

Vague Space as Potential: A Fluid Design for Urban Public Space

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Abstract

Vague Research Studios is a collective research duo with specialization in interactive material design and artistic processes in public space. This paper is based on a pilot project running 2012-2013. This project is geographically situated in the project area of Västra Frölunda, Gothenburg, Sweden and based on 'terrain vague', a concept coined by the architect Ignasi de Solá-Morale. Vague spaces also represent the issue of vacant land, which are both under the pressure of dense building in some areas and at the same time fastly reproduced in other places due to the recession. Both these processes give rise to re-ordering of ownership, claim and use of urban space.

Our aim is to reveal results of a flexible and open urban design by focusing on vague spaces and uncertainty as potential rather than problem. The project is investigating into and concretizing Fluid Design, coined by Prof. Uta Brandes, Cologne, Germany. Fluid Design is described as being a non-authorative and emphatic design that allows for a variety of interpretations and possibilities. The result of a fluid design process tends to suggest options instead of prescribing them.

Our results are presented in three formats, photography, narratives and textile material/artifact. The theoretical concept applied is the 'boundary event' by filmmaker and theoretician Trinh T. Min-ha. This research through vagueness gives results of a possible design of urban public space including diversity, self-organization and surprise. The result is also a critique of finality in development processes in urban space.

Key Words: Urban Space, Vague Space, Terrain Vague, vagueness, uncertainty, Fluid Design, textile material, boundary event

1. Vagueness and vague space

This is a research into the vague where Vague Research Studios are pursuing an exploration called "Vague Space – Vague Tissue" in the project area of Västra Frölunda, Gothenburg, Sweden. This area of Västra Frölunda was planned in the fifties and built in the sixties. Today the former and continuous wave of immigration and gentrification characterize the area. Gentrification is a new tendency in the area where the closeness to the shopping mall Frölunda Torg, condominiums, new leisure parks and playgrounds are selling points to attract new habitants. The 'vague space' chosen as the framework for this research is situated in-between a pedestrian/bike path and a parking lot, about 400 kvm in (20x20 kvm)

in size. The land is owned by the city of Gothenburg, which plans to develop it into a residential area in two years' time. The first step in the process has been to examine how we can integrate textile materials into the terrain and we have chosen to work with the simplest of textile components such as fibres and threads, allowing the site itself to determine the shape of the structure.

The concept of vagueness and vague space are based on "terrain vague", a concept coined by the architect Ignasi de Solá-Morale.¹ The space of terrain vague is ephemeral, as it is scheduled to be built upon in the future. The vagueness of these spaces simultaneously represents uncertainty and potential. It is the instability of vague terrains, the unfinished character and uncertainties that makes the spaces interesting. They serve as both a critique of the order of things and an alternative.² Vagueness does not only apply to a physical place. Space is, in fact, social space and practiced space and therefore includes both mental and physical space and by that it includes use and actions, "social space 'incorporates' social actions".³ Vague spaces are not only defined by their form and material, but also by the activities occurring within them. Early in the pilot project it showed that vague spaces are frequently used for heliophobic activities, such as alcohol consumption, graffiti, sleeping, sex, and as dumps. Vague space does not fit easily into systems of measure and evaluation and includes both the good and the bad.

It is the instability of vague terrains, the unfinished and uncertainties of the space in conjunction with the promise, opportunity and potentials, which make them so interesting. The understanding of vagueness comes from Morales investigation in the polysemantic meaning of the word 'vague'.

The French *vague* has *latin* and Germanic origins. The German *Woge* refers to a sea swell, significantly alluding the movement, oscillation, instability, and fluctuation. Two Latin roots come together in the French *vague*. *Vague* descends from *vacuus*, giving us "vacant" and "vacuum" in English, which is to say "empty, unoccupied," yet also "free, available, unengaged." The relationship between the absence of use, of activity, and the sense of freedom, of expectancy, is fundamental, to understand the evocative potential of the city's *terrains vagues*. Void, absence, yet also promise, the space of the possible, of expectation. (authors italics)⁴

Vagueness cannot be achieved without a considerable amount of uncertainty and usually design processes works against uncertainty and towards the defined and optimization. The fluid design process here has been managed through practice, interventions and by engaging in an open-end process on site. This kind of open-end process includes both artistic and pragmatic practices and engages with theoretical concepts.

