

# The hospitable prototype: a techno-polis in construction

**Alberto Corsín Jiménez & Adolfo Estalella**  
Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, CSIC

'The stranger is also the beggar, since they both belong to the category of persons to whom hospitality is due.' (Pitt-Rivers 1968: 18)

Sometime in the spring of 2009 Madrid's City Council came up with an idea for networking and digitalizing the city's public landscape. The Council commissioned a number of giant screens (140 sq. m.) that would be deployed across the city. An infrastructural digital skin would thus be grafted onto the city's public and social life.

One of these screens was set up at Las Letras Square (LLS), a small public space at the very heart of Madrid's cultural and historical centre, next to the Prado and the Reina Sofia museums. The square is also home to Medialab-Prado (MLP), a critical art and technology centre, part of the Council's Area of Culture, which was henceforth designated curator of the LLS screen, in the assumption that a critical arts collective would best know how to bring out the technology's public sensibilities.

The screen, however, became a major source of controversy and tension within MLP. For one, MLP staff felt the project had been imposed upon them. This was offending for a number of reasons. On the one hand, it made explicit the heavy-handedness, obduracy and opacity of the state apparatus. The screen came to MLP as a plate served cold. More importantly, however, the imposition ran counter to the model of curatorship that MLP had painstakingly been working at for the past four years. Working against established conventions in the art world and the academy, MLP has been developing a number of research programmes aimed at opening-up the epistemic production of knowledge, be it art, techno-science, or culture. Indeed, the idiom of 'opening-up' has become a driving motivation and central concern of MLP's research efforts, as we will see below.

The imposition to curate the giant screen's contents was thus received with disaffection. The project was seen to have been handed down to them 'closed' and with no room for technical or infrastructural re-orientation. There was little to open-up here. In response, MLP took a number of measures.

In September 2009, a 'media façade laboratory' was set up. The laboratory was conceived as a 'platform for experimenting with the production of projects for MLP's digital façade'. The idea was to open up a space where the 'technical production of graphic content, the infrastructural requirements of the screen, and the social and public dimensions of the local urban landscape' confronted each other. As the project's documentation put it, 'in the

absence of specific disciplinary knowledge' the media façade laboratory would have to develop a 'methodology of experimentation'.

A first step in this direction was to convene an international workshop on 'urban screens and public space'. Visual artists, architects, experts on urban informatics and soft infrastructures were invited to debate on the convergence of digital and physical architectures and the remaking of public spaces.

A second step was the organisation of an international call for content-proposals for the screen. The projects selected were invited in turn to a tutored seminar where they made the transition from ideas to paper, in this case, to screen. (Perhaps with a touch of irony the seminar went by the name, Open Up.)

On MLP's account, the seminar delivered uneven results, and it aired and set in motion a number of controversies that have since haunted what may well be called 'the screen affair'. The story behind this affair points to some of the themes and issues that we would like to explore in our paper. They all convene around the making of an incipient experimental technology into a host of, or a hospitable environment for, wider sociological effects.

### **The screen affair**

For a start, four of the eight projects presented at the workshop delivered almost finished products, a 'closure' that goes against the processual and work-in-progress spirit undergirding MLP's curatorial agenda. Moreover, a decision was made for one of the projects, which aimed to broadcast on the giant screen images hacked from local CCTV cameras, not to be exhibited at the seminar's final public presentation.

Over the following months, the curatorship of the screen itself generated tension and unease. Traditionally, MLP favours a 'workshop methodology', where people and resources are brought together for intensive work over a delimited period of time, usually two or three weeks. The screen, however, demanded continuous attention. Considerable amounts of staff-time and money were poured into the façade for the projects to remain operative. The projects' authors, for example, had to travel back to MLP months after the workshop took place in order to make a variety of technical adjustments. Furthermore, the façade itself demanded constant care. Usable only when it is completely dark, the façade had to remain switched off for most part of the day during summertime. This further required the development of a software script enabling the automatic switching on and off of the screen, as well as a number of adjustments to hardware components. Importantly, it also required assessing the screen's impact on the vicinity. Thus, in an attempt to ameliorate the impact on the local neighbourhood, exhibitions are switched off early at night and no music is employed. On the other hand, different projects provoked different local reactions. One of them in particular became an immediate hit in the neighbourhood. It consists of a Tetris game where two players displace and rotate the Tetris blocks as they trickle down the screen by walking sideways across the square. The square was packed during its exhibition and when the time came to screen a different project, a chorus of voices cried: 'Tetris, Tetris'.

