

Unattended Items: Cooperation vs. Anxiety

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Jekaterina Lavrinec¹,
Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Laimikis.lt
(Vilnius, Lithuania)
Oksana Zaporozhets,
National Research University Higher School of Economics
(Moscow, Russia)

Our presentation is focused on the "unattended items" and their role in enhancing urban everyday creativity and citizens' cooperation. We identify "unattended items" as things that slipped out of the routine scenario of use (either by being unintentionally lost or intentionally left). Speaking about unattended items as an example of "small things" involved in everyday communication and thus in shaping the city scape, we acknowledge the growth of their cultural value. This assumption contrasts the consideration of details or small things as an "apotheosis of insignificance" (being quite traditional for Social Sciences until last few years (see: Bissell, 2009)).

Detail is the key notion for the approach we name "Micro-urbanism". Micro-urbanism contributes to exploration of urban everyday life by:

- a) emphasizing the state of becoming (Deleuze) and porosity of urban life (Thrift and Amin, 2002), its multi-layeredness;
- b) identifying the urban citizens as the key-producers of urban life (co-acting with each other and different urban structures) (De Certeau, 1984), considering the city as the scene of their everyday creativity and cooperation;
- c) clarifying the significance of detail in the society of control through the opposition to basic ideas of "grand theories" (Deleuze, 1992; Lazzarato, 2005). We assume that details (small-scale objects), which circulate in particular urban spaces should be identified not only as a mean or key-points of physical or discursive control, but mostly as a mean and facilitator of new urban scenarios. Due to its accessibility for

¹ The materials of interdisciplinary research "Forms of Citizen Interactions in Public Space: street messages, shared items, community art" (2009-2013) were included in the presentation. NGO "Laimikis.lt", Jekaterina Lavrinec, Julius Narkūnas

changes detail becomes the important starting point for inventing new conventions and interactions.

In micro-urbanism detail becomes not the aim of conceptualization but its starting point allowing researchers to reveal the dense net of practices, discourses, and materialities shaping the city scape.

We would like to refer to the street-art project called “Little People” realized by London street-artist Slinkachu² as a metaphor of micro-urbanism. The project aims to rescale the optics of the urban citizens attracting their attention to the micro-objects (tiny sculptures) installed into the streets of the big cities. Speaking about his project, Slinkachu compared these mini-sculptures, which are almost invisible for the untrained eye of the passers-by, to the unnoticeable events of everyday life. The way to make “little people” visible is to adjust the optics and discover nuances and details of everyday life or just the street of the city.

We think that unattended items are the perfect detail to start with our exploration of urban life. Why do we need it as a research focus?

- Being withdrawn from the regular scenarios of the usage, system of meanings, and social relations the unattended items encourage the development of regulative scenarios exercised by institutions (lost-and-found, security services) as well as creativity and cooperation of urban citizens.

- the cultural significance of the unattended items is increasing. For instance, unattended items recently became quite noticeable in the media scape turning into the popular characters like “The Lost Thing”³ (Oscar winner 2010) or “Missing Missy”⁴ (the internet hit by David Thorne)

Applying micro-urbanism as a reflexive tool for studying the unattended items, we will focus on the variety of scenarios of usage attached to the objects and contexts influencing their cultural meanings.

In modern city the regulation of lostness or unattendedness of the items in urban settings tends to become an institutional terrain. It brings special agents to the urban scene (such as lost-and-found office, security service, etc.) and empowers them with the exclusive right for establishing scenarios of the lost thing’s usage. Lost-n-found office appeared in Paris in 1805 to meet the challenges of growing metropolis and complication of urban life. The idea of lost-and-found was based on the idea of city streets being under control either by police or special services establishing the new relations with material objects and fellow citizens in urban environment. These relations can be identified as institutionally controlled and mediated,

²“The Little People Project” is available at: <<http://slinkachu.com/little-people>>

³ “The Lost Thing” (2010) is an animated short film directed by Shaun Tan and Andrew Ruhemann. Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film (2010).

⁴ Thorne, David (2010) “Missing Missy”. Available at: < <http://www.27bslash6.com/missy.html>>

depersonalized, and universalized. Lost-n-found offices introduced the rules of “regulated lostness” emphasizing the status of lostness as a special regime of the thing’s usage, its possible duration (now - up to 6 month), the possibility of the thing to be involved in any other relation – to switch the mode of usage (being found or sold after the established reclaiming period is expired), etc. Sets of values made explicit by lost-n-found offices prioritize the ideas of private property (Jeggle, 2003) (thing being attached to the owner), role of professionals in establishing and maintaining the urban order and ways of things’ using (having an exclusive right for things classification and developing the scenarios of usage, for instance, the thing which became a part of lost-and-found collection did not have any chances to be found without the help of professionals). The fact confirming the “peculiarity” of lost-n-found offices: usually located in the middle of nowhere, they were not exposed to the public. Although in some particular cases the citizens managed to invent some tactics of using Lost-n-Found offices for their own benefits. For instance, there is a joke reflecting this type of tactic in Paris: if it is raining and you have no umbrella with you, just go to the lost-and-found and ask for the black umbrella.

