
Decentralising Social Inclusion: tπt, Homelessness and St Peter's Square



Figure 1: t1t

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Abstract

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This contribution is about t1t, a self-constructible, kinetic and shareable piece of urban furniture that deploys principles of blockchain technology to promote more decentralised approaches to social inclusion, concerning homelessness in public space. Designed according to implicit programming, once it is left in place, t1t aims to problematise the multifold way in which public space is used and shared, suggesting the possibility of having an ecological (relational) understanding of its construction by people belonging to diverse sociocultural spheres.

Author Keywords

Social Inclusion; Homelessness; Blockchain Technology; Research through Design; Public Space; Implicit Programming.

ACM Classification Keywords

J.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous; See <http://acm.org/about/class/1998> for the full list of ACM classifiers. This section is required.

Introduction

This contribution is about t1t, an object I developed as part of my PhD research, which involved questions concerning the practice of rough sleeping and inhabiting public space by people who are homeless within discourses of social exclusion/inclusion. T1t, from the phonetic pronunciation of the word tight used in the expression sleep tight, is a piece of kinetic street furniture, which incorporates recycled cardboard that



Figure 2: Pattern of utilisation of the portico in St Peter's Square



Figure 3: Homeless' effort to maintain the portico clean is a Sisyphean task.

could form both a city bench and a temporary mattress. It is not only thought for the homeless person nor for the passer-by but for both. While constituting an aid for the first, preventing him/her from sleeping directly on the ground, it serves also public functions. It is both personal and public.

Homelessness and public space in St Peter's Square

In particular, I focussed on a community of homeless individuals who inhabit a portico area nearby St Peter's Square in Rome. The ethnographical study outlined difficulties concerning the various range of data and the possible response to the many voices heard. The experience with the community in St Peter's Square has revealed how rough sleepers exploration and use of architectural space may be an exercise of agency. Rough sleeping takes place mostly at night, exposing the city to its own fragilities and contradictions. Public space appears in its very precarity, outlining its social and cultural boundaries, questioning people's right to access it, and whether or not this may nourish ways of relating to other people and practices. However, the corollary of data collected from people who are not rough sleepers depicted a binary condition in which the poles seemed to be irreconcilable.

Hence, a wide array of opposite instances emerged during the research. These included a witnessed indifference towards homeless people, which is manifested through an incapability of establishing emancipative forms of communication between who is homeless and who is not. Other instances involved the economical sphere, i.e. homeless people are not tax payer. People who pay taxes would deserve more services, e.g. housing services from the city council

than homeless people; The other array of data involved a generalised stigmatisation of people who are homeless as not welcomed in public space for their habits, e.g. drinking alcohol. Finally, there was concern about the loss of human capital manufactured by the provision of services, i.e. free meals, clothes, medicine. This last aspect was particularly outlined by people who work for charitable bodies but also from some of the members of the community in St. Peter's Sq, highlighting how the provision of charitable support services tended to diminish independence, self-reliance, dignity and respect within and towards such communities.

Towards the decentralisation of social inclusion

These aspect questioned the notion of social inclusion towards its possible decentralisation as an emancipatory and autonomous form of mutual cooperation between subjects belonging to diverse sociocultural spheres.

The observations I carried out in St Peter's Square made emerge how the space of the portico was cleaned up every morning by the community of homeless people. Despite this practice remained unknown to the majority of passers-by in the daytime, it could be regarded as an emancipatory incentive towards the community of homeless people. This could form the basis upon which to operate, intending the cleaning up of the portico as a form of effort which is put by the community of homeless people to make the space accessible and enjoyable by all.

Hence, the concept has been to design a shared and shareable object that could, on the one hand



Figure 4: tait's functioning mechanism

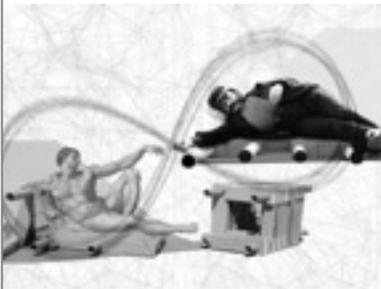


Figure 5: Sharing tait, concept image.

problematise the multifold way in which the portico is used. On the other hand, the object could rise awareness of the effort of maintaining the space of the portico clean by the community of people who are homeless, intending this as an incentive - a claim of homeless people's autonomy and dignity.

