 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004); Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

2 Although providing an in-depth overview of activism in contemporary design is beyond the scope of this paper, the following definition of design activism proposed in the call for contributions to the 2011 Design History Society Annual Conference, titled “Design Activism and Social Change,” suggests that design activism should indeed “...distance itself from commercial or mainstream public policy-driven approaches. Instead, it embraces marginal, non-profit, or politically engaged ...articulations and actions.” “Design Activism and Social Change,” <http://www.historyadeldisseny.org/congres/> (accessed November 21, 2013).

3 Alastair Fuad-Luke, *Design Activism Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World* (London: Earthscan, 2009); Thomas Markussen, “The Disruptive Aesthetics of Design Activism: Enacting Design Between Art and Politics,” *Design Issues* 29, no.1 (Winter 2013): 38–50; Guy Julier, “From Design Culture to Design Activism,” *Design and Culture* 5, no.2 (2013): 215–36.

- 4 Joan Greenbaum and Morten Kyng, *Design at Work: Cooperative Design of Computer Systems* (Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1991).
- 5 Lucy Suchman, Jeanette Blomberg, Jullian Orr and Randy Trigg, "Reconstructing Technologies as Social Practice," *American Behavioral Scientist* 43, no.3 (1999): 392–408.
- 6 Terry Winograd, *Bringing Design to Software* (New York: ACM Press, 1996).
- 7 Ilpo Koskinen, Katja Battarbee and Tuuli Mattelmäki, *Empathic Design: User Experience in Product Design* (Helsinki: IT press, 2003).
- 8 Elisabeth Sanders, "From User-Centered to Participatory Design Approaches," in *Design and the Social Sciences: Making Connections*, ed. Jorge Frascara (London: Taylor & Francis, 2002), 1–8.
- 9 Joachim Halse, Eva Brandt, Brendon Clark and Thomas Binder, eds., *Rehearsing the Future* (Copenhagen: The Danish Design School Press, 2010); Pelle Ehn, Elisabet Nilsson, and Richard Topgaard, eds., *Making Futures: Marginal Notes on Innovation, Design, and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).
- 10 Erling Björgvinsson, Pelle Ehn and Per-Anders Hillgren, "Participatory Design and Democratizing Innovation," *Proceedings of the 11th Biennial Participatory Design Conference* (Sydney: ACM, 2010): 41–50.
- 11 Carl DiSalvo, "Design and the Construction of Publics," *Design Issues* 25, no.1 (Winter 2009): 48–63; Kristina Lindström and Åsa Ståhl, "Patchworking Publics-in-the-Making: Design, Media and Public Engagement" (PhD diss. Malmö University, 2014).
- 12 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Michel Callon, Pierre Lascoumes and Yannick Barthe, *Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011); Isabelle Stengers, "The Cosmopolitical Proposal," in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, eds. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 994–1003.

We present examples from two recent co-design projects. The first project worked with citizens in a public library in Copenhagen. The overall aims were to explore the library beyond its traditional role as a service provider and to find ways to invite citizens into the dialogue on the future of their local library.

The second project was initiated as an exploration of new partnerships between local residents in a low-income area of Copenhagen and municipal waste management and sought to develop new solutions and alleviate unauthorized waste dumping.

Both projects, albeit in different ways, exemplify how a minor design activism is performed through the use of various co-design techniques and interventions, and how this kind of activism is linked to the continuous mobilization of actors and networks to challenge pre-established programs through collective experimentation.

From Co-Designing Objects to the Formation of New Publics

During the past 50 years, various user-oriented design approaches have articulated users as legitimate participants in design processes. In the 1970s, Scandinavian participatory design projects around new technologies set out to promote a relatively well-defined agenda for a specific group—often workers and labor unions. Thus, these projects were articulated outside or often directly in opposition to the dominant development paradigm typically represented by industrial managers.⁴

Since the 1990s, participatory design practices have influenced research in North America, particularly in the context of technology development⁵ and software development.⁶ The focus, both in North America and in Scandinavia, has gradually shifted from political activism to the development of viable tools and techniques that generate empathy⁷ and invite end users into co-creation sessions.⁸

