The sociality and geometry of community development practice

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Abstract This article presents a conceptual framework of practice that considers both the 'sociality', or disciplined practice, of particular kinds of communication and action that build community for the purposes of developmental work and the corresponding 'geometry', or technical dimensions, of that social practice. The framework is presented in four stages, moving from a quintessentially micro-stage of dialogue through to a more structural and geometric model for engaging systems and power relations within a community context. These stages include the sociality of nurturing inter-subjectivity and geometry of dialogue, the sociality of hospitality and geometry of moving from dyads to triads, the sociality of networking and geometry of web weaving and, finally, the sociality of structuring community action and geometry of engaging the horizontal and vertical dimensions.

Introduction

In this article, we present a framework for thinking about community development practice that has been emerging within Queensland, Australia, over the past 20 years. We have drawn on several (established albeit largely unpublished) traces of thinking and practice. We present a prescriptive model based on a framework utilized within community development teaching at the University of Queensland. This model has currency among community development practitioners in Australia, despite its lack of representation in academic journals. In weaving the framework together in a nuanced way, we acknowledge the traces and earlier sketches of key people, particularly Les Halliwell, Dasguta Sugata, Anthony Kelly and Carmel Daveson.
We have adopted a simple structure. First, the practice framework proposed can be articulated as four stages of practice, moving from a quintessentially micro-stage of dialogue through to a more structural and geometric model for engaging hierarchies and power relations within a community context. These stages are presented as though occurring in a linear form, but it should be noted from the outset that in practice, these ‘stages’ should be understood as mitigated by a host of complex social processes, and as occurring in organic and fluid ways. Secondly, in explaining each stage, we will present: (i) the sociality of practice – that is, the regular, disciplined practice of particular kinds of communication and action that build community for the purposes of developmental work and (ii) the corresponding geometry of that social practice, which is a particular way of thinking technically rather than socially (which we will explain in more detail below).

We would also like to differentiate, for our immediate purposes, the terms ‘sociality’ and ‘sociability’. The former refers to a mode of conscious and intentional collective action within a determinable sphere of social relations. The latter implies a process requiring constant patterns of social interaction, of which only a selected part may be directed towards the intentional development of a sphere of purposeful social action. In order for the model to generate purposeful relations, social interaction needs to be intentional.

In defining ‘practice’ we draw here on Gibney (2003, p. 1) who describes it as a type of action and while not entirely separate from theory, it is nevertheless categorically different from theory. Practice informs theory, but is also informed by it, and in this way, there is a constant sense of practice being ‘tested out’ and ‘applied’ in a process that is ‘forever evolving’. Practice, in this usage, is taken to mean that which is constantly altering, exercised and rehearsed with a view to improve both by itself and that with which it is engaged, a notion broadly recognized by the popular adage: ‘practice makes perfect’. In the spirit of this popular adage, the approach presented in this paper has evolved over a period of twenty years. This evolution has included the practitioner feedback, changes in teaching staff over time and importantly a commitment to holding the tensions between a ‘model’ and an on-going ‘analysis’ of the forces and issues affecting practice.

The sociality of community practice refers to the processes of building community within a professional practice setting, and one that requires an intentional and purposeful use of particular kinds of language and action that are both orientated towards, and positively understood within the pretext of, community. The use of the term sociality alludes to the work of theorists such as Studdert (2005) and in a way that contrasts with the notion of sociability. As we have already stated, sociability can
be understood as the simple process of people relating to one another. The social is an adjective describing the everyday relations between people – self and other, other and other – an inescapable fact about human beings as social creatures and living, as it were, in essentially social contexts. However, sociality is used as a way to think of the social in *active* terms. Sociability in many social contexts is not ‘just given’ – it requires the exercising of agency, although that agency may not, paradoxically, be evident on first reckoning. In contrast, sociality is a way of describing this *active* creating of a social life – including the processes of patterning, structuring and interacting within a given context. In this paper, sociality is used to emphasize such agency and intention, giving particular attention to the implications of professional agency for development practitioners.

