Design For Agnostic Space – Reviewing Design Strategies For Conflict Accommodation In 'Wicked' Design Scenarios

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Abstract

Critical discussion of 'public space' challenges romantic ideas that in the public sphere there is a clear or shared 'commons' where individuals, seeking democratic access for common purpose or good, have equal opportunity to participate in the public realm and can go about their business differentiated from the State and/or unhindered by it or other vested interests. With the rise of consumer culture, many political theorists such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (2001) have challenged this view, arguing that public space is increasingly the subject of conflict linked to issues of power, control, and hegemony. Their work suggests that the public realm is characterized by Agonism - commonly defined as either contention for a prize, or as Agonistic i.e. 1. Striving for effect; strained or 2. Eager to win in discussion or argument; competitive.

Agonists believe that we should design democracy so as to optimize the opportunity for people to express their differences and even their disagreements. Yet few accounts of public-space, in which individuals who have to coexist/share available resources with those from oppositional perspectives, review conflict accommodation. An omission that is also true of discussions relating to co-design practices that focus on collaborative consensus.

This paper will discuss the concept of agonism and a number of design case studies linked to (1) graffiti and (2) an experimental student project run by the Socially Responsive Design and Innovation Hub of the Design Against Crime Research Centre (DACRC) at Central Saint Martins (CSM) College of Arts and Design between 2010-11. These examples, in our view, address conflict accommodation and/or resolution by design. They offer innovative ideas about how to address the reality of agonism in both the physical space of the public realm and the metaphorical space of the co-design process.

KEYWORDS: Public Space, Agonism

Background

Many of today's societal challenges constitute what Churchman (1967) and Rittel and Webber (1984) have termed 'wicked' social problems, where no one problem owner is discernable, nor single resolution possible given that the requirements of stakeholders are contradictory. Open, collaborative and participatory creative design approaches have been shown to deliver positive outcomes in response to some of these complex challenges (Gamman & Thorpe, 2011). Constellations of local, national and international initiatives including Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability (DESIS), the Sustainable Everyday Project (SEP), the Learning Network on Sustainability (LENS), the Partnership for Research and Education on Responsible Living (PERL), the Young Foundations' Social Innovation Exchange (SIX) and the recently formed Social Innovation Europe (SIE) are applying collaborative design approaches, methods and tools along with 'design thinking' and design skills to address such wicked problems, with the aim of generating viable and equitable solutions. They are identifying, proposing, prototyping, exchanging and scaling viable solutions to complex problems of the present (e.g. social cohesion, urban regeneration, healthy food accessibility, water and sustainable energy management) in pursuit of more sustainable ways of living. However, to assume that viability equates with consensus would be wrong. 'Wicked' design scenarios deny this opportunity. To paraphrase the poet John Lydgate, (who inspired President Lincoln), as a designer responding to 'wicked' societal challenges "you can't please all of the people all of the time" i.e. not everyone (all stakeholders) will be happy with a given designed outcome. So how can design make a difference? Chantal Mouffe (2007) describes the public context in which dissensus occurs as 'agonistic space'. That is, a 'space' in which different, sometimes oppositional, perspectives and powers compete with dominant wisdom or hegemony. We accept this reading, agree with Mouffe, and view society, as well as the public realm, as 'agonistic space'.

Arguments about the value of design in helping to articulate and address agonistic space have already been taken forward by Carlo DiSalvo et al (2011) who understand that "publics form around and through issues" and as such constitute "communities of interest" (Fischer, 2001). We endorse this idea and also the fact that design agonism is NOT the undifferentiated celebration of antagonism but rather deals with respect for different opinions, positions and perspectives accommodated by design.

This paper explores the role of design in relation to 'agonistic space', to understand how designers who seek to design for the public realm and/or plural publics might best understand what role they may play and how to equip themselves for such tasks. Mouffe (2007) suggests such creative activity "can play an important role in the hegemonic struggle by subverting the dominant hegemony and by contributing to the construction of new subjectivities". Indeed, we believe the two sets of case studies that follow may aid/inspire designers to further explore agonism in relation to design practice in both a physical and metaphorical sense linked to public space and co-design activity.

