Exploring the relationship between design and power:
The case of Venice Beach

Julka Almquist

University of California Irvine, Department of Planning Policy and Design

Abstract: Design and power are pervasive and contribute to the foundation of our everyday lives, but at any given moment we may be unaware of their presence. As a consequence of their ostensible invisibility, the relationship between design and power has remained largely unexplored; in this paper I aim to explore their intersection. Looking beyond traditional views of power, I employ a theoretical framework called the relational view of power based on the theories of Foucault, Bourdieu and Giddens. This relational view focuses on how power is produced and reproduced rather than what it is and who holds it. In this case, power is part of a network of relationships and exists through interactions and performances. In order to examine design and power I use the case of Venice Beach, California focusing on the physical space and the vendors who make and sell their goods. Using Papanek's broad and inclusive definition design is conceptualized as part of public life in which artifacts exhibit shared meanings and express and reproduce values.

Keywords: design theory, design issues, power

1. Introduction

The relationship between design and power is rarely confronted directly. They are both challenging concepts to define, and their elusive nature challenges static comparison. Traditionally, when the relationship between design and power has been addressed it is through one-dimensional notions of power, with a focus on architecture (Sudjic, 2006). In this paper, I aim to explore power within the context of design, to consider how design and power intersect, and the inherent sociality within this relationship. The goal is not to strive toward a critique of power in order to arrive at situation in which design is void of power, but to recognize that there is always power involved with design. Power is not inherently negative, but it is always present. I will present the example of Venice Beach, California from the design of the space to the small artifacts produced and sold by the street vendors. Through this example design becomes an entry point into inherent sociality through which power is revealed.

2. Background Theory: Defining Design and Power

2.1 Design

Design is a broad category that can include both formal and informal methods of making (Papanek, 1984), and can be framed as either a noun or a verb. In the case of Venice beach, Victor Papanek provides an expansive and useful definition of design, "Design is the conscious and intuitive effort to impose meaningful order" (Papanek, 1984, p. 4). This inclusive definition extends the boundary of design from the strict confines of professional design into everyday life. Through this broad definition, many intentional everyday acts of making can be considered design.

2.2 Power: Traditional conceptualizations

The behavioral conceptualization of power is a category in which the primary unit of analysis is individual or group behavior, decision-making and the control of actions. In this sense power is coercive and something that one can "have" or "hold onto" and exercise over another (Lukes 2005). The major theorists working with this approach are situated in the political science and sociology fields primarily, Robert Dahl, Peter Bachrach, Morton Baratz and Steven Lukes. Arguably, the most known idea in this category is Dahl's classic description in which he frames power as "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl, 2005, p. 2). While this definition tends to be the first thing one thinks of in terms of power, it is not very useful in the context of design. If power is something someone holds onto, then how is it represented and manifested in the material world? One could argue that a large building representing a powerful individual (i.e. Le Corbusier's radiant city), could express this form of power, but it reflects only one example within the vast sea of design. Opening up this definition of power will allow us to see that power can manifested through design in far more diffuse and less obvious ways.

2.3 Power: Relational view

The relational view of power shifts radically from the previous definition focusing on *how* power is produced and reproduced rather than *what* it is and *who* holds it. The major theorists in this category are Foucault, Giddens, and Bourdieu.

Foucault argued that power is not something that can be held by individuals, but that it exists everywhere and in every human interaction. "Power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations" (Foucault 1990, p. 94). This shifts the notion of power away from something that can be held by an individual and toward the idea that power exists in all of our relationships

and interactions. In Foucault's definition of power, power and resistance become the same thing opening up a spaces for small acts of resistance in these interactions.