In parallel, within the past 5 to 10 years, the interest in the social and political as design object has kept on growing in other parts of contemporary co-design and participatory design environments. Some research projects, for example, have explored new ways of building social relations by rehearsing new work practices, cultural constellations, and social routines.⁹ Björgvinsson, Ehn and Hilgren have characterized this exploration as a notable shift in participatory design: from democracy at work to democratic innovation.¹⁰ As participatory design has moved out into open social arenas, researchers have explored how collaborative events might help to rearticulate important issues that are not easily accessible to a general public.¹¹

The growing interest in design's ability to shape the political and the social, at least in part, can be seen as a result of ideas, concepts, and theories imported into participatory design research from post-structuralist thinkers like Latour, Callon, and Stengers.¹²

Figure 1

Doll scenarios: a format for collaborative enactment of alternative realities. Photo courtesy of the DAIM-Project, The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts – School of Design.



The more radical constructivist notions of co-creation and representation may be said to have complicated the relation between participation and democracy.¹³ This complication, we argue, is productive, but it also challenges participatory design and co-design research to attend to a re-articulation of the activist impetus and activist tactics of contemporary participatory research.

Co-Design Methods: Staging and Exploring Alternatives

The methodology of co-design is not stabilized or generally agreed upon, but is highly interdisciplinary and subject to continued experimentation. However, some traits have become commonplace over the past 30 years, including some element of ethnographically inspired fieldwork, generative workshops with diverse participants, and iterative prototyping and testing. The particular methodology of the co-design research center at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Design, is no exception. We draw heavily on anthropology and actor-network theory, both in the close ethnographic attention to the details of mundane practice and in understanding the premises for this knowledge generation as always situated and already implicated in the issues at stake. However, the fundamental ethnographic curiosity as to how the world unfolds and the appreciation of multiplicity are, in co-design, coupled with an equally strong interventionist impulse. Design is, after all, driven by a desire to generate change, and at its core lies the design suggestion, the proto-type.

The two apparently opposite movements of ethnographic appreciation and design intervention often intersect in workshops, understood as privileged events explicitly set up for collaboratively exploring field material, such as photographs and quotations, as well as for creatively trying out alternative configurations (see Figure 1).

The co-design workshop participants are often highly diverse people who take up the invitation to assemble, not because they agree on what needs to be done, but precisely because they

13 Thomas Binder, Georgio De Michelis, Pelle Ehn, Giulio Jacucci, Per Linde and Ina Wagner, *Design Things* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

are divided by the issue. Facilitating a two and a half-hour encounter among, for example, municipal waste planners, engineers, garbage collectors, residents, caretakers, and shop owners requires careful preparation to allow them all to participate actively, as well as to appropriate the available tools and materials they need to express their particular concerns and aspirations, but in ways that are also open for challenges and negotiation from the other parties who come from different backgrounds.

The process of probing alternative futures—or “rehearsing the future”¹⁴—continues beyond the workshop. If a particular story of an alternative future lends itself to differing agendas, it might be enacted several times with different stakeholders and through different media: verbally in a contextual interview, conceptually in a design game, and through role-playing with dolls in a scale model. In this case, the story might serve as the basis for a full-scale intervention, probing the desirability of particular alternatives in the context of the participants’ own environment. We return to a concrete example of such an intervention below.

Deleuze and Becoming Minor

The notion of becoming minor in Deleuze and Guattari’s writings is introduced in their book, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1986), but is subsequently found throughout their collective work and in Deleuze’s own.¹⁵

The three defining principles of the minor, according to Deleuze and Guattari, are that, first, it is inextricably linked to the making of an aesthetic entity (literature, film, or, in our case, design proposal) within a dominant, or major, “language.” Second, the creation of a minor literature connects the individual creation with the political.¹⁶ Third, a minor literature always acts as a “collective assemblage of enunciation.”¹⁷ Here, a collective assemblage of enunciation denotes a recoding of the dominant language through the collective work over the individual (e.g., the genius author or designer). The minor, as a process of becoming *other*, then signifies a different kind of political action, precisely because it actuates a movement from *within* the major.