Public ledger and smart contracts: Embodying traces of previous uses

In this respect, tait is made to function as a public ledger, which reminds individuals of the traces of its use and the use of space by other practices. This aspect is deeply linked with its materiality, recycled cardboard. The use of this material was not only motivated by the fact it is symbolic of homelessness, cardboard is in fact used for rough sleeping. But rather because cardboard is a fragile and precarious material. Applied to the construction of a piece of urban furniture it would have demanded people, i.e. both homeless people and passers-by, to take care of it. While tait's inner fragility echoes with the idea of smart contract, in design terms this implied the use of implicit programming in form of feedforward: object's precarity demands care, inviting individuals to reason upon their actions. In other words, tait provides users with the possibility of choosing whether their actions and practices could harm or not the system/object.

In this sense, each person utilising tait participates in the process of sharing it. By using the object, each user becomes part of the process of mediation and sharing while by respecting the fact the object is fragile, the user allows a remote other to enjoy and use tait in a future moment. In so doing, a form of mutual cooperation and dialogue is manufactured. However, this does not happen only through its use. Rather, the

participatory process also comes as a form of external control towards who is using the object, which invites individuals to a sense of responsibility towards the other.

Public/private property rights

Conversely, Tait's materiality could open up to questions concerning its property rights. During the interviews to people who are not homeless, informants were pointing out how tait may be instead repulsive if for instance they perceive the object is dirty due to its use by homeless people. As some of the interviewees pointed out:

Antonella: Well, you know... It's made out of cardboard, so it may smell if a homeless person has slept on it. I don't know, you can't wash it.

Marco: If I knew the object was used by homeless people then I would not use it. I have the idea it is dirty.

Giovanni: No, I don't think I will use it. They [homeless people] are dirty and smell badly.

The argument with smell as a repulsive boundary could make the object be regarded as personal rather than public. In *Stercoral Origins of Property Rights*, philosopher Michel Serres explores the argument with the creation of property, outlining how this can be intended as a boundary. The notion of property functions as a barrier that cannot be overcome by other individuals but the owner. In the development of his argument, Serres utilises the example of the rubbish bin as a possible ultimate object owner: the objects

inside start possessing a sort of aura which functions as a barrier and prevents others from taking these back.

However, the issue with smell and personal hygiene can be moved from this dialectical relationship that manufacture a contrast between rough sleepers and passers-by into a different array of relationship again, as a form of exploration of the community of rough sleepers in St Peter's Sq and the services that have been provided to them by Pope Francis. Nearby St Peter's colonnade a washroom service for the community of rough sleepers was opened. It offers services such as shower, barber and toilet. In this respect, the idea of service as something that is provided as a means of merciful donation is addressed in a different fashion: Personal hygiene is not simply a service, rather it becomes empowering for the rough sleeper. It becomes part of the effort in making that a shared object and contributes to make it be at the same time a personal and a public object.

Ecology of individuals in public space

In conclusion, this contribute aims to highlight the importance inherent in the possibility of decentralising social inclusion in discourses concerning inhabitation of space by people who are homeless. Within the remit of social exclusion of people who face homelessness, the application of principles of blockchain technologies to the design of an object suggest that public space does not come as simply the result of people's actions. Rather, public space is better understood as constructed by an ecology of individuals acting as a network. This ecological intending inherent in the construction of public space calls individuals to develop a sense of responsibility towards the other, in that which that requires its user to take care of the object. Scholar in

social anthropology Athena Athanasiou and philosopher Judith Butler define this aspect as dispossession: exposure and disposition to others.

The two scholars assert that "disposition – with all its implications of affective engagement, address, risk, excitement, exposure and unpredictability – is what brings performativity and precarity together." This contribution therefore should be regarded as an invitation to consider the application of blockchain technologies to design for social inclusion as having the potential to contributing to a more just and inclusive city, which I believe is the foundation upon which a smarter city should be built. Finally, the project I developed suggests that the public is neither an ambiguous heterogeneity of people, nor a series of individualities. Rather the public is an ecology of individual subjects and the construction of an inclusive public space requires some effort. Through the contribution that each involved individual offers, expressed in the form of public actions and practices, the resulting public space is constructed through collective effort and as a disposition to a remote other.

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