How Do We Transition People from a System that Doesn't Want To Let Them Go?': Social Design and Its Political Contexts

Shana Agid

Published online: 29 Apr 2015.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 33

View related articles

How Do We Transition People from a System that Doesn't Want To Let Them Go?'
Social Design and Its Political Contexts

Shana Agid

Shana Agid is an Assistant Professor in Art, Media + Technology at Parsons the New School for Design, and teaches collaborative design, service design, and book arts. Her work focuses on relationships of power and difference, particularly regarding sexuality, race, and gender in visual and political cultures. He has an MFA in Printmaking and Book Arts and an MA in Visual and Critical Studies from California College of the Arts, is the Art Director for *Radical Teacher* **and a member of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) board.**

In fall 2010, I taught a course called Urban Services in which my students worked with students in the education program of a large non-profit organization in New York City that offers a range of services for people diverted and returning from prisons and jails. Just before the semester began, I bought an aluminum storage clipboard to attempt to alleviate a problem I'd had the semester before – not having the things I needed for class in one place. On our first meeting with the students and teachers of the partner organization, I took out the clipboard and one of the students we had come to meet pointed at it and said, "You've got one of those things like what the cops use." I had arrived on the first day carrying what was for me an organizational tool, but for the student who saw it in my hand, was a tool used by the police to hold ticket books. This quickly, if not irretrievably, aligned me (and perhaps

my students) with forces of arrest and imprisonment before we had even begun.

In the United States, a country that incarcerates more people per capita than any other,[1] New York State imprisons the fifth highest number of its residents. Just under 88,000 people are in state prisons and New York City incarcerates close to 30,000 people in local jails. In New York, African Americans are locked up at a rate 9.4 times higher, and Latinos 4.5 times higher, than whites.[2] Ruth Wilson Gilmore has argued that the massive expansion of the prison system in California (mirrored in New York) since the late 1970s grows out of that era's crisis of capital and the surplus of both land and people brought on by everything from economic recession to major shifts in the landscape of labor and industry.[3] She explains that these rates of incarceration are linked to *systemic* conditions that were, she argues, less related to the fact of "crime" – itself a moving target defined by laws that are often changing – and more to structures of race, class, and capital in the post-Civil Rights Era, post-industrial United States.[4] The impact of prison and jail, as well as related institutions, such as policing, courts, and even public schools, is deeply felt by large numbers of New York City residents, especially people of color, working class people, and people living in poverty.[5] These systems are some of the primary contexts shaping the partner organization itself and the lives of people working and receiving services there. For students in the alternative to incarceration program, failure to comply with its rules and requirements, including coming to class consistently, can result in having to serve suspended prison sentences.

I begin this article with a brief discussion of a rapidly emerging, though not new, social design discourse, looking at "the social" as it is framed by advocates and practitioners of social design and what its use can elide when imaging what design might do in the world. I then build on three stories from my students' and my work with students and teachers at the social services organization to explore the possibilities of engaging the political in what are often referred to as "social design" projects. Tony Fry argues that "'the politics of design' is how design is employed, by whom, to what ends, while 'design and the political'" speaks to "the agency of how design acts as (one of) the directional forces that shape human conduct and its material consequences."[6] In a recent book, he builds on this to assert design itself *as* a politics, specifically in relation to its "world-making" role, which he argues is both "ecologically and ontologically transformative." Design's capacity for "causality" makes it, fundamentally, political.[7] I work with these and other ways of understanding the relevance (and presence) of the political, reflecting on the struggles of all participants in our course's work to speak across difference and find ways to articulate the depth and character of the problems that shaped design possibilities. The goal of the class was to identify and prototype service design

opportunities related to the experiences and needs of students at the partner organization. In this article, I argue that efforts to unpack the kinds of complex conditions in which we found ourselves are also endemic to most "social design" contexts, and should more seriously influence such design.

Social Design

In a 2002 article, "A 'Social Model' of Design: Issues of Practice and Research," Victor Margolin and Sylvia Margolin issued a call expanding on Victor Papanek's 1985 second edition of *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*, originally published in 1972. Unlike Papanek, who saw design for the market and design for "social need" as necessarily in opposition, they argue for a continuum with a "social model" of design on one end and a "market model" on the other. This widely cited argument proposes this "social model" focus on designing for "the satisfaction of human needs" less likely to be met by "products designed for the market," especially where some people's needs do not translate into consumer needs "in the market sense."[8] Social design, they assert, will design for people with less economic power whose needs neither define nor drive markets, e.g., "…people with low incomes or special needs due to age, health, or disability" and "people in underserved populations."[9] Presumably these are also people who have less access to political power.

