

Activism, Participation and Art during the Pandemic. The Project *Back to the Future of Public Space*

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Abstract

2020 has challenged our ways of living and making sense of the world, driving us to rethinking our daily life in both the private and public spheres.

Public space has especially been questioned; our understanding of it and the way we use it have been completely revolutionised, opening up new interpretations and evaluations.

At the end of 2020 Rhizoma Design and Research Lab launched a Call for Postcards, inviting architects, designers, artists, and activists to reflect upon the paradigm shift happening in our cities, observing and documenting the changing everyday praxis of inhabiting public space as well as envisioning its future, capturing those reflections and ideas in a Postcard.

In a time when access to public space was restricted and art in public was paused, the call explored the role of a virtual space for the active creation, sharing, and fruition of public artworks.

The call led to a virtual and physical exhibition titled *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020*¹, which has become an observatory of, perspectives, memories, and visions that are currently shaping public space, transforming the individual contributions in a collective narrative.

Keywords: public space, pandemic, activism, postcards, exhibition

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¹ Link to the research project web page:

<https://www.rhizomalab.com/research/backtothefutureofpublicspace>

1. The project *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020*

The outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 has signed a very emotional and critical milestone in the life of cities all around the world.

Governments and rulers have globally imposed restrictions both in terms of accessibility to public space and the ways to use it. Those shifts have deeply affected the physical and emotional engagement that people have with the urban environment. Limitations have applied to multiple aspects of urban life, from the recreational perspective to the possibility of exercising cultural rights connected with the physical presence in the public realm such as the freedom of assembly or expression.

In this context, we as Rhizoma Design and Research Lab², started the practice-based project *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020*, which explored, through a creative investigation, how those unprecedented events have influenced and transformed the perception and use of public space around the world.

With the intention to contribute and foster a larger conversation around the evolving role of public space, the project aimed to create a collective and imaginative depiction of individual narratives on the alteration of uses and feelings around public space during the pandemic.

The virtual and physical exhibition that emerged from this coral reflection encapsulated thoughts, fears, and hopes on the role that the public space plays and will play in our future lives.

2. The genealogy of the project

Since the very beginning of the pandemic outbreak, we started a reflection on the compelling yet daunting possibility that the health crisis would lead to a reassessment of the values, functions, and uses of public space.

Our early speculations on how the pandemic was changing the everyday praxis of inhabiting public space were conceived as part of the book chapter *New Urban Choreographies. Cohabiting public space in the time of a pandemic*.³

In this text we suggested the idea that people's movements in public space evoke a dance made of a combination of improvisation and choreographed movements, imposed by the new social distancing rules and creating a new urban choreography. We investigated how bodies perform differently in this new dimension and how they communicated with each other fear, care, and compliance with the norms and the authority, as a reaction to the new circumstances.

The concept of the 'new concerted dance'⁴ helped us describe the new choreography of movements and practice happening in public space. The concept aimed to interpret how

² Rhizoma Design and Research Lab is a design and research lab founded by Dr Dorotea Ottaviani and Dr Cecilia De Marinis based in Rome, Italy and Melbourne, Australia. Dr Ottaviani and Dr De Marinis are both architects and researchers with professional and academic experience in many international universities such as RMIT, Virginia Tech, Deakin University, University of Johannesburg, Roma Tre University and Glasgow School of Art. They investigate the spatial and experiential dynamics of architecture, especially focusing on public space and how people use, enjoy, and transform it.

³ C. De Marinis, D. Ottaviani. *New Urban Choreographies. Cohabiting public space in the time of a pandemic* In M. Milocco Borlini, A. Califano (Eds.) *Urban Corporis X Unexpected - Special Issue*. Anteferma Edizioni, Conegliano, Italy, 2021, p. 154-166

⁴ Ibidem.

bodies were transforming the way they occupy and inhabit public space based on a mixture of spontaneous reactions and a rigid system of movements and spatial dispositions. Among other considerations, it seemed clear that physical bodies needed more space and distances between them.

Under this analysis, the idea of a 'new concerted dance', distant, explicit, and partly regulated, seemed in open contrast with the scholarly knowledge on public space that, up to 2020, would claim proximity, density, indeterminacy, and ambiguity as positive characteristics to be achieved in public space.

To substantiate our initial observations and also being curious about how others would perceive this situation we posted on social media an invitation to send images from all over the world depicting how public space was affected by the new regulations and restrictions.

