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# Social design: an introduction

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# Social Design: *An Introduction*

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## Introduction

Social design has gained momentum in design research during the last ten years, a development which can be seen as having several roots. Some of these roots go back a few decades, to the writings of Victor Papanek, Nigel Whiteley, and Victor Margolin (Papanek, 1984; Whiteley, 1993; Margolin, 2015), but others are of newer origin, including some initiatives in interaction design and service design. Important research in this regard has been done in Italy (Meroni, 2007; Manzini, 2015), Australia (Dorst, 2015), Scandinavia (Binder, Brandt, Ehn, & Halse, 2015), and the UK (Kimbell, 2014), among others. Several consultancies, such as Participle, IDEO, and Think Public, have also contributed to this development, and at least one book has been published on the relationship between design and the social sciences (Frascara, 2002).

We cannot say we know for sure the reasons behind this surge in interest, but we can point out a few possibilities. Some of these seem to be external to design. For example, the withdrawal of the welfare state in Europe has created markets for semi-public activities, especially in health care and care for the elderly. The financial crisis of 2008 pushed designers to seek more customers from the public sector and from non-governmental organizations. The traditional manufacturing focus of the market for design has, in many key areas, become smaller and more concentrated, resulting in a reduction in traditional job opportunities for designers. Simultaneously, the growth of design education has pushed many young designers to seek new markets, which are being created by a substantial number of complex societal challenges; and design research has given designers new tools to help them work with abstract entities such as services and communities rather than just with things. Whatever the reasons, design is not what it was in 1990; in 2016, it faces a new type of late modernity in which social activities interwoven with things and services create value.

As we noted in the Call for Papers for this special issue of the *International Journal of Design*, there are currently several interpretations of social design. A recent British report classified social design into social entrepreneurship, socially responsible design, and design activism (Armstrong, Bailey, Julier, & Kimbell, 2014). Known for his work on social activism, Markussen (2015) has added social movements to this classification. By now then, we have seen not only a surge in social design, but also the first steps of scholarly discussion about its forms and limits. We can safely say that social design has expanded design beyond its traditional core and scope. It is much harder to say where the limits of social design are and how these limits can best be extended.

For these reasons, it is a good time to take stock of these developments. This is what we have tried to achieve with this special issue, which saw its beginnings in 2014 in the Call for Papers. The call aimed to be inclusive and thus did not set many limits on how social design was to be defined. Rather, it was meant to function as an inkblot that could gather various definitions. The rest of this introduction describes what we saw when the submissions arrived.

## From Submissions to Papers

When we saw the considerable crop of submissions arrive in Fall 2015, we were pleasantly surprised. The outcome looked very promising at first sight. We had 78 submissions from all continents. One additional paper was redirected to the call later, so at the end we had to process 79 papers. When we first went through them, we ranked the submissions by two criteria: their quality and their loose fit to the topic of the special issue. About 20 papers were not up to the journal's standards of quality, for reasons ranging from little or no connection to design literature, missing technique, or flaws in execution of the argument. Another group of papers had no connection to the topic of the call. The largest group of these consisted of papers on media and web designs. We decided early on that although there is no doubt that media and interaction can be seen as social phenomena, they cannot be seen as social design simply by conflating the terms social, communication, and interaction.

After discarding all of these, we had about 30 submissions left. They fell into a few main categories. The largest group consisted of papers reporting on what Armstrong et al. (2014) called socially responsible design, and it consisted of papers on gender, sustainability, inequality, and disabilities (Whiteley, 1993). Another group of submissions aimed at making methodic

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and theoretical contributions, and yet another group reported on design in developing countries. Some submissions were of reasonable quality, but clearly were repurposed from other fields of learning, such as psychology, by merely adding a few design references.

The editorial task we faced was to reduce the number of papers to what we could handle in the review process without sacrificing quality. Submissions in the repurposed group were easy to dismiss. Another group that got an immediate rejection were any papers of poor quality; given the number of submissions in the pool, we had no difficulty in eliminating these ones. A harder decision was to choose which submissions to exclude in the "socially responsible" category. Ultimately, we decided that these papers only served to prove that design can be used for social causes, but left open the question of what makes social design specific.

These decisions reduced the number of full paper submissions to 12. An additional three submissions were included under the category of design cases. When the reviews for these 15 papers came back, we had to reject three of them due to unsatisfactory quality or for being irrelevant to the topic of the special issue. We also excluded two papers that discussed design in developing countries, as we ultimately came to see this approach as representing yet another form of socially responsible design. Two theoretical papers were excluded because reviewers pointed out that though they made promising headway into the area of social design, they did not deliver what they promised.

In the end, five papers survived the process. In terms of what they tell about social design, our definition aligns closely with Manzini (2015). He talks about "social innovation" and urges designers to create new social forms rather than be content with socially responsible design, which follows Papanek and Whiteley in targeting market failures (Armstrong, Bailey, Julier, & Kimbell, 2014). There seem to be several forms of social design that seek to work with existing forms, however, and for this reason we chose not to adopt Manzini's term. We agree with his critique of the limits of traditional social design, but remain cautions of the overtones of his choice of words.