In design and the use of dichotomies is a way of describing a problem in need of design solutions, examples are safe/unsafe, functional/non-functional and friendly/un-friendly. As a background to these design problems the dichotomy of nature and culture can be found. In the text *Nature's r - A Musical Swoon* in the chapter *boundary event – Between Refuse and Refuge* by Trinh T. Minh-ha the concept of “Middleness (Chung)” are described as creating a possible middle ground between extremes, “where all directions are (still) possible; and hence, where one can assume with intensity one’s freedom of movement”,⁵ this seems to offer a space of potential and transformation resembling terrain vague - vague space. The character of the particular vague space in our project is best described as an abrupt collision between nature and culture. This nature/culture character seems to offer something special to the people we have shared the space with, mainly kids, alcoholics and dog owners making their own use of the space. By moving our research to the vague space and by working towards a fluid approach to stay adaptable, thorough, participating and open in the moments of uncertainties we have managed to informally meet and talked to a vast amount of people. In conclusion, the research is situated in-between nature and culture, the formal and the informal and form and formlessness. These are examples of the fluidity and creativity in this project related to the concepts of Middleness, middle ground and a possible harmonious conflict.⁶

Vagueness has enabled us to stay in processes characterized by unsettled dichotomies for longer times. That has raised ideas of urban development as nature and culture, heritage and future and as an on-going creative process. Fluid design is a possible direction for an inclusive, transformative and critical design.

2. Aim

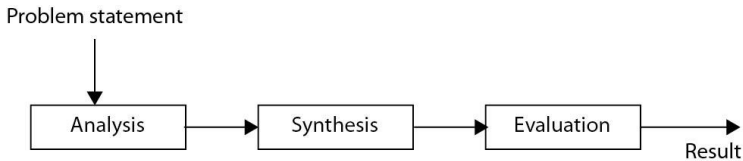
The aim of this text/presentation is to deepen the understanding of, and to concretize fluid design through vagueness. Our studio work aims for a critical view on urban development and especially finality in urban design.

3. Fluid design – a critical method

This project investigates the concept of fluid design coined by Professor Uta Brandes, Cologne, Germany. Fluid design is described as being a non-authoritative and emphatic design that allows for a variety of interpretations and possibilities. The result of a fluid design suggests options instead of pre-scribing them⁷. According to Brandes an authoritative design approach is particularly contra productive in public spaces since these spaces are accessible for everyone and therefore should allow for individual interpretations of use. A term that neatly captures the design quality needed in this context is fluidity. Fluid design provides a framework in which the artifact can communicate its meaning and usability. However within this framework many interpretations are still possible.

Design processes are frequently described and discussed in different forms of

literature and journals concerning design. “Design problems normally originate as some form of problem statement provided to the designer by someone else.”⁸ The definitions of design mostly refer to the process rather than the product, and included all observations about the design process there is one common process upon which many authors agree, a process consisting of three essential stages; analysis, synthesis and evaluation initiated by a problem statement ended by the final result. The design process is an iterative process that goes on until a desired state has been reached.⁹



In the described design methodologies the problem is already defined and used as an input into a problem solving activity focused more on a design that prescribes use rather than suggest options for the user. The foundation of deciding and defining the design problem is very much overlooked in design methodology but is in fluid design one of the key issues. Who decides the problem? A stated problem area is not necessary the starting point to the design process and analysis and synthesis is not always the creative and innovative parts of the design process. The creative and innovative processes are those areas in between for example analysis and synthesis.

The most creative situations in a fluid process are found in-between interpretation and material, which gives a double role for the parties involved as both observer and producer, reader and writer. The process of fluid design is neither pure nor clean but rather it can be described as staying close to the boundaries of interpretation-material, analysis-synthesis and use-design at all given times. The theoretical concept applied is the “boundary event” as a creative space where dichotomies are not a final destination but nodes where the in-between space are where the energy from the poles of the dichotomy can be put into creative use¹⁰. The hyphen (or arrow) between the dichotomies is not a void or a transport distance it is a space of transformation. It is a state of openness and of vagueness.