In ways perhaps not entirely anticipated when the project was first documented, the management of the façade confronted MLP with, indeed, a 'methodology of experimentation'. It has 'opened-up' experimentation to a new scale of socio-technical

complexity. In this sense, the façade stands as an index of MLP's struggle for exploring what a methodology of experimentation might entail. A beacon of public visibility, the façade has thrown MLP into fraught terrain, where negotiating the complex articulations between public interventions and experimental modes of production has become a prototyping challenge of its own.

In this light, the façade is no singular techno-infrastructureal device, but the organon of an urban *oikonomía* (etym. household): a placeholder for negotiating domestic (that is, hospitable) arrangements across technical, political and social domains. MLP's insistence on 'opening-up' may be read in this context as a methodological insistence on generative hospitality, from the interdisciplinary seminar to the public square, where digital information and social life play host and guest to each other in an evolving economy of public space. The hospitable prototype becomes therefore an index of a techno-polis in construction.

### **Hospitality**

There has been a recent surge of interest in hospitality, in the conditions of urban and cosmopolitan conviviality, in the contexts and situations through which strangers may encounter and view each other as commensals at the same polity.

Anthropology's take on hospitality has a distinguished genealogy of its own, tracing its filiation to kinship studies, where affines and consanguines vie for establishing their reciprocal duties, rights and obligations vis-à-vis each other. A well-known point of entry into the study of hospitality, for example, is the house. The house works as a metaphor of the larger atmosphere of sociability through which strangers are turned into guests. There are spatial and material arrangements that dispose the appropriate circulation of stranger bodies, that regulate the exchanges of objects, that demarcate and sanction what and what not to touch, where to seat, who to speak to, who to eat with, etc. Strangerhood is a social body subject to rituals and taboos. As a hospitable environment, then, the house requires that such rituals and sanctions be observed.

Ancient Greece called such hospitable environments, *oikonomía*. The term was used to refer to the house, in this larger sense of an internally administrated space, where bodies, objects and fluids have culturally designated layouts of appropriateness. By default, the 'economy' designated also the umbra or threshold of hospitality: the set of techniques and arrangements through which strangers became guests.

Giorgio Agamben has recently revisited this ancient notion of economy and has placed it at the heart of his genealogical expansion of the Foucauldian investigation of governmentality. We cannot afford to go into much detail here. Briefly, Agamben argues that the governmental principle can in fact be traced back to the workings of the *oikonomía*. From ancient Greece to medieval Christian theology, the economy functioned as an intermediary or administrative category: a threshold category where outsiders and insiders worked out their differences. The economy, then, as a technique of hospitality. Scholastic theologians, for instance, disputed heavily about the presencing of the divine in worldly affairs: does God play a part in extra marital affairs? Do we cheat our partners because He preconceived so? Such disputes led to the development of a whole gamut of intermediary solutions: complex *agencements* that aimed to bridge the gap separating the *duplex ordo* (double order) of divine and worldly affairs. As an apparatus of administration and control over the social

body, that is, an intermediary mechanism between the exceptional power of the sovereign and the muddled and turbulent politics of the multitude, governmentality is therefore but the modern culmination of the theological economy: the tip of an iceberg whose roots lie deep in the management of hospitality.