Before moving forward, we should also like to clarify our use of the phrase ‘the geometry of community practice’, which we take here as denoting a ‘technical’ dimension of the work. Historically, geometry is concerned with questions of size, shape and relative position of figures and with properties of space. Geometers, traditionally, took into their professional gaze questions of relative position or spatial relationship of geometric figures and shapes. Although we acknowledge that there are many kinds of geometries, we contend that the geometry of position is particularly useful for community professionals in illuminating:

- the spatial elements of practice,
- the lines of practice in terms of the purposeful directionality of the work,
- the shape of practice.

The sociologist Robert Nisbet (1966, p. 101), drawing on the work of George Simmel, articulates the idea of geometrical forms and patterns of community life. Using the idea of geometry, we can consider these forms and patterns in terms of spaces, intersecting lines and shapes. In a parallel argument, we also make deliberate connections between geometrical forms and patterns of community development work. There are ways of thinking about practice know-how in community development that can be better understood (and potentially enhanced) by explicitly framing practice as both intentional and disciplined.

The four stages that are considered within this framework, with their corresponding sociality and geometry, are as follows:

1. the sociality of nurturing inter-subjectivity and geometry of dialogue;
2. the sociality of hospitality and geometry of moving from dyads to triads;
(3) the sociality of networking and geometry of web weaving;  
(4) the sociality of structuring community action and geometry of engaging the horizontal and vertical dimensions.

**Stage 1: the sociality of nurturing inter-subjectivity and geometry of dialogue**

Within this framework, the first stage of community development practice requires practitioners to be conscious of the sociality of the inter-subjective. This stage of sociality draws on Martin Buber’s (1947) work and can be simply stated as ‘community is when community happens’. At the heart of Buber’s framework is the idea that community signifies an exacting kind of sociality, one where relationships or encounters are transformed from ‘I–It’ to ‘I–Thou’. As William White (2008, p. 8) has pointed out, this shift requires a profound ‘awareness and respect for others as well as an authenticity of engagement with encounter’. One way of imagining such a shift is to first assert the importance of relationships (as being good in) themselves and to acknowledge both the existence and the potential of what Connolly (1991) refers to as the ‘inter-subjective’. Within the community development framework presented here, the transition out of the I–It logic is a necessary pre-condition for community building praxis, determined not least by the inability of such a logic to sustain, nor engage the kinds of ‘relationships’ required. In moving beyond this singular subjective and towards an ‘inter-subjective’ mode of thinking, the cornerstone of community is laid.

Building on the cornerstone of this kind of relationship, community development is an orientation towards relating to others in ways that are mutual, loving, caring, reciprocal and, crucially, purposeful. A clear statement of purpose adds the critical edge of praxis to our work. As practitioners of development we are clear that while we are purposefully engaging in the **fully** human work of community building (which entails I–Thou or inter-subjective relationships), there is also a strategic purposefulness enfolded into wanting to hear people’s stories, understand concerns, an integral stage of enabling people to move those stories into public processes of social change.

Corresponding to this sociality is a particular geometry of dialogue, described technically in terms of first, second and third movements that have been articulated and drawn here to offer directionality for community practice (Figure 1). As interpreted by Kelly and Sewell (1988), Buber identified three connected and enfolding ‘movements’ in our dialogue with others. The idea of three spiralling movements clarifies our first geometrical shape. There is also directionality within the movements and shape.
For instance, ‘first movement’ interaction occurs when we present ourselves to another party; we say who we are and why we are here. ‘Second movement’ dialogue occurs when there is a response from the other to our first movement statements. ‘Third movement’ dialogue is our response to their response. It requires us to be attentive to what is being said, to listen to and connect with what is being communicated. True dialogue, as suggested by Buber, necessarily goes through all three movements, folding one into another, back and forth in reciprocal fashion. Buber describes this process of establishing mutual or developmental relationships as a condition of moving from ‘I’ (first movement) to ‘You’ (second movement) to ‘We’ (third movement).

The development journey that emerges from this sort of social and technical model comes with some risks when a practitioner engages in a context that is increasingly ‘technical’, ‘professional’ and ‘ends-oriented’. Holding an agenda ‘too tightly’, for instance, negates the dialogical requirements of an effective first and second movement and blocks the possibility of a third movement.