A small selection of received images accompanied the narrative in the aforementioned book chapter, although we realised how the pictures received were telling so many stories and different perspectives of these unprecedented times prompting our interest in exploring the hint further and giving a voice to all of these narratives.

3. The Call for Postcards

Consequently, we realised the potential of researching those ideas further, through the eyes and minds of a large multitude of people, located in very different parts of the world but similarly affected by those limitations. Therefore, we designed and launched the call for postcards titled, *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020* with the idea of reaching different and distant voices through social media and the internet. The idea behind the call was to invite participants to reflect upon the paradigm shift happening in our cities, observing and documenting the changing everyday praxis of inhabiting public space as well as envisioning its possible futures.

The title aimed to suggest reflections on how, in times of crisis, the solution may not only be to wish and hope for a restoration of the previous status quo, but rather take the crisis as an opportunity to explore different possibilities and imagine alternative futures.

Moreover, the format of the Postcard was a provocation *per se* as it encapsulates the idea of travelling - one of the activities forbidden during the pandemic - through the simple combination of a full frame visual artwork, e.g. image, drawing, photographs etc, on the front and room for a short text on the back.

The call was very successful, we received contributions from all over the world and made a selection of 45 postcards to be part of both a virtual and a physical exhibition⁵. Our curatorial strategy in selecting the postcards is to be considered as the initial step for the creation of a participative observatory of perspectives, memories, and visions that are currently shaping public space.

4. A collective narrative

Initially, the call proposed three streams, reflecting on the linear timeline of present, past, and future of public space in relation to the pandemic: *Present* invited participants to observe and document the current praxis of inhabiting public space; *Past* focused on

⁵ <https://www.rhizomalab.com/back-to-the-future-of-public-space>

identifying traces of the past in the current praxis of inhabiting public space; *Future* urged participants to imagine scenarios, visions, and projects for the future of public space. However, participants responded to the call by going beyond those streams, mixing them and offering insights besides a linear timeline. Therefore, observing and analysing the 45 selected postcards, we identified new transversal themes, which added complexity and depth to the three initial streams. Those new categories - *Intimacy*, *Emotions*, *Politics*, *New Urban Choreographies*, and *Envisioning* - emerging from the participants' body of work, were used to trace red threads through the collection of postcards and create a narrative of the collective body of work, guiding the audience through the experience of the exhibition.

The category *Intimacy* explores the idea of personal space and the intimate connection among people, observing how it has been called into question by the pandemic. An example is Yimin Qiao's postcard, which depicts a public space hosting a device for remote kissing (Figure 1).