In the decade since Margolin and Margolin's article, social design has become a topic much discussed in the popular design media, academic design journals, and on the websites and blogs of a growing number of social design and design for change consultancies, organizations, and, in the UK and Europe, government initiatives.[10] Along with increasing use in a range of design fields of human- and user-centered design as well as co-design – defined by Elizabeth Saunders and Pieter Jan Stappers as "the creativity of designers and people not trained in design working together in the design development process"[11] – "social design" has become a staple in design lexicon and practices.[12] Articles in *Design Weekly* covering social design – focused on sustainability and the environment, crime, health, and finance, as well as designer interest in developing British Prime Minister David Cameron's Big Society – have appeared regularly, especially recently. An increasing number of media and scholarly articles discuss the application of design to "social needs." However, the terms "social" and "needs" frequently go undefined other than to name populations or generalized phenomena, such as "ageing population[s]," "climate change," "crime," "the poor," "the underserved," "the disabled," etc. In this article I am interested in raising the mostly unspoken *political* contexts of design practices that are variously called "social design," "humanitarian design," "design for social change," and sometimes "social innovation."[13]

In discussions of social design, the "social" is rarely linked explicitly to political structures – the underlying structural forces and logics that shape and determine both systems and their repercussions for people and communities. An engagement or analysis of power is often also absent, and *qualities* of good or ideal social relationships are presumed to be shared by "society," as are, sometimes, understandings of what it might take to produce those conditions. For example, in a 2008 article, "SES! Social Equity and Sustainability," Ann Thorpe defines "social" as "relations among people, whether those relations are economic or cultural," and defines "equity" as "fairness."[14] While she acknowledges the role of capitalism and market economies in preserving economic inequity, Thorpe ultimately equates "social equity" with "the public good," which she says is maintained through the work of institutions such as "security (defense, fire, and police protection), education, health, democracy, and justice (courts and legal systems)…"[15] The assertion that there is a general public interest in "social equity" that can be maintained through these institutions is widely accepted as common sense in the US and Europe (how they might be funded is another matter).

However, a wealth of research into the impacts of police, courts, and legal systems,[16] not to mention education, health, and democracy, suggests that experiences of efforts to maintain "the public good" affect different people differently, especially depending on where the power to define both "public" and "good" sits and through what institutions. In more recent work, Thorpe explicitly takes on the question of what characterizes "design activism," noting that design has sometimes taken concepts like "change" and "social impact" and reworked them into design concerns, such as "human needs" or "usability," thereby reorienting "activist frameworks" such as "rights" or "struggles."[17] While she investigates "types of change" and offers discussion of activist aims, Thorpe's focus remains on describing what she calls "excluded or neglected groups," and makes broad claims that "the public at large" might be one of these groups, in keeping with an idea that "social change" presumes making change based on politically uniform, if individually varied, notions of both need and desire.[18] It is precisely the historical and political specificity of claims to and struggles for resources and space that shapes activist frameworks, and this, along with their complexity, is often what is lost when those ways of knowing are sublimated to more traditional ways of framing design concerns.

Social innovation presents different approaches to "the social" as a site for design, focusing on small-scale systemic change rather than a "social problem"/designed solution approach. In their book *Collaborative Services*, François Jéjou and Ezio Manzini describe social innovation as the production of relationships and organization for enacting the needs and desires of "creative

communities," groups of people that "cooperatively invent, enhance and manage innovative solutions for new ways of living."[19] In this model, groups work on a local scale and create scenarios that meet specific individual and group needs: food access and production, transportation, use of tools and resources, etc. Designers in this context are imagined to facilitate changes to accepted structures (e.g., individual consumerism) through building on what people are already doing and modeling other options to make these systems viable, desirable, and replicable. Nicola Morelli describes another facet of the social innovation frame, the role of designers in creating conditions for the development of "enabling" solutions through which people "find solutions for themselves."[20]

While this work sets out to produce certain kinds of system redefinition in specific communities – including systems of sharing geared towards changing consumption patterns and increasing sharing systems – it often does not engage with the possibility of resistance from business or government. In fact, Morelli seeks to meet the call issued by Margolin and Margolin in 2002 by scaling up social innovations through business strategies making such designs profitable.[21] As Ilse Oosterlaken argues, however, "…one should not too easily assume that the interests of the poor and of companies are always compatible."[22] Cameron Tonkinwise has argued that, in an age of the UK's Big Society and government budget cuts, "ethically-minded" design that "scale[s] up existing innovations with redesign" might also be paving the way for permanent government retrenchment in the face of, especially, economic crisis. He argues that instead of side-stepping the necessarily political nature of design, a politically-based approach to design in these contexts might explicitly take up efforts to make what are often semi-legal or illegal strategies (e.g., home-based meal sharing systems) "easier and more effective" or defend spaces such as community gardens from being sold by government for private development.[23] While there is a great deal of buzz in both media and US and UK governments about the possibilities of "public/private partnerships,"[24] the presumption that capitalism can alleviate poverty, especially when it requires it, is as Oosterlaken suggests, one to be debated.[25] And while arguably relevant to social innovation practices, the role of socio-economic class or relative privilege in creating access to existing resources is not a major focus, nor are the ways in which access to various networks might be impacted by systems of socio-political stratification, such as racism or xenophobia, that make some spaces more open to some, while closing them to others.

