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ARTICLE

Civic Engagement through DIY Urbanism and Collective Networked Action

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine do-it-yourself (DIY) urbanism through place-based and technology initiatives that support collective networked action to foster civic engagement in neighborhood contexts. The goal is to engage informal and ad-hoc networks of individual and collective actors in productively addressing critical conditions within their urban localities. Based on participatory research and co-design with residents and urban activist groups, Delai Sam and Partizaning, in districts of Moscow, Russia, we devised a series of interventions using a network of mailboxes, prototype online collaboration platforms (SynchroniCITY and MicroAct) and community-based workshops to engage participants in revealing issues, designing solutions and coordinating urban actions. Through these experiences, we consider the challenges of DIY urbanism as an inclusive, sustained and meaningful form of cooperative engagement and urban activism.

Keywords: ICTs; Moscow; co-design; participatory research; new collectivism; self-organizing; DIY urbanism; quality of life; solidarity networks

Introduction

Community self-organizing seeks to undertake activities of common interest that are often unsanctioned, through forms of cooperative action among the disparate parts of an existing social system. In the absence of authority, hierarchy or consensus-based processes among diverse stakeholders engaged in neighborhood contexts, it is important to consider alternative modalities to support forms of self-organization and cooperative design. Cities worldwide are experiencing a surge of citizen engagement through various forms of do-it-yourself (DIY) urbanism and a renewed emphasis on participatory, people-centered urban planning.

Direct citizen action in the urban sphere is on the rise in realms usually considered within government jurisdiction. Often, direct action seeks to generate forms of engagement by example. That is to say, a temporary installation or action is sometimes produced in order to directly influence or indirectly comment on the formal urban planning process. Nevertheless, these direct and DIY actions are

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usually disparate attempts at addressing what is perceived as the 'common good' through individual actions in public urban spaces. There is a growing body of academic literature (Iveson, 2013; Douglas, 2014; Finn, 2014) that seeks to understand the continued expansion of creative DIY urbanism in cities worldwide, which we review closely in the first section of this paper. While many online tools allow individual residents to act through problem reporting, the agency for developing solutions is often left to municipal governments or private actors, as we discuss in the 'Contextualizing Urban Activism and Technology' section.

We then examine DIY urbanism through place-based and technology initiatives that we explored in the city of Moscow, Russia, to foster collective networked action and civic engagement in marginalized neighborhoods. Our aim was to engage informal and ad-hoc networks of individual and collective actors in productively addressing critical conditions within their urban localities. Based on participatory research and co-design with residents and urban activist groups, *Delai Sam* and *Partizaning*, we devised a series of interventions using a network of mailboxes, prototype online collaboration platforms (*SynchroniCITY* and *MicroAct*) and community-based workshops to engage participants in revealing issues, designing solutions and coordinating urban actions. While our work was designed as a small-scale pilot project and pedagogical initiative in limited neighborhood contexts, these experiences allow us to consider some of the challenges of DIY urbanism as an inclusive, sustained and meaningful form of cooperative engagement and urban activism.

Contextualizing Urban Activism and Technology

Ehrlich (2000) explains civic engagement as

> working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. (p. vi)

Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* use the term 'micropolitics' to describe creative and revolutionary everyday actions. The most basic civic engagement is through these simple, everyday acts of change, which 'creates an "ethos of permanent becoming revolutionary", an ethos not constrained by a politics predicated on the now defunct forms of Soviet bureaucratic socialism and a liberal or social democracy . . . this ethos will create new collective solidarities . . . ' (Parr, 2010, p. 166).

One of the challenges we seek to examine is the role that information and communication technologies (ICTs) can play in supporting these collective solidarity networks in an urban context, while engaging cross-generational social capital (Coleman, 1988) through community and neighborhood resources. How does networked collective action go beyond merely expressions of support—'likes' and accolade—to real-life solidarity and urban action that have sustained and long-lasting socio-political and economic consequences (Garber, 2013)? In 2001, Saskia Sassen discussed how ICTs can be used in reframing the local

environment, condition, or context to reflect global significance. '[M]uch of what we experience and represent as the local turns out to be a micro-environment with global span,' said Sassen (2001, p. 411). It 'cuts across borders and connects a variety of points on the globe.' The very concept of the local, for Sassen, would be reconfigured to span distances. Cycling proponents, environmental activists and foreclosure resistance would redraw the map to network actors across distances. 'Through the Internet, local initiatives become part of a global network of activism without losing the focus on specific local struggles,' says Sassen (2001, p. 416). The local is renewed; it becomes a hybrid base, both local and global, from which to act. Local actions carry the potential of global significance. Sassen typified this hybrid base to be on the one hand about city-centered action whose actors network globally, and on the other hand about digital network-based action that doesn't 'converge on an actual terrain for activism' (p. 416).