Bourdieu is an important theorist in the relational view of power because of the way in which he bridges subject-object divide through his concepts of field and habitus. Fields are networks of social relationships not among individuals, but objective positions (Bourdieu, 1993). Within the social world there are multiple fields formed around social and cultural institutions like academics, art, and design. Fields involve markets that value certain forms of capital - symbolic, cultural, social, that in turn determine how one relates to the field and how people are positioned within it; this positioning reveals particular relationships. Individuals within fields internalize their sets of rules and norms as a way to operate within them (habitus) and as individuals interact with their fields these rules and norms are further legitimized. It is also important to note that fields are embedded within other fields whose relationships can create forms of domination and control. For example the field of nursing is embedded in the field of medicine. Within the field of nursing there might be a series of power relationships between nurses, but there is another set of power relationships between nurses and doctors (i.e. doctors hold a dominant position over nurses). Individuals can have more powerful positions (particularly in the context of symbolic capital) (Bourdieu 1993), but it is not something they hold or posses, rather it is something that they produce through their relationships and interactions. Bourdieu's notion of power also addresses is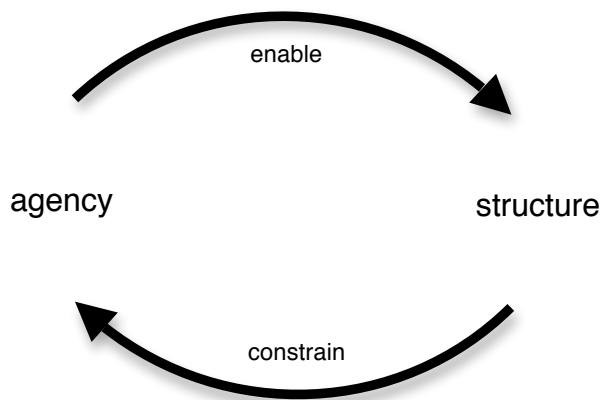sues of symbolic violence through the formalization of fields and the way in which institutions may impose dominant perspectives as a strategy to legitimize power (Bourdieu, 1990).

Giddens' structuration theory is perhaps the most useful in opening the idea of relational view of power and thinking of the possibilities of individual agents within social structures. Structuration theory offers an alternative to the opposing subject-object divide in social sciences. The fundamental idea of structuration theory is that human behavior is enabled and constrained by structures, but these structures

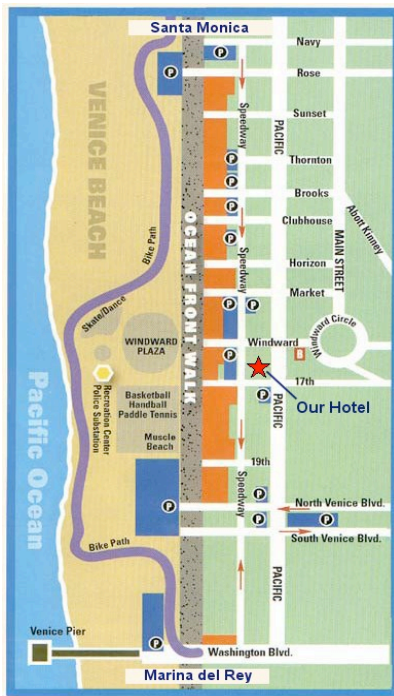

Figure 1. Structuration

were created by human action (Giddens, 1984, see figure 1). The focus is not on agency and structure as static entities, but rather their production and reproduction. Power is inherently tied to the patterning of structure and agency, and structuration is relevant because it suggests that holding power is less important than how power is produced and reproduced.

3. The Case: Venice Beach

Venice Beach has a coastal promenade in Los Angeles, California sandwiched between the district of Venice and the Pacific Ocean. It is a famous place widely represented in the media and is especially known for its Muscle Beach, skateboarders and performing characters. Venice beach can be characterized as a space primarily for *production and consumption*. Tourists and locals visit Venice to play on the beach, watch people, enjoy themselves and spend money. Most of the services offered in Venice are for profit, including restaurants, bars, hotels permanent shops, and temporary street vendors. On the other hand, Venice is an important space for cultural production. The city works to produce and maintain the physical space in order to support the visitors. In this place, artists, performers, and vendors engage in the production of goods and their commercial exchange. These acts of production and consumption reveal the intertwining of design and power from the formal design of the space to the smallest products sold by the street vendors. The analysis of space and the vendor practices might fall at the margins of a traditional design boundary. Despite this, and within the context of Papanek's definition of design, the role of production and consumption, and in particular the way in which regulation attempts to control both making the market of vendor products, makes it a useful analogous case to consider as design and in the context of design.