1. Graffiti Dialogues – Design Interventions that accommodate oppositional perspectives and paradoxical ideologies in relation to public space

On the 21 July 2010 UK Prime Minister David Cameron presented US President Barack Obama with the gift of a painting titled 'Twenty First Century City'. The painting was by Ben Eine, a UK artist who has developed his practice through years of tagging trains and buildings, actions viewed by dominant societal discourse as criminal offences, a hegemony that Mr. Cameron appeared to have been unaware of, or

simply ignored. Eine, like his better-known American contemporary Shepard Fairey (creator of the Barack Obama 'Hope' posters) has previously faced multiple fines and arrests, linked to current strategies of policing criminal damage, on both sides of the Atlantic, that construe all graffiti in this way. Graffiti has been defined within the UK Anti Social Behaviour Act (2003) as "an offence which involves the painting or writing on, or the soiling, marking or other defacing of, any property by whatever means." Many academic papers acknowledge the idea of graffiti as vandalism or criminal damage e.g. Weisel (2002), Sloan-Howitt & Kelling (1997), Bullock & Jones (2004), Stafford and Peterson (2002), Smith (1996) and Clarke's Crime Prevention Studies Series[i]. However, a broader and more contemporary account of graffiti, can be understood as follows:

"Graffiti are cross-cultural phenomena common to every literate society. Within the variable contexts of their production, graffiti personalize de-personalized space, construct landscapes of identity, and make public space into private space, and act as promoters of ethnic unity as well as diversity. Graffiti can be understood as concrete manifestations of personal and communal ideologies which are visually striking, insistent, and provocative; as such, they are worthy of the continued attention of art historians, social scientists, and policy makers alike." (Phillips, 1996).

Eine may have recently gained more recognition as an internationally significant artist, but issues of what constitutes art or vandalism, are raised by his work and earlier career. The idea that graffiti is creative practice that offers "concrete manifestation of communal ideologies" (Phillips, 1996) is not an understanding that officially informs UK policing, or government policy, despite Mr. Cameron's gesture. Off the record most officers we have interviewed tend to differentiate 'street art' as acceptable compared with 'tagging' (a visual signature like a name or logo) which is often viewed as unacceptable mindless vandalism, rather than an early manifestation of artistic activity that may help develop 'street art' practice. Some academics do focus on the analysis of graffiti as a tool for (re)generation. Iveson's work in Australia (2010) describes how the May Lanes project "transformed this out of the way lane into a dynamic space of creativity and interaction, which has now become a destination for people from far and wide" is notable. Also an understanding of graffiti practice as a sociological subculture occurring within a particular historical context rather than simply and solely an expression of 'juvenile delinquency', as expressed in books like Gastman & Neelon's (2011) *The History of American Graffiti*, which gives voice to writers from virtually every city in the US, who have been active over a forty year period. The majority of researchers on graffiti, however, continue to look at it as a regulatory problem, rather than as creative expression or a regeneration strategy, or linked to issues raised by power and control of the public realm or 'commons' (Halsey & Young, 2006). Perhaps this is linked to the consideration of graffiti as a practice that "personalize[s] de-personalized space, construct[s] landscapes of identity, and make[s] public space into private space" (Phillips, 1996) the latter of these impacts arguably equating to 'theft' as defined by the 1968 theft act[ii] in that it makes private what was previously public.

Graffiti is obviously a 'paradoxical phenomenon', being carried out as both an aesthetic *and* criminal practice rather than simply as a criminal activity, thus necessitating new social and policing responses that are fit for purpose and diverse community contexts (Halsey & Young, 2006). Whether graffiti is considered art or criminal damage clearly depends on context, taste and policing strategy, which in the UK varies widely between police forces. The issue of graffiti divides communities, raising challenging questions about sustainability, aesthetics, crime, ownership and inclusivity of community spaces.

In the UK, unilateral responses by law are part of a policing and enforcement strategy targeted at individual offenders. These strategies are costly, rarely succeed or measure favorably when compared with other preventative approaches. Yet they are part of a dominant hegemony linked to the notion that all 'unauthorized' mark-making by individuals in public space is criminal, irrespective of its creative value, or the fact it gives voice and agency to elements of society often silenced or unheard. To summarize a complex field, we would identify that conventional criminology and crime science reviews graffiti in terms of its causes, both motivations and opportunities (e.g. peer esteem and notoriety and easy availability of spray cans and marker pens) and seeks preventive interventions that address these triggers (most recently reviewed in Morgan and Louis, 2009).

