

# Postdramatic Theatre in Smart City Design

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## ABSTRACT

Theatre provides powerful ways to engage people in the development of visions for future interactions, yet theatre is seldom used beyond scenario acting in interaction design. In this workshop the participants are exposed to a novel understanding of theatre, called Postdramatic Theatre, which has emerged as an Avant-garde movement in theatre community to break free of traditional characteristics of theatre, especially the dramatic text, mimesis and the exclusion of the ‘real’ in a play. Inspired by Postdramatic Theatre we introduce three novel formats of engagement for smart city design: *Multi-stakeholder Theatre*, *Field-study Theatre* and *Future Product Theatre*. The use of these formats will be explored in the context of particular foci that will be developed in collaboration with the workshop participants. As the result the participants are expected to become sensitive to the differences of Dramatic and Postdramatic Theatre and have better readiness to conceive of the potential of Postdramatic Theatre for their own design practice and research.

## Keywords

Co-design; Interaction Design; User Experience; Postdramatic Theatre; Improvisational Theatre.

## 1. THEATRE IN DESIGN

Theatre is employed for designing interactive systems in a variety of formats, and it connects to several broader design research programmes, such as user experience research, participatory design research, and embodied interaction research [18]. When theatre is made part of the design process, it is typically used in the form of improvisational theatre [14] where the acts are not completely planned ahead. Improvisational theatre takes many forms in design and the key techniques include the use of role play [10, 13] and props [2, 12]. The degree to which the plays are improvised varies from full improvisation without a plan [9], through semi-improvisation with a rough plot [22], to scripted and rehearsed plays [11]. The most well-known theatrical techniques build on use scenarios, such as ‘Scenario Improvisation’ [1] and ‘Situating and Participative Enactment of Scenarios’ [13]. Theatre is typically employed to extend the so-called scenario-based design [8] to foster understanding of use and to create ideas for future interactions. One of the main reasons for utilising theatre in design is that it supports the participation and immersion of the various stakeholders in the design process. Several studies have

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shown how users can effectively enact future ideas in their native settings [1, 16, 23], and theatre is proven to enable users to design not only mobile systems but also the related work practices [21]. Salvador and Howells [20] underline the value of theatre in setting a common context for enabling users to evaluate future products. An ethnographic intent is embodied in the use of dramaturgical reading to analyse and represent users [15] and organisational theatre to convey findings from a field study [4]. The malleability of theatrical acting is argued to trigger the discovery of new insights about future products with the stakeholders [12]. Theatrical role-play is stated to stimulate interest, challenge current understandings, and facilitate experience sharing between professionals [10]. Theatre is, however, seldom used beyond different forms of scenario acting in interaction design.

Within theatre we have observed a transition similar to the recent development in design – towards participatory and multi-stakeholder approaches. The concept of *Postdramatic Theatre* articulates this transition by connecting a range of different forms of performance, improvisation, and participatory theatre under the same umbrella term. The goal of this workshop is to explore how these forms can be considered valuable to design – in particular to the design of smart cities, as postdramatic theatre is well suited to handle multi-stakeholder engagement with complex processes.

## 2. POSTDRAMATIC THEATRE

The notion of Postdramatic Theatre was first introduced by Lehmann in 1999 to refer to theatre after drama [17]. Lehmann considered Postdramatic Theatre to reside in-between theatre and performance, and his notion proved provocative to many theatre practitioners and scholars [6]. Lehmann contends that Postdramatic Theatre [18]:

- can take a starting point from multiple things instead of having focus on the dramatic text
- has shifted to group-based and collective performances from director-dominated theatre
- calls for presentational and non-mimetic performing in place of mimetic acting
- drives spectators to participate and experience the performance rather than merely observe it
- acknowledges the process of creating a performance over the repetitive theatre play
- seeks for ambiguity of the performance instead of conveying pre-conceived meaning

Many postdramatic performances, however, seldom include all the characteristics outlined above, which has caused contention around the characteristics of the term Postdramatic Theatre. The significance of Postdramatic Theatre for design arises from the ways in which it enables participants to engage in a reflexive practice that appraises how theatrical performance is socio-materially achieved. Postdramatic Theatre is process-oriented and

considers the organising of the performance as part of the whole activity. And this whole may involve moments during which the performers (or participants of the process) prepare for action, experience the happening, embody mimetic roles in a fictional world, or discuss their experiences.

