# Beyond Progressive Design – Part 1

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EDITORIAL

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Beyond Progressive Design from the beginning has been a conversation: the result of reflecting on our own specific practices and expanding the conversation by inviting in others. The call took the shape of 'beyond progressive design' because we wanted to consider what the recent plethora of 'social design' activity adds up to, what issues are emerging around it and whether it marks an important shift. Certainly, we perceived a need to foster constructive critical thinking around socially engaged design. In the CFP we stated:

Inclusive Design, Universal Design, Design for All, Human-centred Design, Co-Design Participatory Design, Design for Social Innovation – such new and not-so-new practices often claim to engage with people in a variety of meaningful, rather than simply instrumental ways, while attempting to codify a relationship between designing and taking

**lab and has managed to 110 collaborative projects to date with companies from across the world. With degrees in Mechanical Engineering and Industrial Design Engineering, he has worked in the automotive, product design and multimedia design sectors. Transport, technology and design for cognitive impairment are key areas of his research, as well as how inclusive design relates to social innovation and social sustainability.**

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responsibility for a diversity of needs, points of view and life positions.

And these are just a few of the questions we posed:

– Can the available forms of 'progressive' designing be sustainable (as in ongoing) without addressing larger systemic and political forces that perpetuate certain cultural habits or inequities?
– What influence can design have on systemic and political change or development?
– Can people/users be equal partners with designers when structurally they are in a less powerful position? Should users be equal partners or contributors?
– Is the concept of need sufficiently interrogated by 'progressive' approaches to designing?

The resulting papers do indeed provide a much needed broadening of the critical dialogue while simultaneously providing a platform to continue the conversation further to an even wider range of voices and participants.

Given the richness of the contributions and the emergent results of the discussion we have split the papers across two issues – the first grouped to highlight issues of the social/political, looking more explicitly out and beyond design; the second 'looking in' and focussed more closely on situated contexts and how design is being reconfigured as the designer, as conventionally understood, is becoming decentred.

What follows are a few observations and positions of our own, here on the social/sociality, in the next issue on the human/ humanism. They are deliberately provisional. We offer them as a start to the conversation – that can begin right away at a comment space opened up at *Design Philosophy Politics* http:// designphilosophypolitics.informatics.indiana.edu/.

Our observations are clustered under these headings:

1. where is the social in design?
2. what do we mean by the social anyway?
3. where is design in the social?
4. the papers

## Where Is the Social in Design?

How are we defining the word 'social' in those design practices that are exploring expanded contexts of engagement today? Sometimes it appears as an add-on adjective to add surface value to a design project, and other times it is deeply rooted in a project, both in its process and outputs. Many designers involved in social/ humanitarian/social innovation projects are working with vague, uninformed notions of the social or with none at all. There is a pressing

need to move beyond the default definitions constructed through our everyday experiences and limited disciplinary precedents to consider whether 'social' is just a label or whether it represents a deep-seated move in design orientation and thinking.

That this "form" of design calls itself social is a bit of a misnomer. All designing is social in that it is embedded in exchange and social relations. What is actually being focused on is the systemic or the "societal". What it means to contribute to a broader landscape of socially relevant matters is the challenge for work in this area. The lack of models in design for understanding how to position design disciplines/practices in relation to the current state of global transition makes for both a lack of critical frameworks while offering a scenario ripe for exploration and contribution!

Much social design and the sources it draws on have high ambitions, citing 'systemic change' as the ultimate goal.[1] But systemic change is not likely to be achieved on a project-by-project basis – unless the activity of social design is to multiply exponentially AND those undertaking it become much better informed about the nature of the social and its inevitable connection to the political. A good starting point is to develop awareness of the social relations of designing, especially in humanitarian projects where designers often disavow their structurally powerful position *vis a vis* 'served' communities. Linked to this is the need to recognise one's own ethnocentrism (which though not able to be 'cast aside', needs always to be taken into account). A particular form of design(er) ethnocentrism arises from the attachment to twentieth century models of object-based design. This needs to be reconfigured: subsumed to a preparedness to become 'a designer of processes and platforms that can enable/empower at multiple levels of social orientation.'[2]

Social and cultural anthropology has looked towards traditional forms of ethnography to make sense of people's daily lives, understand their interactions, actions and communication, all of which form a key part of 'being social'. Design, as a time-pressured profession with a creative base, has co-opted and redefined ethnographic methods, giving rise to the emerging discipline of 'design ethnography'. As a key aspect of adopting ethnographic practice in design is to understand more of a person's perception of the object, environment, system, or service that they are engaged with, an argument could be put forward as to whether this is really social or not. Is the engagement between person and artefact a linear transaction; does it only truly become 'social' when it involves another human being or is directed at them? Or are seemingly singular interactions social even in their a-sociality? So, when we talk about 'social' in the context of design, do we really mean design that effects social interactions, an aim to involve people in the design process, design that seeks to address social problems, or is it a catch-all phrase for design that benefits society?

The word 'social' can mean something very different at the scale of the individual person and their community than it does at the level of political rhetoric, and its use in the design arena needs to be articulated and considered rather than loosely applied.