Urban activism in the form of DIY urbanism is now becoming central to the contemporary urban planning discourse, with a diversity of terms used to explain 'bottom-up urbanism.' One frequently encounters phrases such as 'urban hacking,' 'DIY urbanism' (Iveson, 2013) or 'tactical urbanism,' from North America which refers to strategic short-term urban transformations that target longer term changes (Lydon et al., 2010). 'Pop-up' urbanism as temporary place-making is now part of the vocabulary of contemporary planning theory and practice as are concepts like ephemera (Schuster, 2001; Bishop & Williams, 2012). Terms like guerrilla or insurgent urbanism are popular, signifying origins of resistance and 'making do' in cities (Hou, 2010). Partizaning is another term being used to describe the rise of contemporary DIY practices in Russia, the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. While these terms are generally used to examine practices in the field of 'bottom-up' or grassroots urbanism, they are quite different. Depending on the urban context and history, they highlight the varied and ad-hoc ways in which people use the city and adapt it for their needs.

In *Cities within the City*, Iveson (2013) explores whether unsanctioned action by individuals and groups generates a more democratic form of politics, and whether it needs new forms of authority or platforms to support just and equitable citizen engagement. Connecting these with revived ideas about the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996; Purcell, 2002; Harvey, 2003), Iveson examines whether acting out a right to the city is closely related with the urban politics of the inhabitant. In questioning whether DIY urbanism has the potential to enable urban politics through 'collective forms of democratization and authority,' Iveson (2013) argues that 'those engaged in DIY practices could in fact build this politics by asserting inhabitance as the principle that should underpin the exercise of authority in the city' (p. 945). Hence, DIY appropriations allow practitioners to confront their rights to the city through tactics and strategies staged in the public sphere, deliberately engaging both the public and the authorities. Yet, as Douglas (2014) points out in his ethnographic survey of DIY practitioners, those that identify themselves as such do not necessarily see themselves as radical agents challenging authority and that their activities tend to be in newly hip and gentrifying neighborhoods.

Many believe that DIY urbanism combined with civic engagement can lead to more vibrant, people-centered urban spaces. Residents are often expected to know their own needs best and to contribute to the success of urban developments. This

is becoming an attractive scenario as local governments experience budget shortfalls and look to offload certain functions of maintenance and services on to residents. Indeed, as Finn (2014) puts it, there is the 'potential [that] private overreach or abdication of municipal responsibility or both, may actually mute the purported communitarian aspects of DIY approaches' (p. 391). Yet, instances of DIY and tactical urbanism are emerging within networked environments; neighborhood activists can use ICTs to share ideas, coordinate people and distribute outcomes across cities. Evans (2005) describes them as part of a 'counter hegemonic globalization'—connecting localized struggles and facilitating bottom-up social movements. With this in mind, local governments may be wary of fostering DIY urbanism when the goal of direct action is often to make governments accountable for urban conditions.

Wellman et al. (2002) wrote that 'rather than increasing or destroying community, the Internet can best be seen transforming community such that it becomes integrated into rhythms of daily life, with life online integrated with offline activities' (p. 154). Online networks can thus allow connectivity and support self-organizing that is based on themes and issues of interest held in common across localities. 'The explosive growth of the open-data movement has taught a generation of city-dwellers that they have a right to peek behind the curtain of local government, to identify civic problems and help solve them, too,' writes Badger (2012a, 2012b) of The Atlantic Cities blog.

> But what happens when these newly engaged citizens want to have an equally hands-on role with the physical space in our cities, with our streets and sidewalks and public parks? Could cities make it just as easy to hack the physical world as the digital one?

For cities, this idea that citizens could 'hack the physical world' presents a problem concerning expertise and authority; and when does it lead to a form of anarchy in citizen DIY urbanism in the extreme?

Emergence of Online Platforms for Citizen Engagement

Open data represent a layer of information access, rather than an interface for public–government interaction. And the availability of this data relates to direct and DIY actions that could potentially facilitate the formation of networked communities online. Open data support and reveal inefficiencies and can also engage citizens in supporting government actions through open/transparent web platforms. Sennett (2012) describes this as a throwback to an earlier period of scientific planning. Architects in the 1930s could plan new cities without a legacy of lived neighborhoods to shape them. At that time, the emphasis of engineering was on infrastructure; today, it is on information processing, says Sennett (2012): 'the danger now is that this information-rich city may do nothing to help people think for themselves or communicate well with one another.' In part, the representation of localities using city data is an incomplete, top-down model of the city.

In Moscow, websites like *Angry Citizen* coordinate action around citizen concerns, and similarly *Street Journal* allows residents to report problems in

their districts. Both sites direct complaints to government agencies, although neither website is explicitly run by a municipal government. *РосЖКХ* developed by the anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny transforms reports of nonemergency problems with apartment housing into statements that are delivered to government officials. РосЖКХ was built with input from the founder of *Dom Dvor Dorogi*, another site that directs citizen reports of quality of life or infrastructure problems to municipal and state authorities. Essentially, there is a sizable ecosystem of online problem reporting websites that channel requests to government agencies, some run independently, while others are maintained by the government.