In addition to Lehmann, we draw on Carlson [7], who argues that contemporary postdramatic performances share two key traits: 1) they challenge traditional concept of *mimesis*, i.e. the imitation of reality, and 2) dissolve the boundary between the fictional theatre world and the ‘real’ world. As an example Carlson [8] describes a performance, *Ruby Town Oracle*, where spectators were invited to participate and interact within a constructed mini-village. The performer group inhabited 20 houses by over 40 actors, and created collective background story, with roles and relationships. Audience was invited to visit the village and have discussions with the ‘inhabitants’ resulting in various individual experiences of the same performance. These events can be characterised as ‘social situations,’ and Lehmann [18] uses Goffman’s idea of social situation, which comprises the full environment within which an entering person becomes a member of the present gathering. Theatre thus becomes quite a different experience for each individual, as they engage differently with the performance. We see the power of Postdramatic Theatre in a combination of dramatic and postdramatic ingredients, where the main focus is set on the interaction between performers and participants who are creating the performance together in the present moment.

### 3. NOVEL FORMATS OF ENGAGEMENT

Our Theatre Lab builds on forum theatre [6] and improvisational theatre [8] to conduct organisational research and to study emergent and temporal processes of innovation [7,9]. We explore different ways of engaging participants in design with Object Theatre [5] in the context of Participatory Innovation [19]. We have learned that Postdramatic Theatre allows for a team to resource experiences that are generated live, or experiences that participants did not recognise they had that would be relevant for the process. In this workshop we shall explore three novel formats of engagement that we have developed inspired by Postdramatic Theatre that show particular promise for smart city development: Multi-stakeholder Theatre, Field Study Theatre, and Future Product Theatre.

#### 3.1 Multi-stakeholder Theatre

There are many ‘voices’ – beyond those of users – that are important for innovating successful interactive systems. In Multi-stakeholder Theatre participants simulate a meeting of people with many different ‘stakes’ in a new product idea by engaging in specific roles, e.g. designer, engineer, business owner, user and supplier. After deciding upon the topic of the meeting we ask each participant to pick a stakeholder role and spend a few minutes preparing what that person might say, before the facilitator opens up the meeting and the improvisation starts. Figure 1 shows an example in which designers discuss the proposal of an intelligent bus stop and which consequences it might have for bus passengers and beyond: bus drivers, traffic planners, traffic contractors, municipality, employee’s unions, even bicyclists and car drivers.

In the Multi-Stakeholder Theatre participants act through talking that they improvise in each role. They build on their generic understandings and on their experiences of how this ‘other person’ that they impersonate would react to the proposed design, and how they would respond to what others say. This aligns with Lehmann’s [18] argument that the ambiguity of postdramatic performance creates room for personal interpretation. In Multi-



Figure 1. Multi-stakeholder Theatre of an intelligent bus stop.

stakeholder Theatre the *entire* process of framing the theatrical situation, of developing the role, of improvising the meeting and then of returning ‘back to real’ becomes the theatre experience. The line between playing a role and experiencing a situation becomes dissolved, which creates room for reflexive insight. Each person may become aware of his own presence, but also of the presence of the others, the spatial setting, and the interactions going on. The postdramatic performance happens inside and around each participant.

#### 3.2 Field Study Theatre

People have many experiences and skills that they may not see as important for the project at hand. Field Study Theatre [3] allows participants to resource such ‘hidden’ experiences by constructing a performance that establishes a collaborative and unique new experience. For example, when designing a new digital payment system for ‘unregulated market,’ such as street vendors and flea markets, a group of designers enacted a flea market in order to generate insights about how it feels like to be in one, Figure 2. The action in the Field Study Theatre comprises of four main parts: 1) Invitation, 2) Preparation, 3) Acting, and 4) Reflection.

This format is highly similar to the *Ruby Town Oracle*, as in Field Study Theatre the participants become both creators and experiencers of the performance happening simultaneously in many places in parallel. The performance takes place in the entire space, makes use of the things available, and engages people in simultaneous narration. Multiple acts happening simultaneously creates a chorus of different voices and local-interactions where one only gets a peripheral view to what the others are doing and saying.

