

Subversive Standards or *United Bottle*: A Product Designed For Misuse

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*The healthy man does not flee before the problems posed by sometimes sudden interruptions of his habits, even physiologically speaking, he measures his health in terms of his capacity to overcome organic crises in order to establish a new order.*¹

¹ Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological* (New York, Urzone Inc. 1989), p. 200.

Good Manners, Bad Behavior

The Normal cannot be determined without the Pathological, its dialectical counterpart. But pathologies or crises are not merely dysfunctional. In processes of normalization, they are the driving forces for the establishment of new systems of order. To understand the character of transforming urban territories (spaces/societies) and to be able to act on them, it is indispensable to acknowledge this generating role of crises situations. As urban design and architecture are disciplines that are preoccupied with normalizing and ordering processes, we want to introduce a design tool that promotes a design practice that actively integrates crises into the creative process: subversive standards.

Standards are unified or aspired modes of operation, be they formalized or informal, and generally an outcome of processes of normalization. Subversion as a critical attitude requires an understanding for the prevailing mechanisms that are producing the current normative setting. Instead of overthrowing or negating these conditions, subversion latches into the processes at work and transforms them from within. Subversive standards are aware of their double agenda of both following and generating ordering systems as well as allowing for transformational deviations.

What if a design practice would be based on subversive standards and achieve sustainability by the following operations: faking, undercover operating, parasitism, mimicry, fare dodging, misuse, and camouflage?

Modern Standards

Discourses on normality and the resulting processes of normalization and standardization have been constituent elements of modern societies. They can be roughly described as reactions towards a world of growing complexity and disorder. As normality is never a



Fig. 2: Operation misuse in state of crisis. Temporary shelters.

given, but a product of a discourse of the powers that be, there are alternative normalities at stake. Jürgen Link has differentiated two discourses on normality: proto-normalization (*Protonormalismus*) and flexible normalization (*flexibler Normalismus*).² Whereas proto-normalization sets a norm based on an average condition and strictly defines the aberrant as pathological or abnormal, flexible normalization includes occurring deviations from the average into the normal condition and defines them as part of the normal. Those deviations are even considered necessary as catalysts for societal development and the establishment of new normalities. The advantage of flexible normalizing processes is that they acknowledge change and the possible shifting of standards opposed to the status-quo dictum of proto-normalization.

The history of industrial norms starts at the beginning of the 20th century in Europe. Rather proto-normalizing by character, the industrial norm's function is the coordination of man (producer and consumer) and the machine (device) under the paradigm of economic and logistic efficiency. Their goal is the national and finally international implementation or coordination of those processes. Those industrial norms were strongly influencing architectural practice at the time. Central to the architectural and urban agenda was to ensure standards of living and spatial production in order to better the conditions of the urban population. Modern architects were both infatuated with the concept of the machine (Le Corbusier's architec-

² Jürgen Link, *Versuch über den Normalismus: Wie Normalität produziert wird* (Opladen/Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1999, 1st. ed. 1997) p. 79.



Fig. 1: *United Bottle*.