In New York City, '311' is positioned as a centralized government resources and a direct forum for citizens to report nonemergency quality of life issues. Like in Moscow, there are several websites in New York City that support government agencies in directing and routing citizen concerns to the appropriate authorities. A recently developed website and mobile app which has won significant industry accolade is *Public Stuff*, also focused on facilitating citizen reporting. *SeeClickFix* is similar to 311, but enhances the problem reporting experience by facilitating collective mapping, tracking and prioritization of nonemergency and quality of life problems. Elsewhere in this special issue, Ertiö provides an overview of various mobile applications that foster citizen engagement through reporting and commenting functionalities.

Going a step beyond problem reporting, some websites are entering the realm of place-based community building. Launched in 2012, *Neighborland* is a website that allows people within a locality to re-imagine the spaces they live in and express what they would like to change. *Popularise* is another online platform 'that shares the power to build new places' in neighborhoods, allowing users to connect with other local residents. *MeetUp*, 'the world's largest network of local groups,' allows users to 'organize a local group or find one of the thousands already meeting up face-to-face . . . with the goal of improving themselves or their communities.' The site's stated mission is 'to revitalize local community and help people around the world self-organize.' It is one of the few websites that seeks to connect ad-hoc groups of users both online and offline.

Morozov (2013) is among those who have brought a critical lens to cyber-utopianism and neo-liberalism of disruptive technologies, arguing that they primarily seek to replace existing monopolies and not transform the landscape for truly competitive marketplaces. Yet, while disruptive technologies might represent actors working online to transform systems of city governance and operation (in domains such as transportation, health rating, voting), tactical urbanism reflects the sets of individual, grassroot practices that transform urban spaces. These practices, although very uniquely devised in their physical and cultural contexts, are highly replicable, as Mike Lydon, urban planner and author of the *Tactical Urbanism* guidebooks points out (Berger, 2012).

There is another class of online platforms that place an emphasis on sharing urban-based actions. *Actipedia* is an 'online, open-access, user-generated database of creative activism' creating a space for users to read, comment and share experiences and examples of activists and artists using creative tactics and strategies to challenge power and offer visions of a better society.

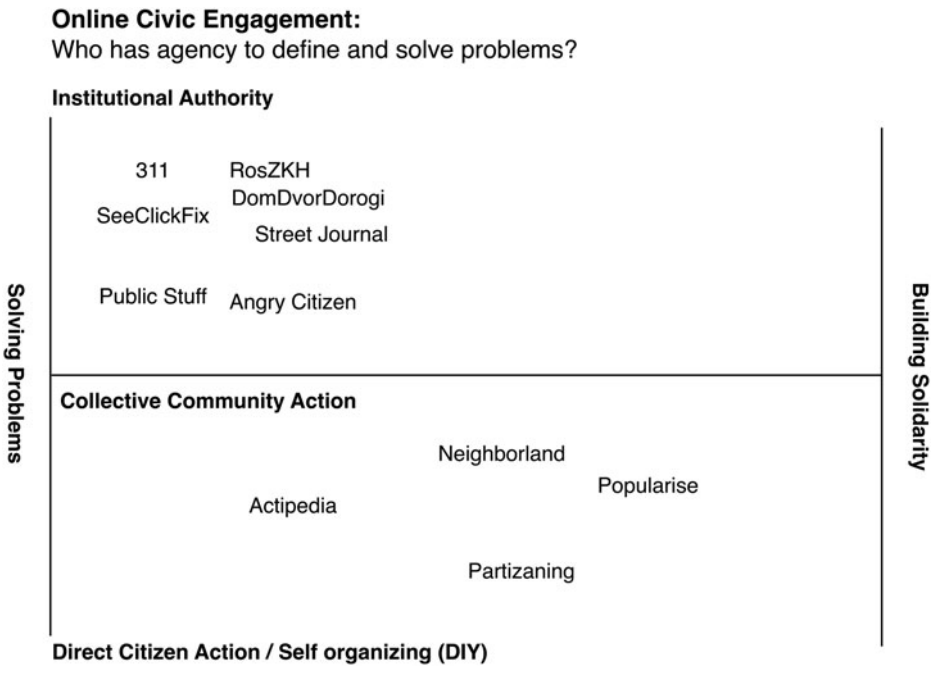

FIGURE 1. Ecosystem of existing online civic engagement websites, position in a design space along problem solving versus building solidarity and institutional versus citizen agency.

100en1dia encourages a day of 100 urban interventions and allows users of the site to submit ideas and find inspiration in the idea of: 'a civil action day where people take ownership of their city and create a better place to live' (Figure 1).