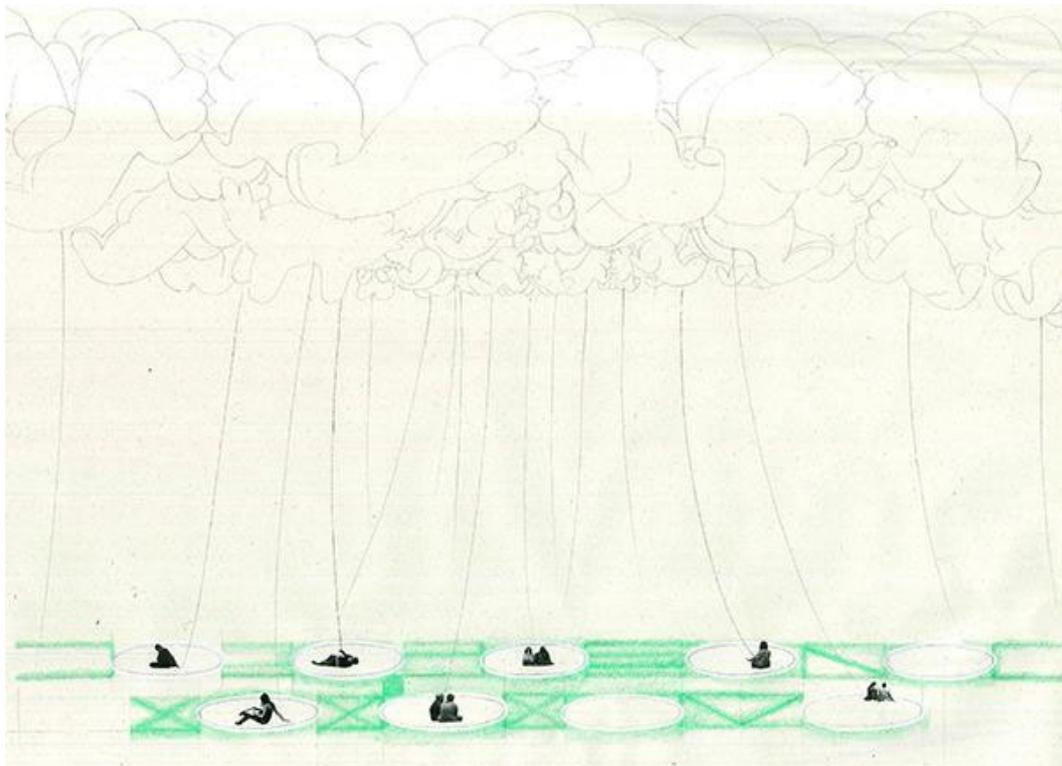


Figure 1. *Helium Balloon*, Yimin Qiao, 2021.

The delicate postcard reimagines the intimate relationship among people as mediated by a tool delivering intimate physical messages. The tool, depicted as a system of clouds in the postcard, stores and shares intimate and sensorial data, reminding of the contemporary idea of the 'cloud' as a centre of data stored and shared among people operating remotely.

Despite very different media and subjects, numerous postcards addressed the complex interrelation of emotions that a year of lockdown and uncertainty sparked. For the

category *Emotions*, the postcard by Frida Rahne (Figure 2), well expresses the contradictory emotions of those arduous times: the image of an elderly man at the window, on the one side embeds an idea of solitude and tiredness, on the other, suggests rest and enjoyment of simple things.



Figure 2. *Burnout Society*, Frida Rahne, 2021.

The space at the edge between the private and the public, the window, becomes the stage for the expression of mixed emotions in relation to this changed dynamic between the private and the public.

The category *Politics* explores a more public aspect: how restrictions have limited the freedom of expression for the multitude of voices usually inhabiting public space. The postcard by Sara Sanchez (Figure 3) reflects on what urbanist and activist Jane Jacobs would have thought looking at public space during the pandemic and how not surprised she would have been of a public space that still doesn't respond to the needs of the community, the pandemic making this even more visible and urgent.

The category *New Urban Choreographies* depicts the different ways in which public life has been transformed by an orchestrated choreography of bodies and movements shaping people's dynamics in public space as if it were a 'concerted dance' (De Marinis, Ottaviani, 2021, p.160). The postcard by Angela Miceli (Figure 4) depicts this dynamic showing the new geometrical and ruled graphics dominating common spaces, in relation to the interior dimension of infinite and unruled spatiality, as represented by artist Yayoi Kusama standing in one of her artworks.



Figure 3. *Jane Jacobs, NOT surprised*, Sara Sanchez, 2021.



Figure 4. *Social Distance Dots° vs Infinity Dots°*, Angela Maria Miceli, 2021.

The category *Envisioning* shows possible futures and scenarios of life after the pandemic. An interesting insight comes from the postcard by Giulia Bonaiuti (Figure 5), which reflects on the idea of shaping new individual realities, suggesting the urge to reimagine new forms of connections with public space. A boy is drawing his own boundaries and activities in a public space where there is no shape and no function and where everything is to be reimaged.