## What Do We Mean by the Social Anyway?

Here is a huge question that could lead to a lengthy account of the history of social theory. We won't do that here. Instead some evocations.

Point one: a simple definition of the social would be along the lines of 'structured relations between people'. In fact there can't be relations that are not structured in some way or another. At this level, the social is not exclusive to human beings. A band of primates or a herd of elephants or a pack of wolves have a social structure. Hierarchies, dominant and submissive, weak and strong, top dog, alpha male – as soon as sociality is evoked, hot on its heels come relations of power, struggle, competition, contestation; but also co-operation, alliances for mutual benefit, the giving of gifts, the granting of favours, sacrifice, altruism – which of course are interpretations, projections, and certainly not unconnected to ideologies and intellectual agendas (thus, for example, animal sociality used to be observed and interpreted mainly in terms of competition, dominance, etc, but in more recent years, co-operation, shared parenting and the like have been played up). But even when steeped in that biologism that projects animal studies onto human behavior (as well as that anthropocentrism that reverses the projection), it cannot be escaped that sociality is never natural, always learned. Socialisation is induction into the structures of sociality; it is learning to play by the rules of the game. Education is a primary means of socialisation. And let's not forget that being inducted into a professional practice (like design) through formal education is an instance of socialisation.

The second big point is that sociality does not exist in a vacuum; it is always located within the specificity of already given conditions ('given' here does not mean static or immutable). This (structured but dynamic) already-given includes the materiality of the 'natural'; it also includes the naturalised artificial environment as well as immaterial structures that structure – institutions, practices, modes of thinking and doing – which in a large sense are all part of the 'ever-present historical now' (as named by Benjamin).

Moving on from sociality to that which might be misconstrued as something of a higher level: society. This is a big idea which exists only as an abstraction according to Latour (as discussed in **Matt Kiem's** paper) and which doesn't exist at all according to Margaret Thatcher (her infamous words: 'there is no such thing as society'). Yet it is a powerful enough idea to be lived and felt as oppressive, as with the notion of society as a repository of values and a monolithic regulator of behaviors. 'Society' is often evoked

as homogenous and flattened out, yet it never is. It's not viable to think it in this way while the goods and 'bads' of society remain unequally distributed. As said, you cannot think the social without thinking of relations between people, and that in itself makes the question of power unavoidable – whether micro, macro, formal, informal, interpersonal, group vs. group, individual vs. group, and so on. And from there one has to ask, 'how, in this particular situation, is power structured?' What is the nature of its holding power? What are its points of vulnerability? What is it doing to those caught within its structures? Who is benefiting? Who is losing? And how might understanding the operation of power in particular contexts and its potential vulnerabilities be exploited so as to counter inequity? These are vital issues, explored incisively in the papers by **Shana Agid**, **Kenton Card and Matt Kiem**.

## Where Is Design in the Social?

It becomes clear that an understanding of the social cannot be provided from within design discourses; it cannot be provided, for example, by simply embracing human-centred design methods. Human-centred approaches do not singularly prove to be vehicles for design intents that wish to address expanded social contexts and relationships (or series of political and power relationships).

This opens the conversation as to where design looks to for frameworks to parse larger social contexts. What can the designer contribute? How does the designer confront the fact that they are forwarding an agenda and what agenda do they choose? How is that justified? Such questions challenge the service model of design, foregrounding the ethics of practice in a fundamental sense. These are also questions about agency and commitment[3], and in the way we've posed them, they also reveal a shifting back and forth between professional and activist ontologies – which are frequently in conflict. Another question underlines this: what matters most – wanting to preserve design as it is currently understood or wanting to understand and contribute to the social challenges of our time even if that means abandoning 'being a designer'? It can be argued that if one is willing to do the latter, this could in fact transform the nature of one's design practice rather destroying it. This goes to Tony Fry's notion of redesigning design as a 'redirective practice' a 'meta-discipline' that "elevates the seriousness, importance and futuring potential of design."[4] Importantly, this is not something that can occur at the level of abstraction, "rather it is a matter of having redirective practice in formation and process so that the redesign of design can occur in the course of working on a specific project."[5]

Defining design by what it has made in the past proves to be even "formally" insufficient. If design is a poster, book, blender, building, a service or an experience, systemic change is inconceivable. Others who also find this hard to see abandon form completely

and often jump to 'design thinking' as a systemic 'tool'. But if we define design by what it could be – even if only based on what is available now – for example, mobile technologies, computation, serial production, inexpensive materials – this opens possibilities of scale, access and new abilities that at one time would seem unfathomable – enabling the design of platforms that are open to multiple modes of participation. We need a formal design vocabulary that speaks to what is now and possible (multiplicity) not what once was (singularity).