In a collective design process, the future is instigated by the tricks and trades of the co-designer, actualized *in* the present: “It is not that the actual is the utopian prefiguration of a future that is still part of our history. Rather, it is the now of our becoming.”¹⁸ Instead of a version of the future already manifested as ideal (in the past), utopia here introduces a different kind of politics—that is, an activism concerned with the negotiation and experimentation within the present to invent new pathways and possibilities. For Deleuze and Guattari, the aim of philosophy, as well as art, is to “resist the present” and call forth a *people to come*—which is to say, a people who are already here but in the process of becoming *other* (becoming minor). In a less abstract sense, what we argue

14 Halse, Brandt, Clark and Binder, *Rehearsing the Future*.

15 The minor is further developed in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004); Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

16 Ronald Bogue, “The Minor,” in *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts*, ed. Charles Stivale (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 2005), 110–20.

17 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 18. To clarify, the last axiom—language—for Deleuze and Guattari is a mode of action through which “incorporeal transformations” of bodies, in the broadest sense, are instigated (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*; Bogue, “The Minor,” 111. The function of language is thus to impose social organization and coding of the world.

18 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 112.

here as a minor activism in design pertains to the actions by which participants and designers, collectively, if only ever so slightly, alter the dominant conditions of the design process.

Towards a Minor Design Activism

According to Marcelo Svirsky, a Deleuzian-inspired activism thus involves three interconnected qualities: “a confrontation with a stratifying organisation, a situational engagement,” and finally, “an inquiring attitude towards the actual.”¹⁹

Translated into a design context, a becoming minor in Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy alludes to actions that cannot be classified by predetermined programs and fixed categories within the project landscape. Becoming minor shuns attempts to co-opt dissenting interests or to control alternative future directions of the project. As for Svirsky’s emphasis on the double articulation of “engagement” and “an inquiring attitude,” incorporating both qualities into the socio-material engagements becomes the task of the design-researcher.

In this way, a minor design activism can be theorized as a tactical principle in co-design, in which the initial design program is brought into flux to allow for subtle redirections in the collective assessment of the present and for speculative actualizations of desires toward possible futures. As a specific tactic, it is often initiated as a calling forth of marginal (and/or marginalized) participants, hitherto ascribed a different role in the design process or simply found at the fringes of the project’s context.

Case 1: Engaging the Local Library as Alternative Community Space

In a recent project, we were invited to help develop new initiatives to bolster user involvement in a Copenhagen neighborhood library. During the initial ethnographic inquiry, our attention was drawn toward a group of youngsters in a drop-in center in the basement of the library. The daily activities in the basement resembled those of a social center, but the children were not registered as formal users of the library. Instead, they had taken over the basement room on their own behest and as a self-organized community. During our fieldwork at the center, numerous conflicts between the youngsters and the rest of the library erupted.

At the same time we began to collaborate with Camilla, a manager on the renewal project in a nearby park. One of her objectives was to include “vulnerable citizens”—specifically, local youngsters—and we decided to stage a dialogue among the children from the basement around the urban renewal project. The children already used the park on a daily basis to hang out with friends when the basement was closed. We opted to collect their stories to engage them and asked them to take us around the park and show us their favorite spots.

19 Marcelo Svirsky, *Deleuze and Political Activism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 165.

Figure 2

A format for telling stories; the kids employ snapshots from their everyday lives to create a book. Photo courtesy of Sissel Olander.



In the course of interaction, we learned we had to abandon the too-directly goal-oriented questions because they did not seem to move the conversation productively forward. We could not simply sample the stories of the children as data to be converted into specifications for redesigning the park.

The risk, made clear in these interactions, is that our engagement with communities, even when directed by good intentions, invariably ends up becoming a “stratifying” straight-jacket, in the language of Deleuze and Guattari. In this case we wanted to engage the youngsters, but they were already quite engaged, albeit on their own terms. Consequently, our questions and concerns came across as uninteresting, or even confusing. We had to maintain an “inquiring attitude toward the actual” (in Svirsky’s terms) and go through several iterations to find a productive way of staging a more accommodating dialogue.

The simultaneously empirical and analytical task at this point in the process was that of reconsidering how the minor (which is more than just a category of marginalized actors) enables a potential re-negotiation of the major, through the major’s own transformation as prompted by the design intervention. The minor is not something that must be “solved”; rather, it is a productive and generative experimentation from within the major. And as the example also shows, it requires an introspective reorganization of pre-existing intentions—and a subsequent change of tactics, on the part of the design-researcher—to maintain a constructive commitment to the minor.

