SECTION 2:
LABS, PUBLICS AND PRACTICES

REDEFINING THE POLITICS OF INCLUSION WITH GEORGE AND DUSTIN

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George knocks in patterns of three, five minutes before 11pm, despite the sign on apartment door #303 alerting fellow residents that the InWithForward team has gone to bed. "The rattlesnakes in my mind won't quiet down," George, age 56, announces as we open the door. "I'm tired of being so lonely."

Based in Burnaby, a suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia, the InWithForward project team is made up of six members including myself (I'm a sociologist), two designers, an urban planner, and two secondees from local community living agencies. We are embedded researchers, process facilitators, investors, neighbors. We are friends. Our task is to understand and reshape lived realities with the residents we live alongside, and the professionals and policymakers we work alongside. Our ambition is to peel back the labels attached to people—homeless, addict, offender, senior, single mom—and remake social safety nets, so that welfare systems and social services operate more like trampolines: supporting people to bounce up over time, rather than simply cushioning people's fall at a given point in time.

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The methods we apply (ethnography, co-design, prototyping) and the organizational structure we use (change lab) are inherently political, meaning that they explicitly involve the possible redistribution of power. I believe that the ability of these methods and structures to prompt lasting change depends on our redefining political concepts such as "participation,"

"inclusion" and "exclusion." In what follows I will also critique and offer alternatives to the verbs "imagine" and "design" and the nouns "publics" and "citizens." Throughout, I will interweave examples from two of InWithForward's on-the-ground case studies: the *Me, Us, and Them Starter* Project in Burnaby, and the *St. Chris Stories* Project in Toronto, Ontario.

TWO CASE STUDIES

InWithForward is a social enterprise I co-founded based in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. During the spring of 2014, InWithForward ran two projects in Canada to test twenty-one "hunches" animating the organization's mission about how to change simultaneously the behaviors of people and of systems.[1] After ten years of (mostly ineffectual) individual efforts to redesign social services in Australia, the United Kingdom and The Netherlands, we hoped to set up, sequence, and finance project work more like a social movement. To do this, we would bring together service delivery organizations, service users, and community members to raise the visibility of populations ill-served by existing systems, to advocate for system engagement, and to demonstrate viable alternatives. In order to amass evidence of alternatives, we would invest in intensive bursts of fieldwork.

The *St. Chris Stories* Project unfolded over twelve days at the corner of Queen Street West and Bathurst Street in downtown Toronto.[2] Perched on that street corner is The Meeting Place, a drop-in center for people who are homeless or precariously housed, most living with drug and alcohol addictions. In the twelve months preceding the project, over twenty-two members of The Meeting Place had unexpectedly passed away, more than in any other year. In partnering with the leadership of The Meeting Place, we asked: how do we not just keep people alive, but enable them to move forward with their lives? By spending mornings, evenings, and weekends with sixteen Meeting Place members, we were able to re-frame the problem (drop-in centers as places encouraging *too much* belonging and providing *too little* incentive for change), and to develop scenarios for a more differentiated range of supports. Local organizations are now using these scenarios to broker partnerships with foundations and government agencies for nine months of prototyping new support mechanisms.

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The *Me, Us, and Them Starter* Project took place over ten weeks in the Edmonds/Kingsway neighborhood of Burnaby, British Columbia.[3] Our team of six moved into a social housing complex to develop answers to the question: how do we increase connectedness and belonging, particularly among residents who are left out and stigmatized, including the disabled, unemployed, seniors, and refugees?

4   Carol Lee Bacchi, *Women, Policy, and Politics: The Construction of Policy Problems* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 1-2.

Fifty ethnographies of residents and frontline staff later, we had begun to reframe the challenge of serving these populations.

Most residents were connected—to friends, family, or services—but these connections often perpetuated the same scripts, and hence the same stuckness. These relationships weren't a source of new input, ideas, or experiences. Working with the residents, we co-developed ten scenarios for new services and neighborhood networks that might increase people's sense of self and their own future. Alongside the fieldwork, we curated a "Debriefing Team" for social service providers and civil servants to gain exposure to the methods and emergent solutions. Social service providers from the debriefing team are now negotiating with their government and foundation funders to finance a nine-month prototype of new community living services.

FROM IMAGINING TO IMMERSING

For us, project work always starts in context, with members of our target population experiencing a social challenge identified by *others*. Our first act is always to question the naming and framing of a social problem. As feminist writer Carol Lee Bacchi explains, the construction of a problem is, in and of itself, a political act and intervention:

> Any description of an issue or a "problem" is an interpretation, and interpretations involve judgment and choices. Crucially, we also need to realize that interpretations are interventions since they have programmatic outcomes; that is, the interpretation offered will line up with particular policy recommendations.[4]

To reframe problems, then, we must recognize *where* our interpretations come from. From experts and secondary sources? From experience and direct observation? While design methods emphasize the latter, they say little about *why* or *how* to observe. Are we to observe in order to empathetically imagine what it might be like to be in somebody else's shoes? Or are we to observe in order to immerse ourselves in that somebody's context in a deeper and thus more critical way?

