



Virus-objects: urban invaders.

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Abstract

Understood as a practice of urban improvement and emphasis on the value of local space through individual artistic contribution, "Do It Yourself" was initiated by us to verify a pure artistic concept of public curiosity about unusual objects in urban space and, simultaneously, to entertain citizens and to get people thinking creatively about their surroundings and, therefore, to activate an anonymous, "nobody`s", place.

To attain these objectives, several experiments were conducted under the concept of "Virus-object", in which "Virus-object" acted as a design object that is artistic, alien by nature - contrasting the surroundings, ready for operation ("communicative") and productive outdoor object. The experiments consisted of a set design objects - modified / decorated / constructed and/or reconstructed objects with an unusual, vivid, monstrous and bizarre appearance in particular context to induce viewers` interest, emotions, and communication. In the project of virus-chairs, where chair artifact was taken as a base form for virus-objects, as well as in students` experiments curated by the author, a special attention was paid to the design of virus-objects, which appeared as heroes with their own destiny, drama and character. Termed "Virus-objects", these artifacts were implanted without authorization or anyone permission and under cover of darkness in city organism. Afterwards, monitoring with video recording of located virus-objects revealed expected and awaited interest of people, who had started to communicate with virus-objects - playing, destroying, stealing, using. The concept and project "Virus-object" emphasized the role of creative initiatives in understanding the values of the urban environment given by the community.

Keywords: DIY, urban invader, virus-object, urban experiment.

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Virus-objects: urban invaders

"Architecture is not simply about space and form, but also about event, action, and what happens in space." (Bernard Tschumi, "Manhattan Transcripts", 1976-1981)

DIY (here): a bottom-up creative activity of urban development initiated by non-professionals or professionals with their own resources aiming improvement of everyday life quality; an activity that is, in addition to this, a way to verify artistic concepts and to make a social and cultural contribution to the city. Representing professionals, we asked ourselves how, in accordance to our individual possibilities, a homogeneous, boring, and anonymous urban environment could be aesthetically updated and conceptually enlivened; what steps to take to enhance public's interest in its immediate surroundings and induce participation of citizens in shaping a heterogeneous and attractive urban environment.

Problem: At the present stage, big city as well as its citizens suffer from the chaos of information, never-ending traffic noise, long distances, etc. This "*unfocusedness*" leads to aesthetic depreciation of urban environment (particularly in Russia, relevant for formed non-central parts of city), which is just a temporary space of transition and transfer, to the loss of interest in surroundings and motivation to be interested in them, leads to the reduction of face-to-face communication between citizens. Alienation of people is increasing and reflecting on the space, where nothing curious happens, only homogeneity and banality. Residents, who are somehow bounded to their residential location, are trying to revive the space by decorating, planting flowers, or chatting, which is an introvert activity. Focused on their own small part of the city, residents set it against unfamiliar and alien city beyond their colorful flowerbeds.

Relying on Nietzsche's statement "The architect represents neither a Dionysian nor an Apollinian condition: here it is the mighty act of will, the will which moves mountains, the intoxication of the strong will, which demands artistic expression" in "Twilight of the Idols" (1968 [1889]), we assume that our creative activity has a potential to change the situation described above. In this sense, "Do it yourself" strategy articulated by architects or artists acquires a significance acting as social and urban trigger, synchronically. By conceiving an object in urban space, architects manipulate public aesthetical perception, behavior, imagination, and senses and articulate a new image of the city.

The concept of virus-object

Using a phenomenological approach (mapping emotions, feelings produced by particular space), intuition and creativity, we endeavored to generate a concept for update unremarkable urban environment aiming to overwhelm alienation, stimulate public curiosity about immediate urban space, and to induce people to take part in shaping their surroundings. But how?

How to enhance a communication and interest in urban space by creativity? How to stimulate urban dialogue that is a respond to the city: discourse, aesthetical and emotional perception of space? How to activate the space, and to emphasize and improve the urban value? How to rewrite the outmoded scenario of particular city fragment to an entirely new intriguing, positive, contemporary, inspiring story?

Hypothetically, the local space catches public interest when something unusual happens there: events, renewal of objective-spatial environment or merely a muffin-man starting his business. Attracted by something alien, new and original in ordinary location and everyday routine, citizens are starting the game – the communication, above-mentioned dialogue. We propose a concept of "Virus-

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objects” – architectural or urban design contribution to renewal of urban space and to people’s memory.