We decided to invite the children to make a book out of their stories (see Figure 2). The intention was to tell stories from the basement because the life in the basement seemed more or less oblique to the rest of the library and the urban renewal organization. Furthermore, such a book could be a token for expressing

appreciation to the children, rather than just taking or sampling from them to gather information. The production of the book was staged as a workshop in the main library, so as to highlight the minor practices of the basement and to exhibit this unique community space, but without co-opting it into the major organization.

In the workshop, we posed a “what-if” question to the children with reference to their stories of the activities in the basement and the neighborhood: *What if the community space of the basement were reinvented in another favorite place in the neighborhood?* The what-if question prompted the children to engage very concretely with an imaginable future, yet to retain a focus on their meaningful practices in the present. Rather than serving as a directly goal-oriented endeavor to redesign the park, the what-if question helps to elucidate the minor of “what is.” As a minor design tactic, this move insists on speculating with what is, thus collapsing the possible into the present. Performed through the very specific set-up in the socio-material assembly of the workshop, we suggest that this event can be seen as a form of minor design activism, insofar as it engages the minor practices of the children in the basement and presents them as a partial model for a re-negotiation of the existing library organization and the renewal plans for the nearby park.

Case 2: When Residents Take Over?

Municipal housing estates in the Copenhagen area are experiencing problems with the unauthorized dumping of waste, occasional vandalism, and declines in the sorting quality of the collected waste. In the public sector social workers are sometimes employed to organize local activities for children and youngsters to remedy social disintegration. However, waste collection and recycling are typically seen as services that do not involve active resident participation. The professional waste sector is well-rehearsed in offering campaigning and communication to citizens about proper waste handling, but most of the strategies used assume that citizens are receiving a service and have to be educated about what to do.

To query the ethnographic realities of the many actors of this field of waste handling, we staged concrete encounters between caretakers, municipal waste planners, and various residents in different areas of one particular multicultural housing estate in Brøndby. With the official board members we were invited to witness the disorders of the waste sheds; we workshopped and tried to re-frame the problem in the drop-in center for youngsters; and we generated ideas for new initiatives with the Turkish women’s group. In this high-rise, children and youngsters of immigrants were consistently the first to be blamed for the deteriorating local environment. However, as we observed, the children also are the ones who often carry the waste down from

Figure 3

Children taking part in a scavenger hunt for waste and showing off their findings. Photo courtesy of the DAIM-Project, The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts – School of Design.



the apartments. To undermine the existing stratifying logic, by which the guilty are pointed out and targeted with educational materials from the authorities, we set out to work directly with the children, both in documenting the problems and in telling stories of attractive waste futures from their point of view.

As a small intervention against dominating assumptions, we invented a *scavenger hunt for waste* to see if we could prompt the children of the local drop-in center to counter their notorious reputation (see Figure 3). Concretely we devised a simple set of rules for finding and evaluating waste, and some illustrative posters to enable the children to actually sort waste as the final achievement of the scavenger hunt.

In the youth center we introduced the activity, and awaited the response: “I will never look through the stuff in the containers!” We tried to control the situation with authority: “All those who want to join, raise your hand and be quiet. You must find these things at home and around in the housing area. When you come back down with the things to the waste shed, you’ll get points for them.” The children started shouting again: “I’m not giving away my mobile phone,” or “Hey, who says we have beer bottles at home!?” Questions flew through the air. The approximately 20 children had been waiting impatiently for two hours this Thursday afternoon, and they quickly ran out the door to outdo their friends. They collected old toys, empty cans, newspapers, plastic bags, and other scrap material where they caught sight of it: “Quick, there is something over there, under the stairs!”²⁰

In terms of relocating agencies through materialities, we had made some simple new posters for the containers and mounted them at children’s eye height. With illustrations they indicate different types of waste and what it can be used for if recycled; for example, that empty soda can provide aluminum for a new bike.

20 Direct quotes have been transcribed and reconstructed based on Joachim Halse’s video recording of the *Scavenger Hunt for Waste* at a multicultural housing estate in Brøndby, Denmark on February 4, 2009.

