

Designing for Vulnerability: Interpersonal Relations and Design

Abstract Vulnerability is the feeling of being exposed and unable to withstand the effects of a hostile environment – something we typically wish to avoid. This study aims to develop and propose vulnerability as an asset when designing for interpersonal interactions. Initiatives investigating how design can foster social resilience, developed for the Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London Cultures of Resilience project, serve a reference to analyze how designers can address interpersonal vulnerability in design practices. I identify various enablers of vulnerability for each initiative and analyze them in relation to the theoretical framework I propose. The main benefit of designing for vulnerability that it enables the possible emergence of *I-You* relations between participants. The *I-You* relations are considered one of a human being's most distinctive features.

Keywords

Design
Vulnerability
Dialogical Principle
Interpersonal Relations
Resilience
Martin Buber

Received February 26, 2017

Accepted March 13, 2018

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The peer review process is the responsibility of Tongji University and Tongji University Press.

<http://www.journals.elsevier.com/she-ji-the-journal-of-design-economics-and-innovation>

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2018.03.001>



1 Editorial note: while the body text conforms to U.S. English, all project titles and institution names adopt British English where appropriate.

2 University of the Arts London, "Cultures of Resilience (CoR)," *Cultures of Resilience*, accessed March 22, 2018, <http://culturesofresilience.org>.

3 Ezio Manzini, "Weaving People and Places: What Art and Design Can Do to (Re)Build Communities-in-Place," *Cultures of Resilience*, accessed March 22, 2018, <http://culturesofresilience.org/weaving-people-and-places/>.

4 John Friedmann, "Place and Place-Making in Cities: A Global Perspective," abstract, *Planning Theory & Practice* 11, no. 2 (2010): 149, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649351003759573>.

5 John T. Cacioppo, Harry T. Reis, and Alex J. Zautra, "Social Resilience: The Value of Social Fitness with an Application to the Military," *American Psychologist* 66, no. 1 (2011): 44, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021419>.

6 For more on the concept of vulnerability, see Carla M. Cipolla, "Tourist or Guest: Designing Tourism Experiences or Hospitality Relations?," *Design Philosophy Papers* 2, no. 2 (2004): 103–13, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2752/144871304X13966215067912>. For more on the application of Martin Buber's philosophy to design, see Carla Cipolla and Ezio Manzini, "Relational Services," *Knowledge, Technology & Policy* 22, no. 1 (2009): 45–50, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12130-009-9066-z>; and Carla Cipolla and Roberto Bartholo, "Empathy or Inclusion: A Dialogical Approach to Socially Responsible Design," *International Journal of Design* 8, no. 2 (2014): 87–100, available at <http://www.ijdesign.org/index.php/IJDesign/article/view/1255>.

7 Ezio Manzini, "Afterword: Weaving People and Places Seminar," *Cultures of Resilience*, accessed March 22, 2018, <http://culturesofresilience.org/afterword-2/>.

Introduction

This study is part of an effort to understand how design can contribute to social resilience and community building.¹ It relates results from the Cultures of Resilience (CoR) program: a set of design and research activities carried out at the University of the Arts London (UAL) from January 2014 to July 2016. The goal of the project was to "build a 'multiple vision' on the cultural side of resilience by putting together a set of narratives, values, ideas, and projects that – directly or indirectly – collaborate in improving the resilience of the sociotechnical systems which they refer to."²

One of the main aims of this program was to explore the social aspects of resilience and how to foster communities-in-place. "Social resilience requires the existence of communities-in-place: groups of people who interact and collaborate in a physical context. Proximity and relationships with a place are what enable a community-in-place to self-organize and solve problems in a crisis."³

The program considered the definition of community-in-place embedded in the broader concept of social resilience. The concept of community-in-place "encompasses both a physical/built environment at the neighborhood scale and the subjective feelings its inhabitants harbor towards each other as an emplaced community."⁴ Social resilience is defined as "the capacity to foster, engage in, and sustain positive relationships.... [It is] the transformation of adversity into personal, relational, and collective growth through strengthening existing social engagements and developing new relationships with creative collective actions." Its positive effects obtain through "meaning-making, social engagement, and coordinated social responses to challenging situations."⁵

The CoR program recognized the role of creativity and meaning-making in social resilience and placed its focus on exploring art and design in that context. Because social engagements and relationships are core aspects that contribute to increasing social resilience in a specific place, the projects comprised a set of artistic interventions and design solutions and processes that gathered people, groups, and communities, usually in a specific local context. The projects took place on a neighborhood scale, and sometimes focused on a specific community institution.

This article draws from previous studies related to interpersonal relations and design theory and practices based on the philosophical framework of Martin Buber. The concept of vulnerability has been described elsewhere as an essential element to be designed to nurture and favor interpersonal relations.⁶ Based on this theoretical framework, I analyze the CoR projects to identify the principles adopted and explore how interpersonal vulnerability was designed in each one.

The original contribution of this study is to take a step further in understanding how designers can deal with interpersonal relations in their practices by considering Martin Buber's theoretical framework. Based on this framework and successive interpretations suggesting that interpersonal relations cannot be directly designed, I frame design for vulnerability in terms of *enablers* that favor the emergence of vulnerable interpersonal relations.

This article expressly places its focus on the design field and does not extend its analysis to the field of art. However, it does benefit from the participation of artists in the CoR program, which may support further analysis by specialists in art.

A statement given by the coordinator of the CoR program supports the present study, confirming that interpersonal encounters that took place during CoR project research "happen out of the involved actors' comfort zones. In fact, an encounter with someone who appears to be very diverse requires taking a risk: the risk of opening yourself to an unknown person and, doing so, becoming more vulnerable."⁷

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