While there are many problem-reporting websites, there are few civic engagement sites that use online spaces to connect with offline realities, or which facilitate face-to-face interaction. It is unclear if these sites adequately (or at least, successfully) promote DIY urbanism or support self-organizing in place-based communities, even if it is their stated goal. There seems to be a lag in inspiring and mobilizing people's interest online and making this actually happen. Place-based interaction and a vibrant problem-solution loop are often missing, while there is a gap or a conflict of interest in terms of quality of life issues being addressed. Many initiatives inevitably encounter rapid turnover of users and changing functionality, while others often shift from being critical of government action to working closely with municipal or government authorities to accomplish shared goals (e.g., *Dom Dvor Dorog*i or *Delai Sam*) or perhaps are simply subsumed by them to sustain their interests. Other groups such as Occupy Sandy used http://www.amazon.com's gift registry to facilitate donations during Hurricane Sandy, demonstrating how actors can flexibly self-organize using an array of ad-hoc tools and technologies available, to suit pressing needs. These sites highlight a gap in activating citizen engagement or an ethos of DIY self-organizing. Hence, there is a need for new forms of globally accessible and adaptable tools to support localized,

community organizing that builds on the work of 'active' citizens rather than simply deferring to governments through problem reporting platforms.

DIY Urbanism and Networked Collaboration: Experiences in Moscow

DIY urbanism is spreading in Russia, signaling a new era of civil society and grassroots activism. With one of the largest and fastest growing populations in Europe, Moscow is undergoing rapid transformation that includes unfettered commercial growth and city infrastructure development (such as roads and highways). In 2010, a group of environmental advocates, architects and planners came together to craft an alternative city manifesto, *Moscow 2020*—an attempt to promote a more sustainable vision of their city and address the global impact of climate change through localized actions. The mass protests after the re-election of President Vladimir Putin in 2011 encouraged many city residents to pursue social and urban changes through decentralization and self-organized action. A wave of young, progressive, municipal deputies were elected in 2012 with a vision to improve the effectiveness of local governance.

We highlight a case study of *Delai Sam*, a Moscow-based urban activist community, to examine issues of participation, democratization of urban planning processes and the challenges of supporting creative citizen engagement. Delai Sam, which means 'DIY' in Russian, is an example of an intentionally self-organized activist network that addresses issues in the urban environment through grassroots mobilization and action. Delai Sam was established in 2010 (originally as LocalFest) by a network of activists, urbanists and artists with a vision of a more sustainable, livable and citizen-oriented Moscow. The activists organize events called marathons every 6 months. The marathons consist of a series of lectures and discussions on urbanism and ecological development, a film festival for activists, days of collective action (such as cleaning-up parks or upcycling) and workshops around sustainable urban change. The festival is open to the public with the idea that anyone can propose a lecture, workshop or action.

As a movement, Delai Sam is meant to extend beyond the festival through long-term projects and information exchange between ad-hoc groups of participants. Delai Sam organizers work with local media partners for outreach and in 2013 created a blog (http://www.delaisam.org) to consolidate information online. Although it has a media-rich and interactive website, the network still faces obstacles in engaging a wider sphere of the public and in facilitating coordinated action in the city of Moscow. While they regularly host events including master classes and workshops promoting urban sustainability, broad-based participation and involvement outside of the core network and marathons remain a challenge. Through these ongoing activities, Delai Sam has disseminated ideas of environmentalism, self-organization and bottom-up transformation, but still seeks to create a sustained forum for people to find tactics or resources for action and understand or gather information on topics of interest.

With the challenge that comes with finding venues for a festival, Delai Sam organizers recognize the need for participants to meet in physical settings, whereby they may learn by doing and deliberate on thematic areas identified. Supporting wider outreach and networking as well as inspirations and resource

sharing throughout the city continue to pose an obstacle both for the initiative and its ethos. Since its inception, Delai Sam has remained a project run by a small group of activists. In 2013, there were almost 200 participants at the conference, but organizers have yet to engage larger communities of interest in a broader dialog and to foster expanded civic action in the city. Involving new partners and citizens in projects has relied on the awareness and actions of a few. There is a challenge of staying abreast of each other's activities in the city or engaging in collaborations; this inevitably leads to replicated efforts, an ineffective use of civic resources and an inability to scale actions.

Although groups use social media (Facebook, Livejournal, Vkontakte and a wiki) to connect, they continue to meet in cafes and community centers provided by partners; hence, place-based interaction remains a key part of sustaining and managing the collective urban efforts of such a group despite their use of online communication platforms. The question remains how best to leverage both place-based and networked collaborations to support sustained urban engagement.

