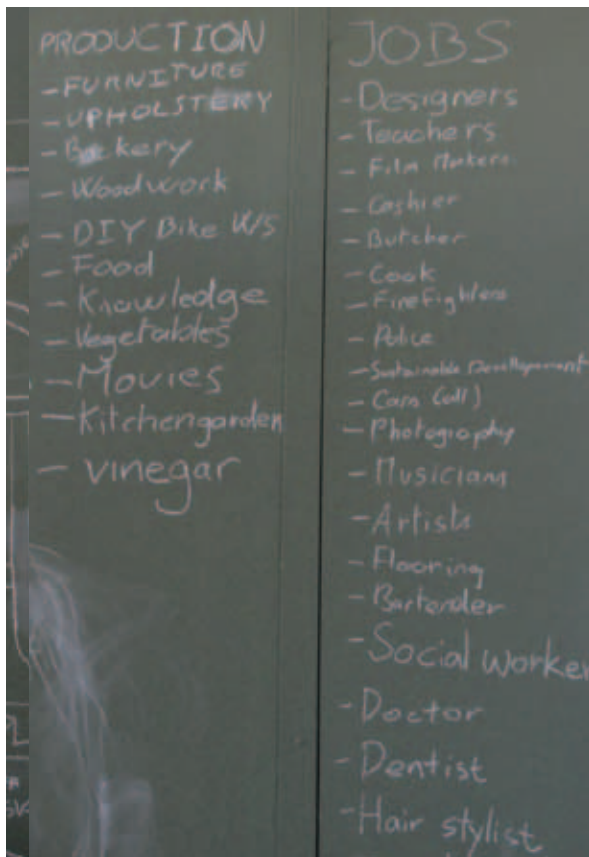


# Cynthia Hathaway



# Neighbourhood lessons



## Create connectedness instead of critical distance.

– Irit Rogoff

Learning should include a dynamic, non-naval gazing relationship of the designer to actuality, where to set foot in the everyday spaces of social relations is an essential part to a design process and results in a more sustainable product. This product, whether it is a thing, activity or experience celebrates what's already there, and is translated by the designer who embraces participation and co-existence, vulnerability over command and community over self. Learning how to connect, without being exploitative or condescending, is vital.

This essay will exemplify ways of connecting through two projects, one in the form of a student workshop during the *Unibz Design Festival*, held in Bolzano in 2012, where participants learned to connect to public space and a vast array of people through the resourcing and interpretation of a commonly found object, the shopping receipt. The second project consists

of a series of events designed by myself called “Car Mekka” for the Utrecht Manifest 2011, a Biennial for Social Design. The Manifest took place in the Utrecht city neighbourhood called the Rotsoord. Here, and specifically at the local gas station called the Tamoil, my connection with various local experts was essential in designing concepts about the future of this place, but just as important, if not more so, was where and how I could connect these experts with each other and to a larger audience. As a place where hundreds of people flow through daily, the Tamoil gas station and car wash was the chosen place where I combined a variety of local experts to set up their businesses. The unusual combinations I made of local expertise with the gas station seems initially strange, but I had the best connector at my fingertips to help: the common denominator or object that ties us altogether, the car.



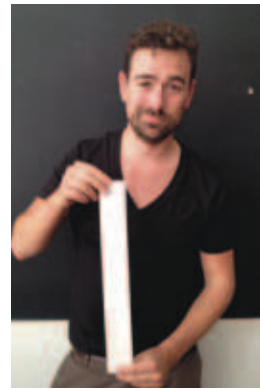
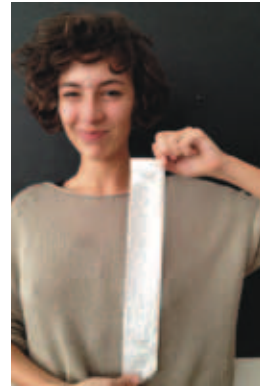
### **From the classroom and into the supermarket**

Open air classrooms invite students to step into the actuality and behaviour of a place. Sheer observation is not enough, so it is important to have a task that allows them to be in the flow of the situation. Observing from the sidelines, or standing out as pre-approved researchers automatically creates distance and a less vulnerable position to absorb “normalcy”. The experiencing of a context first-hand invites previous assumptions to be modified and possibly taken apart.

With the intention of immersing students in a mass public terrain, the Interspar supermarket in Bolzano was chosen as a sort of open air classroom. Asked to collect and analyze shopping receipts proved to students that this simple article holds a cornucopia of inspirational material about a person, a place, hyper-consumption and

purchasing manipulation. On lucky occasions, information about the “before and after” were supplied when the original shopping list was attached with the receipt. Tracking what was intended to be bought and what was actually bought can lead to often surprising and unpredictable paths.