Of Agamben's work on governmentality and the anthropological tradition on hospitality, we want to retain the notion of the economy as a technique of hospitality: an arrangement that disposes bodies, infrastructures and flows in the negotiation of stranger-guest relationships. What follows is a description of emerging forms of urban *economy*, that is, of the kinds of novel configurations where city life prototypes for itself new stranger-host modalities of existence.

### **Interactivos?**

In what follows we want to focus our attention on a research programme developed at MLP on annual basis. The programme is called 'Interactivos?' and opened for the first time in 2006. It is considered by many in the MLP community as the epitome and *raison d'être* of the organisation.

A little history is in place to help contextualise the coming-into-being of MLP. Back in the year 2000, two local artists decided to put together a platform for the promotion of emerging digital cultures in Madrid. The initiative was picked up by the Madrid City Council which for a number of years took the programme under its wings. In the year 2006, however, a decision was taken to dismantle the programme and incorporate it into the larger institutional framework of a new City Council project.

Somewhat unexpectedly, however, the decision was reverted in 2007. The forthcoming renovation of a historic sawmill in the city's downtown is seen as an opportunity to relocate, revamp and re-launch the ML programme. The programme now flashes a new brand and a new name, MLP, which points to its location in the golden mile of Madrid's cultural quarters. The once emerging digital culture now vies for recognition next to the Prado and Reina Sofia's museums.

Internally, the decision to keep the MLP alive is seen as a decision to support a new curatorial project: a move away from exhibition-based artistic practices to the promotion of process-oriented productions.

Interactivos? was designed with this new vision in mind. The programme developed out of a series of educational seminars held in 2005 where artists and technologists Zachary Lieberman and David Cuartielles opened-up the communicational qualities of technology in a do-it-yourself spirit. Along with Massimo Banzi, Cuartielles for example had recently developed an open-source electronic prototyping platform, known as Arduino, which has gone to acquire global reputation as an open electronic standard.

The intuition that technology carried within an educational or communicational quality which could be opened-up through do-it-yourself workshops inspired MLP to design a dedicated programme to the methodological exploration of social-cum-technological interactions.

The way in which over the course of their lifetime at Interactivos? the notions of the 'social' and the 'technological' have shifted in the mutual exploration of their capacities signals to the emergence of what we would venture to call an 'episteme of hospitality' that takes the urban condition as its underlying household or economy.

The programme is held on an annual basis. A theme is selected and an international call for proposals is sent out. Submissions are reviewed and an average of 8 projects selected. A second call goes out, where 'collaborators' are invited to join the chosen projects. Finally, collaborators and project-proponents come together in Madrid over a three week period, where they are funded to develop and produce a prototype of the project. They are assisted in this task by a chosen group of 'tutors', who supervise and advise on a variety of technical and artistic issues.

As its name indicates, Interactivos? was designed with a view to problematize the taken-for-granted 'interactive' dimension of new digital-cum-technological interfaces: what indeed makes an interaction *productively interactive* (vs. say, productive inter-passivity)? The organisation of 'interactivity' in this context takes a particular assemblage. On the one hand, MLP employs and encourages the use of free software and open hardware in its projects. Further, within and without MLP's own organisational template takes a non-hierarchical structure: openness refers thus to both how one ought to speak one's mind in her relation to fellow workers, and to the hospitality displayed towards strangers and passer-byes.

We want to explore in some more detail the purchase that the notion of hospitality plays in the contemporary configuration and deployment of openness, as evidenced in their mobilisation in the Interactivos? context. We want to stress here, though, our use of the concept of hospitality as a technique of economy: that is, as an apparatus of administrating appropriate layouts of bodies, artefacts and flows.

This year's Interactivos? ran for three weeks in July. It congregated some 40 people from different parts of the world. Attendants stayed at a nearby hostel, where their accommodation had been paid for. The decision to house all participants under the same roof is a strategic one, aiming to promote an intense 'work hard, play hard' spirit. The hostel and the MLP space thus fold over each other to produce an atmosphere of concentrated interactivity. Over the course of the three weeks such topological concentrations are managed in other ways too. People are encouraged to promote 'thematic dinners', to which others are invited to subscribe; lunch-picnics are organised to local parks and gardens; and *cañas* (pub crawls) are sponsored in the local neighbourhood every night. Madrid's well-known night scene, public spaces and urban infrastructure thus blends into and foils whatever 'interactivity' may actually ensue.

