

COPY



Royal Rip-offs: Frank Lloyd Wright, Turquoise and Green,
Bas van Beek, 2009 Photo Pieter Vandermeer

CULTURE

Design culture is obsessed with authenticity. Copying is often deemed reprehensible, and borrowing another's idea or incorporating elements of his or her work into one's own is viewed as a sign of creative impoverishment. But is this right? What's wrong with interpreting someone else's creation? Musicians have been quoting each other's work for centuries – why shouldn't the same thing happen in other creative disciplines? Where does quotation end and copying begin? These questions were central at 2011's Copy/Culture symposiums in Berlin and Beijing, organised by PremSela in partnership with the DMY International Design Festival Berlin and the Beijing Design Week. Hybrid Space Lab's Frans Vogelaar was one of the speakers.

by Frans Vogelaar and Elizabeth Sikiaridi

Professor Frans Vogelaar and Elizabeth Sikiaridi run the Hybrid Space Lab, a lab and network where architects, landscape architects, environmental experts, engineers and designers work together on projects in the digital and analogue environment. Below is a shortened version of Vogelaar's talk. In it, he discusses how he and Sikiaridi understand the concepts of copy culture and co-creation and talks about the game *City Kit*, in which players build in a digital version of their neighbourhood to modify and improve their local physical environment.

Copy & Change

When living cells divide, DNA is copied, so that each new cell has a complete set of genetic instructions. Copying is an eternal concept and the basic reproduction method in nature. But evolution is mainly based on faulty copying. Faulty copying - making mistakes within the DNA copy process – is the evolutionary strategy of nature. A mutation, meaning the faulty copy of the DNA sequence of a gene, is normally bad news. But sometimes it provides a survival advantage to the mutated organism that then leaves more offspring (copies of its genes) in the population than the non-mutated organisms.

Copying is also the strategy of cultural evolution. And again, it is faulty copying, based on misunderstandings, thus permitting new interpretations. Cross-fertilisation, borrowing others' ideas and incorporating elements of others' culture into one's own, is crucial to cultural development. Similarly to the faulty DNA

copies being the motor of natural evolution, the motor of cultural development is not just copying but faulty copying. So the strategy is: Copy & Change!

The network paradigm

In his essay "Race and History", written for UNESCO in 1952, Claude Lévi-Strauss, the famous anthropologist, contrasts cumulative, dynamic, "moving" cultures with "static", non-developing cultures. He argues that intercultural connections and cross-fertilisation are crucial to the development of differentiated civilisations. Within human history, interchange, the mixing and fusing of concepts and ideas – thus, cultural hybridisation – enabled the development of variations, of deviations, of new notions and neologisms, forming the motor of cumulative, dynamic, "moving" cultures.

This approach of considering human civilisation as a dynamic network of exchange is gaining in interest today. Historians such as William Hardy McNeill and John Robert McNeill, in their book *The Human Web: A Bird's-Eye View of World History*, describe the motor of history as the growing web of interactions – weaving together hunter-gatherer bands, then civilisations, and finally the whole world – by which people, goods, diseases and, crucially, ideas spread.

Such a reading of human history is a reflection of the cultural shift we are experiencing today. Away from a mindset based on clear-cut categories and identities, the focus is shifting to interconnections and networks. This upcoming network



mobile DIY pavilion
by Hybrid Space Lab for the 2009–2010
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paradigm is closely connected to the fact that digital networks are radically changing the way we live, interact and perceive our world.

Politics, economics, warfare, culture are increasingly taking place in the spaces of information-communication, of media networks. These emerging digital networks are influencing and interacting with our “real” places, modifying the social, economic, and cultural organisation of our societies in general. The theoretical reference to this upcoming network paradigm is network science. Network science examines the interconnections of networked systems and analyses complex relational data in very diverse fields of work. It is an interdisciplinary approach and can be seen as the further development of the complexity theories of the 1980s and 1990s. Network science focuses on complex networks of exchange and aims to develop an X-ray view to understand how dynamic complex systems develop and function.

Co-thenticity

Networked organisations and systems are today transforming our society in general, as described by Manuel Castells in his sociology classic *The Rise of the Network Society*. Political uprisings such as the Arab revolution, the indignados, and the Take the Square and Occupy Wall Street movements are using mobile media networks and social media tools. In their distrust of established political forces and parties, they contest the concept of the “political expert”. Creating independent self-publication channels and demanding “direct democracy”, they form fluctuating networked political forces.

Networked systems are also transforming knowledge production: think of Wikipedia, “the free encyclopaedia that anyone can edit”. Cooperation, co-authorship and open source are found in many contemporary cultural expressions and phenomena, for example, Wikimedia Commons, the free media file repository making available public-domain and freely licensed educational media content (images, sound and video clips) to everyone.