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## Towards "the Social" in Social Design

From these five papers, we can identify several messages about social design. As a prelude, we should point out that we welcomed the geographic spread of the selected papers and the cases they reported on. The research represented in this special issue extends from Northern Europe to Asia, Africa, and South America. Clearly, high-quality work in social design is being done outside its traditional core in Europe and North America.

The first message these papers told us relates to how the writers understood the concept of "the social" in theoretical terms. We had wanted papers that attacked this concept directly, and we were partially successful. We did not find explicit definitions of "social design," but by examining the theoretical backgrounds of the papers, three types of interpretations emerge. Firstly, two of the papers built on what can loosely be called action research. The paper by Yee and White, which looks at community processes by going all the way back to Kurt Lewin's (1946) classic work on action research and organizational transformation, directs us to look at how community building happens through trust building, among other things, how designers can build up community capacities, and how they can align with community leadership. Using different but related terminology, Yang and Sung describe in their paper a case of building a social design platform, also by drawing on the literature on organizational transformation, which itself builds partly on the legacy of action research. Secondly, two papers trace their origins to an amalgam of participatory design and recent literature on social innovation (Ehn, Nilsson, & Topgaard, 2015; Manzini, 2015). The paper by Wang, Bryan-Kinns, and Ji builds on the DESIS network. Its vision of the social comes from systems theory and paints a picture of society as a whole of interconnected parts that ends up in equilibrium after facing disturbances. Del Gaudio, Franzato, and de Oliveira similarly refer to literature on social innovation, but situate it in the work of Michel Foucault (1986) and Anthony Giddens (1990), who attempted to break down the causal link between structures and action, and spoke of productive power and structuration. The way towards change is through small acupunctural studies whose results are then transferred elsewhere through the DESIS network (Manzini and Rizzo, 2011). Thirdly, there is a conceptual paper by Koskinen and Hush, who distinguish three different ways in which designers can understand the social, utopian, molecular, and sociological. One implication of their paper is that the definition of "the social" depends on the ideological and practical background of the researchers involved, and how this definition in turn is reflected in design projects. Their paper shows that social design can be built on many types of theoretical definitions.

The second message found in the papers selected for this special issue relates to the methodic. Every paper reported some kind of intervention: Yee and White in the UK and Australia, Yang and Sung in Taiwan, Wang and his coauthors in China, del Gaudio and her co-writers in Brazil, and Koskinen and Hush in Brazil, Finland, and Scotland. Pawar and Redström's design case is from Sweden. Three words that keep reappearing in these papers are co-creation, participatory design, and social innovation (see Sanders and Stappers, 2013; Ehn et al., 2015; Manzini, 2015).

There are many differences between these methodic approaches, but they also share several features. Most of them encourage design researchers to work on a small scale and to use various types of design things in their work (see Binder et al., 2011). For instance, co-creation usually happens in workshops enriched with various types of design elements and tools. Similarly, participatory design combines fieldwork with real users and a variety of things such as paper prototypes and cardboard mock-ups. Literature on social innovation builds on the laboratory metaphor, but these laboratories are always connected to real situations and push designers out of the studio. Thus, each paper in the selection builds on some sort of fieldwork. Social design seems to go to those places and spaces in which people live and works with them; the relationship is collaborative and usually respectful of local habits and customs.

The third message revealed in these papers relates to the limits of current social design. With the exception of Koskinen and Hush, every paper reports work that was done in some kind of small community. Looking back at the review process, we believe this tells us something about the current limits of social design. On the one hand, small communities can be understood without years of training in sociology, law, economics, or philosophy. On the other hVvand, papers that tried to make larger arguments about design and politics, that related design to large-scale social structures, or that treated society as a philosophical construct failed in the review process. We believe this goes back to some of the constituent practices of the design world. Contemporary design practices are mainly construed to support creating objects, interactive devices, spaces and intelligent systems, but these practices give designers little help in the area of abstract social entities and how to work with them.

If there is a positive message here, it may be this: Designers seem to be well equipped to deal with what the early sociologists would have called *Gemeinschaft*, communities characterized by what one of the founding fathers of sociology, Émile Durkheim (1951), called mechanic solidarity. In these small communities, people know each other and can anticipate the consequences of their actions on other people by relying on lay sociology. Designers are much weaker when they work in the *Gesellschaft*, or societies characterized by what Durkheim called organic solidarity. Here, actions are parts of long chains of action and rules of governance that make it difficult to see the consequences of the actions. Pressing a button may move billions in a millisecond, and while it creates profits for the owners of the mining company, it may also slash three thousand jobs in a mining town in the Andes. Likewise, the signature of the President may move billions from the pockets of the taxpayer to corporations, or vice versa. Two grand modern structures of governance, the state and the market, often stand beside community networks and enter into the very constitution of social problems. Understanding these kinds of complicated linkages is the bread and butter of the social sciences, but designers are still ill equipped to deal with them.[1]

