Friendly but not Friends:
Designing for Spaces Between Friendship and Unfamiliarity

Short Paper

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ABSTRACT

While urban life requires us to maintain a healthy social distance and anonymity from others, a recurring design goal has been to push against this anonymity and assist in the formation of communities. In contrast, our aim in this paper is to design for keeping others at a comfortable distance, without seeming rude or uncongenial. Building on findings from 20 interviews and two design workshops, we present three design explorations that illustrate opportunities to support a sense of friendly connection in local, communal spaces, without promoting the formation of friendship or other long-term engagements, or requiring the effort and commitment they would necessarily demand.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered Computing → Collaborative and social computing**; Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing

KEYWORDS

Social distance, urban life, liminal space, familiar stranger

1 INTRODUCTION

Simmel's essay from 1903, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" [16] introduces a familiar quandary of modern urban living. Even though we live close to many more people than those who live in small villages, we often personally know far fewer of these neighbours. Indeed, if we attempted to meet and befriend each of those who we pass on a daily basis our life would become unmanageable. Urban life requires us to maintain a social distance and anonymity. It depends upon us "not knowing by sight neighbours of years standing", even if that can "appear to small-town folk so often as cold and uncongenial" (ibid). This observation has bene neglected in the design of technology – urban technologies are usually instead designed to assist in the formation and maintenance of communities of differing sorts, for instance by supporting serendipitous meetings with acquaintances [8] or social interactions amongst the unacquainted [18]. While underlying this research is the understandable desire to facilitate increased social contact and companionship, city life is inherently different from 'small-town' life and requires us also to maintain social distance.

In this paper, we explore designing systems that can help us keep those around us at a comfortable distance, without making us seem rude or uncongenial. Already, technology has been adopted for these types of purposes, such as by wearing headphones to prevent unwanted propositioning while in public [9]. Even something as simple as placing one's luggage on the neighbouring seat on a bus is a non-verbal signal discouraging

others from taking that seat – an intentional act of keeping fellow passengers at a distance and fostering a personal space [11]. How can we design for these intentions? Is it possible to design for being "friendly but not friends"? That is, an openness to limited interaction when appropriate, but without an expectation of moving to a more committed relationship.

2   BACKGROUND

Openness to social interaction is strongly regulated, both by how physical spaces are built and decorated (literally with doors and walls) and through the behaviours and discussions that take place in them [1]. Being able to avoid eye contact, to lock doors or just to put on a set of headphones makes it easier for us to choose when to interact rather than being forced into interaction [17]. As Jamieson [10] has noted, creating boundaries between an intimate inner circle and others is not incompatible with community or civic engagement, but rather a routine aspect of managing social life. In HCI, there has been enthusiastic recognition of the importance of neighbourhoods and community, alongside efforts to design technologies to improve engagements with neighbours in local contexts [4–6,15]. Moreover, scholars are actively researching civic engagement in urban settings [2,7] as well as systems that facilitate the sharing of resources among those who live near one another [12].

The variety of neighbourly interactions means it is worth paying attention to how people, at times, purposefully avoid such interactions, and how we might design for these intentions. As Crow *et al* [3] argue based on their study of neighbour relations in a small town, establishing and maintaining a workable balance between 'keeping one's distance' and 'being there when needed' is a skilful accomplishment.

3   MATERIAL AND METHODS

We undertook twenty formative semi-structured interviews with young adults who lived primarily in student apartment buildings in a city in Northern Europe. Our goal here was to investigate the social relationships between those who lived in apartment buildings, and the connections with the local community and local resources (such as recycling facilities). We asked about how relationships were managed between so called 'familiar strangers' [14], that is, people regularly seen around the neighbourhood but not personally known, as well as different variations on this, such as neighbours or those who lived or shared an amenity in the local area but who were not recognised. Eight participants were female, the other twelve male. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 31 years old. Nine lived alone, three with housemates, and eight together with family members. Additionally, we conducted two day-long design workshops with participants drawn from our local industrial and academic collaborations. In these workshops, we engaged with urban spaces between the private and the public, taking advantage of the differing backgrounds of our participants which ranged from working for the local municipality, IKEA, Ericsson, and various research and design organisations.

4   EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

A prominent issue that emerged from the interviews concerned relationships and interactions in the common areas in apartment blocks. Most interviewees' relationships with their neighbours consisted mainly of greeting each other if passing by in the communal space and to some extent outside the building. This friendly connection, even if minimal, differentiated neighbours from strangers. Yet, participants expressed no desire to become friends with their neighbours but they did value being on friendly terms with them. As one interviewee put it: *"I am happy with the relationship which I currently have with my neighbours since I have none."* There seemed to be a subtle tension in living proximate to others while rejecting the burden of what would have felt like excessive friendship.