The case of Venice Beach was selected as a result of a 1.5-year ethnography I have conduced with my colleague, Silvia Lindtner. While this project does not specifically report our ethnographic results, my experiences have offered me the opportunity to become familiar with the place and a collection of relevant examples.

Venice Beach was originally designed for tourism. The early twentieth century developer, Abbot Kinney, intended it to be an American version of Venice, Italy (hence the name) and a "Coney Island of the West" (Elayne, 1991). It was to be a place for fun, entertainment, and leisure. As Venice developed over the last century it maintained the qualities of his original intent, but it also grew to be a public space known for free expression and creativity. It thrived as an energetic space for counterculture, while maintaining a reputation for tourism.

As the enthusiasm for free public expression in Venice has grown there have been tremendous efforts by the city to contain this energy. It is has become a place where freedom of expression and creativity are valued, but also tightly controlled and regulated.

3.1 Institutional and internalized forms of regulation

An important Foucauldian theory of power emerged from his genealogical investigation of punishment and prisons in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1995). He explored in detail an architectural structure, the panopticon, as a physical manifestation of the internalization of power. The metaphor of the panopticon represents a disciplinary society; one in which discipline and power are constructed through the creation and reinforcement of social norms rather than by means of prohibition. Panopticism manifests through segmentation, divisions, surveillance and self-regulation. It extends the notion that power infects everything and is everywhere. It is important to consider Foucault's semiotic analysis of the architecture of the panopticon itself. The reason it works as a self- regulating system is because of the placement of the tower, the visibility of the window and the inability to see if anyone is there making power visible but unverifiable. Venice represents a contemporary manifestation of panopticism.

Venice is a public space with many layers to suit its diverse population. For example, it includes, vendors, skateboarders, graffiti artists, artists, dancers, homeless people who live there, exercisers, beach-goers, etc. Consequently, it is layered with semiotic messages (mainly graphic and spatial) about how it ought to be used.

Venice has an elaborate system of rules posted by the Venice Parks and Recreation and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) as a constant reminder that the space is indeed regulated. These signs include rules such as: no smoking, no dogs on Saturday and Sunday, no graffiti, etc. They tread a fine line between attempting to control the tourist population (that they want there for the income), the local population, the vendors, performers etc. These populations are very disparate and have a wide range of needs and concerns. However, it does appear that this overt system of rules and power favors those who are at the beach to spend money. Some signs suggest people report illegal activity; they are strategically placed in positions that are far from the police station and close to picnic tables. In this case of governing at a distance (Foucault, 1991), people are asked, through signs, to watch and report other people's suspicious behavior. A subsequent self conscious and self-regulating system emerges.

These messages are reinforced semiotically in the spatial design of the boardwalk, especially in the placement of the police station. It is situated directly in front of the skateboard park and the (legal) graffiti wall. Skateboarders and graffiti artists are two groups considered by the police to be problematic and potential criminals. Because of the positioning of the police they are supposedly able to keep a close eye on the activities of these two groups. However it is important to note that the police station has closed blinds and is dimly lit, and it is difficult to tell whether or not anyone is inside. This police station provides a modern manifestation of Foucault's panopticism. The metaphor of the panopticon is very clear here. Panopticism manifests through segmentation, divisions, surveillance and self-regulation. It extends the notion that power infects everything and is everywhere. The reason it works as a self- regulating system is because of the placement of the tower, the visibility of the window and the inability to see if anyone is

there. Whether or not there is someone in the tower does not matter, but rather it is the possibility of the person in the tower that matters. This police station acts as a panopticon to reinforce the internalization of rules and regulations.

Another example regulation is the constant presence of the police on the boardwalk. The police drive back and fourth on the boardwalk and the beach to assert their presence. While there are no cars allowed on the boardwalk, they make daily drive-bys in this space to punctuate their presence in a material way. Their purpose is twofold. First, they want to ensure that people who are visiting feel safe from the potential dangers that might occur in Venice Beach (Venice Beach has a reputation for being moderately dangerous, particularly at night). Because many of visitors are there for tourism they often have money, cameras and various other expensive items that could be stolen. The presence of the police might reassure them that crime is being deterred. Second, the police believe this performance is indeed deterring crime. Driving back and forth on the boardwalk serves as a reminder they are watching and there could repercussions for illegal actions. The police will often make petty arrests for small crimes like setting up a vendor stand illegally simply to make an example and to frighten the other people, essentially as a performance of discipline to deter crime. Their presence fosters the *appearance* of safety along side a supposed actual deterrence of crime; it may not be linked in reality, but it is semiotically shared sign of the roaming squad car.