A boundary event. As such, painting is a form of comm-union with nature—or of natural responsibility/respond-ability—in the realm of no-knowledge. Born from silence, no-knowledge like no-thingness differs substantially from no knowledge and

nothingness. The hyphen makes all the difference.¹¹

Fluid design requires openness and a certain ‘no-knowledge’ as part of the design process and fluid design is intentionally holding back on final results and statements. The main characteristic of a fluid design is to reach for, find and create the in-between and vague situation. These kinds of processes requires openness, presence, time, encounters with people, performativity and fun.

4. Vague Tissue and Vague Text

Textile materials have been part of human life for thousands of years and textile of today are materials with applications in almost all our activities. Textiles as clothing have a particularly intimate quality because they reside the space between the inner self and the outside world and textiles as furnishing define the personal spaces inhabited by the body¹². Physical features such as mobility, textures and warmth are all present in textiles. These amorphous and tactile features position textile as an intermediate material. While textile can be described as an ephemeral object attributed with temporal meaning textiles are not physically brittle. Textiles can be both ephemeral and durable since they are remarkably resilient able to withstand and recover from tear, use, laundering and disintegration. Another potential of using textiles is its infinite potential for change through the use of variation of different fibers, threads, structures and after-treatments.

This project uses the vague tissue – vague text as a virtual probe to investigate a particular vague space where. The ‘vague tissue’ is based on textile fibers, which are used as a cultural material, positioned in-between nature (natural fibers) and human (the body) an intermediate and radical material easily engaged in transformational processes.

Initially we examined how to use the textile material in a vague space as an interpretive tool. We chose to use the simplest textile components such as fibers and threads, which allowed the site to determine the shape of the structures and we winded threads and fibers between tree-trunks as a semi-transparent web or tissue. The semi-transparent appearance together with the soft and flexible material was adaptable in the movements of the tall and rampant weeping willows created a tissue in between the artificial and the natural. We continued to wind yarns between a number of tall stalky and rampant weeping willows arranging the yarns into a 5m times 10m big textile text – VF – the short initial of Västra Frölunda. During the process, the textile text was exposed to outdoor conditions and torn down by many. The challenge was to include the destruction as an aesthetic result of the process and the fact that someone unknown was adding their contribution to the textile text regardless to their intentions.



5. Co-researchers at the public elementary school in Västra Frölunda

During the installation of the vague text we constantly met people using the vague space or people passing by on their way to somewhere else. The most frequent interaction was the encounters with kids from the nearby school who now and then visited us looking for progress of the textile text as well as asking questions. The kids occasionally used the place during their school breaks to play, for example hide and seek or to construct cabins. It was obvious that the openness of the vague space offered a space for excitement, creativity and activity and after an agreement with the school we involved a group of children as co-researchers in our project. The co-research was arranged through workshops in the school and interventions at the vague space and the probe material consisted of an empty notebook and balls of threads.

In the first meeting at the youth center in Frölundaskolan (public elementary school in Västra Frölunda) we gave information about our project and we also prepared for the first intervention in the vague space. They were encouraged to prepare their notebooks for writing stories, collecting findings and other documentation and they also got familiar with the probing material, the wool thread, which they attached in their notebooks.

The workshop was pursued by the first intervention at the vague space and the condition for the intervention was that each child got a ball of thread and an encouragement to explore the area using the material. After finishing their construction of their vague tissue the school kids used digital cameras to document their own work.



At the second workshop the kids used their notebooks where they wrote stories and made drawings about their own experiences of vague spaces. At the second intervention we introduced color. The instructions for the workshop were as follows: 1. You can use as many balls of threads you like but take one at a time. 2. Stay inside the vague space. 3. The most important thing to remember is that you decide what you do with the material and how and where you do it in the space. Do exactly what you feel like doing!

Prior to the final workshop we prepared their notebooks with pictures from the last intervention. We gave the children their notebooks back together with a personal card with an individual feedback of their individual strength as a co-researcher. The workshop was finalized with a discussion about the boundaries for the laws in public space in connection to the interventions; what are we allowed to do and not to do in public space?



6. The thread makes all the difference

In the aftermath of a one year process, engaging in fluid design and exploring the concept of vagueness in and through a vague space, the conclusions are manifold. This paper show how we work in-between material and interpretation, between producer and observer and between user and designer. Embracing vagueness

converts a design process with a focus on problem-solving into a process with a focus on potential.