With shopping receipts in hand, the students developed either a scenario, an object, a series of photographs, or a narrative inspired by one of their list’s contents. With a humble but strong anchor, the receipt, the students found a vast amount of content from which they generated reflections about what was at times eccentric consumer behaviour. The information listed on the receipt and the hand writing on a list revealed to the students that they were in the sensitive territory of personal information. Thus, the students underwent the vulnerable process of substantiating their translations without condescension.



“Workshoppers” with their gathered Interspar receipts, *Unibz Design Festival 2012*.  
Cover, left to right: map of the Rotsoord neighbourhood for the Utrecht Manifest made by students of the Design Academy Eindhoven; lists of industries and professionals found in the Rotsoord.  
Previous page: Interspar Supermarket, Bolzano.



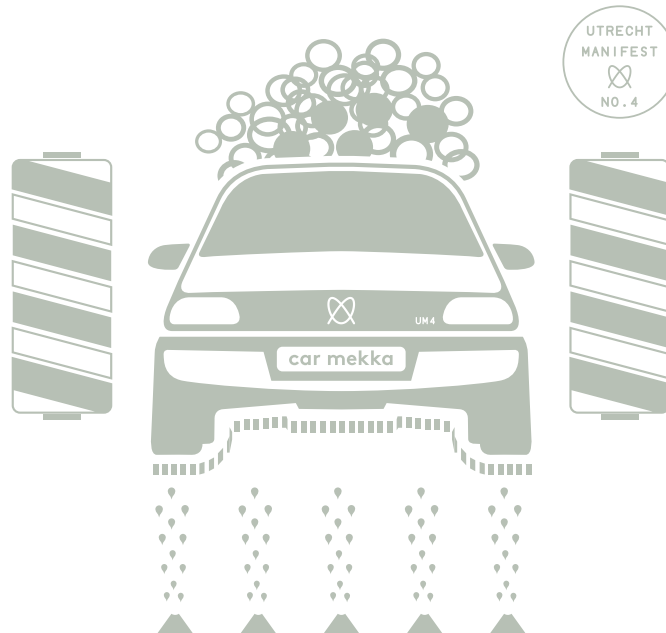


## From the supermarket to the car wash

Today, a designer is compelled to be more mobile and without a permanent studio. Throwing a powerful laptop on his/her back and taking to the streets is a flexible way of working and is especially useful if designers want to focus more on social design. With mobile ease, designers can “set up shop” in communities, living and working within their streets and with inhabitants.

During the 2011 Utrecht Manifest, designers, students, curators, social researchers and artists came together in a converted warehouse to live and work within the community of the Rotsoord. Invited by one of the Manifest’s curators Sophie Krier, and under the theme of “The Networked Landscape”, I designed a series of events called “Car Mekka” at the local Tamoil gas station. Working from Krier’s extensive list of local professional and amateur experts ranging from flower arrangers, beauticians, bird rescuers, botanists, automotive students, film makers, and roller derby clubs, my events consisted of a sort of cross-breeding of these experts at the gas station to connect to a new place and another set

of customers. These connections played an important role as a catalyst for new ideas by bringing together those in the community who may not typically intersect but share a common passion. The local gas station became a place of this action where various business hybrids formed around the passion for and the upkeep of cars. Themed events showcased the coming together of the car industry with beauticians, religious leaders, students from the local automotive college, local historians, light artists, car restorers, cleaners and organizers and a roller derby club. With this fusion, the Rotsoord became a radiating beacon for expert car care; a “Car Mekka”. Ultimately, these events were meant to proclaim to Utrecht, the city at large, the relevance of one of its neighbourhoods through the productive contribution of its citizens, and are to be seen as a model not to be overlooked in the future urban development of the area.





A local nail stylist Esmeralda Klinkenberg was invited to set up her manicure shop at the Tamoil station, where both metallic and flesh bodies were preened and cleaned together. Esmeralda Nail Studio found a new spot and access to hundreds of potential customers. Both men and women had their nails done because the obsession with a car seems to transcend any sexual divide. Although never imagined, Esmeralda and the Tamoil shop owner saw a viable future in beauty and car care with Esmeralda setting up shop there. To celebrate this new combination, I designed the “Manicar” DIY nail stencil kit and auto nail polish to be continually sold in the gas station store as a new product line, as well as when Esmeralda’s Tamoil shop was closed.



*Left to right from above:* Manicurist Esmeralda Klinkenberg with client in front of gas station shop; customers receiving “Manicar” manicure in front of gas station shop; happy customer with logo and colour matched to her car at the gas station; “Car Mekka” stencil catalogue from which clients choose their favourite car logo; “Manicar” manicure kits designed and sold in the gas station shop with nail polish to match. Shown here: Opel and Ferrari “Manicar” kits.





For “The Great Cleaning and Organizing Event”, Paul Serto, a professional cleaner of elderly homes in the area sold his own formula “Serto Solutions”, an “all-purpose” organic cleaner in the gas station’s shop. When combined with a specially designed washing cloth – a hand car wash complete. A professional office organizer, Ardy Kuipers, whose services make physical spaces flow more efficiently, organized the interiors of our (auto)mobile offices during a car wash visit, giving each car more space without taking anything away.