Participatory Research through Place-based and Networked Interventions in Moscow

In July 2012, the authors were invited by the *Strelka Institute for Media, Architecture and Design* to lead a workshop with students and creative practitioners as part of their *Agents of Change* summer program examining transformations in urban life in Moscow. We conducted a workshop titled 'Urban tactics and media ecologies for civic action in Moscow' in partnership with *Partizaning*, a local art-based urbanism collective. As a co-organizer of the Delai Sam marathons, Partizaning was well placed in Moscow's DIY community to help us investigate how residents and activists are networking online and offline to address environmental and quality of life concerns within city districts (microrayons) (Figure 2).

The 2-week workshop included 12–15 participants with diverse backgrounds in architecture, urban planning, information technology, journalism, economics and new media. It was conducted with support from domain experts, activist groups (several involved in Delai Sam) and neighborhood residents in Moscow.

FIGURE 2. Urban tactics and media ecologies workshop held at Strelka in Moscow, July 2013.

Participants conducted community-based research, mapping, ethnographic fieldwork, data visualization and user interface design. One team conducted fieldwork in Troparevo-Nikulino, a 'microrayon' (public housing complex) in Moscow, to understand the common issues in the neighborhood and how residents currently go about resolving them. With this understanding, the team designed an online platform for collecting local issues of concern and ideating solutions to address them, drawing on or combine efforts with other grassroot initiatives in the microrayon. The project included community de-briefings and a network of custom-made community mailboxes installed in the neighborhoods to engage participants in the process of identifying problems.

Our research drew from several methodologies, including interviews and participant observation, i.e., engaging with neighborhood activists and their ongoing activities to better understand their needs and requirements. These findings were corroborated through urban ethnography, i.e., researching specific districts and neighborhoods using interviews and surveys to examine frameworks of social and institutional relations and how these could best be leveraged.

To gain in-depth neighborhood information, we organized informal focus group sessions with activists. The authors attended Delai Sam meetings, and organized small, focused meet-ups with cyclists in Troparevo-Nikulino to gather insight and feedback from the activists on issues such as how they connect with each other, limitations that they faced and aspirations for how technology could be leveraged to their advantage. In addition, intense user-centered design sessions with researchers, designers and practitioners, carried out in parallel in Moscow and New York City, helped refine the ideas for the platform by drawing on the expertise of designers. Thus, using collaborative design as an overarching idea/ethic and methodology, we worked with various groups of people, institutions and activists to provide ideas and inputs during the co-design processes.

The authors were involved in different capacities, as researchers as well as practitioners. Given the scope of the work and a limited time frame for our research, we were not engaged in gathering quantitative data so much as collecting rich, qualitative research. Furthermore, our research was embedded in practice since some of us directly collaborated with or were part of an urban activist collective. Working closely with the Delai Sam activists as well as with community and institutions, the role of the researcher as a practitioner and investigator combined process with practice. On the one hand, the authors were continually investigating and evaluating the needs of active local residents in Troparevo-Nikulino. On the other hand, we also continuously devised design and technological solutions to overcome the limitations in networking and co-working that they seemed to experience.

A prototype of a tool for problem identification, brainstorming of solutions and resource sharing was developed as a proof-of-concept website in the workshop in July 2012, based on our fieldwork. The prototype called *SynchroniCITY* was iterated through ongoing fieldwork and co-design with participants into a revised online platform later called *MicroAct* (http://www.microact.org).

Prior to the workshop, in May 2012, members of *Partizaning* installed a series of mailboxes in Troparevo-Nikulino as part of a self-motivated project, without the permission of local authorities (Malhotra & Polsky, 2012). The

FIGURE 3. Unsanctioned mailboxes installed in Troparevo-Nikulino.

idea was to create a physical interaction space, beyond the online realm, to engage youth and elderly. The mailboxes moved beyond the problem-reporting dynamic by connecting public spaces and suggesting (via signage) that people work to solve the problems themselves or in collaboration with others (Figure 3).

As a result of this intervention, *Partizaning* received 60 pieces of mail, which reported different requests for change with varying degrees of urgency (and seriousness). Indeed, the mailboxes were used by children and the elderly, two demographics that either do not access the Internet regularly or are under-represented in urban decision-making processes. The letters revealed specific problems; many people marked critical locations (for repair or safety concerns) on hand-drawn maps and voiced general neighborhood concerns or desires. The mailboxes were supported by an ad-hoc group of residents and activists in the district. Based on the numbers and types of letters, we recognized not only that there existed a strong level of community discontent, but also that a form of DIY activism in Troparevo-Nikulino existed, albeit disjointed and fragmented. The letters held promise of engaging latent social capital and were well received in communities through exhibitions and forum discussions (Figure 4).