Users, aided by improvements in information-communication technology, are increasingly developing their own new products and services, “democratising” innovation. These innovating users often freely share their innovations with others, creating user-innovation communities and a rich intellectual commons. The word “prosumer” is used in this context to describe the type of consumer who becomes involved in the design and manufacturing of products so they can be made to his individual specification. The word “prosumer” blends the roles of producer and consumer and was coined in 1980 by the futurist Alvin Toffler, in his book *The Third Wave*.

Today, the “prosumer” can be engaged in innovation and design as well as in the manufacturing of products that fit his individual specifications and needs. In recent years, 3D printing has developed into a low-cost technology anyone can use to produce objects. 3D printing allows for industrial production on a desktop scale, enabling autonomous production for individuals and designers. This development of object production is enabled by the Internet and the acceleration of technological developments and open-source communities. Digital blueprints of objects are designed in 3D software and can be shared via digital networks. On special Internet platforms, people share these open-source 3D designs that can be produced via rapid prototyping with 3D printers. In this context, positioning the notion of “copy” opposite “authenticity” and “originality” is becoming obsolete. As designs are co-authored by participants who adjust or improve them, one cannot speak of authentic designs any more but must speak of co-thenticity.

Prosumer design

Hybrid Space Lab developed the Simple City forum, an interface for the co-authorship and co-curatorship of urban projects by professionals and laymen. The design of this simulated urban environment can be broken down to simple elements that can be copied and modified (Copy & Change) by users of the city.

Laymen and city users, by copying, pasting and modifying the basic elements, can easily adapt the urban design in order to develop new urban settings. They can thus co-author this interface that enables the communication of dynamic and networked information on urban projects.

An example of a Simple City application is the City_Kit project, developed for the Hong Kong social housing authority for a target group of young people who are familiar with computer games but hardly play outside. Playing the City_Kit game, the residents can adapt and improve their local physical environment by building a digital version of their neighbourhood. Using modular building components that can be moved around and fixed in certain places in the environment, users can build micro-stages, exhibition decks, floating bars and theatres, swimming pools and other recreational facilities that make living in the neighbourhood more fun.

City_Kit is an open-source medium in which participants can add elements and share their designs. An online platform in the form of a website allows residents to actively take part in the game. All it takes is a simple click of the mouse to interactively test your own virtual version of City_Kit. City_Kit of the Day is a contest under way on the website. Residents and game users can design their own objects and facilities; the winner gets a chance to actually carry out his or her idea. On the website, the user can also pinpoint exactly where a digital object would be located in the analogue world. This can be done using a mobile phone, RFID or a GPS system.

The goal of City_Kit is to help you revalue your local surroundings and incorporate the new, imaginative layers created in City_Kit's virtual world. Making small modifications to the personal, physical environment in digital space changes the experience of living in the real world. An outcome of the City_Kit project was the DIY Pavilion, first presented at the waterfront promenade of Hong Kong within the framework of the 2009–2010 Hong

Kong–Shenzhen Biennale of Urbanism and Architecture and later set up at the Hong Kong Jockey Club Creative Arts Centre and at the Kwai Tsing Theatre in Hong Kong.

The pavilion's architecture is based on a design principle with a flexible structure that can adapt to site and programme requirements, to different content, context and spatial situations. The pavilion consists of triangular plywood plates sewn together with the help of cable binders. It is a flexible mobile structure that can be easily disassembled, transported, reassembled and sewn together again, adjusted to the size of the site and the local requirements. Videos on urban issues were projected on the triangular crystalline structure of the pavilion's interior as it travelled to different locations for community education. The structure of the pavilion's architectural design principle makes it possible to involve the users in its design, building and transformation. With both City_Kit and the DIY Pavilion, the users share and co-author their design, creating spaces of co-thenticity.

Networked creativity

Exchange and cross-fertilisation – Copy & Change – are not just the central concept of evolution and development in nature and culture. In contemporary “network society”, networked co-operation and co-authorship are gaining in relevance. Co-thenticity is replacing the “©-culture” logics of the industrial age, where the creative one designed for the non-creative masses. The upcoming creative economy and society (of “forced leisure”) based on the affluence of networked creativity have to find other functioning modes than the ones that consider creativity as a scarce good to be protected by copyright regulations.

We not only need new working business models but also social strategies to support, in a sustainable way, the upcoming creative economy and society of co-thenticity. This calls for a general social debate. Such a discussion would trespass the still narrow boundaries of a professional field and could put design in the centre of a discourse addressing general social issues.