The 'Broken Windows' theory of Wilson and Kelling (1982) posits that failing to control 'incivilities' such as graffiti can lead neighbourhoods to undergo a 'spiral of decline' into serious crime; but evidence is mixed, as to whether this thesis is actually proven. It is nevertheless reinforced by Modernist architectural discourse's intolerance of disorder that   contributes to graffiti being consider as 'other' to the architectural surfaces it speaks from, rather than an equitable addition or vibrant regenerative form. This is not surprising. Grattiti's space as 'other' locates it alongside those cultural practices the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) pointed out are often designated 'dirt[y]' and/or those practices the architect Jeremy Till (2009) suggests are often dismissed as 'mess[y]' by the dominant hegemony.   Thus graffiti is equated with aesthetic signs of disorder, degradation and decline not just by police officers and architects and/or those in whom it genuinely provokes a signal response that its easy to break the law, but also by those with an implausible sense of aesthetic taste and perfection, that demands the built environment always looks 'clean'.

Understandings of graffiti as a 'signal crime' (Innes 2004) which connotes to the public on a symbolic level that they are at risk and contributes to un-ease are accepted in criminology. Graffiti features in 'fear of crime' research and 'reassurance strategies' that aim to increase perceptions of community safety; this independent research suggests that graffiti raises public fears and needs to be removed in order to reinforce order and stability. Lacking from this account is an understanding of multiple publics with different, oppositional views, including the idea of graffiti as creative expression that provides regenerative effects. However, some criminologists advocate the need for a crime/art balance (e.g. Halsey and Young, 2006; Sutton et al., 2008; Morgan and Louis, 2009), whilst, radical perspectives from the graffiti community assert that graffiti gives voice to those otherwise silenced or unheard; "My first impression why people were writing was because I felt people were angry...Writing was a way of saying don't make a decision without consulting us" (Gastman & Neelon, 2011 p.26). Dotmaster[iii] (citing Bourdieu, 1984) argues that public advertising constitutes symbolic violence, whose effects are abrogated by those who perceive all graffiti as deviance, or property crime or antisocial behaviour rather than artistic or creative practice. Both accounts suggest that not all 'publics' are granted equal (or often any) voice in decisions as to who 'owns' the public realm from the perspective of visual engagement. Lack of discussion/understanding of such discourses against graffiti, means social control is promoted over community empowerment.

These conflicting explanations of graffiti reveal many contradictions, and differences of perspective, and as such, at the present time, appear irresolvable, constituting a 'wicked' scenario. This is why we have explored how some practice-led projects, have found new and different ways of mediating conflict in public space around the issue of graffiti. Many are exhaustively documented by the full accounts provided by Gómez (1993) and Iveson (2010), and more recently by Gamman and Willcocks (2011) who have argued that "greening not cleaning" graffiti hot spots might propose some new ways of resolving the 'problem' of repeat graffiti in areas where the community have democratically argued for its removal.

The Graffiti Dialogues project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in 2010-11, led by DACRC with the intention of trying to find new ways to address some of these conflicts. It attempted to document studies linked to new approaches and to make these resources available to a broad community of interest, via the website and network, www.graffitidialogues.com. Four case studies that seek to move beyond the notion of "stalemate" and use design innovation to address the requirements of conflicting parties linked to graffiti are reviewed here.

(i) OPEN GALLERY *(DIFUSOR, Barcelona* http://www.openwalls.org/ and http://www.difusor.org/?s=open+gallery).
A managed but 'open' wall makes allocated wall spaces available to writers/artists, in conjunction with a web-based and anonymous registration system. Writers can log on without fear of being identified with the consent of the local community. Residents of locations where this has been implemented so far are reported to have fed-back that the scheme has improved the neighbourhoods and Difusor state that the legality of the system has permitted or encouraged a far wider range of creative practitioners to bring their different approaches to the allocated spaces. This scheme is now being expanded as a network. See

representatives Xavier Ballaz and Cristian of Difusor speaking further about this project on http://graffitidialogues.com/.

(ii) STREET ART DEALER (*C6* http://www.streetartdealer.com)
This interactive website is designed to facilitate sales of on-street 'artworks' via QR tags and mobile phone technologies, which has the potential to both promote an accessible and structured sense of commercial competition among those producing the work.   Also to use digital technology to effectively negotiate which on-street works are more popular with other users of the space without risking prosecution. The positioning of graffiti practice as a commercial activity explores the possibility of granting access to graffiti artists via a commercial arrangement to be viewed in public space not dissimilar to the manner in which advertising sites are sold that have visual impact in the public realm.