The term, form and features of the virus-object. The term “Virus-object” is defined as a outdoor design object that is artistic, alien by nature to urban environment and contrasting with its surroundings, ready for operation (“communicative”, open and accessible) and productive. Thus, being implanted into the city organism, virus-object inspires people to reproduce its copies or to design congenial art. It is supposed eventual physically (architectural) changes in the environment – in a form of mimesis of this type of art and proliferation of creativity in various forms (*Fig. 1a*). In conceptual point of view, “productive” means provoking interest, activity and emotional respond. Conceived in human scale, virus-object acts as a communicator, inducing communication, a generator, producing new artifacts or concepts, and a convertor, updating and energizing depressive or aesthetically ruined space. The virus-object penetrates into the homogeneous urban space and plays a role of an attractor and transformer, distributing social interest and compelling to feel, perceive, and act.

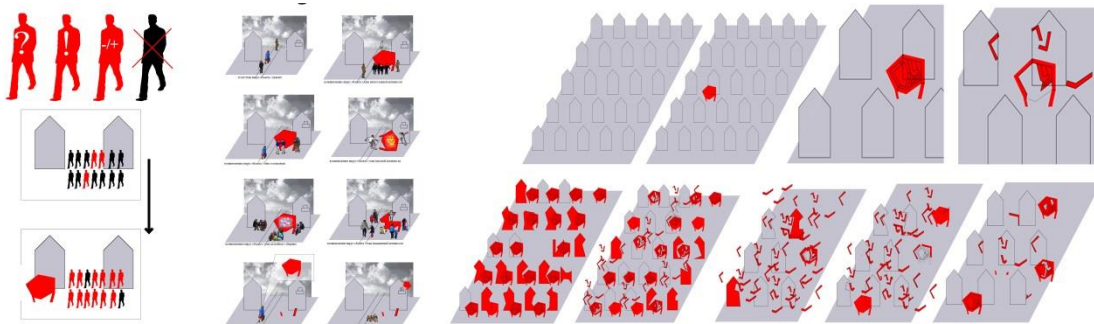


Fig. 1a. Virus-objects: communication formula.

Unusual, strange, alien, attractive, outrageous, bizarre, ugly, new, useful, ... - these adjectives describe something that touches someone's feelings. The main feature of “Virus-objects” is highly emotional charge that is expressed in visual appearance, and articulation in the location. The multi-valence of virus-object, based on its communicative ability (objects can be used, relocated, changed, etc.), and thought-provoking or irritating image, causes citizens` “intoxication – strong emotions” (Nietzsche, 1990), intrigue, and action, i.e. an urban game or dialogue, which means that a person responds on the virus-object. Virus-objects as invaders of ordinary create events in the city. (*Fig.1*)

Using Krauss’s (1985) terminology in regard to virus-object, its form is “not-architecture” and not “architecture”, not a sculpture and not “site-construction”. Artifact with not only a decorative, aesthetic, symbolical or utilitarian, but also a productive and communicative function that brings it to urban design objects, but not exactly, because of irrationalism and absence of evident utility. Hence, virus-object is somewhere in-between. The artistic, subjective and spontaneous **form** of virus-objects is represented in three different “morphotypes”: “*stipare*” - a form that covers; “*parasitus*” - a form that parasites; “*liberalis*” - an independent form. Each virus-object is a temporal phenomenon. The lifetime of virus-object varies from an instant user’s (citizen) observation and action till a long-term period of involving many users.

The Virus-object is unique and original in its creative and spontaneous nature, despite being a conjunction of “already constructed network of comprehension”, ideas and meanings, according to Foucault’s (1970) thought about originality: “[...] not the immediacy of a birth [...]” and “[...] populated entirely by those complex mediations formed and laid down as a sediment in their own history by

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labour, life, and language; [...] what man is reviving [...] is all the intermediaries of a time that governs him almost to infinity. [...]" (Foucault, 1970, p.330-331)



F1.ig. Virus-objects: the intervention to the city. Collage.

Experiment

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The described concept of "Virus-objects" was verified by means of artistic experiments in particular urban context: namely, the experiment "Virus-chair" and also, curated by Reshetnikova, successful experiments by students of the Department of Linguistics, Cross-Cultural Communication, Service and Tourism, the Faculty of Environmental Engineering, Samara state university of architecture and civil engineering (SSUACE) (Fig. 9a, 9b, 9c).



Fig. 9a. Students` experiments: "Funny balloons on the tree" by Salikhova Sabina, 2009.



Fig. 9b. Students` experiments: hanged man "Edik" by Myasnikova Sveta & Soldatenkov Alexey, 2009.



Fig. 9c. Students` experiments: graffiti "Door to nowhere" by Soldatenkov Alexey, 2009.

The main purpose of the "Virus-object" experiments was to design an object that would catch public interest, cause emotions and response, promote dialogue and initiate discursive space, and persuade to turn attention to immediate surroundings.

The experiment "Virus-chair"

Assuming that the appearance of virus-object(-s) in an anonymous context would evoke a vivid response, amuse citizens and energize the place, **urban experiment "Virus-chair"** was conducted at Samara, Russia in Autumn 2009. In this project, chair artifact was taken as a base form for virus-objects (Fig.2).

