

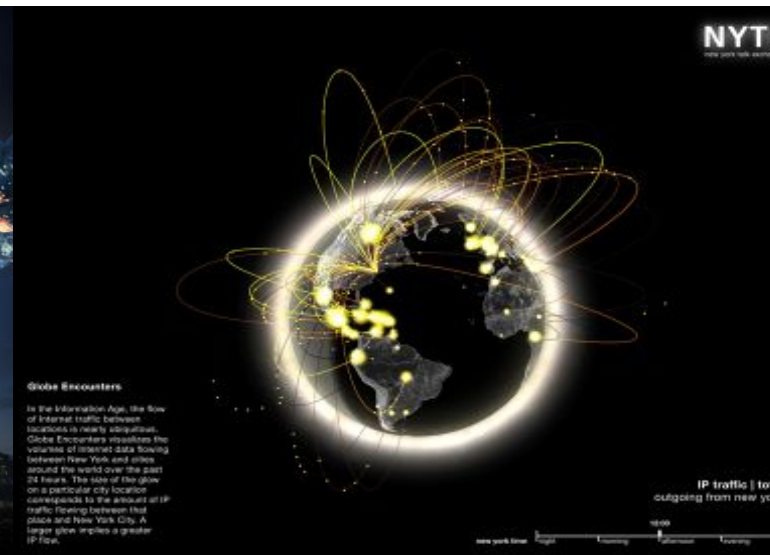
The potential and shortcomings of strategic ambiguity  
as management practice in design labs:  
An ethnographic study of MIT SENSEable City Lab

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Presentation for CADMC 2013



Research group that studies the interface between cities, people and technologies and investigates how the ubiquity of digital devices and the telecommunications networks that augment our cities are impacting urban living.



## | SENSEable City Lab

- **7+ years**
- **50+ projects**
- **350 collaborators**
- **More than 60 different disciplines represented**  
(e.g. Theology, game programming, Russian studies, medieval studies, sport, music, space science, Asian arts, economic of culture...)



**How is the lab organized in order to foster these conversational modes within this transdisciplinary dimension?**

Strategic ambiguity in SENSEable City Lab

- Strategic ambiguity is a “**strategy for suspending rational imperatives toward consistency** [that helps organization] explore alternative ideas of possible purposes and alternative concepts of behavioural consistency” (March & Olsen, 1976, p. 77)
- Eisenberg describes strategic ambiguity as a managerial approach where people in organizations **deliberately use communication strategies that are not consistent** over time or omit important contextual cues thus **leaving space for multiple interpretations by others**; people within organizations are thus freer to interpret and act according to their own viewpoint (Eisenberg, 2007)

This paper draws upon a research conducted by the author at SENSEable City Lab in 2011 and presents some critical reflections on the **potential** and the **shortcomings** of **strategic ambiguity as management practice** within the lab

- **Cultural and communication dimension** of organizations as an important element in organizational studies (Dandridge, Mitroff, & Joyce, 1980; Hatch, 2006; Jones, 1996; Schein, 1985; Schultz, 1995)
- The application of an **ethnographic approach** with the direct involvement of researchers in the field has proven to be a common method of a good number of these organizational studies (Czarniawska, 2012)



- I followed the daily activities of SENSEable City Lab's members in Cambridge MA (USA) across a period of 4 months (from February to May 2011)
- I participated to meetings, brainstorming sessions, events
- Data collected through direct observation, my experience as participant, unstructured conversations, email exchanges with members

Boundaries

senseable city lab

A door constantly open



Ambiguity across the organizational structures

- **Horizontal decentralized organization**
  - Power originating at lower structures
  - Self adaptiveness
  - **Teams as key units** of a new organizational order

**VS.**

- **Clear vertical management roles**
  - Transversal to the entire group
  - Make sure that all the efforts have a common orientation, also in terms of expectations from external partners that provide funding or institutional expectations from the MIT in terms of scientific results.
  - Historical memory of the lab
  - Decide how the lab should be externally communicated in order to create a consistent presentation of its vision and activities

10-4000  
M. JOROFF/  
PH.D. OFFICE

PRIOR TO APRIL:

- BOWLETS <sup>WHERE ARE 1-4??</sup> / paper design (Nashid - 5<sup>th</sup> book)
- GRAPHIC WALL / CARTA (Eric)
- WEBSITE (P. Ben)
- CENTER - FUTURE CITIES - 2007
- QUALIFIED - BUREAU (TRIS)
- FEDERAL (CALCULATED PLAN)
- ANIMAL - WHITE - KANNON
- YEAR (MAGNET) (MAGNET)
- RESIDUALITY
- CONVENTION (MAGNET)
- 11<sup>th</sup> (MAGNET)



## Ambiguity in organizational structure

- **Paradoxical** horizontal vs. vertical structure
- Co-existence of **parallel, overlapping, conflicting systems of power and authority**

Ambiguity in engagement roles

- **Flexible engagements** (inside SCL and specific teams)
  - Fluid membership
    - Short, part-time engagements
    - Combination of academics and professionals from industry
  - Flexible roles over time
  - Extended geographic distribution
  - Knowledge clusters with extensive ties



## Vignette

“Hey, I’ m collecting biographies from all the members of the lab. Did you send me your bio?”

“Should I? Am I part of the lab? I’ m only staying here for a few weeks!”

## Ambiguity in engagement mechanisms

- What defines the membership with the lab?
- Is membership defined by the boundaries of the lab (if I am inside these boundaries, then I *am* part of the lab)?
- If so, what happens when the lab has ambiguous, not clearly defined and continuously reshuffling boundaries?

Communication flows as regulatory mechanisms

## Vignette

“Are there rules in the lab?”

“Mmh, not in a strict sense. I guess there are unspoken rules...”

- **Low formalization** – rules, positions, tasks and responsibilities are redefined depending on the situation
- **Control mechanisms based on communication**
  - Management practice composed of coordination mechanisms that manage dependencies among activities (Malone)
  - **Communication exchanges and flows play a big role as organizing mechanism**
    - Meetings, pecha kucha presentations, emails, brainstorming sessions



green prefab

## Ambiguity in communication

- Discussions among the team members usually arise in order to interpret what was said in some previous meetings with the board directors
- These discussions allow the team members to enter into a dialogic mode, express their own viewpoints and act based on their own interpretation of the ideas of the board directors

Shortcomings of strategic ambiguity



## Anxiety as reported by team members

"The lab desperately needs a hierarchical system!"

"The potentials of transdisciplinarity are huge, if there is a strong aspect about the lab, it is the fact that it brings together people from diverse backgrounds. This is also its greatest weakness, as it is quite challenging to coordinate efforts in such an environment."

"Potential cross-pollination = potential misunderstanding!"

Remarks

- Strategic ambiguity as a management practice **can play a positive role in creating an environment where multiple viewpoints can co-exist**
- This comes with a price, **as this multiplicity can also lead to ambiguous communication** within the organization and thus to a lack of unified meanings. This can be a **stressful situation** for some members of the organization
- The potential of strategic ambiguity as a management practice relies on the ability of organizations to **apply it in a critical way**, carefully reflecting upon the frictions and tensions elicited in the process

thank you

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