Most approaches to design in relation to social contexts build on user- or human-centered design methods discussed above. But as Klaus Krippendorff argues, human-centered design (HCD) is not only a method, but a way of conceiving design as "an essentially social activity," in which designing cannot be "separated

or abstracted from the context of people's lives."[26] He notes that what HCD should focus on is not an articulation of the needs of individuals or communities in a pre-constructed framework suitable to the thing being designed, but rather, imagined and possibile futures conceived and desired by people with whom a design is shaped.[27] While it is precisely these futures with which social design is arguably concerned, "the context of people's lives" is not, in fact, always at the center of efforts to design in the face of poverty, ecological degradation, or potential violence. This might be especially true where design practices focus only on those immediate needs that can be seen and understood for the purposes of designing in relationship to them. A recent article in the San Francisco Chronicle, for example, covered a design student's prototype testing for a coat/sleeping bag designed to help homeless people keep warm on nights they do not have access to indoor shelter.[28] While this undoubtedly could be an important intervention into the conditions experienced by homeless people – it tested well, and people with whom the designer spoke expressed excitement about it – it is not a design addressing the problem of homelessness, it is a design addressing the problem of hypothermia, an outcome of homelessness.[29] I say this less as a critique of the project itself, and more to point out that making it easier to survive homelessness is different than working to end homelessness.

Tony Fry and Clive Dilnot note that in designing for sustainable futures, "…a great deal of well-intended 'reformist,' 'sustainable' design activity does little more than sustaining the unsustainable."[30] Were social design to fully consider the political, designers might be compelled to imagine how design can address or intersect with "social problems" by first reconsidering what defines a person's or community's needs (especially where that challenges designers' own conceptions). Even as the problem of hypothermia *caused* by homelessness and the structural inequality that *causes* homelessness necessarily overlap, there is the possibility, as Fry and Dilnot point out, that designs alleviating *conditions* of structural inequality also "sustain the unsustainable," especially if a designer doesn't know or make clear that a given design is merely a stop-gap, and, in fact, an undesirable one. Gui Bonsiepe describes participation as a process through which "dominated citizens [people dominated by external forces] transform themselves into subjects opening a space for self-determination, [which] means ensuring room for a project of one's own accord."[31] If participation which is now so valued in designing can be similarly considered, then design in these contexts becomes a political project aimed not at ameliorating needs, but producing or enabling conditions for making fundamental shifts in systems of power. With this idea in mind, I'll turn now to a consideration of the political and return to the context of my course.

Political Contexts

Sociologist Avery Gordon asserts a theory – that "life is complicated."[32] She builds on legal scholar Patricia Williams' argument that the law – a system of meaning with material consequences – refuses this complexity, insisting instead on "narrower, simpler, and powerfully hypnotic rhetorical truths."[33] Gordon breaks this theory into two parts – the first concerns the legibility of power relations and the second regards what she calls complex personhood. I begin with the first and return to the second to provisionally define the political contexts that are arguably inextricable from design, whether or not they are acknowledged, and to explore why unpacking these contexts should be important to designers and design processes.

Gordon writes, "Power relations that characterize any historically embedded society are never as transparently clear as the names we give to them imply."[34] Power can be understood as the ability to influence or control outcomes, and as oversight and control of resources of all sorts. Here, Gordon refers to the ways power is wielded, or just exists and evolves, between people, groups of people, and institutions. So, on the one hand, she argues, power is not something static. On the other hand, it can be used to create harmful conditions, with or without intention. Power manifests through exchanges – through the sometimes literal give and take of information, resources, access, opportunity, and even legibility. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault characterizes power as something that is neither always external to us nor separate from us; power can be disciplinary, imposing forms of self-discipline, and it can also permeate our lives and experiences at multiple, even contradictory points.[35] Gordon writes:

> Power can be invisible, it can be fantastic, it can be dull and routine. It can be obvious, it can reach you by the baton of the police, it can speak the language of your thoughts and desires. It can feel like remote control, it can exhilarate like liberation, it can travel through time, and it can drown you in the present. It is dense and superficial, it can cause bodily injury, and it can harm you without ever seeming to touch you. It is systematic and it is particularistic and it is often both at the same time.

Power is undoubtedly at work in design relationships[36] and in the lives of people in any design process, whether designers, stakeholders, users, or collaborators.[37] In my course's first workshop as a large group, the teachers at the partner organization and I planned to have our groups of students do a series of activities and tasks together, in an effort to address up front something we experienced previously: the students were wary of each other and where my students often had preconceptions of people who have been to jail, their students were dealing with ideas about who gets to go

to college and what their experiences and privileges might be. We asked all of the students to interview a number of other students, primarily focusing outside their group, asking two set questions and one question of their own choice. The set questions, "What do you like most about the city?" and "What is most challenging for you in the city?" aimed to draw out a range of ways of thinking about and being in the city that could be used for brainstorming. We hoped that this might also raise issues that each group of students might not have considered on their own (e.g. policing), or, conversely, wouldn't have expected someone in the other group to share, even if for different reasons (e.g., getting a job or living in an expensive city).

Students' responses to each other expressed a range of likes and challenges. Peopled liked the bright lights and big buildings of New York, being able to go to parties and interact with lots of varieties of people, and going to the movies. People felt challenged by college being hard, the city being too expensive, cold weather, difficulty getting a job, and, for one person, "my own self." Police contact or imprisonment were also challenges for some, articulated as "getting around the cops," "staying out of jail," the cops being "always on you," and being arrested for not having identification.

