User-Centred Design

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EDITORIAL

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This issue was to be on design ethics, but we have still to receive enough papers of a sufficiently high standard to publish, and so have delayed it. It is not too late to submit proposals (but please read the brief first). The deadline for final papers on this theme is now 16 June 2004.

But because there was such a good response to 'user centred design' (with far more offers of papers than for previous themes) this issue has been brought forward. Those who submitted full papers are to be commended for their hard work and ability to meet the deadline.

The themes chosen for DPP calls-for-papers are usually along the lines of 'design and ….' this in order to provoke thinking beyond the limits of design conceived of as a professional practice. Adopting the theme of 'user-centred design' departs from this, as this is an already recognised direction within design practice.

The papers selected for publication constitute a broad spectrum of understandings and dispositions towards user-centred design and its perceived problems. The take-up of the issues flagged in our call for papers is extremely varied, but no-one has really been willing to explore user-centred design in the relational

context of ontological designing and the dominant condition of unsustainability. To consider why this might be so, this editorial introduction is in two parts – first, the original call-for-papers statement is reproduced; second, is an introduction to the papers.

Also in this issue, Anders Ronnau takes issue with John Wood's use of physics in his paper on 'designing clocks with synergy' in DPP no 4/2003. Tony Fry reflects upon Samer Akkach's essay on Eurocentrism in DPP no 6/2003–4, and there are reviews of the just released English translation of Bruno Latour's *Politics of Nature* and of Harold Nelson and Erik Stolterman's *The Design Way*.

Part 1 – Original Call-for-Papers

'Using it all up – user centred design' – Stating the theme in this way is intended to provoke exploration of the potential contradictions of user-centred design, defined here as an advocated disposition towards designing. User-centred design is often promoted as 'socially responsible' because it focuses on how people actually interact with specific products and designed environments, rather than prioritising product form and appearance.

As a philosophy of practice, user-centred design extols designers to find out more about, and take into account, people's 'needs': e.g., consider how an older person with arthritic hands might open certain types of packaging, how a parent with a stroller might negotiate a shopping centre, how a computer keyboard might be used by a child, and so on.

While professionally, user-centred design can be a useful counter to ego-driven or aesthetically fetishised approaches to designing, and while it often focuses on important practical issues, much goes unquestioned. For example, 'needs' are regarded as self-evident and inherent, while certain (very low) levels of ability or dexterity are taken as normal; likewise attributes like convenience and automatic operation are typically regarded as beneficial. But more significantly, positing 'users' as the privileged source of design problems and solutions, obscures the bigger picture of how designed things actually design those who use them, inscribing needs, attachments, physical and mental habits, and, more generally, making up entire, and entirely familiar, worlds of dwelling and their accompanying capacities, competencies, expectations and much more. This idea – that modes of human being are the product of (interpretatively) being with the designed environments in which humans come to be, has been named as 'ontological designing' (c.f. the work of Terry Winograd & Fernando Flores or Tony Fry).

Is user-centred design able to take account of ontological designing? Should the user be regarded as an *authority* on use or instead as an *effect* of use? How does user-centred design

deal with the issue of products/systems that appear to function extremely effectively or that people are very comfortable with, but which cumulatively, have negative effects? We can think here of all that has been designed to take physical effort out of everyday life – cars, lifts, escalators, remote controls, household appliances, power tools, agricultural machinery, and the whole domain of the televisual – and which has thereby reduced physical fitness. Or, to indicate another dilemma: how can user-centred design deal with people's attachments to products with high levels of environmental damage, albeit distant in time or space from those users? Even more fundamentally, how can user-centred design bring into critical focus the environmental myopia of human centredness (anthropocentrism)?

Part 2 – The Papers

Paul Rothstein and Michelle Tornello Shirey report on their study of how the design industry in the USA understands and deploys user-centred research in design processes. The slippage from user centred design to user centred research, allows the phenomenon to be defined more broadly, not as a mode of design practice that takes an ideological position on the relation between designers and users, but simply as a pragmatic tool to deliver 'more effective design outcomes'. They locate the origins of user-centred research in mainstream design starting with Henry Dreyfuss in the 1940s and 1950s.

Their study makes clear how blurred are the lines between consumer market research and user-centred research intended to feed into the design process. They are interested in finding out whether there is a commonality of understanding among those conducting user-centred research, and in whether its effectiveness can be measured. In this, their concerns are circumscribed within the model of design as service provision.