The first conclusion we would like to present is the interactive part of this paper and presentation. The project *Vague Space –Vague Tissue* shows many examples of intermediate media, for example the combination of drawing and photography, text and material. Especially in the research books of the school kids this has been apparent but also in the vague space where we have found dumped materials in combination with parts of texts or imagery. The Textile Text that was an initial intervention also connects material and text using textile material and monumental letters. This leap between material and text seems to be an especially interesting space of exploration. Here we have decided to make this metaphorical connection even more specified. Inspired by Trinh T. Min-ha and the boundary event the metaphorical claim between material and text is taken even further, the Thread becomes the Hyphen, the Hyphen becomes the Thread.

~~The Thread~~ ————— - The Hyphen

The thread as in the ball of threads that you are holding in your hand right now and which is therefore not a material (for a sweater) but a part of a larger (con)text where this thread can connect that which is connectable. Creating new forms and meanings. A probing material in a dichotomized world.

The second conclusion connects to the work by the school kids where they attached a piece of wool thread in their notebook. The line of images below show a few examples of the attached thread/hyphen. We couldn't help to notice the amount of different ways a thread can be attached to a piece of paper. Remembering that we never asked the kids to do it in any particular way and initially we didn't even anticipate the potential of this as a creative space.



The conclusion that stands out from the kids' interventions is the variety and diversity that a simple component can give. Instead of working with deliberately designed and finished artifacts we managed to observe how the simple component of the thread made the school kids themselves become more visible in their approach with the material. The school kids entered a state of creative space through their actions and the creative space was larger than anticipated and filled with more meaning and potential for every individual. A result related to our co-research with the kids has been that the school has initiated other projects in the vague space engaging other pupils from the school. The group of school kids that we met has started a project of their own where they pick rocks and stones from outside and paint them. A stone with your own name is a popular theme in this self-organized project.

Since "the hyphen makes all the difference" we can conclude that in between dichotomies, in between problems and solutions lingers an opportunity, a potential (vague) space, invisible at times but possible to make visible with a thread/hyphen¹³. The strongest argument for embracing vagueness and a fluid design is its possibility for diversity, self-organization and surprise. Urban development and urban design has a tendency to manifest itself as a never ending and on-going activity from the perspective of every-day life but presented as having well-defined problems with finalized solutions. Fluid design and vagueness are possible concepts to re-open stuck and closed process and make falsely established problems and solutions uncertain again. The concretization of a fluid

design which is the aim of this paper shows that this kind of design is interdisciplinary, fit collective research and is characterized by open-ended processes. The result is the establishing of new possible spaces for creativity, use and ways of thinking.

Notes

¹ Ignasi de Solà-Morales, Terrain Vague. *Anyplace*. Ed. Cynthia C. Davidson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 118-123

² Ignasi de Solà-Morales, Terrain Vague. *Anyplace*. Ed. Cynthia C. Davidson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 118-123

³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 33

⁴ Ignasi de Solà-Morales, Terrain Vague. *Anyplace*. Ed. Cynthia C. Davidson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 110

⁵ Think T. Min-ha, *Elsewhere, Within Here: immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*. (NY: Routledge, 2011), 70

⁶ Think T. Min-ha, *Elsewhere, Within Here: immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*. (NY: Routledge, 2011), 70

⁷ Brandes, Stich and Wender. *Design by Use: The Metamorphosis of Everyday Things* (Germany: Birkhäuser, 2009), 175-186.

⁸ Nigel Cross. *Engineering Methods: Strategies for Product Design*. (UK: Wiley, 2008), 12

⁹ Bryan Lawson. *How Designers Think: The Design Methods Demystified* (UK: Architectural Press, 2006), 31-40

¹⁰ Trinh T. Min-ha, *Elsewhere, Within Here: immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*. (NY: Routledge, 2011), 63-66

¹¹ Trinh T. Min-ha, *Elsewhere, Within Here: immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*. (NY: Routledge, 2011), 68

¹² Judith Attfield. *Wild Things: The Material Cultures of Everyday Life* (UK: Berg, 2001), 121-132

¹³ Trinh T. Min-ha, *Elsewhere, Within Here: immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*. (NY: Routledge, 2011), 68

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