Gordon's theory that life is complicated helps connect students' experiences to a larger political context which is, among other things, a set of conditions that both shapes and is shaped by relationships of power, which are neither fixed nor finite. Such political contexts shape the systems in and with which we live. They are manifest in people's experiences with those systems (e.g., the courts or the police) or in reference to them (e.g., being stereotyped as dangerous by someone who crosses the street when they see you). Designers work back and forth between the possibilities and constraints of such systems and how they do or do not meet the needs of people who use them. Often missing from this process, and from the analysis and synthesis through which design proposals, prototypes, and final designs emerge, are the complex *political* forces that shape and determine these systems, how they are experienced differently by different people, and, perhaps most importantly, who benefits from them, who does not, and why. For example, the students at the partner organization – not just the one student who commented on my clipboard – shared certain experiences of the city in which we all live, including regular interaction with or conscious efforts to avoid the police, while interacting with or avoiding the police did not figure prominently in most of my students' (or my) experiences. And, if we were to be stopped, members of my class were likely to have different interactions. Across a group of some twenty people, then, we had both different experiences and associations with a large city system – policing – and we, as designers entering into this issue, might find that what was challenging about the

police was not individualized bad police behavior, but, instead, realities of how policing functioned and on whom police attention focused in the city. This was something that seemed to challenge my students' ideas of the role of policing in "society" and their capacity as designers to design solutions to a stated, if complex, problem.

This was not the only challenge facing students in this organization. There were a host of other concerns and interests: financial capacity; feeling safe (defined differently by different people); finishing school; getting a job, and, more explicitly, being able to get access to the education or capital that would give them a chance to get, or make for themselves, work that interested them. Students also identified concerns and desires about the physical space of the organization. They wanted better food nearby (or better than the bologna sandwiches provided for those who cannot afford to buy lunch) and community or performance spaces in the building where the organization is housed. Some of these concerns seemed more "designable," and one challenge of the course became *not* choosing to focus on these in lieu of wrestling with the implications of the "more" complex, which would remain major factors in the day-to-day lives of our partners. If policing or under-employment represented complex networks of issues, then to keep them close at hand we would need to work on and around them in ways that would allow us to gain footholds while not compromising the real messiness of the issues themselves.[38] We had to resist flattening out the experiences and stated concerns of the students in the organization in a rush to find "problems" for which we could make "solutions."

Wicked Problems and Structures of Power

In his 1992 essay, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking," Richard Buchannan makes a now well-rehearsed argument that the types of problems that characterize what designers do and how they work are what Horst Rittel described in the 1960s as "wicked problems." Buchannan notes that Rittel was asserting a counter logic to the idea that design processes are linear, moving from analysis to synthesis to designed thing.[39] Instead he described the kinds of problems coming through design as "a class of social system problems which are ill-formulated" and in which there are a range of people involved in both problem defining and decision-making, who themselves have a range of "conflicting values," and where both information used by designers and the "ramifications in the whole system" are confusing.[40] In other words, design and designers are always working with and on problems characterized by their "indeterminacy," which Buchannan defines as having "no definitive conditions or limits."[41]

Beginning with these exceedingly, but also typically, complex foundations and materials, designers, he argues, are working

with "quasi-subject matter" that they must particularlize through their working process. In this way, without attempting to "take the wickedness out" of the problem, designers can look to the specificities of a "concrete situation" to "conceive a design that will lead to *this* or *that* particular product."[42] While arguably the imagined outputs of design processes have expanded, it is widely accepted that a series of iterative, linked phases using analysis, synthesis, and generation, sometimes linearly, but always also circularly, characterizes what (good) designers do.[43] It is evident to many people doing and writing about design today that designing happens in complex, changing systems and that design processes wrangle with this in a range of ways.

In my course, our work was to design or redesign services intended to facilitate "transition" out of the large and complex system of policing and incarceration. And while the fact of the system's complexity and unfixed-ness are undoubtedly important to designing in this context, also central and perhaps more defining, are questions related to how power, authority, and dominant ideologies closely linked to them, figure prominently when designing with people currently and formerly *under the control* of this system. In this specific context, manifestations of relationships of power, even when they go unarticulated, impact what can be designed and for what purpose.

In the days following our first workshop with students and teachers in the partner organization, I received an email from a student in my class. She discussed the specificity of her relationship to the students with whom we'd met – how some aspects of the institutional-looking organizational space and the sense of obligatory participation she feared the students there were feeling were reminiscent of experiences she'd had. She also discussed her clarity that despite these similarities, she was now on the side of the "designer" working with people in a service agency, and that this had something to do with her whiteness and opportunities, among other things. In her struggle to orient to the work we were undertaking in this context and to understand the context itself, she noted,

> I guess this is where I find myself as a designer. I am sitting here looking at a complicated problem. A problem that really I don't understand. I can understand the problem – but it is so complicated...I guess I start to wonder, what gives me the moral authority to even suggest that I do or do not under-stand? How do I make sense of this at all?