During several decades the efforts of security services (obviously altering the lost-and-found scenario) to monopolize the regulation of unattended items in urban settings under the scenario of anxiety became highly visible. In this case the unattended item is considered as a source of unidentified threat/danger. The scenario of anxiety turns the fellow citizens into the dangerous others, increases the mutual suspicion and narrows the terrain of communication or help (substituting it for professional assistance). Consequently, the security professionals (or/and police) are supposed to be important intermediates in urban everyday communication. The emotional scape of the city saturates with fear and anxiety.

Although institutions try to put an unattended item on the route and incorporate it into the net of the highly controlled relations, the effect of thing being slipped out from the prescribed scenarios still gives urban citizens a chance to initiate a communication on the lost thing creating their own agenda, organizing new places and developing new conventions. We assume that the intensions of citizens contrast institutional reasons. One of the main point of “finding the thing” for them is to show that you do acknowledge or care about others.

Unattended item turns into the starting point of urban creativity by encouraging the passers-by to create the new scenography of the urban place, which requires the spatial sensitivity of urban citizens, their reflexivity on the ways the space is used by the passers-by. The main idea of the spatial transformation is to enhance the visibility of the thing (for instance, putting it on the plain view), to adjust the place to the gaze of passers-by allowing them to notice and recognize the thing, to make thing accessible. These actions actualize the importance of the particular urban place and question the very idea of urban alienation.

The scenography of the place might be changed. We discovered that being installed into particular places, the lost things quite often “attract” other things transforming the place into the place of exchange or sharing. Besides all, the new scenography makes evident or even tangible the presence of the fellow citizens not as indifferent or dangerous ones, but as the ones who care either about others or their belongings. Thus, the co-action of urban citizens

results in establishing temporal relations of mutual aid and developing the new set of conventions that bring to life temporal communities of mutual aid.

Either being lost or found, the thing stimulates the communication among the citizens (who often lack this type of skills). The off-line communication is still prioritized, although recently it is quite often supplemented by the on-line version. The announcements informing the others about lost/found objects become the important mean of communication and facilitate the development of interaction skills in urban environment. On one hand, the announcement fits in the logic of mediated communication (explicating the distance and the alienation quite typical for the urban life), but on the other hand the content of announcements dramatically changes recently. Aiming to attract attention, to impress a passer-by and turn him/her into an assistant, the announcements are getting highly emotional and personalized. There are several tactics of personification used by the citizens: 1) the presentation of the “biography of the thing”, which emphasizes its connection to the owner; 2) the explication of the owner’s attachment to the thing; 3) the hand writing (or naïve writing) reflecting the physical presence of the owner.

It should be mentioned that the announcements are quite regularly considered not only as a source of information, but also as a communicational scene or the playground. Initiating this type of communication, the announcements saturate the emotional scape with the irony, the spontaneity and joy of communication, the orientation to the other.

Co-acting and communicating, the citizens not only create the fixed number of scenarios of dealing with unattended items (such as finding, playing, sharing), but also perceive them as different regimes they might choose.

Although we analytically divide the scenarios attached to the unattended items by focusing mainly on the emotional effects they produce (and talking about the stability, anxiety or warmth and cooperation), it must be taken into consideration that these effects are not fixed and might change enriching the existing scenarios with new combinations. For instance one of the important changes of the last decade is the diffusion of the scenario of anxiety. Previously the citizens were prescribed to address the security professionals in case the unattended item was noticed. Now the citizens/the passengers/the passers-by are requested to address the other passengers first and ask them about the item. So, the institutions acknowledge the citizens cooperation as an important resource and try to install it into the net of regulations.

Speaking about the changeability and interconnectedness of the existing scenarios, we apply the notion of “emotional kaleidoscope”. Originally it describes the variety and intensity of the feelings of the person who found/lost something. It mixes the surprise, the joy or the sorrow, the trust for the others, etc. The idea of “emotional kaleidoscope” reveals the variety and multilayerdness of urban experience appealing to different contexts and scenarios. The illustration of the kaleidoscope might be the sculpture of the lost wallet that was put on the street of one of the Russian cities. Being fixed and monumental, the thing refers to the significance of the lost items in urban everyday communication, but at the same time it reminds

the passers-by about the kids game which used to be popular in some countries. The wallet was tied up with the cord and put on the way to attract the attention of passers-by was the main seduction for the adults encouraging them to pick up the thing. The kids who control the situation by manipulation of the cord were considered to be judges testing the adults for their unselfishness, their obeying the urban conventions. Combining many references and meaningful contexts, as well as the surprise of seeing this thing on the street, this wallet at some point gets into the important means eliciting the different contexts (past and the present,) the mixture of the play and the importance of obeying the rules, the irony.

We think that unattended items attracting the attention of the researchers to everyday situations, materiality of urban life and its conventions (supported by institutions or the communities), return us to the street by the reminding us about the importance of everyday scenography and emotional scapes that overcome the alienation and bring the urban everyday creativity as a terrain where new languages and new solidarities are produced into the front stage of urban studies.

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