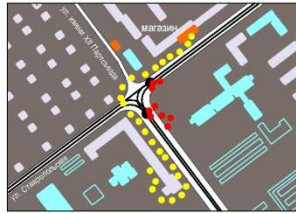
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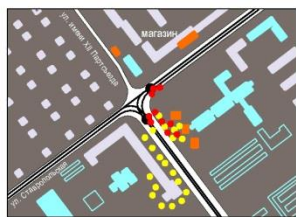
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- residential
- public
- retail
- tram
- tram / bus stop



- residents
- passengers



Map is created by Chubukina Olga

Fig. 2a. The situation: location of virus-chair experiment

Five virus-objects, Virus-chairs were put in the city space under cover of darkness. Since this "injection" the camera documented everything that happened with objects: the game began. The life of "Virus-chairs" was video-recorded (Fig. 2b), showing the citizens` interest.



Fig. 2b. Video shots: lifetime of virus-chairs.

Virus-chair design, character and fate. Vivid, strange, attractive, doomed, self-contained, joyful or lovely virus-chair was a redesigned old chair with prescribed individuality:

Bodiless, sad self-murderer "**Hanged man**" (Fig.3) caused anger and was immediately thrown away by unknown after five hours of being mounted.

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Fig. 3. "Hanged man" virus-chair. Concept, infinitive form and definitive form. Drawing, photos.

Bizarre, creative "**Freak**" (Fig. 4) with an embedded glass with a growing onion became an event for children, who dismantled it in two days.

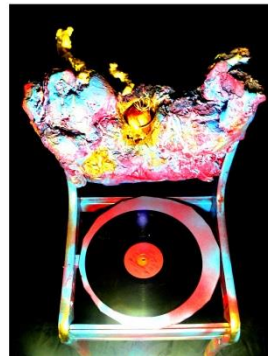


Fig. 4. "Freak" virus-chair, Drawing, photo

An introvert, "thing-in-itself", "**Wrap**" (Fig. 5) showed resilience and adaptability, although suffering being used as a table by alcoholics and students. Stolen (supposedly by them) after seven days it, hopefully, is still alive.



Fig. 5. "Wrap" virus-chair, Painting, photo.

The most joyful and beloved one "**Rocker**" (Fig. 6), an optimistic character, became an entertainment and supporter to the street sellers of sweets and candies and passers-by. It was lost after fifteen days, despite being constrained with a wire cable to the bus stop.

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Fig. 6. "Rocker" virus-chair, Photo.

The most inert character "**Mimer**" (Fig. 7), who reflected the world around, was damaged in an accident after three days. It had a virtuous life, helping people to wait their tram.



Fig. 7. "Mimer" virus-chair, Drawing, photo

Table 1 shows the description (materials, physical dimensions) of the virus-chairs, the perception by the citizens called "communication", and the effects of this communication for the object, resulted both in taken actions on the virus-chair and in object's lifetime. The intensity of the communication and the degree of interest is represented in actions of people and, hence, lifetime of virus-chair.

Table 1: "Virus-chair" experiment synopsis

Name of Virus-chair	Description: material and dimensions (width x depth x height, cm)	Communication: process*	Communication: effect for the virus-object	Lifetime
"Hanged man"	Metal structure with a rope 45x45x65 (Figure 3. "Hanged man" virus-chair, Drawing, photo)	"Killed" in a short time by an unknown	Demounted and disappeared	5 hours
"Freak"	Multicolored	Used as a toy.	Expropriated by	2 days

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	artifact- assemblage with such details as an onion, that was growing in a bin with water, and a platter ca 60x50x80 (Figure 4. "Freak" virus- chair, Drawing, photo)	Captured the fancy of children	children	
"Wrap"	Plywood box, with symbols 65x65x65 (back-rest 15) (Figure 5. "Wrap" virus- chair, Painting, photo)	Used as a table by people in the streets and people waiting for transport.	Stolen	7 days
"Rocker"	A combination of metal structure – former chair – and a molded plywood 200x45x85 (Figure 6. "Rocker" virus- chair, Photo)	Caught the fancy of street sellers of sweets and candies and passers-by, who wallowed with pleasure	Lost	15 days
"Mimer"	Painted as a picture usual wood chair 55x55x75 (Figure 7. "Mimer" virus- chair, Drawing, photo)	Used as a chair for sitting and putting bags on it.	Damaged	3 days

The experiment lasted for a bit more than two months – October, November 2009, during this time: virus-chairs were replaced many times by people, deconstructed, used as a table or chair, demounted and/or stolen. The real paths of virus-chairs are illustrated on the figure 8.