If this observation is correct, social design in its current stage may do well at the scale of a village or an informal organization, but its prospects of success are far smaller when it has to deal with the abstract structures of governance typical to late modernism. Both the current vocabularies of design and the methodic practices of design start to crumble when it extends its scope from the scale of the community. If social design expands its scope to the complexities of modern organized bureaucracies, networks, democratic mechanisms, and systems of resource allocation, not to mention Bruno Latour's (2005) actor-networks, it inevitably faces complicated conceptual, theoretical, and methodological issues it is not yet equipped to deal with, even though attempts such as transition design (Irwin, Kossoff, Tonkinwise, & Scupelli, 2015) and paradigmatic innovation (Brand & Rocchi, 2012; Gardien, Djajadiningrat, Hummels, & Brombacher, 2014) are pushing design in that direction. If we are right on this, we have to add a word of caution about going too fast or too far in the direction of a larger, society-wide scale, although this cautionary observation also points toward several research directions for the future.

## Theories of Change

These considerations finally take us to what this special issue of the journal has to tell about how social designers interpret change. Looking back over the papers that were selected, we can see that some of the approaches used have historical roots on the left side of the political spectrum. In particular, participatory design traces its roots to Scandinavian Marxist movements of the sixties and seventies (see Ehn et al., 2015), and although the social innovation approach behind the DESIS network is not explicitly political, it leans vaguely to the left in its belief that grassroots projects are a way to bypass unsustainable economic and political structures of society (see Falabrino, 2004: 19; Manzini & Rizzo, 2012). The Colonsay case builds on Marxist sociology. Other approaches are less radical in terms of their politics. For instance, the roots of Kurt Lewin's (1946) action research are in social and industrial psychology rather than on the left, and Sanders and Stappers' (2013) co-creation builds on the legacy of user-centeredness, which largely rejected the political ambitions of participatory design.

Again, these approaches are designed to work in technology development, workplaces, and *Gemeinschafts*, but they lose a good deal of their power when the scale is extended to the *Gesellschaft*. The IKE project described by Koskinen and Hush illustrates the problem. The project was a hybrid of several barely visible agendas, including business interests, government politics, administrative agendas, and change agents with an unclear political agenda. This is typical of mature democracies more generally. In them, power is invisible and omnipresent, and not clearly in anyone's hands. This was also one of the driving forces in the paper by del Gaudio and her colleagues. If this Foucauldian insight is valid, one implication for social designers is that they cannot choose their sides in the manner of early participatory designers. Whatever commitments they make, the implications of their choices are not in their control. Social design projects have ambiguous ends and articulate several agendas and visions, and their outcomes are ambiguous and unforeseeable.

This collection suggests several ways forward toward the bigger issues, however. One way would be to take seriously the implications of the analysis of Koskinen and Hush. Molecular

social design is happy with small changes, and its potential for larger-scale change is yet to be explored, but the other two approaches they describe open doors for working at a larger scale. First, the approach of sociological social design, as described at the end of their paper, would give designers tools to understand those social structures that produce the circumstances people take as given, but that in fact produce outcomes that work against their well-being. The price for this approach would be having to take the social sciences into greater consideration, which would push design away from its practical base. Second, what they call utopian social design has significant empirical and critical potential also on a bigger scale. By building utopic discourses supported by designs, social designers could point out alternatives to current realities, perhaps in the manner of modernist utopias in architecture or the speculative designs of Dunne and Raby (2013). The utopian approach has several problems, of course, and it runs the risk of being seen as so unrealistic that it won't be taken seriously outside the field of design. No doubt Paris could be built better were it first wiped out, but is it the designers' birthright to make proposals like this without taking seriously the compromise-heavy world of politics? Where does utopia turn into a brave new world, where only some animals are equal?

For us, this special issue of the *International Journal of Design* reveals that social design has already extended the scope of design and that there are several ways to approach its form of design. Current social design practices are limited in scope in terms of their power, but social design can overcome these limits by developing richer discourses of the social by building on its own legacy, using the expertise from both worlds and joining forces between social scientists and designers, next to the other stakeholders involved in social design projects. It has already made a serious contribution to design by raising questions about the nature of "the social" as an object of design, and no doubt it has paved the way to better futures. For us the mood of this issue, then, is optimistic.

## Endnotes

1. The distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* is from Friedrich Tonnies (1957). Obviously, they were not the only ones who tried to find vocabularies to describe changes in industrial society. Karl Marx's (1975) term of choice was "alienation" and Max Weber's was "bureaucratic rationality" (Weber, 1978). Among design writers, the most vocal critic of modernism is still Tomas Maldonado (1972), whose disillusionment came from his interpretations of Auschwitz, the Vietnam War, and the ecological crisis of the sixties, and was built on the critical theory of Adorno and Horkheimer.

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