One paragraph before, however, she offered a very specific understanding of the system in which the students in the partner organization were caught up, as one that is,

…designed to either eat a person alive, or to at least to chew on him long enough – only to spit them back out in a form where he is longer the person he once was. You can leave the system – but it will never let you go, it doesn't matter what part of it you were in or why you were there. Whether it follows you in the form of paper documents or only existing in your dreams at night. Isn't this the whole purpose of it all? Its either to make an example of you or to teach you a lesson (maybe even both).

And from here, she arrived at a question not about the ability to design *at all* in such complex contexts, but of the political nature of recognizing the purpose and position of a system and imagining how to design against its aims: "How can we design something to transition people from a system that doesn't want to let them go?"

Contending with the political – the systemic nature of wicked problems – means adapting designing to explore conflicting and contradictory aspects of how concepts of "need" are differentially defined by people in different political and experiential positions, with different relationships to power. It also means situating not only the knowledge and experiences of potential "users" but of designers themselves as a means of fully acknowledging both tacit understandings and tacit beliefs that deeply inform the often hunch-based work of design. Some designers may be drawn into work in political contexts by their own experiences and desires. In another article I explore at length the importance of seeing what designers are "reflecting through" in relationship to their own situated position(s) and how this impacts designing, especially in these contexts.[44] I raise this key issue here to argue that the *tools* and *methods* of design alone are insufficient if design work is to make social or political change, as a real engagement with histories and systems of power relevant to each specific design context is a precursor to such shifts. I turn to the second story from my class here to explore this idea.

In our final workshop the design students worked from the semester's research to define a range of possible design ideas. From these, they made artifacts for paper prototyping, including blank images of open spaces (a deck/garden, food truck, and room being used for storage that opened onto the street) and scenario cards picturing a range of service and use options for the spaces. Prior to the workshop, students working on the materials sent me the images they planned to use. The scenario cards act as prompts to engage users' own ideas and imaginations, so while based on ideas that came through previous workshops, their purpose is to provoke responses that expand on what they suggest or act as a platform from which people can suggest new or different ideas.

The cards looked visually engaging, with easy to read images and text and plenty of space for writing/drawing. I was, however, concerned about the images themselves, which were almost

entirely 1950s-era US-based images of white people. The people with whom we'd been working were all people of color, mostly African American and Latino, and many roughly the same age as my students, between 18 and 22. I decided to write to the students in my class to raise these ideas, as over the semester we discussed issues of representation and how images produce meaning, and this seemed like a critical moment to engage their work and process. I wrote:

> I am concerned that the images on the cards are stylized images of white America in the 1950s, a time that might be hard for students at [the organization] to identify as their own and using images that feature all white people in the spaces as the makers, doers, buyers, sellers. The era pictured in the images is also one that was defined by racial segregation that was maintained by not allowing African American people into some of the kinds of spaces you all are proposing, something the…students may or may not know from their time at [the organization], or from hearing stories in their families or among friends, but could be a point of confusion or frustration. We've talked in class about how images mean and about the ways in which seeing images in design tools that one can really own and work with need to show ideas that people can project themselves into. I think these images might be an obstacle to them helping to facilitate the process you want to have happen in the workshop. I am not suggesting at all that you should use images that might be stereotypically associated with the students…, but that you think about what kind of images would represent a space that is one your co-designers in the workshop can project themselves into in order to take that ownership you expressed the desire to create and switch in those images in your designs.

I was asking my students to consider how these scenario cards were or were not likely to reflect, speak to, or represent the specific needs and desires that had been expressed by our collaborators. I was asking them, as well, to make central to their design process consideration of the specific political and historical contexts (e.g., the US racial state) that the chosen images represented. I also hoped they would engage the political and historical specificity of the lives and experiences of the people with whom we had been working, based on the stories they had been telling us. By asking them to rework the cards, I hoped the design students would become more closely attuned to the specific, self-defined needs of our collaborators. This would be critical to any designed system or service that could build on and expand the organization's students' capacity to, as Bonsiepe suggests, be self-determined, thereby ensuring room for a "project of [their] own accord."[45]

How, then, can the role of a design tool become doubled so that it acts not only as an artifact for designing, but as a means to provoke important conversations about our own assumptions and privileges? I was asking my students to consider both their own positionality and at the same time to focus on how their design process could facilitate what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls "making power." Specifically, she suggests that change happens when people organize to *make* power, rather than thinking of power as something to be *taken*, as static and on one side of an "it (structure) versus us (agency)" model.[46] To imagine this as a capacity of both making generally and making in design, specifically, requires an understanding of the already present role of hierarchical structures and existing, if always shifting, relationships of power in the structures around, about, and within which design takes place.[47] To ignore the political dimensions, then, is to refuse to engage the question – a question that can be asked in a number of ways in a range of circumstances in which design and especially "social design" are operating: How do (people) transition out of systems that do not want to let (them) go?