Of course the project themselves also become contested spaces and sites of interactivity, and of 'openness' itself as an experimental modality of sociability. A project at this year's Interactivos? will help illustrate the point.

All projects are first introduced in the afternoon of Day 1. The projects' 'authors' are invited to introduce the conceptual design informing their visions. The author of the project that concerns us here showed a video of a crumpled paper-ball gradually stretching and spreading itself wide open. The visual effect was like an ice cube melting at sun. The

larger proposal aimed at developing an experimental design for a kinetic sculpture mirroring an arctic polar icecap. It was meant to draw attention to climate change.

When the tutors first reviewed the project, one of the tutors got involved in an intense discussion with the project's author. A central aim of the project was to scale-up the prototype, so that the 'melting down' effect could be obtained using larger pieces of paper. In its current design the effect worked at a scale of centimetres but it was hoped that it could be replicated at a scale of metres. The tutor, however, observed that no such prototype could ever be built, because paper does not have the structural qualities that will yield such results at such a scale. The tutor thus advised and encouraged the artist and the group of collaborators to explore the use of alternative materials. This infuriated the artist, who felt challenged, and threatened to leave the workshop. Things got more complicated when one of the collaborators experimented successfully with paperclips, and in so doing drew the attention of other collaborators.

The tutor would later confess that the project had arrived to MLP 'closed', meaning that the promoter was not willing to negotiate any aspect of her original design. The prototype that the group had been convened to produce had little to tinker with. Materiality, design and scale came together in a conceptual compact that left no room for creative manoeuvring. Defined thus, 'closure' and 'openness' prompted a series of further discussions and reflections in conversations and exchanges amongst tutors. One tutor saw it as a typical example of the disciplinary clash between the epistemic cultures of artists and technologists. Some artists, he argued, make a categorical distinction between conceptual and material work: projects arrive conceptually 'closed' and their materialization should involve no creative tinkering with the concept. Craftsmen, on the other hand, are of the opinion that the very material arrangement of a project entails its constant reformulation and, therefore, will always remain structurally open

The culture clash between artists' and craftsmen's approaches to creativity has a distinguished and old provenance, some aspects of which have recently been retold by Richard Sennett, for example. What we believe is worth noting out here, however, is the use of the notions of 'closure' and 'openness' in the characterisation of certain modalities of design-work as 'prototyping'. There is no simple dichotomy here between ideas-work or hand-work; between artistic or conceptual creativity and manual or technical skills. These are certainly dimensions of the character of design-work appraised by MLP's tutors and collaborators. But they form part of a larger cluster of epistemic qualities. Most prominent among these is the openness of the design: its capacity to accommodate or take-in material re-arrangements, scale-shifts, novel aesthetic and sociological effects. Insofar as it may work successfully as a prototype, a design needs to be able to host emerging and shifting social economies (*oikonomias*). It needs to be hospitable.

The role that hosting plays in emerging socio-technical assemblages is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the hosting of web contents. During Interactivos? MLP insists that all projects document their progress in a wiki hosted within MLP's own website. Documentation has become a benchmark of good practice for MLP and an insignia of their methodology of experimentation. It is often singled out by MLP staff as a fundamental routine of MLP's organisational mission. It is also a standard of what openness stands for. Well-documented projects allow people who were unable to attend the workshop to prototype their own designs at home. They open-up the projects to

strangers: the documents work as a source code for strangers to make the projects their own. In so doing, documentation turns visitors into guests. Importantly, also, the host-guest relationship facilitated by wiki-work helps build-up the prototype into a robust project. The prototype grows in robustness the larger the community of strangers that are turned into guests.