Through the workshops, fieldwork and a series of in-depth discussions with active residents from Troparevo-Nikulino, it became clear that people lacked a way of sharing resources or involving one another in community improvement activities. Although the research team met with local cycling and forest conservation activists in the area, their efforts seemed isolated from other cycling-related activities occurring across Moscow. Participants in the workshop were tasked with tracing and mapping the action networks of advocacy in the Troparevo-Nikulino district. Through interviews with residents and activists, they observed that residents come together in advocacy networks at a variety of

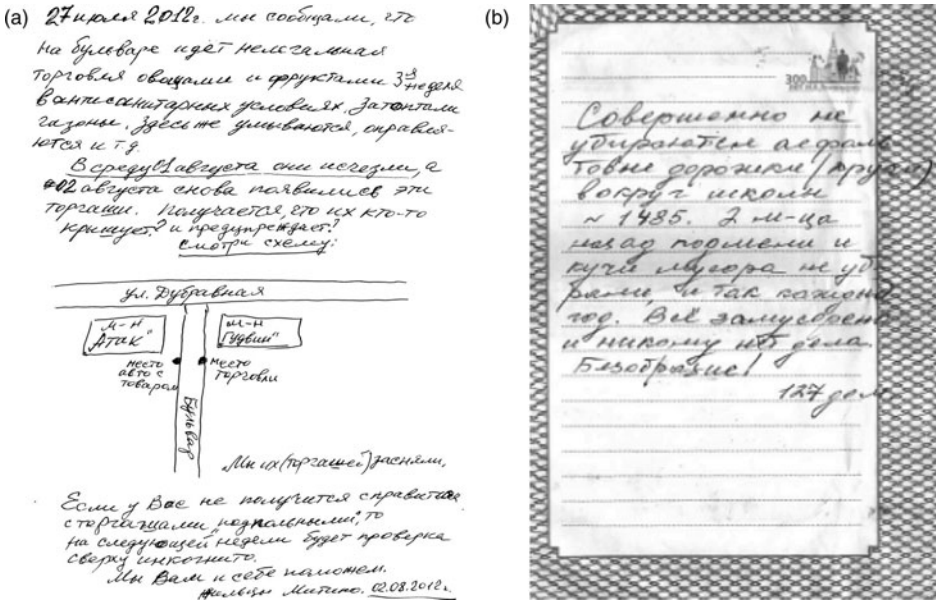

FIGURE 4. Examples of letters received in the mailboxes in Troparevo-Nikulino.

communication levels. These levels of communication are defined by different degrees of community participation and diverse usage of urban space. Notable across all these levels is the function of scale. At the lowest level, friends in a neighborhood might congregate to address a concern about personal finances. The scale moves up the social and institutional ladder to the municipal level where public infrastructure is the concern.

In Troparevo-Nikulino, the constant social enablers in the neighborhood were both the young activists and the community's retired seniors. For others, the conflicting demands of occupation and civic engagement fragment their ability to coordinate collectively. There is an opportunity to engage these diverse demographics of neighborhood actors and facilitate occasions for cooperative action. Distinct motivations, stakes and modes of communication clearly play into the nature of engagement afforded among the diverse networks of actors involved. Through this preliminary ethnographic work and neighborhood interactions, we began exploring ideas using rapid prototyping and participant feedback to design a platform that supported activists and broadened participation among the youth and elderly.

Co-Design and Prototyping of Online Collaboration Platforms: *SynchroniCITY* and *MicroAct*

SynchroniCITY began as an online version of the mailboxes intervention, co-created with participants during the workshop in Troparevo Nikulino. The website was designed to allow people to describe perceived urban or social issues in their

microrayon and explore an archive of emerging design concepts, which they may try to repurpose in their own context or comment on. Like the mailboxes, the public was invited to participate in a form of local urban planning by posting their ideas about the problems and opportunities in their locality. The shortcomings of this problem-solution model quickly became evident during our workshop. As with the mailboxes, user definitions of problems can range from the petty to the obscure. Negotiating consensus on the definition of the problems stifles creativity to coordinate solutions. As we identified in the workshop, many civic engagement websites in Russia and the USA constrain the parameters of problems to the point that they can be solved by public servants. While the post-a-problem then track-the-solution model of civic-engagement encourages city officials to measure success in city administration with citizen perceptions of quality of life conditions, this corporate customer service orientation can fragment citizen networks of civic action. In our view, websites such as *SeeClickFix* in the USA and *Dom Dvor Dorogi* in Russia bothillustrate the limits of a problem-solution model of interfacing individuals with governments without activating the local context of actors and networks.

SynchroniCITY emerged as a means to 'synchronize' tactical urban actions and design interventions, not only within the microrayon, but also to share and potentially replicate or repurpose them across the city. In this context, there was a demonstrated need for residents, particularly urban activists, to remain aware of what was happening across the city and engage or collaborate with similar actions (e.g., cycling tactics and activism). The prototypes were developed rapidly and were tested by active residents in Troparevo-Nikulino. The site was openly discussed during an outdoor, weekly community meeting, which not only was attended by youth, but also caught the attention and interest of the elderly passing by, who came to discuss their own problems and ideas at length in these gatherings. The *SynchroniCITY* website provided a good proof-of-concept design to engage participants and examine the emerging limitations of networked collaboration to support place-based urban action (Figure 5).