Complex Personhood and Figuring Need

In closing, I return to the second part of Gordon's theoretical statement "life is complicated," which she calls "complex personhood." Complex personhood is a way of understanding that the stories people tell about themselves and their "social worlds" and its problems move between what they know and see and what they imagine and hope, and that complex personhood "means that all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others."[48] In the process of designing, designers work to identify design opportunities which are often summoned into visibility through methods that draw out the articulated, and sometimes unarticulated, needs and desires of future users or co-design collaborators. In this concluding section of the article, I turn to one last group of artifacts produced in the course's collaboration in order to consider how Gordon's notion of complex personhood might help unpack the political contexts and forces that shape and make articulable needs that become central to designing.

All of the workshops and co-design sessions after the first class were planned by the students in my course, acting in their role as designers. This preparation was central to the class, and while students experienced failure and frustration at times, they became adept at information-gathering as the semester progressed. For our penultimate meeting with the organization, the design students determined they had broad ideas based on what they had heard so far and wanted to hone these to inform a more specific set of design possibilities. They hoped that rather than, for instance,

proposing a service scenario focused on job placement (which already exists at the organization), they could propose a specific way the organization could provide jobs the students wanted, or jobs that provided skills they wanted, so that the labor a service might require would also build toward students' stated needs, needs beyond job placement alone.

To do this, the design students developed five prompts: "What are you doing when you feel best about yourself?," "Describe your perfect (legal) hustle," "What would you most like to learn about?," "Describe a time you felt really comfortable," and "Think of a time you were out and someone made an assumption about you – what would you like to say to them?" To draw out specific and detailed responses, they made books into which students could write or draw their ideas. They also arrived at this approach because in previous workshops working in groups had sometimes made it harder to hear from everyone. The books created private spaces where people could work, even as they sat in small groups and so could also talk about their ideas if they chose.

Students' responses to these prompts ranged from wanting to run a hair salon to a plan for a food truck that sells ice cream and t-shirts in summer and hot chocolate and warm clothes in winter at New York City parks and schools; from feeling most comfortable with family or taking a long walk in order to "think about how beautiful life is and don't take life for granted" to feeling best when doing music; from learning science ("the planets and the stars and the beginning of time") to getting a General Equivalence Diploma (GED) to being a drug counselor; from finishing school even though people thought she couldn't to believing that when people "see me out in the world they think I'm a bad guy because of my appearance and how I carry myself…," but feeling that "I am nice and respectful."

If we look at these responses through the framework of complex personhood, the needs, desires and goals drawn out through this workshop can also be understood politically. There is a complexity, in Gordon's sense of the word, in wanting opportunities, experiences, and sometimes even things that many other people have access to without ever having to consider the possibility of *not* having or presuming that access. Given the context of this work – collaborating with people who have been or are currently in contact with or subject to systems of policing and incarceration – these needs, desires, and goals are not only information about social relationships and formations, but about relationships of power. And, while they might also be shared by others in other contexts, they are not only specific to the people speaking them, but specific to the context in which they are being spoken.

What, then, would it mean in this context (and others like it) to imagine that "need" is defined and determined differently by people with different relationships to existing systemic organizations of

power and to making new forms of power? How does one design from that understanding? Often, "needs" or the ideas of how those needs might be met are defined through dominant ideologies, structures, and relations of power, in addition to the perspectives and assumptions through which designers themselves see or understand their worlds, which may converge with or diverge from dominant ideas. Considering the political aspects of design in social contexts would require designers to acknowledge that designing based on needs defined by people seeking to make power for themselves means contending with how access to defining one's own needs, much less meeting them, is uneven and structured by inequality. In this context, things like "comfort" or "happiness" or "work" take on the significance of also demonstrating a right and capacity to *be* at all, in both social and political terms.[49]

Gordon explains that complex personhood is "at the very least… about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning."[50] In design, always, but especially in design that is intended to address "social needs" or "social problems," it is critical that designers (and their academic and media interlocutors) reckon with the determining and distorting factors of political contexts for understanding that words mean differently, needs register differently, and that in some cases (for example, safety, in which the dominant logic is that the police and prisons produce safety, which was not true for our collaborators at this organization) this means the difference between seeing or not seeing how it is that a system will resist letting go.

A 2010 article in *Design Weekly*, discusses the opportunity some designers in the UK see in Prime Minister David Cameron's Big Society – his call to "open up public services to new providers like charities, social enterprises and private companies" in order to produce "innovation, diversity, and responsiveness to public need."[51] In the story, Lord Bichard, chairman of the UK government's Design Council and director of the Institute of Government notes that, for example, "No designer would have created the dysfunctional web of policies and procedures which, while aiming to reduce reoffending, have instead increased the prison population to record proportions and failed to provide support to short-term prisoners."[52] Perhaps he is right that had a designer designed it, it would be better designed. But Lord Bichard's assertion presumes an apolitical framework in which prison is itself a presumed "social good," rather than asking what else, besides poor design, might influence the manifestations of imprisonment in the UK. It presumes that my student's question, "How can we design something to transition people from a system that doesn't want to let them go?" is a false premise. Without a critical engagement of the political context in which the prison and its inefficiencies act, it would not be possible to consider other options, including that the problem Bichard describes is not one

of poor design but of the role of the prison in contemporary social and political culture.[53]

Design in and for social "problems" alone cannot help but produce changes that are always already adapted to political contexts as if those problems exist in contexts that are fixed and unchanging at best, and nonexistent or inevitable at worst. In so doing, some kinds of social design assist in more deeply fixing politically unequal relationships of power, even as the range of design solutions produced either alleviate specific hardships or aim to bring awareness to them (and here, to what end?). How, instead, might increasing the capacity in design professions, among designers, and in specific design work to see into a range of possible futures, including ones shaped by political visions or desires to fundamentally change relationships of power, change the nature of "designing for change"?[54]

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. John Schmitt, Kris Warner and Sarika Gupta, 'The High Budgetary Cost of Incarceration' Center for Economic and Policy Research, Washington, D.C., June 2010, 1.

