

Open Works and Their Structural Configurations

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Wide-reaching change is often driven by technology — new tools, that are flexible, inexpensive, as well as inclusive grant affordances for all types of creative, collaborative actions. Each year millions of amateurs, those not trained as creative professionals upload their works to Youtube, Tumblr, Flickr and Vimeo, among others, as a means of establishing agency, authorship and connection with others. A great deal of this “work” can’t be considered creative genius, however the process of creating and sharing are the activities I believe, designer’s want to facilitate, and guide. Creative professionals are in powerful positions to provide capabilities for amateurs and their own colleagues to create, collaborate and connect with others. Considering these emerging behaviors, in what ways can artifacts radiate the degrees of openness necessary to generate and enhance creativity for amateur participants? How can designers create appropriate structures for individual’s goals and varied levels of creativity? The opportunities for creativity designers can provide are powerful ways to redirect behavior away from superficial ends and towards that, which can improve aspects of humanity.

In recent years certain design practices are responding to the participatory demand by shifting away from an object-driven design process - in which there is ultimate designer control, resulting in a finished end product - to an organic process in which directions, ideas and products are develop in collaboration with designers and non-designers alike. This process is exemplified through user centered design methodologies such as persona and scenario development, prototyping, visual ethnography, and others. Ultimately these actions and ideas begin to alter the traditional relationship designers have with users or clients, people who they regarded merely as someone who is given a finished design artifact to operate. However, for the most part the above techniques are observationally oriented rather than participation oriented.

Umberto Eco highlighted a participatory approach in the visual arts, music and literature in his 1962 publication, *The Open Work*. Eco’s notions of “openness” is described as having defined constraints and latent characteristics that guarantees the work will always be seen as a whole rather than conglomerations of random components. Though in movement, the works provide a structural vitality and are characterized by the invitation to make the piece in collaboration with the author. This concept, adopted as a model for how and what designers make, initiates a co-creative relationship where clients become our collaborators. And so this type of association affords an atmosphere in which strong ideas can grow, thereby producing more powerful and satisfying end results.

Eco classified three types of open work. The first, “a kit of parts”, are artifacts that are left unfinished, the author seems to hand them on to a maker in the form of loose construction kits. “Works in movement”, the second category described are “artistic productions which display an intrinsic mobility, and have a kaleidoscopic capacity to suggest themselves in constantly renewed aspects to the viewer.” The final type, “the indefinite” are “works that use symbols as a communicative channel for the indeterminate, open to constantly shifting responses and interpretative stances.” (1)

As a component of this research I arranged a workshop with the participants at the 2011 Design Inquiry gathering. The group was given a kit of parts open work, in the form of an acrylic, laser cut recreation of the ‘Plaque Découpée Universelle’. Joseph A. David invented this device in the 1870s to produce the entire alphabet, numbers and symbols from a single stencil. David, a New York inventor, specified in his US patent that the tool was: ‘an improved stencil-plate, by which letters, numbers, and other characters may be traced in plan or ornamental style’. It would serve as a ‘cheap device for assisting sign painters in tracing and spacing letters in a quick and convenient manner’, or as an ‘instructive toy for children, teaching them to form words or numbers, by tracing the individual letters or numerals.’ (2) David’s aspirations were broad, thinking that the plate might be adapted to make three-dimensional shaded effect and even serif characters.

Participatory projects often founder because they lack an appropriate structure to suit amateurs’ skill levels. Creative activity occurs at different degrees depending on your knowledge and experience of the domain in which you are working. Liz Sanders the founder of Make Tools, a company that explores co-design methods found that there are four levels of creativity that people seek. (fig. 1) The categorization levels depends on your skills and experience with the given domain and follow a developmental path from doing to adapting to making and finally to creating. You may find

LEVEL	TYPE	MOTIVATED BY	PURPOSE	EXAMPLE
1	doing	productivity	getting something done	organizing my herbs and spices
2	adapting	appropriation	make things my own	embellishing a ready made meal
3	making	asserting ability or skill	making with hands	cooking with a recipe
4	creating	inspiration	express creativity	dreaming up a new dish

fig. 1. Sanders, Elizabeth B., "Scaffolds For Building Everyday Creativity", 2006

yourself at the beginning doing grouping within a particular domain, and at the specialist level of creating in another. Sanders's work can be employed as a structural gauge to understand the creative abilities and needs of individuals engaging in co-design processes.