**Stage 2: the sociality of hospitality and geometry of moving from dyads to triads**

Assuming that a practitioner has engaged in the sociality and geometrical movements described earlier, the next stage of the work is to build a community development process by engaging others, because at this point the process is confined to the initiating agent and what we refer to as the ‘story teller’ or the responding agent. The practice of community development is, if nothing else, a praxis that enables a group of people to work together to bring about social change through public action. So while ‘community’ is experienced in the kind of relationship described earlier, that is,
inter-subjectively as in I–Thou, this is but a first step. The discipline of community practice now requires extending the invitation, so that others may participate and for people to accompany one another in conscientious public action.

The sociologist Georg Simmel (Wolff 1964, p. 139ff) may be useful in framing the invitation and ‘interaction’. He brings to our attention the significant transitions that take place when we move from ‘community as two people’ (dyads) to a sociality of three (triads). Simmel argues that there is a qualitative difference in moving to triads whereby the closeness of two (the Buber I–Thou) is disturbed by the more difficult requirements that comes through the introduction of a third party. The third person can always be felt to be intruding upon the stability of the dyad. Within this framework of practice, there is an inherent paradox in the inclusion of a third person. On the one hand, Andrews (2007), echoing Dethlefs and Kelly (1988), proposes that the triad is the cornerstone and the basic structural unit for community – within a triad, there is space, security, objectivity and subjectivity; on the other hand, as Simmel argues, the emergence of the third party invokes a new set of challenges to each person, which could manifest instability, insecurity or trepidation over the potential threat of including an ‘outsider’. In order to make this geometric shift, the inclusion of the third party must be preceded by a preparededness to welcome others. So that the paradox does not result in simply further consolidating the dyadic relationship, to the exclusion of other meaningful (and we maintain critical) actors, the triad must be regarded as a building block and not an end in itself.

Theoretically, we draw on Jacques Derrida’s (2001) notion of ‘community’ as hospitality (Caputo, 1997, p. 108) when reflecting on this shift because of the potential paradox within the social practice. According to Caputo, the problem with the idea of community arises, for Derrida, out of its association with ‘military formation’, which Derrida understands as ‘the kissing cousin’ of the word ‘munitions’, that is, ‘to have a communio is to be fortified on all sides, to build a common defence, as when a wall is put up around the city to keep the stranger or the foreigner out’. Gazing at the idea of community through the optic of munitions implies that community can be as much about the exclusion of other people as inclusion (Caputo, 1997, p. 108). To counter this tendency towards exclusion, we maintain that community ‘as three people’ needs to be constructed as an explicit interim goal. This, we believe, casts a positive first light on the triadic form, one which recasts new members as ‘welcomed’ assets as opposed to ‘unwelcomed risks’.

Within a triad, no one person can control all the relationships or dictate the common space. Ideally, there are always two other people who have a
relationship independent of that person. In place of a relationship premised on dominance and control, the framework promotes the value of trust. Trust is, therefore, a deeper requirement of the triad than that of the dyad. Given the potentiality for apprehension over the involvement of the third party, trust plays a vital role in the positive reception of hospitality, in stabilizing the relationships, in fostering an intimacy between the three agents and in creating an environment that is conducive to cooperation and productive mutualism. The capacity of each person to enter into a community of hospitality alludes to a key social practice that is central to community development. While many groups are able to build collectives, it is the other-oriented welcoming of the stranger that is characteristic of the principles of community development that we wish to articulate. This ‘open quasi-community’ (Caputo, 1997. p. 121) is an affirmation of a commitment to always remain open and to be purposeful in this. Holding an analysis alongside the practice of this second stage requires an awareness that some negative or subversive forces will be at play, including, for example, a fear of others, a culture that is ‘risk-adverse’ with its accompanying reluctance to acknowledge the positive potential of engaging with the ‘unknown’.

It would be clear to the readers that within the proposed approach, the corresponding geometrical practice is to move from the dyad (I–Thou) of a single relationship characterized by two people to a triad relationship characterized by three people. Within the geometry of such a practice, this quantitative shift from two people (one relationship) to three people (three relationships) represents a significant number of qualitative changes. For Dethlefs and Kelly (1988), the significance of the triad is that for the first time, the number of people involved equals the number of direct relationships (three people = three relationships). They also argue that the nature of these relationships changes for the first time:

as soon as one person has whispered a plan of action to another, the action has made the plan action […] The real nature of the public becomes evident and finds it’s source in this ‘threelfold cord’, for an agreement between two people is consolidated in a very special way by the inclusion of a third person. Alone we occupy all the relationships; with two we share the half, with three the third. In a three person relationship, although everyone may be party to an agreement, no one can occupy all the relationships (Dethlefs and Kelly, 1988, p. 18).