2. 'The Sentencing Project Interactive Map' The Sentencing Project, accessed May 10, 2010. http://www.sentencingproject. org/map/map.cfm#map.

3. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

4. There is not space in this article to delve deeply into Gilmore's argument here, although it is highly relevant to why the political contexts that produce or surround what get called 'social' problems can and should be fundamental to design in these areas.

5. See, for example, Ray Rivera, Al Baker and Janet Roberts, 'A Few Blocks, 4 Years, 52,000 Police Stops' *New York Times*, July 11, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/12/ nyregion/12frisk.html and 'Stop, Question, and Frisk in New York Neighborhoods' an interactive map of stop and frisk police stops in New York City in 2009, July 11, 2010, http://www. nytimes.com/interactive/2010/07/11/nyregion/20100711- stop-and-frisk.html?ref = newyorkcitypolicedepartment.

6. Tony Fry, 'Design and the Political' *Design Philosophy Papers*, 6 (2003-4): np.

7. Tony Fry, *Design as Politics*, New York: Berg, 2011, 234.

8. Ibid., 25.

9. Ibid., 25.

10. See, for example, Participle (http://www.particple.net/), Project H (http://projecthdesign.org/), The Design Council (and its RED project) (http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/), Design Altruism Project (http://design-altruism-project.org/), Design 21 (http://www.design21sdn.com/), among others.

11. Elizabeth B. N. Sanders, and Pieter Stappers, 'Co-creation and the new landscapes of design' *CoDesign* 4:1,Jan. 2008: 6.

12. While it is too much to delve into here, there is of course a great deal of work on participation in design, which has a long history. For recent discussions with some particular relationship to this article, see: 'Ilse Oosterlaken, 'Design for Development: A Capability Approach' *Design Issues* 25, no. 4 (2009): 91–102; Henry Sanoff, 'Multiple Views of Participatory Design' *METU Journal of the Faculty of Architecture* 23, no. 2 (2006): 131–143; and Zeynep Toker and Umut Toker, 'Community Design and Its Pragmatist Age: Increasing popularity and Changing Outcomes. *METU Journal of the Faculty of Architecture* 23, no. 2 (2006): 155–166.

13. Tony Fry's extensive writing on design and politics and design as politics addresses many overlapping approaches to the role of politics in design and design in the political, including the imperative that design recognize that it is a political engagement (see, especially Fry, *Design as Politics*). Here, I am additionally interested in framing the politics inherent in design scenarios and designers' own frameworks and approaches to designing in what are most often called 'social' areas to ask what are the impacts of existing political structures of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, etc. on the contexts in which designers are beginning to work in new numbers.

14. Ann Thorpe, 'SES! (Social equity and sustainability)' *Innovation: the journal of the Industrial Designers Society of America* 27:1 (2008), 20.

15. Ibid., 22.

16. See for example, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007; Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003 and *Abolition Democracy,* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005; Julia Sudbury, ed., *Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-Industrial Complex* (New York: Routledge, 2005; Joey L. Mogul, Andrea J. Richie and Kay Whitlock, *Queer (In)justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States,* New York: Beacon Press, 2011.

17. Ann Thorpe, 'Design for Social Impact – is it activism?' *Design Activism Blog*, September 15, 2010, www.designactivism.net/archives/262.

18. Ann Thorpe, 'Defining Design as Activism' unpublished article, accessed May 20, 2010, available at http://designactivism.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Thorpe-definingdesignactivism.pdf.) It is interesting, for the purposes of this paper, to note that one of the case studies Thorpe includes is of the redesign of a massive US Courthouse to be a 'green' building intended to 're-imagine the public square.' The redesign of this building, Thorpe argues, 'frames the courthouse's role in the functioning of democracy and its values of fairness and openness' for 'citizens navigating the justice system' which seems to build on the basic presumption evident in much social design that crime, courts, police, etc. are understood and experienced as uniformly 'helpful' or necessary for 'public safety.' See Thorpe, 'Defining Design as Activism' 7.

19. François Jégou and Ezio Manzini, 'Tools' in *Collaborative services: social innovation and design for sustainability*, François Jégou and Ezio Manzini (eds), Milan: Edizioni Polidesign, 2008, 30.

20. Nicola Morelli, 'Social Innovation and New Industrial Contexts: Can Designers 'Industrialize' Socially Responsible Solutions?' *Design Issues* 23:4 (2007), 5–6.