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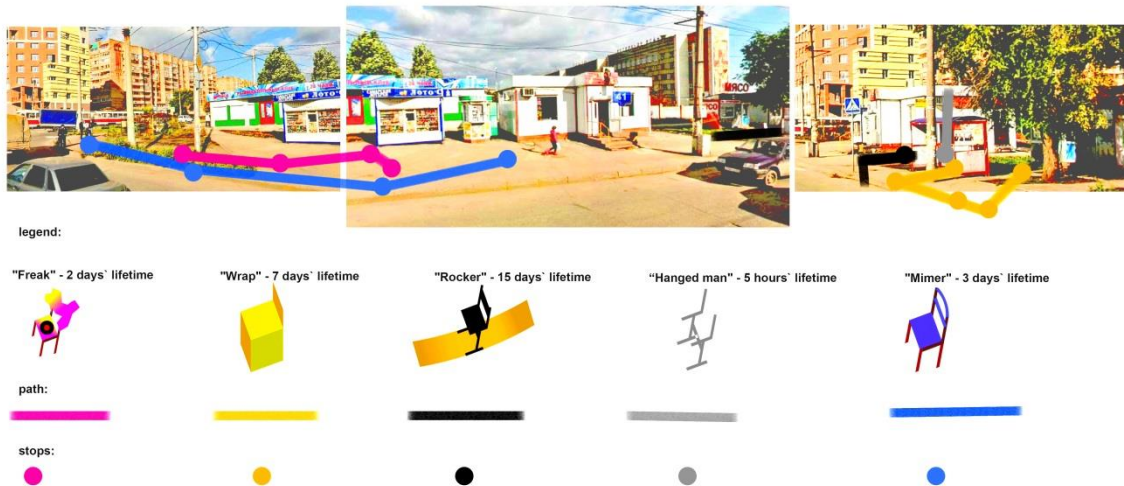


Fig. 8. *The paths of virus-chairs.*

Evaluation of the experiment results

The active use of the virus-chairs represented the curiosity about something new and strange in anonymous space of the particular context - 22 Partsjezd / Stavropolskaya str., Samara, Russia. The analysis of video-recording allowed to conclude that virus-chairs with positive character (or program), such as "Freak" and "Rocker", rejoiced and entertained people and were intensely used; "Hanged man" as a virus-chair with negative character caused instant indignation and was dismantled; neutral characters, such as "Wrap" or "Mimer", were perceived as ordinary objects and, thus, were traditionally used as chairs or tables. Although it seemed difficult to evaluate precisely emotional sphere and negative or positive sentiments, that the objects had induced, the experiment achieved the result of space update, creating an event and, therefore, energizing the place.

Two main objectives were attained: 1) a pure artistic concept of public curiosity about something alien and unusual in urban scenery, "Virus-object" concept, was verified; and 2) people were interested and actively participated in the described experiment, unknowingly taking care of their immediate surroundings and being involved in urban game.

The initiated game, under "Do It Yourself" strategy, revealed the possibility to change, socially, aesthetically and architecturally, the city space on individual resources, albeit in micro-scale.

Conclusion

DIY strategy, as a creative practice of urban development, was initiated to update an anonymous, homogeneous, boring urban environment.

Promotion of public interest to the surroundings as the main aim was pursued, as well as pure artistic task, contained in creating an artifact to induce public curiosity in urban space. "Virus-object" as an artistic expression in urban environment was defined as a design object which contrasts its surroundings, and acted as a communicator, generator, and a convertor, updating and energizing aesthetically ruined city space. A concept of "Virus-object" was formulated and assumed, as a mechanism for the bottom-up micro-scale "renewal".

Several artistic experiments were conducted in Samara (Russia) in 2009 to verify the concept: namely, the experiment "Virus-chair" and, curated by Reshetnikova

students` experiments. Objects were implanted in urban organism with subsequent monitoring and analyzing.

The experiment "Virus-chair" (chair artifact as a base for the object) was conducted in a residential block at Samara. Vivid and strange, highly emotional in appearance virus-chairs attracted people attention. Citizens participated in this game - replaced virus-chairs, sat on them, dismantled them, etc. People actively, albeit unknowingly, took part in shaping the space around, deleting an unpleasant object or using a good one. The whole period of experiment was video-recorded.

In accordance to the experiments, people are engaged and involved in urban space, when it is creative and changing. Virus-objects as a form of communicative art conceptually and emotionally enrich the surroundings and people`s everyday routes and experience, promoting a dialogue and entertaining.

"Virus-objects", even in a form of temporary design (e.g. virus-chair), have a potential of urban positive transformation. Artistic objects, public art, which are communicative and accessible, create an event space and pose an urban identity and non-commercial cultural consumption.

The "virus-object" method shapes an open story in the developing habitat, increasing the degree of freedom, causing a new perception of common space and communication by means of artistic will. The virus-objects play a role of making sense and stimulating response, where there is nothing to talk about; these objects create something to remember, and form a new narrative.

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