(iii) REVERSE GRAFFITI (*MOOSE* http://www.symbollix.com/ and http://www.environmentalgraffiti.com/featured/35-greatest-works-of-reverse-graffiti/1949?image=4).
This artist's work (Moose) is key in a recent wave of practice to simultaneously challenge material paradigms within graffiti practice and explore 'green' issues linked to the built environment, through works that are cleaned-into-existence. How can there be any inference of crime against property if the dirt (often a residue of airborne pollution) that has been removed from public space to create the graffiti wasn't desired to be there in the first place, or was not located by the guardians/owners of the space? Despite this, the artist confirms that one police officer locked him up on the charge of removing dirt, the suggestion being that he should return the dirt, which appears ludicrous to many and probably would not stand up in court. Again there is an opportunity to hear the artist's own account of this strategy on http://graffitidialogues.ning.com/group/codes_of_practice/page/moose. The effectiveness of this mark-making strategy was exemplified for us when visiting the gridlocked and polluted city of Sao Paulo. Graffiti artist, Alexandre Orion, who had used dirt removal to create patterns on a city underpass, had the effect of forcing the authorities that had long neglected this aspect of the public realm to clean the whole wall simply to remove the graffiti (http://bioephemera.com/2007/03/19/pollution-kills-but-arts-the-crime/).

(iv) SIGNAL PROJECT and LOUGHBOROUGH JUNCTION ACTION GROUP (http://www.signalproject.com/ and http://www.loughboroughjunction.co.uk).
Community Leader, Lois Acton, is a political activist who works with graffiti writers, and other experienced artists and local people to connect and regenerate communities. She is linked to diverse projects, two of which are named above, linked to reclaiming neglected spaces (such as underused tunnels and bridges) in order to connect communities and encourage active participation in the public realm. Local communities work with artists to create 'place-making' narratives that grant voice to both writers/artists and other members of the local community who have their stories visualised on the walls. A full account of the Signal project can be viewed at: http://graffitidialogues.com/.

We have identified the above four creative interventions regarding address to graffiti in order to understand not just how conflict in the public realm has been resolved or accommodated by design within some communities, but also to review how they have 'reframed' the 'problem' of graffiti as an 'opportunity' for creative intervention. We argue these interventions move well beyond perception and definition of graffiti as crime and have created strategies that might well contribute to greater equity and quality of life in our cities. Waging 'war' on graffiti, rather than accommodating it in the ways we describe is likely to result in displacement of graffiti locations rather than sustainable resolutions. Also as Iveson points out:

"Pushing graffiti culture underground through criminalisation only serves to isolate young people who feel the urge to pick up a spray can or marker and express themselves. This doesn't stop them writing, it often simply stops them developing the skills and ethics that might improve their efforts beyond serious reproduction of their tag" (Iveson, 2010).

This is why we consider such case studies worthy of further investigation / rigorous evaluation. Whilst such rigorous evaluation has not yet occurred the project creators provide qualitative evidence that these solutions are effective at reducing and/or accommodating conflicts related to graffiti within communities of diverse publics.   Our view is that these approaches – or a combination of elements from several of them - if evidenced to deliver desirable impacts, could form a 'suite of interventions' available to be drawn upon. They could also be emulated and/or adapted by designers in and of the public realm, to meet the needs of other contexts where conflict exists, and for which innovation beyond the 'cops, courts and cleaning' hegemony is urgently needed. Indeed, we believe that there is real value in seeking to compile case studies of design interventions. In particular those that appear to resolve/accommodate societal conflicts, and which deliver forms of regeneration linked to strategies for new sustainable ways of living in cities, across a broad range problems (not just graffiti) to best prepare and inform new design practice for public space.

2. Design *for* Empathy: Design devices that explore Design for Agonistic space

As a research centre we often develop our research, or ideas we are interested in exploring further, via student design projects that are conceptualized as design led investigations. This approach is exemplified by design briefs we have run with MA Industrial Design Students at CSM, UAL, including one designed to explore how 'design for empathy' can address conflict resolution or accommodation, drawing upon established design research methods.

DACRC, and the Socially Responsive Design and Innovation Hub, located within it, is a practice-led research initiative that delivers open and collaborative design-led action research to address societal needs and challenges. Our practice requires us to be able to accommodate and facilitate equitable involvement of diverse actors, with sometimes contradictory needs and desires, in design-led address to 'wicked' societal challenges such as crime, health and climate change.