This tension played out most clearly in corridors and stairways, where running in to a neighbour was most likely. Participants mentioned that while on most occasions they would see nobody, the frequency with which they entered or left meant that a limited relationship did build up between those who shared a stairway. Some interviewees described how they often wore headphones in communal areas, especially when leaving or entering the building. One interviewee explained how she, in an attempt to avoid a particular neighbour, they checked through their door that the neighbour was not present before entering the communal space. For the most part, however, participants expressed little need to avoid neighbours when moving through communal areas: *"It's not like you avoid them, if there is a neighbour outside when you take out the trash it is no big deal."*

Encounters in these liminal spaces did not extend beyond general familiarity, nor did the participants hope for deeper engagement: *"I have no interest in creating a relationship as a result of sharing the same building."* However, this was balanced by a desire not to be seen as unfriendly. This meant that actions that felt explicitly unfriendly, such as not saying hello while passing by a neighbour, or not answering when asked a question, were frowned upon. While participants mentioned that they would at times actively avoid casual interactions with others, they shared a commitment to being friendly, and to not being seen as the sort of person who would be hostile to interactions with neighbours: *"I always attempt to be open, greeting my neighbours, I usually greet [even] people I don't recognize [inside the apartment building]."*

Our interviewees thus faced the dilemma of appearing friendly without inadvertently inviting friendship. There was also an acknowledged benefit of living in the sort of place where one could rely upon others, and in a community where there was a generalised sense of trust and friendliness. For example, a participant explained how he would interact with his neighbours more to arrange things like *"borrowing tools to fix the bike"* if needed. We characterised this as aiming for generalised friendliness, while resisting the making of friends.

5   DESIGN EXPLORATIONS

Our empirical findings and workshops lead us to explore the themes with three prototypes, designed to be embedded in local,

communal spaces. We implemented three prototypes (as smartphone/iPad apps), and conducted a limited deployment of the third prototype with users directly recruited to install and test the application while they were in a play park in the city.

5.1 Friendly Signals in a Garbage Room

First, we sought to explore how we could use swapping goods and recycling as a way of enabling a sense of generalised trust without explicit face-to-face interaction. Some of the apartment buildings where our participants lived had a communal 'garbage' room that included a space where used items could be left so that other residents could peruse and take what interests them. In the interviews participants mentioned noticing reusable items in the recycling area, and four participants admitted to actively look for reusable items, picking up and then reusing left items.
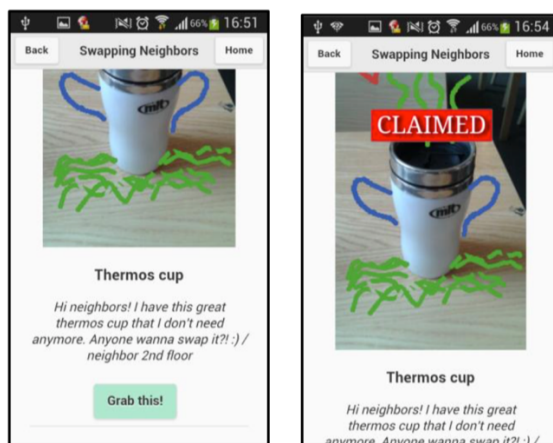

Figure 1: 'Swapping neighbours' prototype.

One interviewee sometimes went to the recycling area *"just to see if someone has thrown out something useful"*. Another was disappointed with the large number of usable items that are thrown away and argued that things that get thrown in the recycling area become *"dead"* since they are thereafter seen as trash rather than potentially valuable goods. According to this participant, it would be preferable for people to mark their items as usable hand-me-downs so that others would know that they are welcome to take them. While existing practices of handing over used goods via the recycling area do not require in-person interaction, they were sometimes connected to feelings of awkwardness and embarrassment, since items in the recycling area risked being labelled as trash and because there was no way to thank anyone when one found something useful.

The swap app we designed (Figure 1) addresses these concerns by supporting swapping without introducing the costs of in-person coordination. When an item is placed in the Swap Shelf, the user takes a picture of the item and indicates that it is available for others to take. This helps solve the problem of "dead" goods as residents can make explicit that items they have left in the location are meant as usable hand-me-downs, not trash. Other residents can browse through the photos and, once

they see something of interest, go to the shelf, collect the item, and 'claim' it in the app. The app allows them to acknowledge their neighbours, too, adding to a sense of friendly neighbourly relations without removing the desired social distance. On garbage day, the photos are erased, offering a clear time limit to the collection of items and removing the need to manage posted content, thus minimising the effort required.