21. Ibid., 18–19.

22. Ilse Oosterlaken, 'Design for Development: A Capability Approach' *Design Issues*, 25:4 (2009), 101.

23. Cameron Tonkinwise, 'Politics Please, We're Social Designers' *Core 77*, September 1, 2010, http://www.core77.com/blog/featured_items/politics_please_were_social_designers_by_cameron_tonkinwise__17284.asp.

24. 'Let's hear those ideas' The Economist, August 12, 2010, http://www.economist.com/node/16789766?story_id = 16789766&fsrc = scn/tw/te/rss/pe.

25. The role, and limitations, of capitalism is addressed at length in Fry's *Design as Politics*, with a specific focus on the political and ecological unsustainability of a system that requires unending expansion and resources.

26. Krippendorff puts it this way: 'Designers need to know *how desirable these futures are* to those who might inhabit them, and whether they afford diverse communities the spaces they require to make a home in them.' Klaus Krippendorff, 'Design Research, on Oxymoron?' In *Design Research Now*, ed. Ralf Michel, Basel: Birkhäuser Architecture, 2007), 70–71.

27. Ibid., 71 (emphasis in original).

28. Kevin Fagan, 'Design student creates coat for homeless people' *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 11, 2011, http://

www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file = /c/a/2011/09/11/BAHR1L2HK8.DTL.

29. Many thanks to Christine Gaspar, who summed this up astutely in a conversation about the jacket/bag and the possibility of articulating political and contextual specificity in relationship to what it is that designers are designing for, and to Cassandra Shaylor for bringing the story to my attention.

30. Tony Fry and Clive Dilnot, *'Manifesto for Redirective Design' Design Philosophy Papers* 2 (2003).

31. Gui Bonsiepe, 'Design and Democracy' *Design Issues* 22 (2006): 29.

32. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008 [1997], 3.

33. Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991, 10.

34. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 3.

35. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage Books, 1980.

36. Yoko Akama, 'Warts and all: the real practice of service design' paper presented at *DeThinking Service, ReThinking Design: First Nordic Conference on Service Design and Service Innovation*, Oslo, Norway, November 24–26, 2009.

37. See, for example, Lucy Suchman's excellent discussion in here 2002 article 'Located Accountabilities in Technology Production' *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems*, 14(2): 91–105.

38. John Law, 'Making a Mess with Method' version of 19 January 2006, available at http://www.heterogeneities.net/publication/Law2006MakingaMesswithMethod.pdf.

39. Richard Buchanan, 'Wicked Problems in Design Thinking' *Design Issues* 8:2 (1992), 15.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., 16.

42. Ibid., 17.

43. See, for example, Sanders and Stappers.

44. Shana Agid, 'Worldmaking: Theory/Practice Practices in Design' *Design and Culture* 4 (1): forthcoming, March 2012.

45. Bonsiepe, 'Design and Democracy' 29.

46. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 247.

47. This, too, can be linked to Fry's notion of 'redirective' design, and to the idea that 'the designing natures of things…becomes a matter of political decision (without the comfort of certainty). *Design as Politics*, 103, 234.

48. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 4.

49. Gordon describes an exercise she and her students did after reading Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, in which they listed every explanation given for 'why dreams die.' I quote

extensively here both because it strikes me as deeply relevant to a discussion of how one hears and understands need in specific contexts and because it is somewhat reminiscent of the layers of meaning that could be gleaned from the books made by the students at the organization: 'These ranged from explicitly externally imposed and internalized white supremacist standards of value, *the nature of white man's work*, and the dialectics of violence and hatred to *disappointment*, to *folding up inside*, to *being put outdoors*, to *the weather*, to *deformed feet and lost teeth*, to *nobody pays attention*, to *it's too late*, to *total damage*, to *furniture without memories,* to *the unyielding soil*, and to what Morrison sometimes just calls *the thing*, the sedimented conditions that constitute what is in place in the first place. This turns out to be not a random list at all, but a way of conceptualizing the complicated workings of race, class, and gender…Such a conceptualization asks that we constantly move within and between *furniture without memories* and Racism and Capitalism.' Gordon, *Ghostly Matters,* 3–4.

50. Ibid., 5.

51. Angus Montgomery, 'Designers want to be part of David Cameron's 'big society" *Design Weekly*, July 29, 2010, 7.

52. Ibid.

53. In the wake of the uprisings in London and beyond in the summer of 2011, cultural theorist Paul Gilroy gave a talk in which he argued, among many other points, that the decision to imprison vast numbers of people as a response to the riots is a distinctly American response. He said: 'If we go down that road, we're headed toward a society that's *run on the basis of mass imprisonment*. And that's not just about making the prisons bigger and fuller, making them engines for making money for private corporations, but it's also about turning your schools into prisons, and turning your streets into prisons, and turning your community into something that's much more like a prison. And we do not want that society based on mass imprisonment. That's not our future. We are *not* Americans, we are not Americans.' See, 'Paul Gilroy speaks on the riots, August 2011, Tottenham, North London' *The Dream of Safety blog*, August 16, 2011, http://dreamofsafety.blogspot.com/2011/08/paul-gilroy-speaks-on-riots-august-2011.html

54. As one example of work being done that takes these questions on directly, see the Center for Urban Pedagogy, http://www.anothercupdevelopment.org/