## The Papers

The papers in this issue engage explicitly with the nature of the social and the political in recent social/ humanitarian design. Their perspectives are connected to practice, but adopt a critical distance from it. **Shana Agid** in 'Social Design and its Political Contexts' seeks to expose "the mostly unspoken political contexts" of these kinds of design practices by critical reflection on a project where design students worked with an organisation that provides support for people returning from the prison system. The paper carefully elaborates seemingly small incidents and interactions during the course of the project that revealed social inequity as indivisibly lived and structural. Agid argues that the defining of 'needs' in such contexts is inevitably political and cannot be delimited by just looking for 'what needs to be designed' in conventional design terms. Given their training, designers are most likely to incline towards artefactual solutions to perceived social problems, which according Agid's argument may be of little value or even counterproductive. This is borne out, and made nuanced, in 'Participatory Design as an Approach to Social Innovation' **by Karine Freire, Gustavo Borba and Luisa Diebold** which compares two design projects undertaken for service organizations in Brazil: one aiming at improving the income of a group of women, in which the designed object proved to be unsuccessful as a catalyst for social change, and another where a different designed artefact inserted into a different context – a health education program for people with diabetes – proved to be effective. The difference, as they argue in detail, centred on the nature and degree of stakeholder participation.

The artefact is less of a problem for **Matt Kiem** who in 'Designing the Social and the Politics of Social Innovation' shows that design is already deeply embedded in social processes inasmuch as the social is mediated through designed materiality. His paper gives a concise account of the ways in which some recent social theorists (such as Elizabeth Shove and Bruno Latour) have foregrounded material practices, arguing that this 'practice theory' needs to be taken notice of by designers/researchers because the materiality of social practices inevitably encompasses designed things. He then connects this to design for social innovation which will always entail

"designing with/for/against/and amidst the dynamic of what has already been designed" and sets out to assess "how useful design for social innovation is as a strategy for displacing the established and unsustainable social relations that we currently have with forms that can develop the ability to sustain."

In social change projects, the relation between the designer and those for whom the designer designs is crucial, but the nuances of such relations often go unseen. Is it a relation of imposition, soft coercion, co-operation, or mutual exchange? The politics of a design project are located at this interface as well as at the large scale of institutions and the State. The assumptions and mind-sets in play in the conception and setting up of a project are crucial: **Freire, Borba and Diebold's** discussion shows that meaningful participation is enabled or disabled from the outset. The social relations of 'progressive design' and their political implications are also explored by **Kenton Card** in 'Democratic Social Architecture or Experimentation on the Poor?' where he discusses architectural projects of Auburn University's Rural Studio; the activities of Architecture for Humanity; and a housing project where graduate architecture students partnered with a Latino community in Austin, Texas. Using these 'ethnographic snapshots', he finds "three structural failures that could expose the paradox of social architecture – resulting in the opposite outcome of what was intended" and further, asks, "how do we gauge success when 'participatory' practices are contested by locals?" His assessment might, to some, seem bleak, but he goes on to explore where socially concerned architects might find enabling knowledge – in the theorisations of the urban and the political of Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey and Slavoj Žižek – and where they might seek allied practices, for example, the political action of the 'Right to the City Alliance'.

Architectural values and community values came into conflict in projects discussed by **Card**, and clearly it is inappropriate to impose 'solutions' upon communities, but what about where the project is setting out consciously to change community values – to change cultural practices rather than support and enable them? This is the delicate territory into which **Vera Damazio and Gabriel Leitão** step in their account of 'Design against Domestic Violence'. They present a moving account of the making of a video about non-violent ways of bringing up children, and its first screening to a group of parents in Amazonian Brazil. Interestingly, this was a communication design project, where the designers sought to meet the needs of those delivering the social change program; in this, they drew on Jorge Frascara's theorisations of communication design, which subsume formal aesthetic concerns to questions of change and impact.

We are sure these papers will stimulate your thoughts, and we invite you to comment at *Design Philosophy Politics* http://

designphilosophypolitics.informatics.indiana.edu/ and also to take a look at some substantial papers engaging with similar concerns in the recently launched journal, *Zoontechnica*.[6]

## Notes

1. See for example, Robin Murray, Julie Caulier-Grice, Geoff Mulgan, *The Open Book of Social Innovation*, The Young Foundation, 2011, as cited in Freire et al's paper in this issue.

2. Of course, this is recognised by some practitioners. Speaking of the Bayview Rural Village project (in Virginia, USA) architect Maurice D. Cox said, "putting an organisational structure in place – even before we had a design concept – turned out to be the most strategic decision made during our design process", an action that ultimately led to Bayview Citizens for Social Justice Inc. becoming "the largest affordable housing provider on the Eastern Shore." Architecture for Humanity (ed.), *Design Like You Give a Damn,* London: Thames & Hudson, 2006, 162-3.

3. A question explored from an existentialist perspective by Philippe d'Anjou, see for example, 'The Existential Self as a Locus of Sustainability in Design' Design Philosophy Papers 3–4/2007 (online) and *Design Philosophy Papers Collection Four*, ed. A-M Willis, 2008 (print).

4. Tony Fry, *Design Futuring: Sustainability, Ethics and New Practice*, Oxford: Berg, 2009, 54-5.

5. Ibid.

6. See especially Nada Filipovic's 'Taking to the Street' and Jason Robertson and Daniel Sobol's 'The Designer's Paradox'. http://zoontechnica.com