

GC presentation at CEGE research festival

Transcript: 16th Sept

So you are going to hate this project: it ran over budget, it ran over time and the results are inconclusive but the background to this work, as we have seen today, is this concern with an urbanising world and urban disasters and how this is being taken up by humanitarian organisations.

The original piece of work, funded by RIBA, came about because Alison interviewed me for her dissertation about 4 years ago and was preoccupied with the way that humanitarian agencies seemed to be conceptualising and operating in the city (namely in Port-au-Prince in Haiti) and she wanted to examine this further by making films, and interviewing people and then bringing urbanists and humanitarians together to thrash out their differences. So we held a workshop at the end, explaining what we thought some of the tensions were and using the films and a design exercise. But when people broke out into their groups they proceeded to act out some of those tensions. We recorded the sessions and because we couldn't be with every group for the whole time, we wanted to look more closely at what was actually happening as people talked about the task.

It is Grand Challenges funded project and we brought together Camillo Boano from the DPU, Brent Pilkey from the Bartlett, Alison Killing – who runs her own urban design practice in Rotterdam called Killing Architects, and me, formerly employed by a humanitarian agency.

When we got Brent on board, Alison – who is a bit more au fait with the interweb – said “oh wow he looks interesting it looks like he did his PhD on grindr!”. I was like, is that a euphemism “I am doing a PhD on a dating app...” But no as it turns out he did his PhD on on gay people and their relationships to housing and stereotyping

I was like “Wow you can do a PhD on gay people and their relationships to housing and stereotyping”
You actually can!

And, as it turned out, we needed a person who could do that to do this because what we wanted to do is what's called discourse analysis which is not about what people say but about how they say it to each other and how that starts to make ideas and entrench certain systems of power and certain ways of understanding things

So we did this discourse analysis but, Alison and I, we didn't really know what this is

So we gave him all the transcripts but he didn't know what we didn't know so instead of him saying “are you sure you want me to transcribe all this material because that's like 5 PhDs worth of text, he transcribed all the audio and we spent all the money on transcription and we had no money left to do the analysis.

And my whole project plan was like outsource the transcription, the outsource thinking over here and that is simply not what discourse analysis is and that is, in fact, a project engineering approach. Trying to break up the problem into solvable parts and then reassemble them into some truth about the world but with this material you just can't do it

So, what I want you to watch now is a minute or two of a film about urban design which is one of Alison's films that she made in Haiti, interviewing urban designers in Haiti.

If you look at this and then in your own heads, this is the kind of material we're talking about. This is a taste of the material. It's a real city. It's a number of people who work for humanitarian agencies talking about their jobs, talking about what they think urban design is and this was the source material for our workshop. So it brought everyone to the same point for thinking about it but it's also – you are just listening to people's stories and it's hard to analyse that.

But the other problem – and perhaps you’ve seen enough of it to get a sense of the problem.

I’m going to stop there and just explain a little bit of that problem.

The two problems of this project were: you can’t break down discourse analysis into its component parts and the other problem is, I don’t know how closely you can see this but this whole project had become such a toxic soup for me because there is another problem here and I was trying to think how I could explain it to you to make you feel embarrassed by the pain of it and the only thing I could come up with was I went to this comedy night by this woman who did a show about 90s feminism and it was this really funny comic who’d gone back her universities, saying what feminism was in the 90s and then had gone back to interview people who ‘grew up’ and it was followed by a whole panel about feminism. And the audience, as you can imagine, was like 90% women and as soon as the open floor started, it was the one man in the room who spoke. And it was one of those moments when you’re like: it’s really adorable that you middle class white man is a feminist but can you shut up now and let the women speak.

[Not included in live version] But at the same time I could identify him, partly because I am the kind of woman who would probably speak up at something like that but also because I can identify with being a feminist who feels alienated from women. As evidenced by my longstanding love for a fellow alienated feminist: Billy Bragg. So, I still feel like I might have something to say and a different point of view but it is still coming out of this body: yes a woman but also a white, middle class person from a country (Britain) with a specific history of imperialism and domination by language and culture and army and enterprise.

A horrible, confusing and contradictory moment and this is what this has become for me: like even talking about this stuff, about humanitarian agencies is, like, they should just shut up now. In that film it’s all white people talking and then Haitian people working. Everything about the films has become so so toxic for me. So then you have to go back to the source material and work out how are we getting to this place where we talk about our power in such a superficial and dumb way and all the recommendations about how humanitarian agencies should work in cities is about local engagement and working with local people and we can’t even make a film where we get them to talk to us. That is just a completely unrealistic and impractical recommendation because we are so overwhelmingly intervening and powerful in this situation.

And so that’s the end really of this story about why interdisciplinary work is so disturbing. And all the while I was like “I don’t want to read it”, I just want to make a graph or nodes or visualise it. I don’t want to read it again” and everyone was like, “nope, you can’t make a graph you have to look at the text”

So we looked at the way people talked about refusing to draw anything during their design task and the prejudice people had about drawing over writing.

And eventually they let me draw a graph, but actually I couldn’t draw the graph until I’d worked out what the most interesting things about what people said were and then, you can’t see but you can read about it in the report, is that when people ignore image and texture and maps and go on and on about their personal experience and stories, and it was those people who the most powerful people in the room, who didn’t want to draw maps because that was too dangerous or bold, but when they spoke to each other all they did was tell stories about their own experience, massively stereotyping people in the community, and it was just such an irony that they should turn away from the task at hand, the technical task and they were the most biased in stereotyping people.

So don’t do interdisciplinary research. It’s really traumatic.

But when this report comes out we hope that it will be a way to expose people, development and humanitarian people, to alternative ways of looking at the world.