The significance of this shift for Dethlefs and Kelly is the new trust required within this threefold cord because, as they rightfully point out that ‘[a]ll persons within the triad are subjective, interactive or objective and this makes it difficult for an outsider to control’ (Dethlefs and Kelly, 1988, p. 19).
Within the Queensland developmental community, this geometrical practice is known by its technical name: the ‘0–1–3’ method. It highlights the move from one person (zero relationships) through to two people (one relationship) and finally through to three people (three relationships), hence 0–1–3 (Kelly, 2008, p. 71). An application of the 0–1–3 method would unfold as follows:

A practitioner meets a community member (A) who expresses concerns about an issue – for instance, no organic food is being produced locally.

The same practitioner meets another community member (B) who expresses a similar concern.

The practitioner then prepares A to meet B to reach back to A.

All three get together to purposefully consider what they can do (hence 0–1–3; a movement from one person with zero relationships to two people characterized by one relationship and then finally three people with three relationships).

The 0–1–3 concept does not mean that community life is centred upon the fate of such small groups, that is, groups of three. The sociality of hospitality and the geometrical shift from dyads to triads simply clarify the principles of the basic structural unit for social action. Figures 2–4 are a series of three pictures depicting the geometrical relationships of this building block.

This geometry can be contrasted with the geometry of case management, individual service delivery or even group work practice, where the professional or the worker remains central within the diagram. Clearly, the spatiality and shape of the practice are profoundly different within each kind of practice, and we recognize the temporal role of workers within various relational contexts (Figure 5).

Practitioners need to be aware that the 0–1–3 method can become distorted if the movement from dyad to triad is not infused with the principles identified in stage 1. Again, we caution practitioners about the risk of allowing technical demands to overrun the corresponding sociality.

**Stage 3: the sociality of networking and geometry of web weaving**

While hospitality and triads are the social and geometrical building blocks of the community, they are certainly not the endpoint of community development practice. It is proposed that the next level of community development practice requires the weaving together of community-orientated networks involving people willing to act cooperatively in order to bring about the social change that is desired. At this level, community
development practice requires a community of people defined as a ‘group of people networked together that is engaged in purposeful social action’. The key social practice at this stage of community development work is networking (Gilchrist, 2004).

John Paul Lederach names the corresponding geometrical task as ‘web making’, arguing that web making requires strategic networking as a purposeful activity within peaceful community building (Lederach, 2005,

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**Figure 2** Primary geometric unit

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**Figure 3** Primary geometric shape

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**Figure 4** Primary geometric process

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... 0–1–3

The primary organizing unit in which a personal concern is linked through relationship first with one other person, and then with at least one more.

Within this tiny but powerful set of AUTHENTIC relationships and agreements, we commit to becoming active.

I share my concerns with someone else

We agree!

I bring all agreeing parties together

Who also agrees!

I share my concern with one more person

I (worker) have a concern
The sociality of networking requires careful practices that ‘weave relationships and connections that create the social spaces that form the invisible fabric of human community . . .’ (ibid, p. 101). Within community development practice, the intention is to move beyond the invisible web of relationships that make up community life in more general mundane terms (such as we have alluded to in our distinction between sociability and sociality). The goal is to purposefully weave networks of people who have decided that they want to take purposeful public action (and who are not solely together on account of circumstance).

The importance of active membership is also captured by Dethlefs and Kelly (1988, p. 1) in their distinction of ‘network analysis’ and ‘networking’. They hold that network analysis refers to practitioners analysing and describing ‘the nature and shape of relationships between people’, whereas networking is the purposeful ‘mobilizing and linking people together about their concerns, their work, their struggles, laughter and celebration’ (ibid). Such purposeful networking ensures the possibility of cooperative and creative synergy, where the whole is more effective than the sum of total individuals and where the paradigm moves from observation to action.

