

Labyrinth Within: Emergence through Documentation

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines our design proposal for the OZCHI 24 hour design challenge. The design brief challenged us to identify an unused space and revitalise it through a design proposal. Through a series of inquiries we conceived a design concept, introducing a labyrinthine experience into a linear urban space. Our argument in this paper is that documentation and externalisation serves both as a way of communicating the process, as well as creating an understanding of the design situation.

Author Keywords

Design documentation, Emerging ideas, Design process.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to give a short account of our final concept, and an overview of the underlying design process. This will lead to a discussion of the importance in being situated in the design domain, and how extensive documentation played a critical role in the emergence of the proposed concept.

LABYRINTH WITHIN

Labyrinth Within is a labyrinthine experience set in a linear urban space. The domain for our design proposition is an alleyway in the city of Århus, Denmark. The alleyway stands out as a narrow passage between two larger streets. A dark and unwelcoming space at night, and a dirty and unfriendly passageway in the day. Our concept addresses the negative values of the physical space by augmenting it with a virtual layer. The virtual layer gives the users a reason to be in the alley for an extended time period, and changes the way they experience the physical space. At the same time the notion of a virtual labyrinth played into some of the existing values in the alley. The secretive, narrow, hidden feel in the physical domain is also connoted in the concept of a labyrinth.

Interaction

At each end of the alley is a board with a drawing of a labyrinth and instructions on how to navigate through the virtual space. Upon entering the passageway the user is

met with a switch and a LED light, see figure 1. The switch represents a fork in the virtual labyrinth, and by setting the switch the user indicates which direction they want to follow in the labyrinth. When moving forward to the next switch, the light adjacent to the switch will come on. If the light is red it signifies that the user has hit a dead end and has to take another route at one of the previous intersections. If the light is green the user is free to make another choice of left or right. Note that just like in a real labyrinth, the user might need to go all the way back to the entrance, in order to choose the right direction in the forking path.

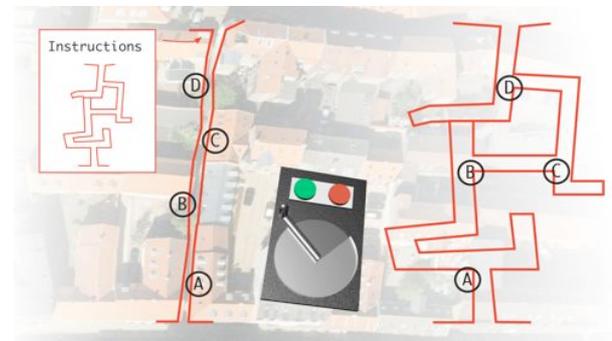


Figure 1. Concept overview

If the user reaches the other side of the passageway and overcomes the labyrinth, all the lights in the alley will flash bright green, indicating success.

DESIGN PROCESS

During the challenge we made a series of explorations into the domain. After an initial brainstorming on the various concepts of space, we set out to explore the city of Århus through the technique of *Dérive*. This approach helped us to defamiliarise the city of Århus and make room for, what Guy Debord (1958) calls “possible rendezvous”; to bring us to places unknown and sharpen our observations. After the *Dérive* we decided on a specific domain, which led to the stage of engaging users through the participatory method, *Fictional Inquiry* (Iversen and Dindler, 2008). As the method prescribes, we used a narrative, consisting of a frame and a specific problem, the participants were asked to help address.

After these inquiries we defined three concepts from our findings. The concepts were externalised through the use of picture scenarios. This technique was chosen due to its rich potential in communicating and situating the concepts. As described by Pedell and Vetere (2005), the picture scenario serves as an evaluation tool, in putting the designs into a context. The three concepts were compared and contested through a critique session, leading to the choosing of a final concept. The final

concept was elaborated and further conceptualised in the creation of our challenge submission video.

For a more rich account we refer to the blog (Design Blog, 2010).

UNDERSTANDING THE SITUATION

We consider this challenge to be a *wicked problem* (Buchanan, 1992). However, we prefer the term situation to problem, as the problem and solution is inherent in the situation. We believe that understanding the situation is essential to creating good design.

To attain a deeper understanding we draw on our design repertoire, our previous experiences and *knowing* (Schön, 1987). During our inquiries into the domain we gained insights in the form of explicit findings and a form of tacit knowledge, from the exposure to the entirety of the process. Initially the repertoire helps the designer to form the first inquiry into the situation. As each inquiry provides insights, the designer builds an understanding of the situation. This understanding leads to further inquiries and at some point a formulated design intervention. As Schön describes it, the designer has a conversation with the materials of the situation, where each move triggers a *back-talk* from the material, causing the designer to gain new insights (Schön, 1987).

The distinct methods we used served as one form of inquiry, but documentation served as another way of making conversation with the material. Löwgren and Stolterman (2004) describe how sketching proves a vehicle for forming ideas and communicating and Dalsgaard et.al. (2009) present different maps for visualisation, communication and reflection. Both approaches indicate that externalisation and formalisation in the process create an instrument for converging and reflecting on ideas.

DISCUSSION

Seeing that it was important to build an understanding of the specific design domain, we specifically chose methods that would feed us inspirational data about the domain. The very short timeframe we had for this challenge, naturally limited the amount of insights we could obtain and put to use. We did, however spend a large amount of time in the alley in doing our *Dérive* and *Fictional Inquiry*. The deeper our comprehension of the domain could become, the more based on observation rather than speculation, our concept would be. Instead of making assumptions about our space, we experienced it first hand, which made sure that we would not design for laboratory setting, but for a real space with real complexity. Furthermore, the broader our comprehension of the domain could be, the more nuanced our dialog would become, which could in turn accommodate a design tailored to the specific space and situation.

Significant for our understanding of the emergence of ideas is our appreciation of how externalising, i.e. putting ideas into the world in the form of words, sketches and scenarios, changes the design situation. As described above, when we apply a given method, both the situation

and our understanding of the situation changes. Each time we formulate and document our tacit understanding of the situation, we make a selection. This, in turn let us appreciate the domain in a new perspective. From previous experience we have adopted the stance, that in order to produce a satisfactorily rich design, we have to introduce more than one concept. One of the core concepts of the method Inspiration Card Workshop (Halskov and Dalsgård, 2006) is the generation of numerous concepts in a short time. Combined with the picture scenario technique we forced ourselves to define three concepts for a critique session. When we began elaborating these concepts, only two of them were clearly defined. As we slowly introduced these concepts into the domain, via the situated picture scenarios, a third concept emerged. Each concept acted as a move in the dialog with the situation and each new concept made us appreciate the situation in a different way.

CONCLUSION

Through our process we have found that documentation facilitates a dialog between the design situation and possible concepts. Documenting our progress and findings acted as our sketching tool and the final concept emerged through a dialog between the domain and previous concepts. Externalising thoughts and experiences is thus a crucial part of the design process as a tool for understanding the present and for conceiving possible future concepts.

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