#### 3.3 Future Product Theatre

The main idea of Future Product Theatre is to confront product ideas early on with current practices of the prospective users. The



Figure 2. Field Study Theatre of a flea market experience.

participants act out both the idea of an intelligent product and the users in order to imagine interactions between these two. Theatre sets the stage for developing a shared experience of a future. In an example (see Figure 3) a half of a group of designers prepared to demonstrate ideas for how a smart bus station might help passengers, while the other half prepared roles of different (and unexpected) passenger characters. The performance commenced by the two groups meeting and the passengers trying out the new bus station design.

While Future Product Theatre is similar to improvised acting with props, we focus on the activities of organising and de-organising the performance in order to appraise the ways in which



**Figure 3. Future Product Theatre in smart city design.**

translations happen to the meanings given to particular things in interaction. In Future Product Theatre, half of the participants are acting out the non-human machinery while the other half enacts the users. This is a trait inherited from postdramatic theatre: animating movements and responses of non-human things. The act becomes curious due to the quality of human expression being different from machine operation. People engage in a process of constructing the setting, deciding what roles to take, developing the characters together – then clashing with the other team, which supposedly have quite different plans and expectations. Perspectives intersect and the participants are not only responsible for their own individual experience, but also responsible for the entire situation as it emerges and develops.

#### **4. WORKSHOP PROGRAMME**

In the 3-hour workshop we invite design researchers and professional actors to participate in three types of postdramatic theatre formats and reflect on how they can be used to feed a design process of the smart city. We will accept 15 participants from diverse backgrounds with the interest to explore how the work with theatre methods might inform their own practices, be it in interaction design, participatory design, or design research. The workshop will follow this schedule:

- 1) Introduction to postdramatic theatre – 15 min
- 2) Setting a Smart City focus on participants' wishes – 15 min
- 3) Multi-stakeholder Theatre trial – 30 min
- 4) Field Study Theatre trial – 30 min
- 5) Future Product Theatre trial – 30 min
- 6) Reflection and discussions – 30 min

Participants will discuss how the workshop experience relates back to their own work settings in order to develop a new

understanding of postdramatic theatre in the design process. Participants are encouraged to work out suggestions for further research directions and come up with suggestions for new experiments.

#### **5. OUTCOMES**

The workshop aims to inspire participants to apply postdramatic forms of theatre and increase their sensitivity to what can be achieved through theatrical approaches in design. To push the research agenda, we will also gather and trial suggestions for further development of the three formats and the postdramatic theatre approach.

#### **6. ORGANISERS**

**MERJA RYÖPPY:** I am actor part of Theatre Lab at SDU Design Research at the University of Southern Denmark. In my work I engage students and researchers to work with participatory theatre methods in the field of design and participatory innovation. I am able to draw from the expertise I have from two very different fields as I hold a M.Sc. (tech) in product development as well as a B.A. in applied theatre. I believe that approaches from theatre can be used to explore what goes on between people in a design process and to better understand human interaction with products.

**SALU YLIRISKU:** I am associate professor of Interaction Design at University of Southern Denmark, SDU Design Research in Kolding. I have background in interaction design, industrial design, concept design and video-based analysis of designing. I joined academia after working as interaction designer in a large IT company. Since that I've worked several years as leader of the Embodied Design Group at Aalto University design research focusing on novel interaction design concepts. My relationship with theatre has always involved video in some way, whether as a tool to document professional theatre plays, a movie-making tool for creating and capturing enactments on video, as a means to learn about what happens, and as a way to present what is being learnt.

**PREBEN FRIIS:** I am part of Theatre Lab at SDU Design Research. My background is in theatre as actor and director and for 20 years I have also used those skills in business consulting, until I joined the university three years ago. I have done a MA by research connecting theatre improvisation with complexity management. One of my main interests in the university is to develop theatre ways of working in research projects. And in most research projects social interaction between people is playing an important role and is therefore a natural ground for theatrical exploration.

**JACOB BUUR:** I am professor of User-Centred Design at University of Southern Denmark, and research director of the SDU Design Research Centre. My first encounter with theatre in design was in the mid-'90s while being manager of the user-centred design group at Danfoss A/S. We invited two drama interns to use theatre to study how refrigeration mechanics work, and how they might use new digital tools. Later, from Dacapo I learned about Forum Theatre, and lately I've enjoyed experiments with Postdramatic Theatre in design. I don't act much myself, but have years of experience with video recording and analysing theatre in design.

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