FIGURE 1: Dustin's favorite panhandling spot, Toronto, March 2014.

FIGURE 2: Testing ideas with George in Burnaby, June 2014

Dustin's context is the stained sidewalk in front of the coffee shop. There he sits most days, reaching up to press the electronic door opener, in exchange for a coin or dollar bill. There he lies many evenings, passed out, until the police prod him to go home—because Dustin has a home. Were Dustin the subject of a user-centered design project, we might interview him at one particular time, on one particular day, retuning to our studio to develop a representation of our conversation: perhaps as a persona, or as an element in a "service journey" map. Forming representations of objects, events, or scenes is the essence of imagination. But while imagination is a critical component of creativity, without immersion, our representations risk missing critical components for change.

For example, had we not observed Dustin late in the evening, we might have missed him swaying in front of a music club, entry denied. We would have missed how he craves dance—and also how, without an increasingly potent drug cocktail, he is in too much physical pain to move. None of this information was elicited during our talk-based interview. Yet understanding Dustin's triggers and his aspirations gave us important hints about the kinds of intervention that might address both what *others* see as the problem (his drug use) and what *he* sees as the problem (his lack of mobility).

FROM DESIGNING FOR TO MAKING WITH

Immersion is not a guarantee against the design team's possible misrepresentations of what they are seeing. No matter how many hours we spend in context, we remain privileged visitors, able to choose the times of our arrivals and departures.

5   See Albert Bandura, "Self-Efficacy Mechanism in Human Agency," *American Psychologist* Vol. 37, no. 2 (1982): 122.

6   Raia Prokhovnik, "Public and Private Citizenship: From Gender Invisibility to Feminist Inclusiveness," *Feminist Review* Vol. 60, no. 1 (1998): 87.

Our outsider status encourages our own biased perspective, through which our ideas are filtered. The only mechanism we have found for making our own biases contestable and malleable is to return our ethnographic stories, generative scenarios, and mocked-up touchpoints with the user to those users themselves, soliciting their feedback.

Indeed, it is through multiple rapid cycles of feedback and iteration that we transfer—and share ownership over—our insights and suggested interventions. Unless end users and system stakeholders feel a sense of control and competency over what is emerging, they are unlikely to invest in the hard work of behavior change.[5] In the act of making our assumptions explicit and our ideas real *with* users and stakeholders, we hope to increase receptivity and motivation for change. By contrast, when we design *for* people, we risk overlooking this important potential basis for instituting lasting change.

FROM PUBLIC TO PRIVATE

Most of the levers for changing behaviors lie in the crevice between the private and public spheres. Dustin's craving for drugs is heightened late at night, long after the social workers and drug addiction counselors of Toronto have gone home for the day. Similarly, George, our neighbor in Burnaby, felt most alone late at night. What George wanted above all was to meet a woman and get married. He is a heavy user of publicly subsidized mental health services; but although his case workers could talk to him *about* relationships, they could not cross the public-private line and accompany him to a pub to meet women. In the absence of changes in his private life, George's cost to the public will most likely continue to rise.

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Too often, "design for the public sector" fails to critically reassess what actually constitutes the public and private spheres in a given context. Political studies professor Raia Prokovnik argues that what brings us together as citizens isn't our shared activities within the public sphere (such as employment or voting), but the diversity of our activities in the private sphere. She goes on to critique the very idea of a public-private divide: "For it is the very tendency to think in dualistic terms about public and private—the need to define oneself in opposition to, in rejection of, and in a hierarchy with something else, rather than in connection to it—that needs to be overcome."[6] Rather than accept a received dualistic boundary between public and private, we attempt to efface it, both in our methodology and in our (co-)designed solutions.

CONCLUSION

Blurring boundaries between the public and private spheres; between designing *for* and making *with*; and between imagination and immersion is not without ethical tensions and risks. As much as we intend to shift power and control to end users and system stakeholders, we retain significant power and control, even in our hybrid roles of neighbor, friend, researcher, and facilitator—roles that end users and stakeholders sometimes struggle to understand. But rather than redraw a fixed line between research and day-to-day living, we aim to be upfront about our dual motives, and to open up our process for all to see. At all times, end users and system stakeholders can read our notes, see our photos, and participate in our work of sensemaking. That makes our inclusionary practice a constant, negotiable work in progress.