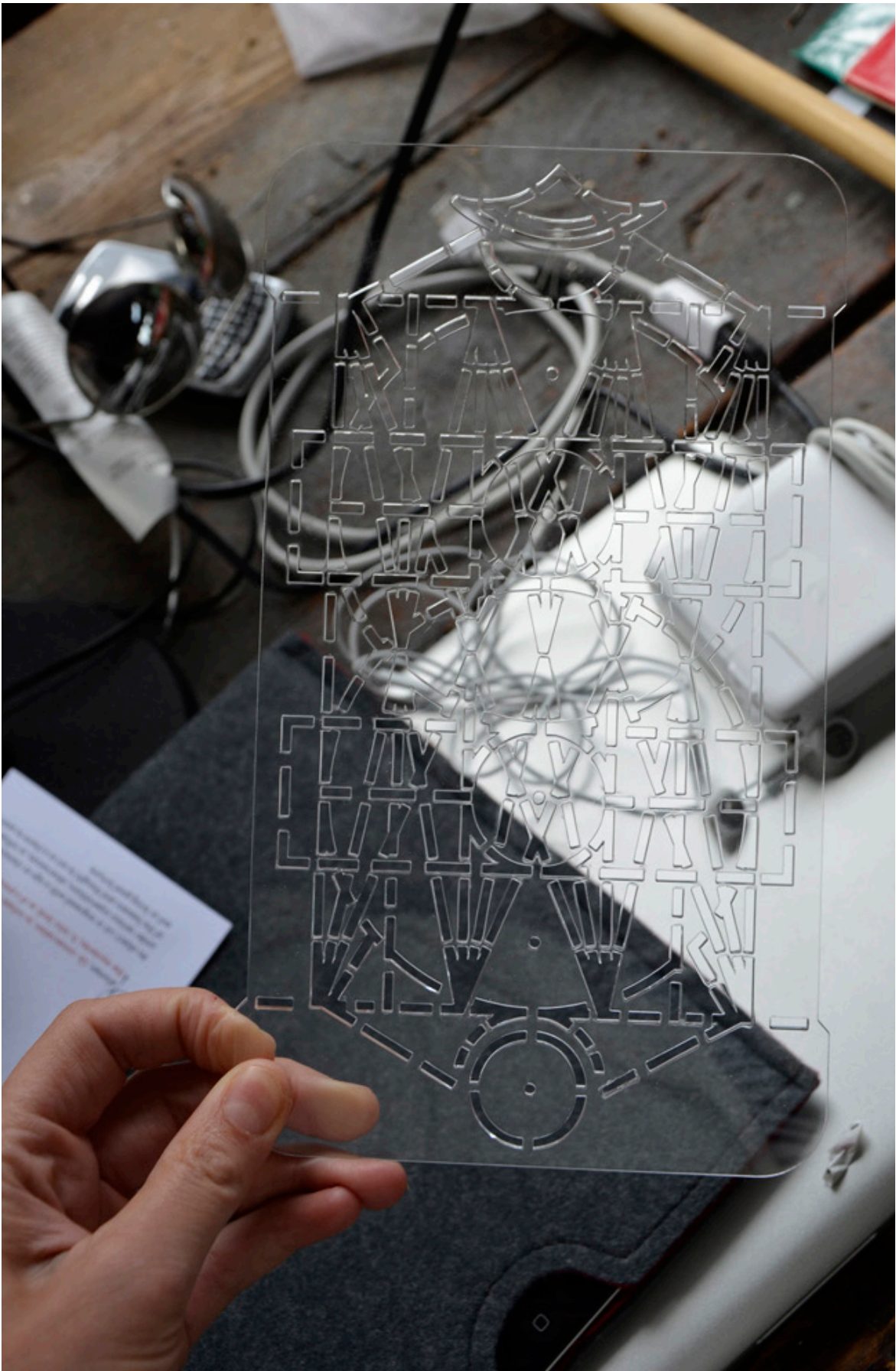
Through use of the 'Plaque Découpée Universelle', the DI group was charged to determine what the appropriate structure could be to suit amateur participants varied abilities. The complexity of the stencil appeared to be a fixed system, a somewhat limited tool without the flexibility to produce anything but what was prescribed by the creator. In discussions with the DI contributors the work seemed to be inviting mis-use rather than correct use in-order to have a sense of authorship in the end results. But we must consider this feedback was given by a group of highly creative individuals, who are at the foremost level within the design domain, and inherently are seeking expressive freedom in collaborations. It becomes evident that ambiguity in an open work has the latitude necessary for self-invention for those with significant experience in creative domains. Amateurs, however are in need of open works with directives, guides and demonstrations to encourage experimental expression. At first the complexity of the device