Such projects typically deliver design-led social innovations that require changes in the behaviour of social actors within communities, and often involve compromise, or 'reframing' of their initial perspectives and desires. Consequently, we have found it useful to consider the metaphorical 'space' of a collaborative design project as an agonistic space in which diverse and, sometimes, contradictory agendas of actors compete; a 'space' in which hegemonies must be challenged in an attempt to grant equity of agency to actors and to enable contribution to the co-design process. In attempting to 'design for empathy' some student projects sought to explore the role of design in creating objects or contexts in which hegemonies could be challenged and empathic insights between actors gained. The outputs of these activities can be considered as 'design devices' (Manzini & Rizzo, 2011) which we have described elsewhere as 'designed vehicles' that enable [co-design] process participants to "go on the co-design journey", and co-navigate toward collectively articulated destinations (Thorpe & Gamman, 2011).

The brief 'The way you make me feel – design for empathy' required MAID student designers to identify conflicts between users and then to use empathic methods, design tools and dramatic techniques pioneered by Augusto Boal (1979) in his 'Theatre of the Oppressed' to understand the experiences of each user within the conflict scenario, before trying to design 'devices' (objects, environments, systems or services) that would enable the conflicted actors to gain insight into each others perspectives. Students were not required to solve the conflicts through design, rather to communicate oppositional perspectives so as to generate empathy between conflicted actors.

Students chose design territories that addressed diverse scenarios of conflict ranging from religious and ethnic divisions /differences to those arising between bedfellows linked to snoring!

'News Clash'

"Muslims are being "demonised" by the British media, with 91% of reports being negative, research commissioned by London's mayor has found" (BBC News [Online], 2007)

'News Clash' addressed the issue of representation of specific demographics/identities within the media. It sought to allow those of one identity, ethnicity or religion to experience the news from the perspective of another. A 'find' and 'replace' function is added to news platforms such as BBC News Online. This function allows the user to search for a keyword that is representative of a facet of a persons' identity, such as a religious belief, and replace it with a word that they feel to be representative of their own identity. For example. if a non-Muslim wanted to experience the news from the perspective of a Muslim then they would chose a keyword that they felt represented their own identity, 'Londoner' for example, and instruct the tool to 'find' the word 'Muslim' in all news stories and replace this word with the word 'Londoner'. On reading the news on the site the user would then gain insight into what it would feel like to read the news from the perspective of a person that identifies with the word 'Muslim'.
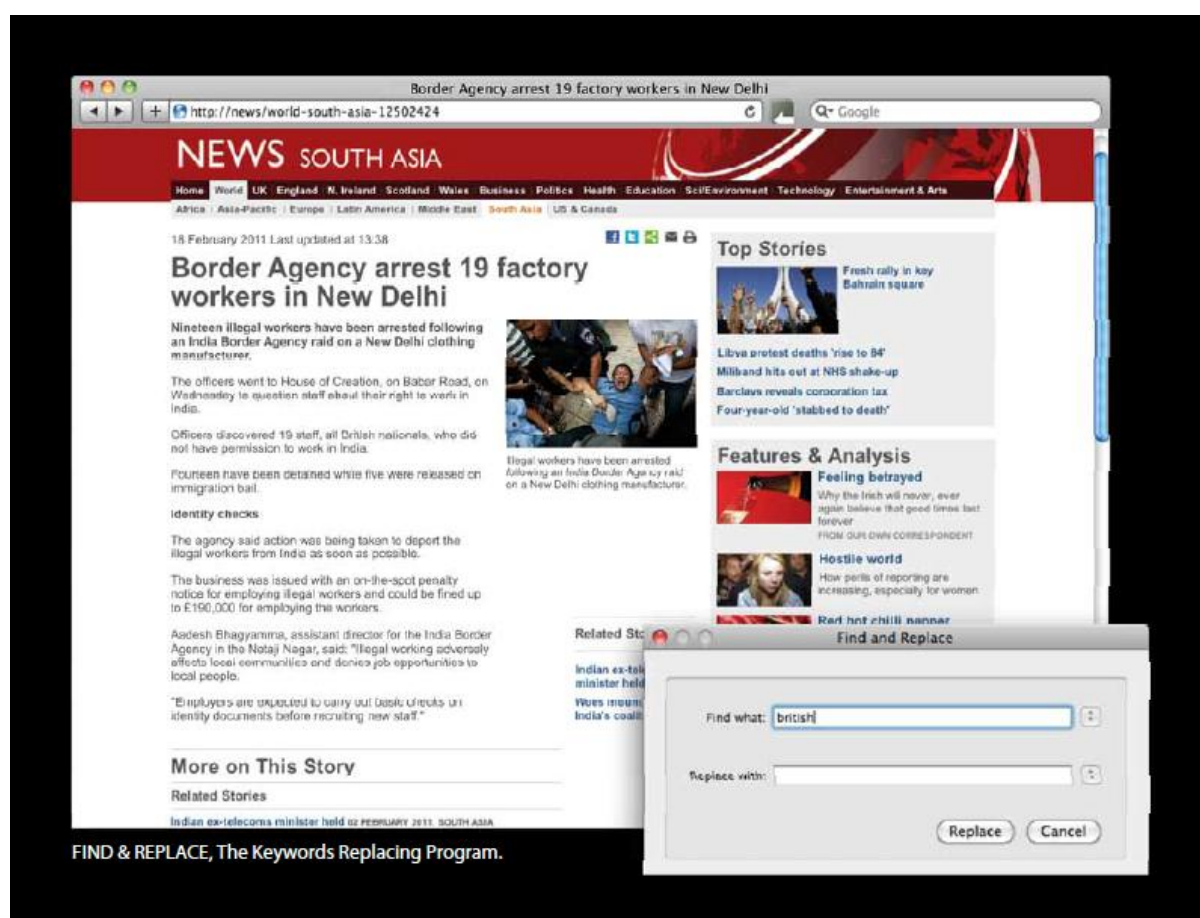