*Left to right from above:* shoes neatly in a row after organization by professional organizer Ardy Kuipers; a fan of “Serto Cleaning Solutions”; Ardy Kuipers getting ready to organize the interior of a car; “Car Mekka” washing and polishing cloths sold in Tamoil shop, with an assortment of helpful cleaning tips sourced from local experts in cleaning and restoration like cleaner Paul Serto, organizer Ardy Kuipers, the Tamoil car wash owner Sabrina van Dijk and car restorer Emile Valenteijn; bottles of “Serto Solution” produced by Paul Serto and sold in the Tamoil shop.



Giving real life experience to students of the car sales department of the local Automotive College was a great way to test their skills and knowledge about various car brands during the time frame of an eight-minute car wash session, and connect with strangers who know a lot or not so much about their cars. “The Great Car Drive Thru Debate” was organized as an event for discussing the different qualities and features of the car at hand. This debate occurred only during the more expensive car wash and as an incentive to sell more washes, the gas station offered a free extra service: the car debate in your car. Customers filled their waiting time with feisty debate sessions with car sales students Bill van Middendorp and Glen van Es. Drivers would be asked at the end of the wash to give a ribbon to the best debater. The debater with the most ribbons pinned to his shirt was given a diploma signed by the owner of the Tamoil station, Sabrina van Dijk. The students also received a study credit from their school.



*Left to right from above:* driver listening to the arguments from debaters Bill van Middendorp and Glenn van Es as they go through the car wash; debaters Bill van Middendorp and Glenn van Es; diploma for the winner of the “Great Car Drive Thru Debate”; debate ribbons designed by local fashion designer Melissa Peterson - Bonvic and given to each participating driver to hang on their rear view mirror as a souvenir; debater Bill’s shirt with the most ribbons.



Pastor Harmsen from the neighbourhood church was interested in “Car Mekka” as a way to connect to his community at a time when congregations are dwindling. At the Tamoil gas station, he and his colleagues could find a new audience during the “On Your Way Car Blessing” event. In the tradition of St Christopher, the patron of travelers, the Pastors’ blessing of cars and drivers for a safe journey helped the church to find new relevance in an unexpected place.

Light artist Jan Willem Campmans transformed the normally closed night hours at the car wash with the event “Pimp My Car and Me”, where the driver and car rolled onto the car wash lot and were transformed live by light beamed onto the driver and car. A souvenir photo was produced and sold to the owner to add to the family photo album.



*Left to right from above:* Pastor Harmsen and assistant outside gas station store; blessed water in special copper urn with wand to bless cars and people; Pastor Harmsen blessing a van and driver at the gas station; example of a car and its owners being pimped with light; an example of a final family photo portrait from the “Pimp my Car and Me” event.



## Learning from the neighbourhood

The expertise of a designer includes judging when and what is necessary to change or add. In some cases, creating focus and highlighting what already exists is enough. Designers can gauge to what extent design supports or confuses things. At “Car Mekka”, design was better used as a series of inserts that facilitate, but without enforcement, meaningful connections between people and place. Design was implemented as a highlighter of what people are already doing in the neighbourhood. Bringing them in contact with each other and creating an alternative platform and application of their skill were the added values of this community design project.

Many designed objects were born out of this action, and were initially supportive props for the events rather than a result. However, many objects, such as the cleaner, the cloth, and the nail kits, did have an afterlife: their inclusion on the gas shop’s shelves added variety to a lineup of mass-produced products typically found at gas stations everywhere. It was important to have all products made locally, to support local industry and reveal the expertise of their maker to thousands of gas station clients. Content came from place and content was place.

Catching the attention of drivers without slowing them down is a feat for a design, and staying within the flow of a pit stop is essential for a connection to be successful. Complementing the quick fix service provided by the gas station, a design in these circumstances has to glide along whilst adding value. Working efficiently within the time frame of an existing procedure of an eight minute car wash or a two minute tanking results in the easy uptake of a design. Stalling people who are in a rush is not a good idea. Designs should not drag but enliven a well-oiled machine and mindset.

Finding a common denominator such as the car as the grand connector to a vast array of people and potential participants is a gift to a designer working in social design. The car can provide a handshake with millions if you design well. In

this way, a shopping receipt is also a grand connector, but as we tread around issues of access to personal information we need to recognize the power and sensitivity surrounding these types of objects and how to approach them. A designer’s role and responsibility is to put his/her creative skills in action and provide translations that enlighten the tasks and perceptions of everyday life. Shopping receipts and cars are keys to getting us there.

Film documentation of the “Car Mekka” events can be found on the following website:  
[www.hathawaydesigns.org](http://www.hathawaydesigns.org)