

# THE CITY AT PLAY / CO-DESIGNING GAMES AS ECO-POLITICAL AGENCY

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## ABSTRACT

“The City At Play” displays parts of how co-design researchers in collaboration with civil servants practically have engaged in exploring urban ecologies by challenging current collaborative municipal mapping and transition processes through game development. The exhibit is a narrative installation of tangible traces from the participatory prototyping sessions and “animating” interventions into municipal planning contexts - in this case climate transition in the Öresund region. It is argued that a game inspired co-designing mind-set – rather than a problem-solving approach – presents ways to explore and critically reflect upon dynamic urban complexities as eco-political contexts of competition and collaboration across competencies and administrative units.

## INTRODUCTION

Within the field of Participatory Design, ‘design games’ is well established as a form of collaboration (e.g. Vaajakallio & Mattelmäki 2014). Yet, the design games used are often pre-designed e.g. by the participatory design researchers organizing the collaborative and mutual learning process (Simonsen & Robertson 2013). While pre-designed games are also increasingly explored in urban deliberative planning processes (e.g. by Mistra Urban Futures and MindLab in Denmark), a growing attention has also developed as concerns the very staging and programming of any gaming situation (e.g. Bogost 2007), including an increasing recognition of the “agonistic” element of urban dynamics (Mouffe 2013). In the Urban Transition Öresund project (see link), which this exhibition entry largely builds upon,

we have therefore explored the potential of rethinking planning practice in urban ecological terms through an action/co-design research approach. Together with civil servants from different local departments and municipalities in the Öresund region, all with ambitious sustainability goals, we employed game development as a way of questioning current common procedures and formats aiming at urban transition.

## THE CITY AT PLAY EXHIBIT COMPONENTS

Practically, negotiation and decision making concerning sustainable urban development and climate transition often happen in meeting rooms among civil servants through procedural talking and with some selective working materials such as scale drawings and meeting agendas. While partly imitating this framework, the exhibit aims to question the power relations and processes reproduced within such contexts.



Figure 1: Overview of the main components of The City at Play: 1) Imitated meeting-room setting (table, chairs, ‘agendas’, cups, etc.) (in front); 2) annotated transparent bags with fragments of material from the game co-designing workshops and local game-tests during the long-term participatory game development process (left in the back); 3) the final version of the co-designed triangular “UrbanTransition” design game (right in the back); 4) and co-design researcher’s reflective stop-motion video (on top of animated table in the front).

On the ‘municipal’ table, a stop-motion video exposes a different game and form of planning practice, requiring other materials and roles. In conjunction with the animated table, these are displayed, as an abundant resource for alternative forms of knowledge production.

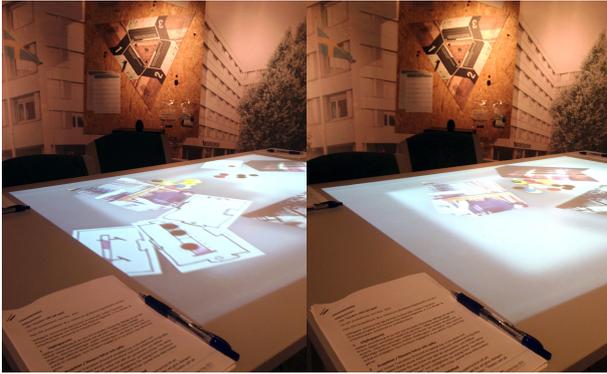


Figure 2: With selected tangible materials from the process, the stop-motion video capturing cores of the process and the co-design researcher' critical reflections upon experiences and insights from the game co-designing process as well as current and future municipal urban transition dynamics and practices. The video included in the exhibit is available here: Link: <https://vimeo.com/115227393>

## THE CITY AT PLAY & DESIGN ECOLOGIES

Through participatory game development with a sustainability or transition focus, the installation addresses design ecologies in terms of value generating power dynamics. The aim of the project, from which the exhibit stems, has been through a game setting to stage and try out an ecology approach within everyday municipal practice. Through integrating and critically challenging different sustainability focuses (ecological, social and economical), the idea has been to expose how these are often either uncritically integrated or treated separately by different actors and in distinct 'silos' (Boyer et al. 2011). Exploring this integration–separation dynamics through the co-designing and further refinement of game mechanics, the project managed to unveil the radically different perspectives on and interpretations of sustainability and transition simultaneously in use. Requiring a sensibility as regards different interests, flows and dependencies, the game development further sharpened the listening capabilities, argumentation and conceptualising skills among the participating practitioners, making explicit the preconceptions about local conditions and the priorities concerning possible sustainable solutions.

A core part of the game development process was the critical and constructive reflection on modes of collaboration that took place throughout the process. Collaborations typically happened both within and across municipal departments and with other stakeholders (e.g. municipal managers, local citizens, developers, etc.) – and this in relation to broad and complex urban transition issues. This mutual learning process was largely triggered during hands-on co-designing events, where the testing and experimenting of prototypes happened in direct relation to local 'real-world' cases and with actual stakeholders.

With a focus on spatial inter-dependencies and power dynamics over time, the game setting and format offered an eco-political framework, enabling participants to challenge habitual and anthropocentric planning paradigms. The game development unfolded

as a socio-material re-programming, a 'playful' exposure of assumptions and (individual and departmental) taken for granted procedures. Rather than top-down alignment of economic, ecological and social systems, radical transition design is a question of bringing several ecologies – mental, social, and environmental – into play. All in all, the project and the installation aim to expose the materiality and situatedness of this eco-political play and to raise renewed demands for new modes of collaboration within local governments.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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