Figure 1. 'News Clash' MAID Student project

'Hijab', Juhee Jo

'Hijab' explored the conflicting perspectives around the requirement for the Hijab to be removed when passing through airport security. Ethnographic research with both Hijab wearing Muslim Women and passport controller's working at Heathrow airport revealed conflicting perspectives. A graphic communication strategy was developed for use in passport queues at the airport. Hijab wearers were handed a postcard that challenged them to 'find the face' of a young Muslim woman, whom the student

had befriended during her research, from a series of images of people wearing the Hijab. Passport officials were handed a postcard requesting them to remove their trousers.
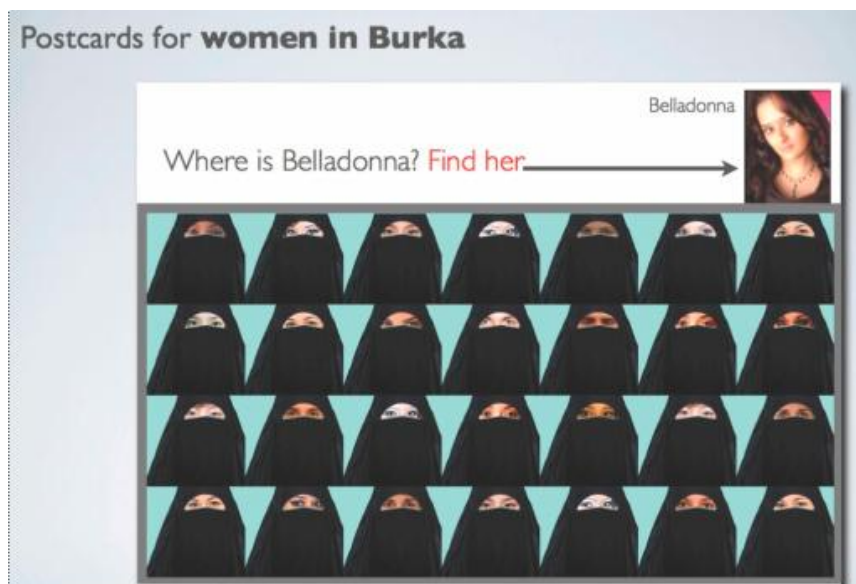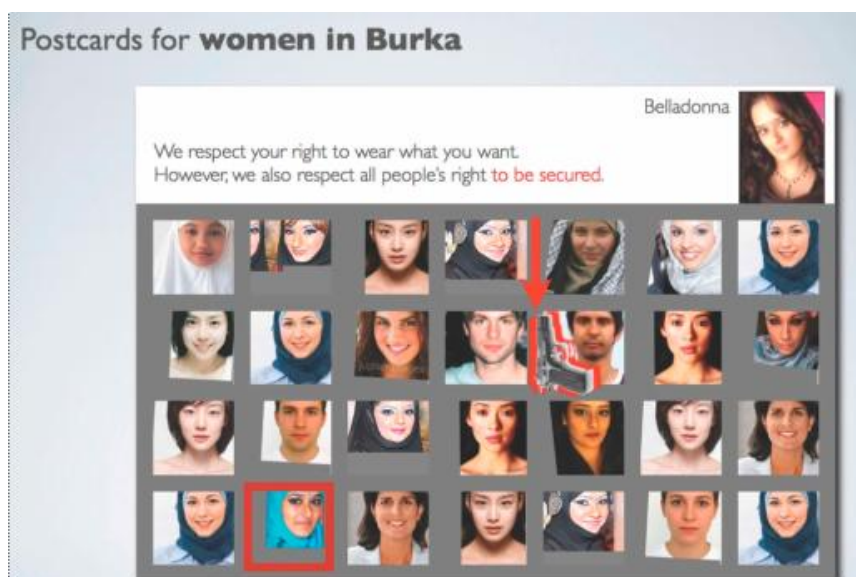