At the 2010 Interactivos? workshop, however, the promoters behind two projects insisted on having the work documented in their own respective websites. There are a number of reasons why authors may sometimes choose to follow this route. It is not unusual, for example, for future versions of some prototypes to travel to media and digital arts festivals. Artists' websites thus figure as portfolios of their work, as well as portals for potential collaborative ventures. Wikis invite collaborators to contribute to a project's documentation by editing and enhancing various aspects of the prototype's design, or even of its possible applications. If the wiki is hosted in the artist's website, there is obvious reputational and symbolic capital that accrues to the artist, not to mention claims over intellectual property, should they ever become a concern.

Although artists and MLP both have an interest in archiving a project's life, what the archive stands for in each case is different. For MLP the archive is a technique of hospitality that enables prototypes to gain robustness. Some artists share this concern, and are well-known for endorsing creative commons access to their materials. Indeed, it is unlikely that an artist who does not endorse these principles will ever get invited to a MLP workshop to start with. But in MLP's case the archive has gone on to become a methodological imperative. At one level, archiving is what will always prevent projects from 'closing down'. So long as the documentation exists for anyone to look it up and make it her own, projects will remain 'open' and, as such, in beta or prototype version. Hence the importance that projects be documented in MLP's wikis, not artists. For one can never be certain that an artist's website will not shut down. As a durable and sustainable project in time, prototyping calls-for MLP's hospitality.

## **Conclusion**

The use of prototypes to convene and organise complex socio-technical projects is of course not a new phenomenon. For centuries, artists, architects, engineers or draftsmen have used sketches, templates, drawings, scale models or written notes to orient and guide preparations of future design work. In this sense, the prototype is an index of different epistemic and visual cultures: a tensor of how things come to be.

In her piece for Chris Kelty's prototyping experiment (see <http://anthropos-lab.net/studio/episode/03/>) Marilyn Strathern recalls an experiment in designing a seminar series which, she argues, might rehearse something of the qualities of prototyping. What may be distinctive about prototyping as a social form, she says, is the uncertainty of relations that opening up a social process to strangers might yield. In her own words, 'If prototypes seem on the increase, I throw into the ring the suggestion that one spotlight is shone where uncertainty is encountered in collaborative relations, and probably between relative strangers.'

Our ethnography has likewise found in stranger-relatedness a curious placeholder for what prototypes do. At MLP we have encountered talk and practices of prototyping as a model for the larger organisation of social relations; in particular, a model for the negotiation and

extrapolation of relations between hosts and strangers across a variety of social and technological domains. The prototype, then, as a site for mediating relations between strangers and hosts. Different objects, technologies or social projects play host and stranger to each other at different times and spaces. The media façade tenses its strangeness against the public urban square. The tension throws into relief and simultaneously helps define new meanings of urban conviviality and citizenship. The archive tenses its strangeness against future visitors, and in so doing challenges established notions of authorship, creativity, curatorship and knowledge-production. The scale and original material conditions of a prototypical design tense their strangeness against the community of collaborators who must legitimate and ultimately help the design incarnate in a material object: the design must at one point cease to be a stranger to others and must become a host for fellow workers. Throughout, the work of prototyping experiments recursively with the infrastructural *oikonomía* of openness, interactivity, and community.

This way of understanding the work of prototyping, as a technique and culture of hospitality, partakes of larger contemporary techno-political currents, as witnessed in the development of the free and open source software and hardware movements or the revitalisation of do-it-yourself cultural expressions. In this wider context, the hospitable prototype perhaps signals the slow emergence or configuration of a novel political *oikonomía*: a tensor of a techno-polis in construction.

Pitt-Rivers, J. 1968. The stranger, the guest and the hostile host: introduction to the study of the laws of hospitality. In *Contributions to Mediterranean sociology: Mediterranean rural communities and social change* (ed.) J.-G. Peristiany. Paris and The Hague: Mouton & Co.

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