The given challenge of this mini project was to find ways to establish more productive partnerships between local residents and their initiatives, the municipality, and the professional waste sector. What if the municipalities and the waste sector could find ways to actively engage and support resident initiatives to ensure more sustainable waste handling? The small intervention recounted here points to a democratic potential of calling forth the minor voices to undermine the stratifying “logic” of seeing children as the cause of the problems and of seeing the adults as blame-free. It also points to the wider innovation potential in re-thinking citizens’ roles from being the passive receivers of services to being the prime actors in local waste-handling initiatives.

Minor Design Activism: Between Analysis and Tactics

Let us consider what the two interventions described mean in terms of minor design activism, citizenship, and public participation. In the process of re-positioning the scapegoats, there is, of course, a risk of simply proclaiming the children as the real but unacknowledged heroes. Instead, we contend that the approach offers an activist demonstration of the need to pose the problem in new ways, rather than to discuss solutions to the problem as already agreed upon. By looking at the immediate scapegoats as a “minor potential,” we reveal the possibility of making a new temporary and subversive connection between some of the bored children and the disorderly waste sheds. But just as important, the intervention became an occasion to question two central assumptions about the problem: First, for the municipality, the members of the formal board of the housing association might seem to be the obvious choice for communication and collaboration because of its transparent organization and clearly articulated responsibilities. By contrast, many of the residents form more temporary networks around particular issues of concern. These temporary networks are more difficult for the municipality to collaborate with both because they are bureaucratically invisible (mostly with no formal membership) and because they potentially dissolve or reform around other issues at any time.

Second, public information about waste sorting procedures is disseminated to citizens in a yearly manual, on how to dispose of each type of waste correctly. However, this type of manual fails to engage with the particular materialities of everyday life in the housing estate. For example, it is simply not *ready-to-hand* for a 12-year-old resident who are busy doing things with a view to achieve something. In other words, carrying down the household waste is just as much an opportunity to meet with friends and play around in the waste sheds. The yearly manual thus appears as a corrective to unauthorized or incorrect behavior

of lazy or ignorant citizens and, inadvertently, casts aside the “minoritarian” remainder as citizens not to be entrusted with progressive waste handling.

The children in the library basement and in the municipal housing estate alike were not singled out by the design researchers as an a priori category in need of emancipation. Rather, these groups were both discovered and constructed through the initial co-design activities on site, and only afterwards were cast as central participants (and co-designers); hence, interviews, workshops, and design games are in these cases activities of a becoming minor.

Some interpreters might object that the children, in both cases, were present as minoritarian groups all along—primarily in the way they kept to themselves in the basement or roamed the courtyards around the housing estates on the fringes of attention, but also in the margins of the initial design program. Although the children might be seen as minorities in the Deleuzian sense of obstructing assimilation into a major strata or discourse, this vision pertains only to the analytical gaze of the design researcher as a virtual predisposition that might, or might not, be actualized as a minor design activism. In the case of waste handling, the group of children didn’t present themselves by their mere presence, but only through the series of situated engagements held with various groups of actors in and around the estate. In the case of the library basement, the children serve as a tempting figure of alterity. But as is clear from the account, only after some difficulty in finding a productive rapport with the children did the design researchers manage to initiate a constructive conversation (i.e., a becoming together through experimentation).

Activist Qualities and Design Materials

The analysis provided entails two important perspectives for a more nuanced depiction of a minor design activism. First, activism here must be conceived as that which includes both the analytical gaze and the tactical engagement. Second, bringing-forth of a minor becoming always requires a material translation through some form of material incursion.

If we extrapolate the practical qualities of activism provided by Marcelo Svirsky, in trying to move toward a conceptualization of the main traits of a minor design activism, we would define Svirsky’s qualities in three ways: (1) as challenging stratification by continually opening the design process for an ongoing, collective re-negotiation of the existing conditions; (2) as a simultaneously analytical and tactical engagement that operates from within existing socio-political and material realities in a given situation; and (3) as using generative tools to inquire into existing conditions and collectively speculate about alternative configurations of the actual.