Figure 2. 'Hijab' MAID student project

Figure 3. 'Hijab' MAID student project

Figure 4. 'Hijab' MAID student project

'Snoring', Tanatta (dia) Koshihadej

"If it gets to the stage when the snorer ignores pleas from their partner to do something about the problem, then it shows a lack of consideration and this will often start to permeate into other areas of the relationship" (BBC News [Online], 2001).

'Snoring' addressed the claim that snoring silently destroys relationships. Whilst there are devices on the market that claim to prevent snoring, they are typically uncomfortable to wear and prevent the wearer from sleeping. However, left unaddressed the snoring of one partner can prevent the other from sleeping. The 'devices' designed to encourage empathy in this scenario were an uncomfortable ear protector to be worn by the non-snorer and a snoring alarm clock that detects snoring and records and replays the sound to the sleeping snorer, waking them.

Figure 5. 'Snoring' MAID student project

Figure 6. 'Snoring' MAID student project

'Polly say the magic word', Ploenpit (Tusy) Nittaramorn

'Polly say the magic word' is a toy for people that moan a lot that aims to help them empathise with a partner who is required to listen to their complaints. 'Polly' is a toy parrot that can be worn by the complainant or located on a perch in shared space within the home. 'Polly' is able to detect negative words and phrases and record them. On repetition of these phrases 'Polly' replays them in random order enabling the complainant to experience what it is like to have someone close to them complaining all the time.

Figure 7. 'Polly say the magic word' MAID student project

Conclusion

This paper has used theoretical ideas about 'agonistic space' to explore diverse design led strategies for accommodating conflict in contemporary scenarios linked to physical and metaphorical interpretations of 'space'. It understands that Agonism is very different from antagonism. Agonism, originates from, the Greek *agon* which refers most directly to an athletic contest oriented not merely toward victory or defeat,

but one which emphasizes the importance of the struggle itself—a struggle that cannot exist without the opponent. Victory through forfeit or default, or over an unworthy opponent, comes up short compared to a defeat at the hands of a worthy opponent—a defeat that still brings honor. An agonistic discourse will therefore be one marked not merely by conflict but by mutual respect and admiration.

Exploring facilitation of agonism through design, via analysis of case studies, and by connecting these ideas to design methodologies via experimental projects has helped us further understand, illustrate and articulate a role for design and designers that lies outside that of 'problem solving'. A role concerned with the creation of objects and contexts that facilitate social actors to co-exist and empathise. We are interested in this role for designers linked to development of roles, tools and methods that facilitate co-creation as well as co-existence in the face of 'wicked' societal contexts and design challenges. In our experience, this exploration has been useful for our students who have explored empathic design processes in the creation of tools, in the form of 'design devices', that themselves serve to generate further empathic insights.

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Endnotes

i http://www.popcenter.org/library/crimeprevention/

ii 1968 Theft Act, Basic definition of theft:

(1) A person is guilty of theft if he dishonestly appropriates property belonging to another with the intention of permanently depriving the other of it; and 'thief' and 'steal' shall be construed accordingly.

(2) It is immaterial whether the appropriation is made with a view to gain, or is made for the thiefís own benefit.

iii http://dotmasters.co.uk/