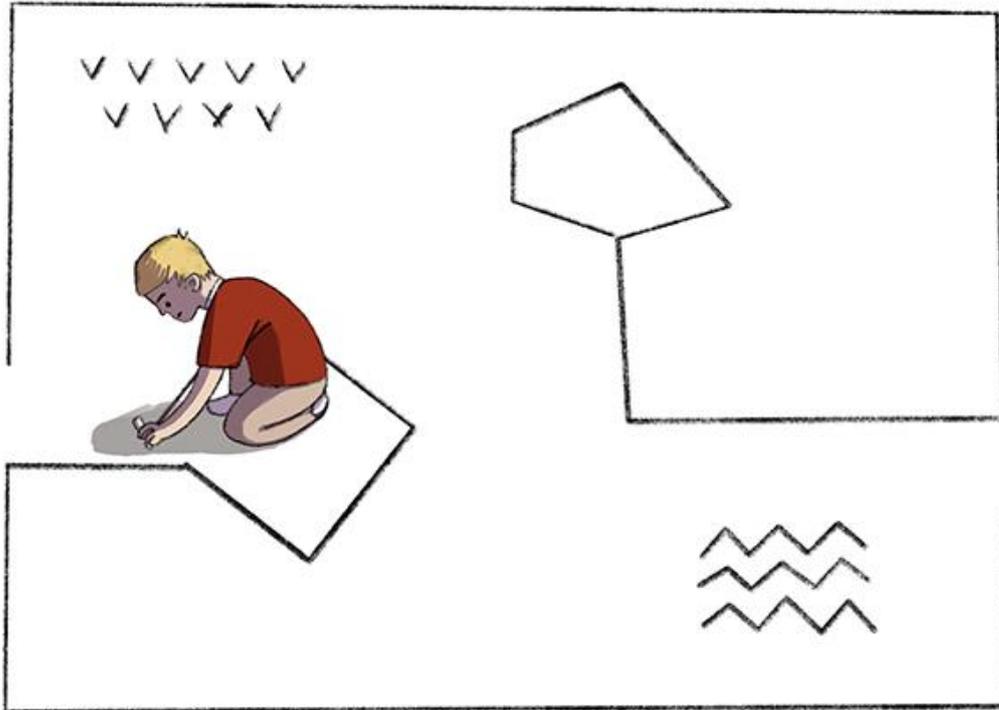


Figure 5. *BOTTOM UP*, Giulia Bonaiuti, 2021

5. The exhibition: a virtual and physical journey

The exhibition has been imagined as a format to be adjusted to both virtual and physical settings. Its first edition was launched in March 2021 online through the Rhizoma Design and Research Lab website⁶ presenting the authors and the selected postcards as a virtual collective narrative and observatory of public space during and after the pandemic.

Following the first edition, the exhibition has been travelling both virtually and physically.

It was showcased online at the Media and Architecture Biennale 2020 (MAB20) titled *Futures Implied* which was held in June and July 2021. The MAB20 portal has been hosting the exhibition under the category: Playful and Artistic Civic Engagement.⁷

The exhibition has also travelled physically around the globe. Firstly, it was displayed in Australia at the A+B Gallery of the School of Architecture and Built Environment,

⁶ Link to the website: www.rhizomalab.com

⁷ Link to the MAB20 webpage: <https://demos.mediaarchitecture.org/mab/project/10>

Deakin University, in May 2021 (Figure 6); then in the US at the Rhizome LLC Lounge of Virginia Tech, in September 2021 (Figure 7); and at the time of writing this paper, it's travelling to Europe to be hosted in different institutions (Figure 11).



Figure 6. Exhibition of *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020* at the A+B Gallery, School of Architecture and Built Environment, Deakin University, Australia, May 2021. Photo by Cecilia De Marinis.