5.2 Creating Awareness by the Entrance

The second space that we addressed was the communal stairway. In particular, the glass doors or windows by the entrance came up as areas that could support lightweight interactions among residents that required little in terms of time or effort. While apartment buildings often have noticeboards for announcements our participants mentioned that the window by the entrance had the potential to act as a more effective space for urgent messages, such as notifications of door-code changes, local events, or reports of criminal activity in the area.

We explored using adjustable lighting in the common space to look at how it could support subtle neighbour interactions. Our first design was based around changing the colour of the lighting in the hallway, with the purpose of communicating different things with different colours. We discussed colour mappings ranging from the functional, such as specific colours indicating new messages available online concerning the building, to the commemorative, such as particular colours for different seasons, or even the more enigmatic, such as 'puzzles' where the meaning of colours was to remain initially unannounced and unexplained. Our goal was not an informative display, but rather a lightweight way to use technology to foster a sense of social connection among residents. Instead of inviting social interaction directly, the aim was to provide an awareness of changes that may affect residents through the subtly shifting colour of the lighting. We were interested in possibilities of supporting a 'slow burn' approach to the location-based community that the residents in an apartment building form.

5.3 Building trust on a Playground

In contrast to our first two designs, the third design exploration moved us away from apartments to engage with the broader local community, in particular those who come together around the use of neighbourhood playgrounds. We designed an app that acted as a sort of 'Instagram for Places' (Figure 2), where photos with accompanying descriptive audio clips could be taken and sent to a specific place (initially limited to local playgrounds) that the user frequented. This was enforced using GPS to bind submission to within the bounds of the park. Once a user sent a photo to a park from within, they would then be able to access a newsfeed of images, sounds and videos related to it.

One scenario is to allow children to send and see pictures from those who frequent the playground. This enables limited social interaction between those who share a common place but do not (want to) have a closer relationship. As suggested by McLachlan et al [13], this type of activity could provide a low-risk and low-effort practice through which trust within the local

community could grow in an organic way, without requiring too much too quickly. A preliminary test of this app with four local families gave us initial feedback showing that they were enthusiastic and responsive to the concept. However, a more detailed analysis of a larger participant group has yet to be conducted.
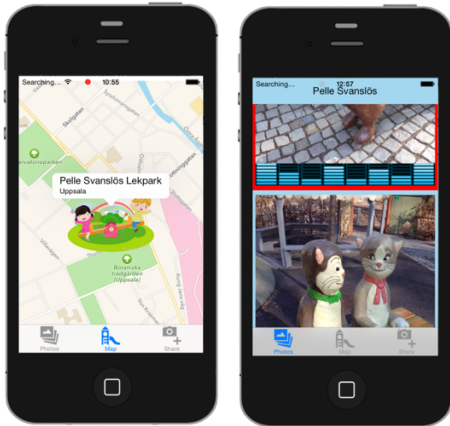

Figure 2: 'Instagram for Places' prototype.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While there is value in maintaining social distance in the city [16], it is still often ignored or undermined in community-oriented design projects. Our design explorations map out some of the opportunities around the concept of being *"friendly but not friends"*. The designs are aligned with the slow and gradual nature of neighbour relations. They highlight how connection that involves low commitment and/or little effort can still support meaningful and helpful exchanges amongst those living proximate to one another. Importantly, they aim to respect neighbours' skilful efforts maintain a workable balance between 'keeping one's distance' and 'being there when needed' [3]. Part of this was design that helps neighbours to 'appear' friendly, and to perceive those around them as such, without necessitating any great social effort or cost. It was clear from our interviews that there was a desire to live in a local community where there was a generalised sense of trust and friendliness, and to encourage and communicate such sentiments.

What does this mean for designing interactive systems that succeed in supporting neighbour relations? Many attempts at such technologies have been evaluated based on their ability to foster deep, meaningful, and long lasting connections between users. As we discussed in the introduction, though, a lauded benefit of the city over the small town or village is the ability to meet like-minded people, instead of being forced to socialise with whoever happens to be proximate. We would argue that key to future design work in this area is aiming seemingly low by seeking interventions that require little of those involved and are careful to respect a social distance between those interacting. We acknowledge that designing for social distance goes somewhat against the grain of community technology. To

address the desire to retain social distance can seem misanthropic. However, the need for distance is a fundamental part of urban life, and to ignore it in design is to miss an opportunity to understand an important aspect of everyday sociable interaction in urban settings.

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