

Hybrid Space Lab (Amsterdam/Berlin)

A WRITTEN INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH SIKIARIDI AND
FRANS VOGELAAR – QUESTIONS BY INGA WELLMANN

What is Hybrid Space Lab?

Frans Vogelaar (FV): Hybrid Space Lab is an interdisciplinary environment characterized by an innovative and integrated approach to spatial issues. It specializes in strategic research and high-end design. It is an R&D and design practice that focuses on the hybrid fields that are emerging through the combination and fusion of environments, objects and services in the information/communication age. Hybrid stands for our strategy of combining fields, Space reflects our expertise and Lab stands for our innovative and experimental approach. Our web address ends in .net, suggesting our working practice of involving a network of specialists.

What concept does the name reflect?

Elizabeth Sikiaridi (ES): Mixing fields, combining expertises and considering environments in their multiplicity of dimensions is for us a method for finding new relevant solutions to increasingly complex spatial design challenges. We investigate actual developments in the general fields of culture, communication, production, exchange (markets) as well as technological innovations, not to foremost monitor market development but in order to generate visions.

FV: The starting point and spearhead of our work lie in the fusing of digital and analog environments, in embedding media networks in urban, architectural, social and cultural space. Our environments are today being rapidly transformed by medialization – and hence globalization. Today's technological developments are accelerated by the fusions of

information technology, nanotechnology, biotechnology and neurotechnologies (brain technologies) and their convergence into new hybrid technology platforms such as DNA computing, nanobiotechnology, synthetic biology and neuroengineering... We approach these technological developments from the perspective of the designer, the architect and the urbanist, by 'inhabiting technology', by transforming these technological developments to meet the way we want to live.

ES: Innovation is not a goal in itself, but a means of coping with and steering developments. Hybridization is an evolutionary strategy to develop new solutions for the changing environments in our fast-moving world. I remember an early reading of an essay entitled *Race and History* that Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote for UNESCO in 1952. Lévi-Strauss contrasts cumulative, dynamic, moving cultures with static, non-developing cultures and argues that intercultural connections and cross-fertilization are crucial to the development of differentiated civilizations.

What kind of projects do you work on and initiate?

FV: Hybrid Space Lab is a lab and a network in which designers, architects, urbanists, landscape architects, environmental planners, software and hardware engineers, and media artists collaborate to develop projects for combined analog and digital, urban, architectural, design and media spaces. The relationship of digital service environments and artifacts to our architectural and urban surroundings and objects is central to our strategic research and design agenda. The research and development projects range from urban games and urban planning to buildings, architectural interiors and industrial design applications and wearables.

ES: We also have a long track record in consultancy; we were part of a think tank for the Dutch government and have advised corporations, local authorities, and cultural, educational and research institutes. We developed the project idea for the Urban Dinners on the main highway of the Ruhr region for the RUHR.2010 Cultural Capital organization. Our working method is to merge analytical investigations with synthetic design processes. We apply Design Thinking to a very extensive range of issues and fields.

FV: We work internationally. At the moment we are busy with a project for the Tschumi Pavilion Foundation in Groningen in the Netherlands, consisting of a programmatic plan, a business plan, an urban strategy and an architectural design for a new Media and Performing Arts Centre. We are also in the final stages of a project for the Torino World Design

Capital 2008, geared to security in public space – politically, a heavily abused issue in Italy. Our approach is based on the appropriation of public space by proposing and designing a series of services that strengthen and encourage public involvement in the open spaces of the city. Last but not least, we are curating an international touring exhibition on cityscape and sustainability and designing a ‘Media Camp’ due to be built in Shenzhen by the end of 2009.

Where does the Hybrid Space Lab come from (i.e. your background story/out of what need did you set the ground for the HSL)?

ES: Frans studied industrial design and architecture and urbanism; I studied architecture and urbanism. Before setting up our practice we had already gained professional experience in many different fields, including architecture (OMA/Rem Koolhaas, Behnisch & Pa.); industrial design (Studio Alchemia/Alessandro Mendini); and fashion (trend research in Paris), as well as urbanism; landscape architecture and urbanism; material design, food design and exhibition design; interior architecture; media design... We both have hybrid cultural backgrounds and have lived and worked internationally: I was born in London, grew up in Athens, studied at the École d’Architecture de Belleville in Paris and at the Technical University of Darmstadt. Frans was born in the Netherlands, grew up in Zimbabwe, studied at the Design Academy in Eindhoven and at the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA) in London.