Beginning with the first axiom, a confrontation with a stratifying organization, the designers in both cases clearly try to challenge the *a priori* organizing functions of the assemblages in which they operate. In the housing estates, this challenge is of the preconception that waste handling is a serious matter that has to be addressed through the existing channels of decision-making and hierarchies.

The second axiom, situational engagement, refers less to the activities of design researchers, *per se*, than to the demands they place on the group of actors—in this case, the children—to be actively involved and to productively intervene in the circumstances of their present situation. Demands, in this sense, might take different forms (e.g., persuasion, seduction, provocation) but nonetheless signify the most important move on the part of design researchers, without which a minor becoming is rendered impossible.

With the third axiom, design researchers direct their attention toward the conditions that keep the group stratified and locked into a specific position. And by means of collective engagement and speculation, for example, the scavenger hunt and the production of the book in the library, they seek to rearrange the existing conditions by “steering both thought and action.”²¹ In a sense this quality of an activist approach is an inversion of the first axiom because it takes on the scale and perspective of a group “to come,” whereas the first axiom confronts the organization as a whole.

To be sure, to critique the state of things is a rhetorical call, but in a design context, it is equally a quasi-ontological activity in which the reconsideration of the “actual” is supplemented with alternative visions of the present and of possible futures. In the language game of asking “what if” questions or rehearsing alternative practices of waste collection, figured as treasure-hunts, the designers inquire into the range of the actual. This decidedly designerly take on inquiry infers a practice of speculation and imaginative projections as the means to propose alternatives to the current and henceforth enables moves in new directions. In the cases presented here, a great deal of the encounters with the children can be seen as the process of rehearsing the future.²²

Conclusion

The qualities of activism, discussed here, relate in part to the collective discursivity or, in the language of Deleuze and Guattari, to a “collective assemblage of enunciation.”²³ But such enunciation cannot stand alone; it must be supplemented by the material aspects of the assemblage—what Deleuze and Guattari call the “assemblage of bodies” and what we in design terms could appropriately call the shaping of things. “Bodies” and “things”

21 Svirsky, *Deleuze and Political Activism*, 166.

22 Halse, Brandt, Clark and Binder, *Rehearsing the Future*.

23 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.

obviously refer to many entities in and around the design situation—for example, the physical constraints and opportunities afforded by the build environment itself, such as the children's hideout in the library basement. But if we take a narrower focus, both cases exhibit different design materials by which to enact a speculative re-organization of the given situation, thus enabling a minor becoming. In the housing estates project, the treasure hunt can be seen as just such a material speculative incursion on the assemblage. Although it was instigated by the design researchers, its full potential—for example, as a confrontation of the stratifying organization (“children are incapable of playing an active role in waste handling”)—could not have been anticipated prior to the actions. In a similar fashion, the collective production of the book by the children in the basement becomes, not a representation of a minor becoming, but an integral part of activism itself. It enacts—that is, unifies and makes performable—the speculative renderings of the children's desired alternative realities.

Prompting changes from within by means of a minor design activism can be summed up as an ongoing commitment to engage with the possibilities of change in organizational networks (e.g., in schools, libraries, or public service enterprises), in collaboration with partners and stakeholders. Contemporary co-designers are increasingly called on to work in dynamic organizational configurations in complex socio-political arenas. Under these conditions, a minor approach can prove itself particularly useful because it enables co-designers who have a social agenda to better articulate how contemporary participatory design can operate through collaborative design interventions. Through such interventions, it mobilizes new actors and opens new vectors of change from a position firmly embedded in the organizational corpus of public institutions, operating through the given socio-political conditions these institutions afford. Hence, a minor activism is one that, rather than proclaiming a critical distance from the existing conditions, tries to move the internal organizational structure through design interventions that alter the perceptual outlook of decision-makers about possible futures.

Activist design interventions enable new kinds of dialogic transformation processes to challenge existing design programs, as we have shown in our account of two co-design processes that happened in controversial sites where professional technological knowledge of waste handling and urban planning overflows the everyday world of young citizens. In this regard the concept of a minor design activism is meant both as a contribution to the growing scholarly debate about the efficacy of design activism and as an invitation to begin a dialogue about what design tools and tactics we might use in the future to prompt change from within.