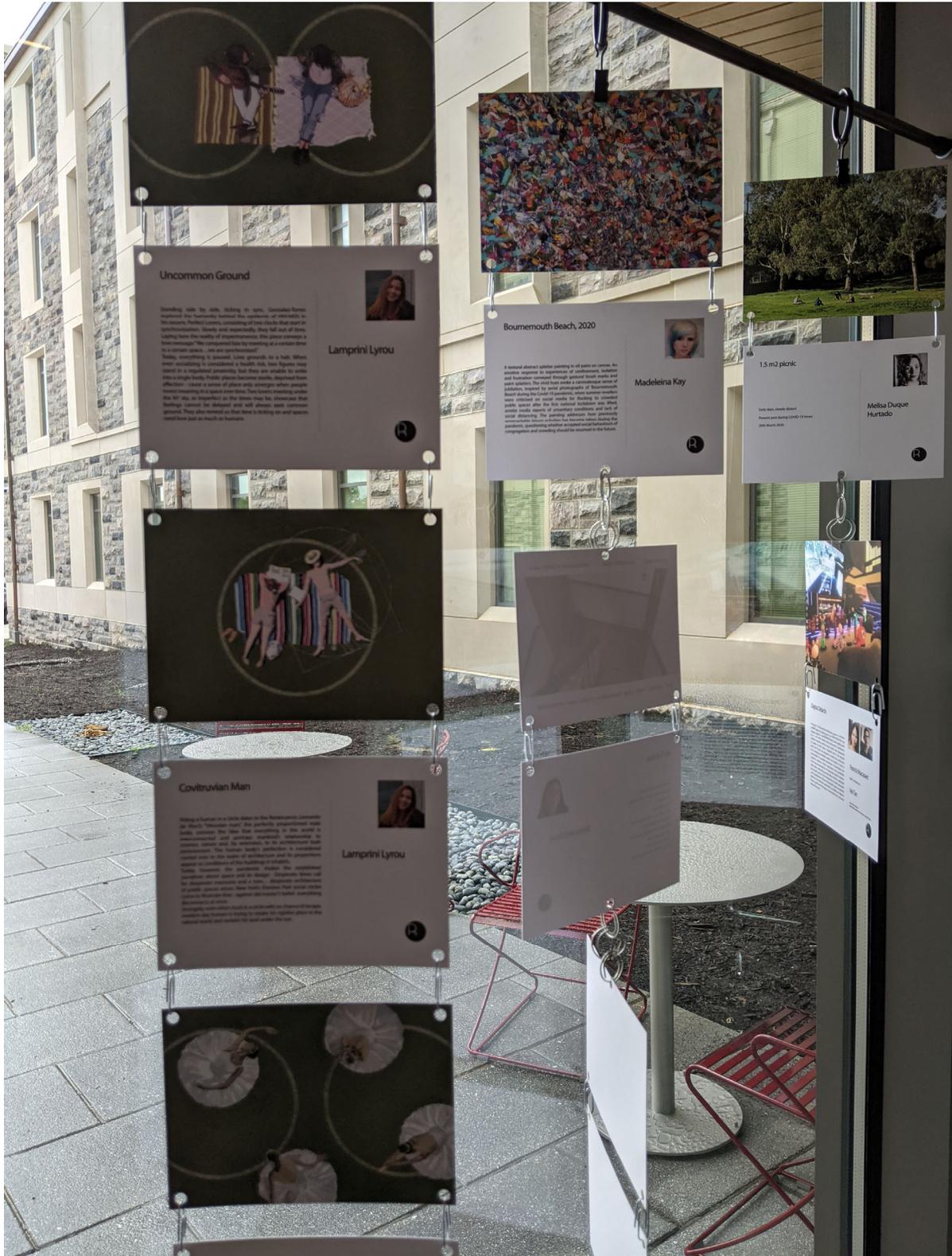


Figure 7. Exhibition of *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020* at the Rhizome Living Learning Community Lounge at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, USA, September 2021. Photo by Grant Hamming.

The format of the exhibition as a collection of postcards - small-scale and homogeneous objects - facilitates its mobility and its capacity to perform well both in the digital and the physical realms. It can easily travel and it can be adjusted to different spaces, surfaces, and external conditions.

The journey of the exhibition, which has been hosted and welcomed by different institutions, suggests the importance of discussing the role of public space in our ever-changing world.

6. The curatorial project: a flexible design for a Do-It-Yourself exhibition

The exhibition was imagined as a travelling entity that could adapt and be shaped by the place and the community that hosted it; therefore, the exhibition design project envisioned a Do-It-Yourself configuration. The format involves an instruction manual, received by the host institution together with the postcards and based on visual communication only, with no words involved, to make sure that everyone everywhere can make sense of it (Figure 8). Some minimal rules and suggestions on how to curate the exhibition of postcards are presented to guide the on-site curators.