FV: We were aware from early on that the ICT developments, the rise of a network society as Manuel Castells puts it, would have an immense impact on the way we live and work, accelerating globalization, the flexibilization of lifestyles and the development of the creative economy. The new production and communication tool of the networked computer provides a common working instrument for a broad range of creative professions. It is also transforming creative processes and products and paving the way for a series of hybrid professional fields.

ES: At first, when people were thinking in terms of the polarity of media and physical space, it was difficult to communicate our ‘hybrid space’ approach, which considers the physical environment in the context of and in relation to the networks that it belongs to and interacts with. We started with self-initiated artistic research projects. These led to consultancies and research and development and design assignments.

Where do you locate yourself within the broader context of the creative economy? Would you consider yourself to be an intermediary institution at the interface of several disciplines?

ES: The creative economy is, by definition, dynamic. The traditional disciplines will develop, transform, mutate, fuse. We see our ‘undisciplined’ laboratory as a catalyst in this process and as a space for development and experimentation.

What are your strategies in overcoming outdated structures or practices?

FV: When we started, we did have a communication problem as we did not fit neatly into the predefined territory of the distinct disciplines. We were repeatedly asked: What exactly are you? Designers, architects, urbanists, landscape urbanists, researchers... or media artists? We responded with an offensive strategy, by defining our office as a hybrid laboratory.

What definition or interpretation of the ‘hybrid’ do you feel is of relevance for contemporary phenomena in the economical, social and cultural sphere? Where and how does the phenomenon of the hybrid transform the way we work, share and use space, organize ourselves and others, develop new institutions, identities and job profiles, and so forth?

ES: In the times of the Aristotelian categories, the notion of the ‘hybrid’, the crossbreed, had a negative connotation. Today the notion of the ‘hybrid’ is everywhere. Hybridization is becoming an increasingly important issue in the cultural field. Look at the attention paid to world literature; think of the 2008 Nobel Prize for Literature. Today, you have hybrid cars, hybrid businesses, hybrid securities, hybrid plastics, hybrid plants, hybrid pigs... all reflecting a cultural shift away from a mindset based on clear-cut categories towards a flexible approach based on intermixtures, on interconnections and networks.

FV: Hybrid space is everywhere in our daily lives. Take, for example, the private (communication) space of mobile telephony, which creates islands of private space within public urban space. Or monitored environments, where cameras keep watch over open urban areas. The teleworkplace is becoming an integral part of the home, the office is becoming a space for encounters, with a meeting lounge atmosphere, the (connected) car is becoming a mobile extension of our networked existence, to name only a few examples.

ES: Hybrid defined as the combination – the fusion – of the analog and the digital is a good starting point. As Frans just mentioned, medialization and globalization are transforming space, activities and professional fields. Hybrid retail, integrating e-commerce and physical stores, changes the shop into the experiential space of the point of sale. Hybrid publishing is closely entwined with citizen journalism. In new business models customers are co-creating and co-developing products. Think of the Lego Digital Designer that enables users to create, share and improve the design of the building brick toys.

FV: The days when people were defined by their profession and remained with the same employer and in the same professional field throughout their working life belong in the past. Together with my students at the Academy of Media Cologne we are developing strategies for ‘hybrid practice’. The aim is to generate new practice models for the multi-job strategies and the patchwork biographies of the ‘project workers’ of today and tomorrow.

In the past, who and what were the forerunners and idols of today’s hybrid practice?

ES: One of the pioneers was the Greek and French music composer, media artist, architect and engineer Iannis Xenakis (1922–2001). In the 1990’s we worked with Xenakis in his personal archives in Paris and interviewed him on his work and artistic concepts. What is interesting about Xenakis is the way he implemented structures in different fields and transferred them from one field to another: from engineering and mathematical-scientific research to music, from music to architecture and to visual events. Xenakis worked on the poetics of the electronic age, as he called it, integrating the new, universal, electronic tools of the computer in his artistic oeuvre. He argued for the development of a general discipline of form, a general morphology, an interdisciplinary effort, corresponding with his universal thinking and his practice of ‘transfer’.

FV: Another pioneer is the American designer, architect, author and visionary inventor, Richard Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983), who was deeply concerned with sustainability issues.

And, with regard to the book title, what do you consider important for the governance of the creative economy? Is there a special need for new intermediaries, both on an individual and an institutional level? Will it be important to find new modes of representation for the ‘in-betweens’ – such as a lobby for creative intermediaries, or new institutional interfaces?

ES: It is important to reflect on and discuss these themes. We still need to develop not only working business models for the creative sector but also social strategies to support the sustainable development of a creative society and economy.

FV: We believe that it is important to strengthen the interdisciplinary networking platforms and support creative environments of encounter because they foster innovation. One shouldn't underestimate the strategic value of cross-over spaces and hybrid laboratories.