Technically, there is a particular geometry to web weaving. For example, Lederach’s observational work emphasizes the contribution of spatial thinking in understanding the technical processes of web weaving. He argues that ‘the very language used to describe the web-making process is, in and of itself, a lexicon of building networks for strategic social change’ (Lederach, 2005, p. 81). His diagram (Figure 6) identifies some of the key stages of building and strengthening webs. His work enables us to re-think the technical processes of strategic (and action-orientated) web weaving.
Homer-Dixon (2006) highlights the potential vulnerabilities of building webs that are over-reliant on hubs. He argues (Homer-Dixon, 2006, p. 117ff) that strong webs require many nodes and minimal hubs. The problem with hubs is that if within a community development process a person who is acting as a hub ‘drops out’, then the whole network is left vulnerable to collapse. Thus a geometrical understanding of community development practice emphasizes the value and complexity of technically astute and skilful web weaving. The geometrical implications are that a practitioner needs to become aware of the potential strengths and weaknesses of complex networks of connected people, organizations and institutions as per the work of practitioners—theorists such as Gilchrist (2004). An understanding of the geometry of our practice also ensures that we become disciplined weavers of the web conscious of where we situate ourselves within the web itself.

One of the key goals of this kind of networking is building resilient networks. Such a goal brings to the fore the need for careful consideration of
issues such as hubs, nodes and kinds of networks. For example, networking social practices that locate the community practitioner, or any key person, as a central hub within a web can create the perception of increased stability within the web. Our concern, as practitioner-theorists, is that having practitioners occupy this central position within the network will actually have the inverse effect of increasing the vulnerability of that web by reducing the resilience and effectiveness of the networking practice. Attuned to the goal of building resilient communities and robust community development, the co-creative work of building more nodes and less hubs reflects better technical approach to enabling community development practice.

Social capital theory is also useful in thinking about the sociality of networking. Diverse kinds of social capital such as bonding, bridging and linking ensure that again practitioners are attuned to the goal of building resilient networks. Nurturing bonding social capital requires networking people together or geometrically weaving a web of like-minded people. The web of relationships might be characterized by ‘strong trust’, but the type of community created from this kind of networking and web weaving can undermine societal resilience when facing change pressures. Such webs can easily fall into the trap of excluding others, de-linking from people who, by their mere presence, are able to challenge and grow social perspectives. Within a world that is struggling with demographic changes related to diversity and coexistence, resilient communities require purposeful networking across differences, hence the need for web weaving that also builds and reinforces the significance of bridging social capital.

For Dethlefs and Kelly (1988, p. 10), echoing the insights into Lederach (2005, p. 81), another key element of networking requires understanding the spatial dimension of the practice. They argue that ‘it is an attempt to substitute space for organization and to link need with resources as directly as possible, with as little spatial separation [. . .] possible between need and resource’. For example, in Figure 7, A, B and C are people. They are linked together in relationships and are also linked spatially to the needs and resources.

In weaving such a network, the practitioner must avoid adopting a position of control over the functions of the web. A diffuse network of ‘nodes’ connected by purposeful (but not instrumental) relationships must prevail over centralized ‘hubs’. By structuring the network as shown in Figure 7, people are linked directly to resources, thereby allowing them to bypass practitioners. The crucial point at this stage is to avoid weaving a web, whereby the practitioner is the key link (hub) between people and need to resource. The key contention here is that gate-keeping invokes further, and unnecessary, barriers to accessing resources in addition to changing
the community-resource dynamic. This, we argue, runs contrary to the ethic of empowering for change.

The size of the web is also important to understand within our geometrical practice. Looking at the above diagram we can infer how quickly the number of relationships (signified by a line) becomes exponentially large as we add people. If we were to add a hypothetical fourth person (as D), there would be many more relationships. Smaller webs enable people to participate in most of the networked relationships. Larger webs can leave many people feeling disconnected to, or overwhelmed by, the networking activity.

The geometry of the web’s size is captured in the formula below. Practitioners can gauge the rate of increase by comparing the ratio of members to relationships (where \( X \) is the number of people and the result of the equation gives us the number of immediate relationships). We are mindful, therefore, of the geometric pressure placed on the sociality of practice and that as relationship-webs grow, so too will they face challenges in terms of maintaining and incorporating the dialogical spirit developed in earlier stages. This does not point to any inherent flaw in the geometric design, but rather highlights the centrality of hospitality and dialogue as continuous across the social process (Figure 8).