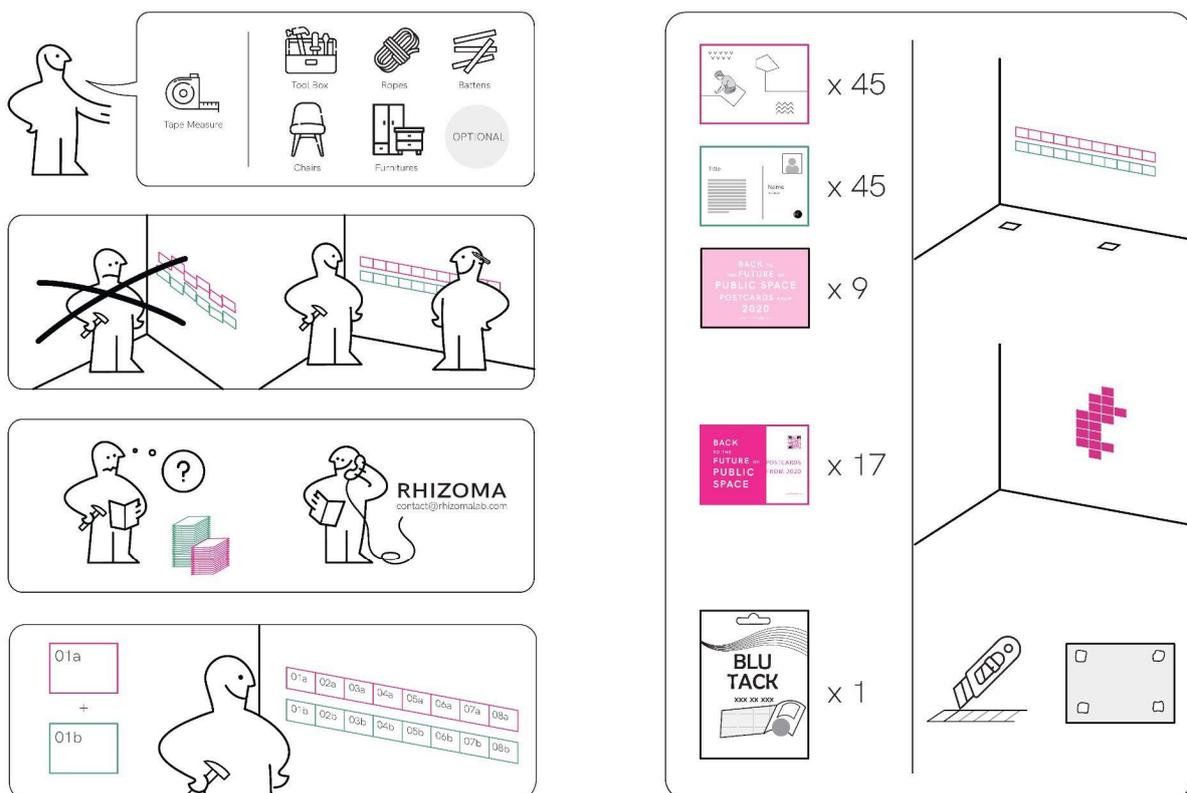


Figure 8. *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020*, Instruction Manual, Rhizoma Design and Research Lab in collaboration with Annan Zuo, 2021.



The manual offers possible scenarios of postcards set on walls different in size and shape, as well as design options that the host can use as a starting point. It also offers different scenarios of how the human body can experience the exhibition, and defines minimal distances and spaces (Figure 9).

Furthermore, the manual reveals the infinite potential of the exhibition, only made of postcards, simple rectangular bidimensional small-size elements, that can be easily adapted to any physical setting, demonstrating the flexibility of the format. All the elements of the exhibition, including posters presenting the project, the authors, and the curators, are similarly made of a combination of postcards: this allows for multiple arrangements and distributions, maintaining the same content.