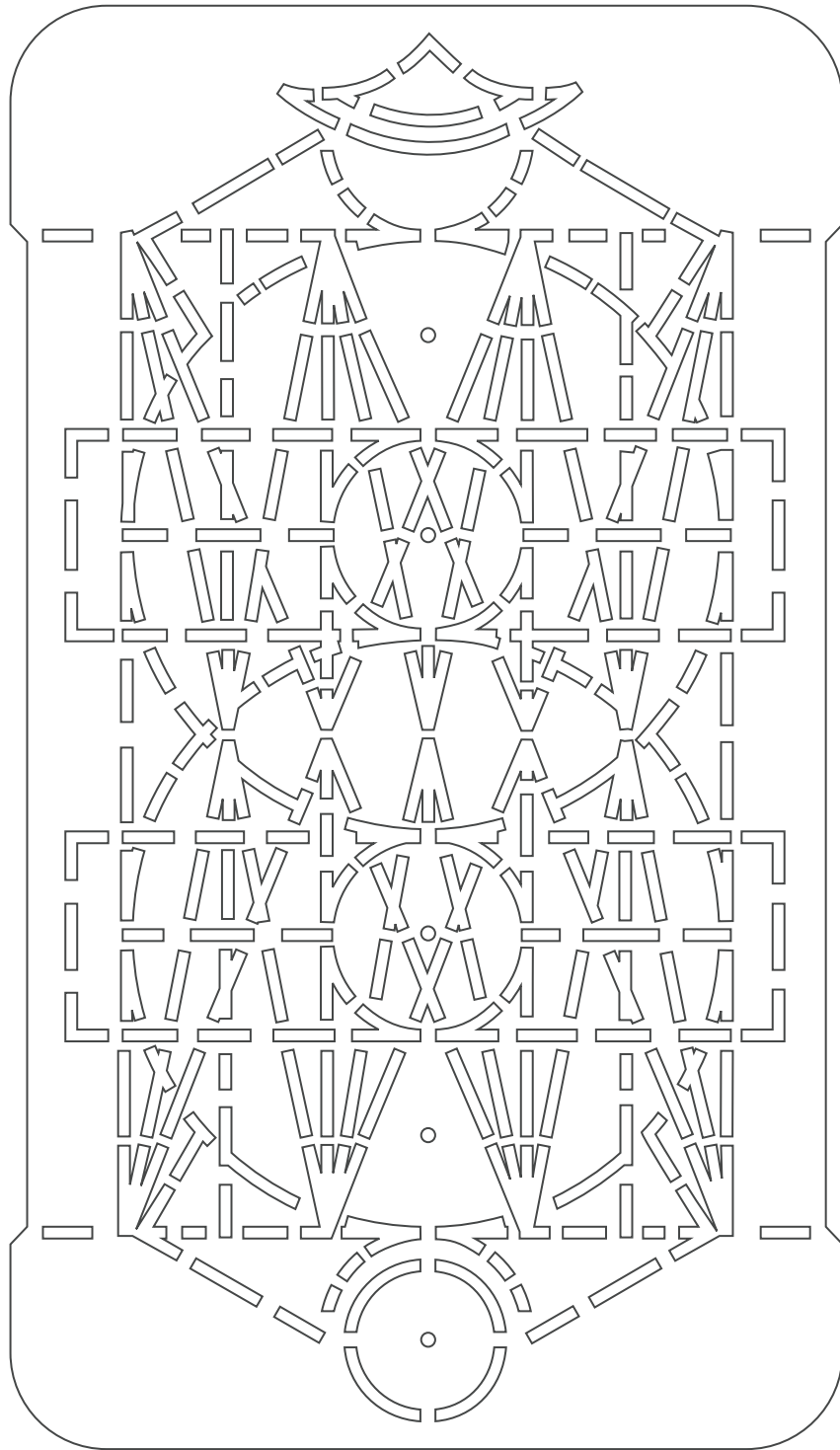
is overwhelming for those unfamiliar with creative acts, yet the strict rule based system is a comforting first step towards creating.

(For readers wanting to investigate the stencil, I've included a copy, for a digital version or to send your feedback / experiments please contact the author at: bchornyak@vcu.edu)

I acknowledge that this phenomena is broad in scope, nevertheless, Open Works maintain the following qualities whether they manifest themselves as an artifact or a process. They give prominence to open-endedness, abstraction, unfinished, an extended or ongoing life-cycle. These works are in movement, characterized by an invitation to make the piece together with the author. Technology and the creative professions are constantly experiencing change—as individuals increasingly desire greater degrees of participation and creativity in their lives, the role of the designer is growing to encompass that of catalyst and collaborator. Designers willing to take risks, increase trial and error efforts will be the impetus for this open, collaborative work, empowering amateurs to become active contributors and co-authors.







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