

Double Room: An Exploration of Public Space with the “Zen View”

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ABSTRACT

Double Room, by the artist Susanne Schuricht, is an interactive installation in public space attempting to make its “users” look at their surrounding from a fresh perspective and enabling them to become susceptible (again) to the appearance of their city, its state of permanent change and the relation to ones fellow citizens.

By moving sliding wall partitions, participants re-frame the cityscape visible from inside the room. At the same time a video camera records these activities from an outside perspective and displays them inside with a *delay*. Activities of a predecessor become visible on a display, while own activities will become visible for future visitors.

Author Keywords

Private & Public, Public Space, Urban Experience, Temporary Architecture, Time & Space, Perception, Observation, Voyeurism, Interactive Installation, Zen View.

ACM Classification Keywords

[Information Systems, Arts and Humanities]: H.5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces, *Synchronous Interaction*, *Asynchronous Interaction*, *Theory and models J.5 Arts and humanities – Architecture – Fine Arts*.

INTRODUCTION

Double Room is an enclosed wooden structure with moveable wall and ceiling partitions. It is accessible from three sides. Pedestrians are encouraged to pause their activities and take a break in Double Room. After entering the visitor moves the sliding doors to her own desired positions, creating an individual perspective upon the outside world, a personal window upon a chosen slant of reality. Sliding back and forth, one can *limit* and *enframe* the current image of the surrounding environment and at the same time the view from outside into Double Room. A video camera positioned outside records these inter-actions and the process of transformation. These recordings appear on the screen integrated in the static, fourth wall. Yet it is screened temporally delayed. Instead of observing oneself

in synchronous real-time the actions of a predecessor become visible. Being exposed to these past activities, the newly restructured space in fact becomes a joint creation among strangers, a semi-private space in public – in constant, collaborative flux, connecting present and past, reality and the virtual.

EXPANDING BOUNDARIES

Double Room is placed into public space. Being installed in various urban transitory settings or as well in more natural and contemplative environments it can become a research tool to experience various dimensions of space through an interactive process with the inhabitants of that space. It inspires people to become active themselves engaging them in a playful process of spatial reconstructions observed and archived by the digital eye.

It challenges boundaries on a multitude of layers and levels. Its design addresses the urban audience not as passive consumer but as active and creative citizen, asking for engagement and critical reflection. It challenges the individual’s *perception* and *memory* – not only of the environment but also of *self* and perception as such; The role of the observer and the observed. It also critically engages with urban development, the speed of change, triggers reflection on public CCTV observation and contributes to restore urban culture to human scale.

Expanding Peoples View

Double Room is generating processes to see the well-known with new eyes and discover new relations. The experience of enframing directs the attention to details of architecture, people and the overall surroundings that have not consciously been recognized before. This new susceptibility towards previously unrecognized detail of urban space encourages visitors to pause for a moment and to explore. It enables them to re-discover the all too well-known and to perceive the city from a different perspective.

New Relations between Inside and Outside

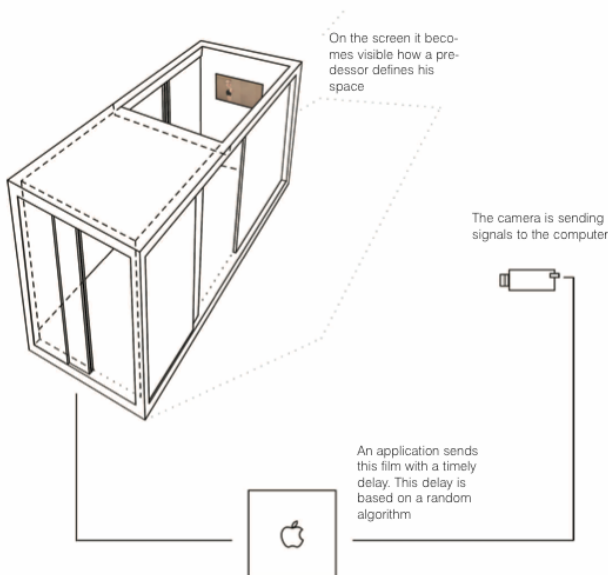
Double Room offers a tool to re-perceive boundaries between inside and outside, public and private, between distance and closeness, exposure and intimacy. The act of enframing creates two windows. One directed from inside looking out and one outside looking in. There is only a slim line between exterior or interior and the visitor is oscillating

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between the two states, being neither inside nor outside. Even if all sliding elements are closed it only appears to be an inside which is still intruded by the outside through the digital images from the outside view.

The activity also includes a *performative* aspect, as the visitor is spectator and actor at the same time. New relations are created between the people inhabiting the public space. Selecting a more or less open perspective from which to experience the surrounding – also defines how the surrounding experiences and thus communicates with the selector. Its successive inhabitants determine Double Room’s fluid stages of transparency and opacity.

The installation offers various states and possibilities of closeness and confrontation with the urban stranger: Communicating via the digital screen, exchange with the surroundings from within this object with its adjustable penetrability, sitting together in this small public room, overcoming the common "laws" of keeping distance in public spaces.



The Perception of Change

Dwellers perception of their city is challenged. Change is usually experienced *after* it has happened. Most of the times this takes place too late to become consciously aware of this process. A new building supersedes an old one and regularly there is no individual memory of the old edifice that has disappeared. As a part of human nature, of our perception, we only become aware of *change* – and are much less susceptible to the *static* and *permanent* things that surround us. These are taken for granted. Once we have seen something we create a mental image and *stop* seeing it. Our awareness numbs to the quotidian.

To a degree this is a modification of Christopher Alexander’s “Zen View”¹ which prevents the gaze from numbing to the surrounding by consciously creating an artificial constraint for the curious, wandering eye of the beholder. Only an *awareness* of this numbing enables us to re-discover and appreciate our everyday world. Double Room does this by allowing individuals to create their own perspectives upon their surrounding environment. By interacting with Double Room, visitors also experience themselves. They are prompted to define their relationship to their every-day environment. A new perspective is the result, the perception of the every-day space will be sharpened.

Through its mix of manual intervention supported by digital media it makes its participants aware of change as such. Transitions become visible as physical and sensual experiences; become conversations between architecture and urban space, between public and private.

Time

In Stewart Brand’s theory² of the rate of change described in “The clock of the long now: Time and responsibility” the three fastest moving areas are fashion, commerce and infrastructure. The three slowest ones governance, culture and nature. Double Room enables the attentive visitor to recognize change on the three top levels. The buildings that can be observed originate from different decades or centuries, yet the shops in the ground floors are merely years or months old. Fashions pedestrians are wearing possibly only weeks. By raising awareness for these issues visitors may think about their role regarding sustainability and the urban culture they participate in.

Observation and Control

The sliding elements intend to frame the landscape – yet they enframe the body of the inhabitant as well and expose him to the outside. The point of view is that of a voyeur, but subject and object become unclear. It is not the visitor who controls the environment, the environment controls the visitor as well. As users of Double Room observe their surrounding and are observed themselves by pedestrians and the video camera – In this recursive interplay they may recognize and question the socio-political relationship of observation and control.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Boris Hassenstein and Wolfgang Wagner. Further informations: http://sushu.de/double_room (Pdf file, 1 MB)

¹ Alexander, Christopher (1977), “A pattern language,” Oxford University Press, Pattern Nr.: 134

² Brand, Stewart (1999), The clock of the long now: Time and responsibility, Bantam Books