**Stage 4: the sociality of structuring community action and geometry of engaging the horizontal and vertical dimensions**

While the first three stages of this framework have emphasized the relational dimensions of practice, in this stage, we focus on its structural dimensions.

The sociality of community development practice can also be described as structuring community action. The idea of structuring community
action refers to the practice(s) of stabilizing activity over a period of time in some organizational form (and these can be non-formal, formal or a mix of the two). It is structural in the sense that community development processes move from relational webs (such as demonstrated in the previous stage) to structural formations. Underpinning the sociality of such a formative process is the recognition that the concerns of the poor and marginalized are, in many cases, directly related to the structuring of social life. We take here the examples of poverty and power. However, the conditions of poverty may be constructed and understood, overcoming poverty requirements, as a fundamental principle, tackling the conditions of powerlessness.

The corresponding geometrical practice is that of engaging the horizontal and vertical dimensions. While previous discussions have drawn on geometrical patterns of dyads, triads, networks and webs, this section draws on a more hierarchically depicted geometry that highlights social relations of power and social justice. If part of the previous section was informed by social capital theory, this section is primarily informed by theories of social justice. Our approach draws on a geometrical image that highlights both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of practice.

Technically, we propose that from a geometrical perspective, the ‘horizontal’ (poor-to-poor) dimensions of practice can be called ‘community building’ (the emphasis is on the web-weaving practice described in the previous section), since practitioners have engaged in the processes of dialogue, hospitality and networking in building a community development process. The ‘vertical’ dimension of the work is focused on engaging with
people in the context of structures and systems of power. Within the context of community life, there are always relationships in which power is unequally distributed; take, for instance, teachers/students, doctors/patients, citizens/bureaucrats, owners/workers, social workers/clients and other variations of the patron–client model. While such unequal power relations are not problematic in themselves, sometimes the work of community development does require engaging with them. While the horizontal dimension of the work is explicitly concerned with building purposeful webs of relationships between people, the vertical dimension of the work requires a structuring of community action to tackle public issues, including how power is structured between the powerful and less powerful. At the core of this practice is a purposeful structuring of community action towards the vertical, ensuring that resources are allocated fairly based on the principles and practices of social justice including redistributive and commutative justice, democratization (as an ethic biased towards the poor) and human rights.

Again, practitioners need to combine some analysis with the practice model. At this stage in the framework, analysis needs to be considered and not rushed by an imperative to act. This includes thinking through the various dimensions of the public issues, community and political strategies, and the kinds of structures that will sustain the action. This may require practitioners to revise previous stages of practice in order to advance together. Further, some creative thinking needs to take place around what ‘structures’ are most appropriate. Practitioners may wish to reflect upon the virtues of different kinds of ‘structures’, noting that formal structures can easily become an end in themselves.

**Conclusion**

A framework of community development practice has been presented here that identifies four key stages and that proposes a way of thinking about each stage of practice through the prisms of sociality and ‘geometry’. The former illustrates the social processes of community development practice named as nurturing inter-subjectivity, hospitality, networking and structuring. The latter illuminates a particular way of thinking about the technical tasks (in terms of space, shape and direction) of dialogue, moving from dyads to triads, web weaving and engaging the horizontal and vertical dimensions. It is important to understand that such a framework operates on a rendered sense of the ‘real’ – we acknowledge that the ‘real world’ of community practice is much messier than stages and clearly named social and technical processes. However, the framework can signpost ways of thinking about practice that ensures a community development
worker does not ‘get lost’ in the felt chaos. Maintaining a clear understanding of the significance of social processes such as nurturing the intersubjective, hospitality, networking and structuring will stand a practitioner in good stead. While maintaining a clear (and concurrent) understanding of the geometrical shape and direction of dialogue, building triads, web weaving and engaging the horizontal/vertical dimension can ensure that a worker brings technical discipline to the work. The driving principle and underlying ethos of ‘practice’ are that there is a disciplined well-thought-out, tried and tested way of working. We argue that highlighting some staged social and technical processes through the prisms of sociality and geometry should add to that discipline.

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References