These examples of spatial design, signs and public performances related to watching provide an excellent example of a disciplined society. Their placement is intentional throughout the boardwalk to communicate to all people that they are being watched. Many cannot verify if they are really being watched, however the signs are a representation of surveillance; a deterrent because of the possibility that you could be caught and the potential for self-regulation. In this spatial reading of Venice Beach the power and regulation is resituated from being held by the government to something internalized by individuals and reflected in their interactions creating a sense of government at a distance.

3.2 Markets and Capital, the Field of Street vendors: Bourdieu

Arguably the most central group of people on the boardwalk are the street vendors. They have been an important component of the free speech and counterculture movement in Venice and are thought to "make the place." Venice Parks and Recreation and the LAPD have targeted the vendors as a group whose behavior and movement must be strictly regulated. The regulatory decision-makers in the city of Los Angeles want the energy to thrive in Venice because it brings in a lot of revenue from tourism as an iconic place in Los Angeles. On the other hand, it appears that there is so much energy in this space that it needs to be contained. This is particularly true with the street vendors who sell their goods on the boardwalk. In the past vendors would set up their goods anywhere on the boardwalk - kind of like a haphazard flea market. This created a lot of conflict between the brick-and-mortar shop vendors and the boardwalk

vendors. The brick-and-mortar vendors felt their space was being invaded and because they paid more money in rent that they should have more rights to the space.

The haphazard arrangement of vendors also made it difficult for people to navigate through the boardwalk. To deal with this issue the city divided the boardwalk into official vendors spaces and instituted a lottery system that the vendors must go through in order to sell their goods. They utilized strategies in the material world, modifying the design of the space and implementing a newly designed lottery in order to represent the new forms of regulation

In order to sell goods, the vendors must also obtain a license (costing $25 USD for the first year and $10 USD for subsequent years), they must show up to a lottery on Tuesdays with their vendor license and wait for their name to be called in order to obtain a spot. The boardwalk was divided into approximately 200 rectangular vending spots marked by four painted corners and a stenciled number in the lower left.

The spaces on the beach side of the boardwalk exist in one long line, near the sand. Because the spaces are limited, there is a tremendous amount of competition to obtain a spot. The parks and recreation board argues that this system was implemented to prevent fighting over spaces. The lottery, to a large extent, has reduced fighting among vendors, but it has created new problems as well. The system privileges those who live locally and/or have the resources to attend the lottery each week.

3.3 The field of vendors

An important factor in the lottery is that it begins to legitimize the vendors as a group. The rules for vendors include the new lottery system, but also stipulate what the vendors can and cannot sell, how they can use the space and what kinds of activities are acceptable within the space. Despite these rules from the city, the vendors have their own internal definition of what it means to be a legitimate vendor in Venice. To them you don't need a permit or permission from the city, but you need goods and performances you are willing to offer the public in that space and the endurance to continue this practice for a sustained period of time (usually over three months). In other words, they have a field of vendors (Bourdieu, 1993). Their own construction of vending has little to do with how the city defines it and more to do with factors such as how long they have been there, how much money they make and how the make and sell their goods. If anything they may define themselves in reaction against the city's regulations. The vendors produce and reproduce their field in Venice they learn from one another and internalize the important cultural and social norms of what it means to be a vendor. This becomes the way in which they make individual decisions about their production and vending practices and maintain their status within the field. There are several people who are considered leaders within the field of vendors. For the most par they are people who have been working there the longest and they maintain this position through a number of different methods, including defending their practices, developing smaller groups of vendors with whom they will work and help out, and asserting themselves to the police and parks and recreation staff. All of these actions build symbolic

capital. The city outlines rules and norms of commercial exchange for vendors and aims to make the lottery almost obligatory point of contact. The contract of use and production policies reinforces the field of vendors by drawing boundaries around acceptable and unacceptable practices. The vendors then work to define themselves in both their own field and the way in which the city wants to define them, and by resisting these rules. Pushing against the formal field of vendors, and resisting formal power structures is what crystallizes the field of vendors in relation to this field of formal regulation, and sets up important power relationships within the field.