This appears to be in contrast to the paper by *Peter Lloyd*, which (citing a different body of literature to Rothstein & Tornello Shirey) defines user-centred design as an ideologically motivated practice informed by notions of participatory democracy and posed against the model of the designer as a creative individual who stamps their vision on the material world. His binary is of course tendentious and is undermined by reading his paper alongside Rothstein and Tornello Shirey's, which makes clear just how routine is the incorporation of collected data on users' behaviours and perceptions into the design process.

On the other hand, Lloyd usefully challenges purely functionalist understandings of the relation between products and users. He argues that the value of products lies not in the extent to which they fulfil a simple 'need' or desire but in the meanings and associations they accumulate (or not) for their users over time. Therefore, he

suggests, value cannot be prefigured in a participatory design process.

The two other papers are more deeply grounded in design activity.

Stella Boess revisits her work as a designer of facilities for older people in a sheltered housing co-operative. She questions her initial disposition and motivations as well as the kind of user research carried out and how it was interpreted. Drawing on different theories of interpretation including Deleuze's metaphor of "an Indian who doesn't know how to grow the maize", she looks for what could be learnt and thus now done differently. This centres upon: finding appropriate metaphors for generating the design work; the designers being with, and alongside, the 'users', while acknowledging difference, and being attentive to the fine grain of how people negotiate designed environments to constitute their lives materially and meaningfully.

While Boess states that the question of sustainability is only peripherally considered in her paper, the attentive and quietly questioning approach she takes would seem to have much potential for designing for more sustainable ways of living. It opens up possibilities for seeing how product environments can either limit or extend possibilities for living, how people are distinctively marked by the specificity of the designed environments in which they dwell. For example, the flipside of design research on how physically less able people negotiate facilities designed for the able-bodied would be to examine homes, workplaces and other designed environments that are increasingly being designed to minimise physical effort, and to investigate how this is shaping the performative abilities of 'able' bodies as well as the perceptions of effort, comfort, and wellbeing of those who inhabit these bodies.

The construct 'user-centred design' begs the question 'who is a user?' In the literature, this question rarely gets answered beyond instrumentally descriptive categories (computer-users, car-owners, purchasers of a particular type of product, etc.) Users are often automatically assumed to be consumers (another problematic category). The paper by **Raija Halonen** is a timely reminder that vast numbers of users of the products of design are not consumers, but workers who have little or no choice about the tools, equipment and systems they use in their workplaces. Her study focuses on how a group of factory workers (as information users) responded to efforts to redesign their familiar system of information recording and retrieval.

The papers published here show how idea of 'the user' is mobilised within a variety of design activities and projects, with motivations varying from market research to increase profits through to more ethically inclined aspirations of creating products or systems more in tune with how people's lives are already, rather than imposing 'the new' upon them. Across this spectrum of

difference, it needs to be remembered that a 'user' is first and foremost a particular *subject position*, a delimited construction layered onto persons. At the same time, such is the nature of subjectivity, that those persons subjected to whatever user-construction is in play at that moment (whether in their everyday dwelling in their designed environments or as participants in a focus group being prompted to reflect upon their relation to particular products) can only act within the limits of what's available to them – as language, resources, materiality, etc. Or to put it another way, people as users are shaped by what they use to such an extent that there is no authentic core or fountain of genuine need to be uncovered (by e.g. user-centred researchers) from under the layers of their use habits.

That people can and do change what they use, how they use it and their habits of use is no guarantee of sovereignty either, as such changes are mostly prompted by encounters with new (or mostly images of new) things to use. At this point, we can also see that the concepts of 'use' and 'user' are also restricted by an overt instrumentalism which sits uncomfortably within the vaguer promises and ambiences of the experiential that cluster around so many contemporary products/services. Some designers or researchers attempt to bypass the overly functionalist emphasis of user-centred design and research by seeking to understand people's relation to designed materiality and immateriality in terms of meaning or emotion (hence the interest in 'design and emotion').

But whether the emphasis on the person-artefact relation tends towards the functionalist or the semiotic, there is a problematic buying into subject positions that have been shaped in, and by, the context of an economic and cultural system that is massively inclined towards the production of unsustainability. In these circumstances, should researchers and designers really be trying to probe the psycho-social in order to unearth, and then serve, inauthentic desires? Or is the more urgent task that of designing towards the construction of subject positions that incline towards sustainment? This is the kind of question that is inseparable from design ethics … which we hope to explore in the next issue of DPP.

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