Several months after the workshop, in February 2013, *Partizaning* organized a community-based focus group session in Moscow to conduct participatory research with activists who organize Delai Sam. The goal was to better understand whether their concerns were largely site specific or issue based. At the Ecoloft environmental space, activists and participants of Delai Sam explained pressing urban issues and how they get involved. Discussions revealed that people had many themes of interest that were both location (district) specific, like local parks or construction projects that were damaging to the environment in their districts; but they were also motivated by issues that cut across geographic boundaries. The simplified notion of location-based problem reporting and the dichotomy of problem-solution action did not necessarily address creative urban activism or alternative visions of the city. Hence, any proposed online collaboration platform needed a wider framing and participation of publics.

It was very important for activists to meet in public, place-based contexts despite wanting to coordinate activities online. In a large and unwieldy city like Moscow, many activists find themselves feeling separated, working independently and unable to merge their efforts with others easily. Several expressed the desire to

FIGURE 5. SynchroniCITY—rapid prototype of website showcasing problems, solutions and resources posted.

work with a community on issues of shared concern. In particular, having a sense of place-based and proximal awareness of actions by others is something many participants desired. As explained by one participant, 'it's a good idea to be able to open a website and see what is happening *around you* and to have the ability to easily get involved.' While a site like SynchroniCITY would enable people to share initiatives with a wider audience, participants also expressed a need to maintain some form of anonymous or private interaction, especially when engaging in discrete or tactical actions whereby their identity may lead to legal repercussions from authorities. For this reason, many have previously used anonymous interaction in 'Meetup' sites.

One of the central methods employed in the process of developing the emerging MicroAct platform was using the process of co-design. This meant that the targeted end-users (i.e., active residents and other activists in Moscow) were central participants in a collaborative process (collaborative in multiple respects – between the authors and activists, multiple types of activists, with institutional support in the designing of the website and the mobile application). This process of co-design included regular meetings with designers and programmers in which opinions and inputs were requested, as well as surveying for the needs and requirements of the activists in question. Our role was to moderate a process of collaborative design, engaging the activists as experts as well as users of the platform. In this project, co-design had limitations in that, first, it prioritized a specific audience with its needs and, second, it generalized needs based on this audience of users—which may or may not be representative of broader 'democratic' or participative ideals (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6. Residents in Troparevo-Nikulino providing feedback on the first prototype of SynchroniCITY.

Partizaning went back to Troparevo-Nikulino and met activists with whom the team had worked on the original prototype, to learn more about their ideas and concerns. The activists were shown emerging design concepts for the website that expanded its focus and functionality. They preferred ways to simplify the design and access both location-specific and thematic views of emerging projects. The discussions revealed that self-organization and urban action requires both localized and place-based coordinations as well as awareness of similar efforts across the city. A broader framing of cooperative action than purely problem solving (including fostering communities of interest over time) was also needed to sustain and build capacity for action and socio-political solidarity among networks of community actors. Transparency of content, trust and anonymity had to be handled and negotiated carefully among networks of actors, requiring flexibility in allowing distinct modes of usage. Co-designing through participatory research ensures that any online platform handles these complex social dynamics over time.

Based on outcomes from follow-up research with various urban activists, we found it helpful to devise a notion of 'microacts' as an overarching concept that encompasses the idea of taking actions at a micro-level in one's own localized context, coordinating and expanding on them socially, while being able to scale, transfer or repurpose them in other settings. MicroAct seeks to reframe the problem-solution dynamic by supporting a richer form of interaction around co-designed interventions, building of social capital and engaging solidarity networks across problem contexts and sites. The design of the newly devised site (http://www.microact.org) was centered on coordinating and sharing representations of urban actions. This conception is operationalized in the framework of collectives, actions and campaigns. Actions are represented by microacts, which are shareable and replicable containers of media content. In essence, microacts are activity streams of images and narratives related to any kind of urban tactic, intervention or direct action. A microact can represent a site-specific instance of a collective effort to influence changes across the city. By documenting an action—how it was accomplished and the influence it gained (illustrated by the media content

documented by participants)—microacts are positioned for replication or repurposing in different contexts (Figure 7).