While the vendors do not define themselves in the context of the city's rules, the resistance against them is central component of the field of vendors. One form of vendor resistance involves using material objects and acts of making as a means to establish their space.

One of the best ways to illustrate the use of resistance to establish the field of vendors is to consider one of most prominent and controversial vendors. He is a leader to some, and an enemy to others. This particular vendor has been working in Venice beach for over 20 years. He not only refuses to participate in the lottery, but has physically taken over four vendor spots, precluding anyone else from selling there (whether they participate in the lottery or not). He does this using four material tactics of resistance: painting the ground over the numbered and demarcated spaces, posting a sign covering all the spaces denouncing commercial vending in the city, placing his repurposed political art work to completely contain the spaces, and by producing written materials attacking the city for regulating free speech.

In doing this he has a group of strong supporters who work with him in his space playing music and displaying political art. He is somewhat of a hero figure among vendors, giving him a tremendous amount of social capital within the field of vendors. He has been arrested on numerous occasions for outwardly fighting with other vendors, tourists and police. These arrests only increase his symbolic capital among those who already admire him. On the other hand, he has become an enemy to some vendors because he has completely taken over four spaces that could be used by someone. At the end of the lottery every week those four spaces are the last to go, and those who participate in the lottery do not even bother to take those spots. If they argue with him over a spot, he will refuse to give it up at the risk of being arrested, further increasing his symbolic power. Vendors have essentially accepted that those are his spaces and no longer fight with him. His acts of resistance against the rules and regulations of the city and other vendors have solidified a powerful position in the field of vendors.

It is useful to think of these forms of resistance in the context of structure and agency. Foucault argued that power and resistance are dependent on one another. But how does one resist power that is everywhere? Resistance suggests agency. Foucault's notion of structure surfaces primarily in his discussion of power in *Discipline and Punish*. In the sovereign power only the king has agency, however in the new regime of panopticism, power exists in all relationships. His theory suggests that power is enacted everywhere, but there is space for individuals to take action. "Power comes from below; that is there is no binary and all-

encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix" (Foucault p. 94). Power and resistance are like flip sides of the coin; where power exists so does the possibility for resistance. Considering his chain like movement of power, power/resistance can be mapped onto the structure/agency figure. In other words, structure operates like power and exists in all relationships while agency is the possibility for action in individuals. His theories of power/resistance are summarized well here:

"Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always 'inside' power, there is no 'escaping' it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned…Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary" (History of Sexuality Vol 1, p. 95-96).

3.4 Agency Making, and Empowerment: Giddens

According to Giddens, power is agency (Haugaard, 2002). The vendors are not completely governed by social forces including the field of vendors or the institutions that regulate them, they are also autonomous actors in the world. Within structuration theory individual action patterns structure and these actions are more important than a seemingly static outcome. Giddens, like Foucault and Bourdieu, argues that power exists in social relations, but he also points out that power relations are always reciprocal. They involve degrees of both autonomy and dependence (Lukes). For example how do the less powerful manage resources and skill to exert and express their power? Agentic acts by the vendors help reveal this process and how power is expressed through autonomous and dependent actions. The vendors are never completely powerless within the social institutions of Venice or within the field of vendors. As a group they are able to resist and maneuver around rules imposed by the city, but they also do this as individual agents through acts of production and innovation. One of the most important vendors in Venice is a man who has made a sand sculpture everyday for the last 15 years. Each morning he tries to get a space close to the sand so that he can easily move it onto the boardwalk. If he does not get

this space he would have to walk to another space or all the way down to the beach to collect the sand. Next he brings sand from the beach to the boardwalk, spends the whole day creating the lizard sand sculpture.