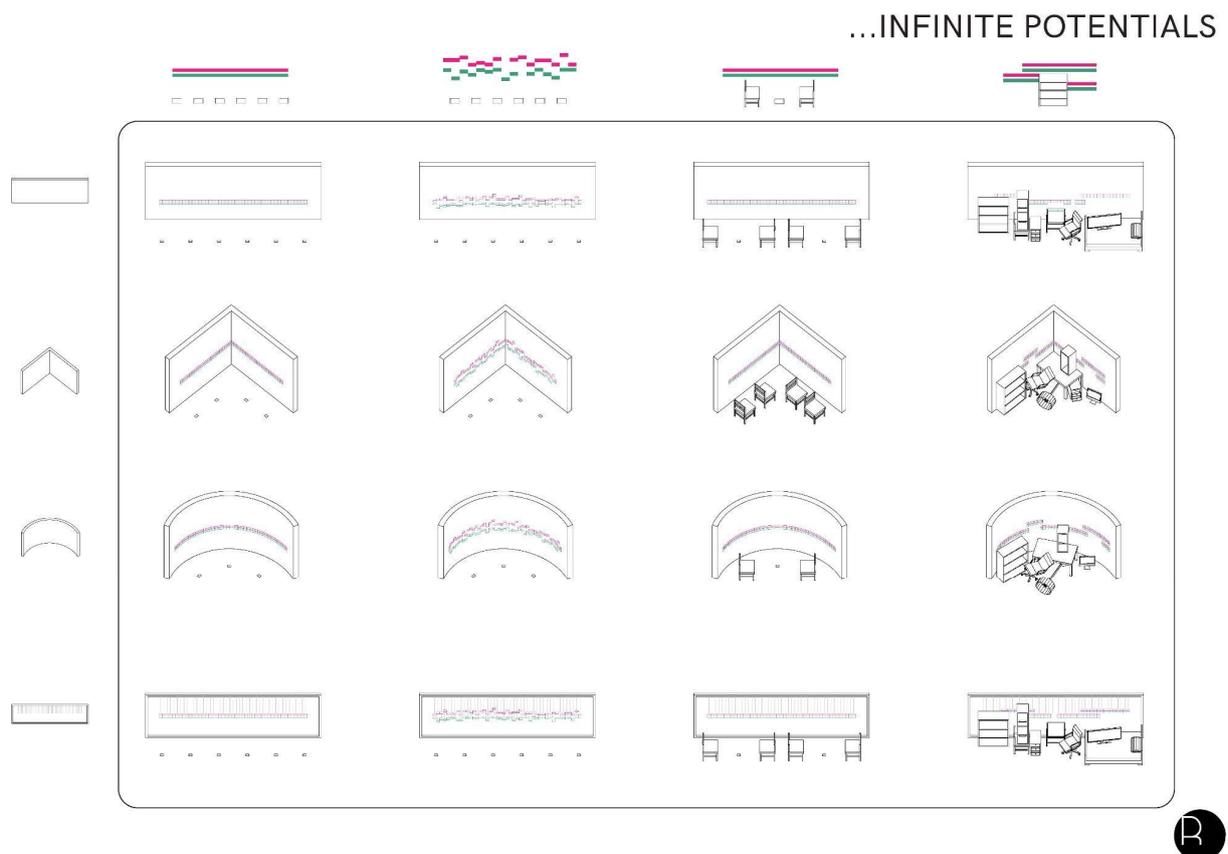


Figure 9. *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020*, Instruction Manual, Rhizoma Design and Research Lab in collaboration with Annan Zuo, 2021.

The Do-It-Yourself exhibition format aims to generate participation and interest in the themes and provocations presented by the postcards. The community of participants in the exhibition expands while travelling with new authors and new curators contributing to the ongoing dissemination and discussion.

8. Conclusions

Through a creative and participative approach, the presented exhibition and associated activities contribute to a broader discussion over the role of public space in our cities in an era of constant revolutions (Bauman, 2003) where the COVID-19 pandemic is one of the many challenges that contemporary cities have to face, although it has accelerated the global discussion over the future of cities.

The exhibition, as an artistic collection of insights, provocations, reflections, visions, brings a creative light to the discussion, inviting participants to represent their insights and provocations creatively and artistically, through the use of different media and technologies.

Moreover, participation has had a pivotal role in the exhibition and it has been achieved at three different levels: the level of the collective artistic narrative, the curatorial level applying a Do-It-Yourself approach, and the subsequent level of participation in events resulting from the exhibition.



Figure 10. Prof Deborah Sim with SOVA students organising the setup of the *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020* exhibition at the Rhizome Living Learning Community Lounge at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, USA. September 2021. Photo by Grant Hamming.

Finally, the series of events and presentations derived from the exhibition has produced participation of local and digital communities.

The call and the resulting exhibitions have given voice to diverse and heterogeneous individual reflections on public space, intertwining those voices and creating a collective narrative: artists, architects, designers, activists, academics, have generously contributed to formulate a visual discussion over the topic

Furthermore, the Do-It-Yourself approach to the exhibition reaffirms the intention to generate participation, through the creative engagement of institutions and communities that hosted the exhibition, which were called to interpret and adapt the exhibition to their specific context (Figure 10).



Figure 11. Exhibition of *Back to the Future of Public Space: Postcards from 2020* at the Public Space Museum in Bologna, Italy, hosted by City Space Architecture, November – December 2021. Photo by Dorotea Ottaviani.

Social media and digital platforms, in this respect, have played a critical role in conveying and spreading information, creativity, and conversations. The call has received contributions and attendance from all over the globe, creating an interesting dynamic between the global and the local level of the discussion.

The creative enquiry addressed by this project brings new understanding of the perception of public space in contemporary cities. Creative insights generated through this project can inform further investigation on what role public space will play in the

future and how it will creatively be adapted and transformed in the service of individual and collective needs.

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