

Troubled Waters: Co-constructing Possible Futures through Community Design and Innovation Workshops

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There is a tide in the affairs of men. Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat, and we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures.

- Brutus in Julius Caesar Act 4, scene 3, 218–224

Abstract

Structuring workshops aimed to serve as catalysts for social innovation in zones of armed conflict is a complex endeavor, yet an interesting way to foster community engagement, build empathy and produce knowledge. This article discusses the community design and innovation workshop called (TaDIC - Taller de Diseño e Innovación Comunitaria) developed in Tumaco, Colombia. This was designed as an immersive experience to spark local innovation through participatory design with communities. The objective of the workshop was to stimulate the reconstruction of the social fabric and contribute to peacebuilding. The intention of this workshop was to shift the attention towards “those things that exceed the bounds of design” (Suchman, 2011, p.16) and to conceptualize the way that this workshop was designed, facilitated and measured. The way in which they fundamentally define the success of the workshop. The outcomes of the event challenge the traditional tenets of innovation. This paper further examines TaDIC as a tool that is deployed intentionally and provides certain affordances, evidenced in the everyday interactions of people, material and immaterial objects, and places. The advantages of situated innovation are discussed as well as the shortcomings of an over emphasis on technology and physical prototypes. Designing and facilitating this workshop taught the organizers and participants the importance and value of empathy and trust in the production of experimental knowledge.

The main goal of the event is to share a design methodology through an immersive, hands-on, co-design experience. The design methodology is framed as a form of practical problem solving that can be applied in multiple situations; it is transmitted to participants by guiding them through the design cycle in order to generate prototypes of design solutions that address local issues as they work in design teams. Thus, an underlying expectation of TaDIC is that the methodology will be used by participants beyond the scope of the workshop in order to improve conditions in their everyday life. The methodology is complemented by a focus on material creation expressed in the “making with our hands” philosophy of the event, as well as in the materials and tools that are mobilized for it. The formal curriculum of the workshop has the design methodology as its backbone.

A second principle holds that diversity fosters creativity and empathy, which is why participants come from multiple places and backgrounds. The event promotes the idea that all knowledge and skills are valuable, but it tries to give relevance to local knowledge and practices, promoting scenarios where they are shared, expecting them to inform or frame the design decisions that are made by the teams.

Third, the workshop is based on participatory design, which is why the event takes place in close proximity to communities that are the final intended users of the prototypes. At least one

representative from the community of intended beneficiaries takes active part in the design process of each team, and two community visits are programmed in order to gather information during the initial problem framing stage and later on, after ideation and fast prototyping in order to gather community feedback on the design solutions proposed by the team.

Finally, the workshop is a setting for the creation of meaningful bonds between participants, local communities, supporting institutions and the territory. A particular setting is created where national, international and local participants live and work together for two weeks. For TaDIC, the Tumaco Diocese venue was rendered into a workshop and living space, which provided food, room, and tools (including convivial tools) for participants to be and work together. The bonds created are expected to drive future collaborations, to promote the continuity of the work and to harness solidarity.

The underlying theory that drives people and institutions to organize TaDIC is that the combination of all these elements will help catalyze social innovation in Tumaco and contribute to the construction of peace. More specific descriptions of the organization and results of related co-creation events organized in Colombia can be found in the literature and in the IDIN website (see Guzmán & Reynolds-Cuellar, 2018; Pérez Molano et al., 2018; Reina-Rozo, Thompson, & Leal, 2018). As mentioned above, the formal curriculum of TaDIC is intended to transfer a design methodology to participants. The surrounding activities are meant to set the design work in context and to foster significant relationships. The motivations of all the actors involved and the atmosphere that unfolds through the situated interactions during the workshop shape what might be a hidden or rather implicit curriculum. An implicit curriculum consists of messages imparted by the environment in which some kind of formal teaching takes place (Cornbleth, 1984; Martin, 1976). In that sense, an implicit curriculum might not be intended, but it emerges from a complex set of interactions. The particular environment of TaDIC was in that sense co-created not by design, but by interactions as they unfolded in the designed spaces and activities of the workshop.