As a means to scale up the effort, microacts are created by collectives and organized within campaigns. Collectives group users around the actions that they co-create. Users that follow or participate in the production of a microact are associated together, and this association groups their activity (along several collectives in some cases). Collectives can represent established community groups or an ad-hoc assembly of individuals. Campaigns are a kind of virtual stage upon which to bring together a variety of actions that may support a sustained or short-term advocacy goal (urban, social or political). Hence, problems and solutions were reframed in this model as campaigns and microacts. Individual microacts could serve a variety of campaign objectives. For example, a critical mass cycling intervention could serve to both support advocacy for better cycling infrastructure and enrich cycling culture in the neighborhood. These distinct campaigns can reflect diverse articulations of issues and desired outcomes without limiting cooperation and sharing of urban tactics and best practices. Through rich text commenting and social network sharing, interest and participation can be generated in a design process that draws upon the experience and outcomes documented in previous microacts. While the platform continues to be developed, it will be further tested with participants through other pilot sites and workshops in Moscow and elsewhere.

The MicroAct platform was designed to foster a networked self-organization and co-design around urban tactics and advocacy. The challenge is not only how to

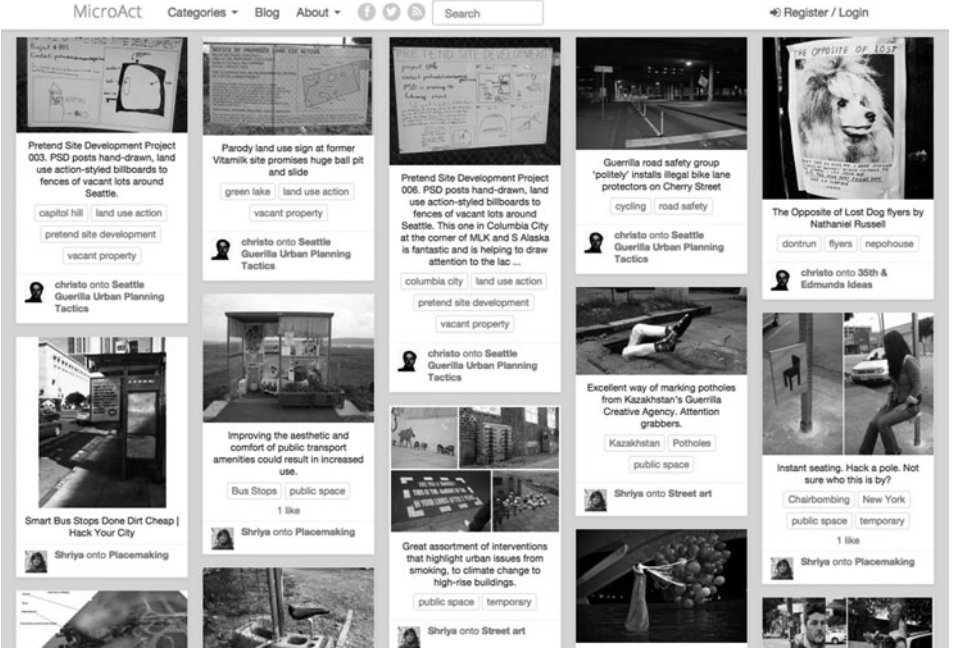

FIGURE 7. Co-designing and staging collective action using MicroAct.

facilitate grassroots action but also how to create a productive dialog between neighborhood residents and municipal or city-based policy-makers.

Toward a New Collectivism for DIY Urbanism

Both the neighborhood mailboxes initiative and the MicroAct platform seek to support local collective actions and are in themselves micropolitical and a form of solidarity. They emerged from participatory research and design engagement with Moscow-based activists involved in Delai Sam and Partizaning, as well as workshops and fieldwork conducted in Troparevo-Nikulino. It is important to consider how these initiatives can facilitate a new form of collectivism in Moscow, one that builds on informal and ad-hoc solidarity networks of activists, designers and neighborhood residents rather than top-down hierarchical or instrumental problem–solution modes of citizen engagement that have become popular today.

Such collectivism must be inclusive to encompass the diverse demographics, motivations and needs of residents, allowing cross-generational engagement, across socioeconomic boundaries and technology-based access. Hence, we must foster place-based interaction opportunities with networked synchronization. Emerging virtual connections among participants often need to manifest in real space for concrete action and effectiveness, while taking into account concerns of identity and anonymity, particularly in the case of unsanctioned or politically engaged activities.

The problem-reporting approach, which most existing civic engagement websites seem to follow, may facilitate more effective urban governance, but rarely seek to build a capacity for collective civic engagement. To create social capital, there needs to be a more sustained and deepened engagement among all stakeholders including residents, activists and municipal actors in the city. Disembodied online networks are not sufficient; there needs to be a way to facilitate localized dialog and urban action. Our experiences with Delai Sam and Partizaning in Moscow demonstrate that technology and crowd-sourcing alone cannot sustain citizen engagement and build solidarity networks. If DIY urbanism is to have any relevance and influence as a new form of urban re-planning in the city, we must examine how experimental and creative grassroots efforts can be scaled and repurposed, while devising more inclusive, sustained and meaningful forms of engaging neighborhood actors and city-wide initiatives through both place-based and networked collaborations.

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