Each day he attempts to shape by hand (he does not use a mold) the exact same sculpture. Sometimes there are differences, for example he will face the lizard a different direction, or use another pair of sunglass lenses for the eyes, but ultimately his goal is to create the exact same sculpture. He leaves a can for donations out in front of the lizard. Because he is a performer he cannot ask for money, but he has a cardboard sign that asks if you take a photo that you leave a donation. At the end of the day he destroys the sculpture and puts the sand back because he is not allowed to keep it on the boardwalk. Before the restrictive space limits the sand sculptor made a variety of different sculptures that were various shapes and sizes. The new zone restrictions force him to make a sculpture that fits within the allotted space. This lizard has become a good solution because he curves around and he can make him large and fit into the space. The vendor's practice has also been complicated by the lottery system. The sand sculptor was very frustrated with the strict regulation. He participated reluctantly because he still needed this practice to make money, but he felt a strong opposition to the lottery. Despite the lottery system he is able to get the same spot every week because of his long tenure on Venice he has established symbolic capital (within the vendor community) and influence over vendors who will give him the spot he wants (he has a spot that he uses every week that is known as his spot). Before the regulations other territorial issues existed; they were

unofficial and only among the vendors. Now the struggle is with both the regulations form the city and issues of territory within the field of vendors.

The rules in Venice were meant to contain some of his creative expression. Literally he was forced to make his sand sculptures smaller in order to fit into the smaller spaces measured, numbered and painted by the city; they imposed the regulations that now require his sculpture to occupy a smaller space. However the regulations have not stopped his practice, they have just presented opportunities to innovate within the new system.

For example, another of the regulations that some vendors resist is that goods must either be handmade or have a public message. A handful of vendors design work and have it massed produced in other countries, in order to sell in the market. Others innovate around rules. One particular vendor sells a knock-off Eva Zeisel design, hugging salt and pepper shakers. They are mass produced in China and purchased at a low price by the vendor. According to the rules this is not allowed, however there are clauses in the regulations stipulating that if your product engages in public messages and free expression, it can be sold. The vendor of these ceramics has argued that her product is a representation of free love and passion and is permissible under the rules. She designed a sign to communicate her interpretation of free expression to the regulation

officials that monitor the boardwalk. To some extent this is simply spin, but it is also a subtle form of resistance. She has been conceptually innovative as a way to maneuver around the rules.

Another regular vendor on the boardwalk reproduces prints of public Banksy images. He has found an innovative printing process that allows him to make canvas prints and t-shirts at a very low cost and is able to turn a very large profit on his goods. This is in part a result the popularity of this work. His products sell well in the market because Banksy's political message, renegade approach, and street art aesthetic resonate with the free expression atmosphere of Venice. One could interpret the appropriation and reproduction of Banksy images as counter-intuitive. To a large extent the point of Banksy's graffiti is meant to be located in a particular time and space as a way to critique and make social commentary of that place. Once removed from that space and without context, they lose some of their power. This however seems to work in Venice because some may argue it embodies the political context that Banksy often aims to communicate. What is interesting about this vendor's practice is that he is unwilling to share his innovative printing techniques. He feels he has been able to make such a large profit because of this technique. He doesn't want others in the market to take his ideas, offer similar product and decrease his sales. Being innovative in the vendor market can be a way to make more money. Not sharing with other vendors is another form of resistance. While the vendors may act together to resist against the larger social rules, these smaller acts of making are ways in which individuals can assert themselves and express individual rather than collective agency.

4. Conclusion

Individual acts of making produce and reproduce Venice; they give Venice an ephemeral quality while maintaining a certain level of stability. The vendors produce their own structures both within the community and as a result of interactions with the systems of regulation. They have ways to maneuver around the rules and to maintain stable practices even as these rules change over time. Consequently, Venice maintains qualities of counter-culture and free expression. The vendors are able to ride out the changes maintaining their practices of production and engaging in the commercial market despite them.

Exploring design and power reveal the inherent sociality in the two concepts. Design is an entry point into social life exposing forms of power and resistance in everyday practices. The case of Venice Beach and its vendors could be applied to other cases of designers or forms of design revealing that power, in varying degrees, is always present.

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