Designing the Social, and the Politics of Social Innovation

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The late 2000s was a period of tremendous growth and achievement for proponents of social innovation.[1] With the proliferation of research centres, think tanks and journals, the establishment of the Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation in the United States, the adoption of social innovation terminology in the UK government's Big Society agenda, and ringing endorsements by the President of the European Commission, social innovation has become an established policy doctrine. Amidst these developments many designers attempted to claim that design has a legitimate role in social innovation, moves that were met with varying degrees of enthusiasm from commentators on both design and social innovation.[2] In the context of the serious challenges of unsustainability and social inequity, the response of the design field to the apparent hope and possibility offered by social innovation warrants at least some a degree of critical examination. Yet relative to the volume published on the topic of social innovation there is a surprising dearth of critical literature, particularly regarding the role of design.

In response to these observations I will use this paper to examine two questions: 1) What is the relation between design and the concept of the social? and 2) What are the possible political implications of design for social innovation? The first question will be addressed through a selective survey of theoretical positions relevant to the social role of design. This will lead into a more focused examination of the results of the EMUDE (Emerging user demands) project, one of the most valuable research projects on design for social innovation published so far, in order to develop a provisional critique of the political function of design for social innovation vis à vis its ability to instigate discontinuous social change in the interest of sustainability.

Revisiting the Social Significance of Design

What relation does design(ing) have to the concept of the social? Precedents for thinking about artefactual production, mediation, and consumption in social terms are numerous, rich and complex, and would be difficult to adequately survey in a single paper.[3] The more modest objective here is to derive some conclusions to this question by comparing a selection of recent work in social theory and philosophy.

A valuable starting point for returning to the question of design and the social is Clive Dilnot's Design as a socially significant activity[4] which argued for design to be recognised as a distinct form of activity with significance beyond the simple production of material things. According to Dilnot, design can be distinguished as a particular way of thinking and communicating that is concerned with giving form to the materiality of a human world. Dilnot stresses that the concept of form not only refers to the design of particular commodified objects but should also be understood in terms of the ordering of an entire socio-technical mode of being. He adds that this conscious ordering of the material world towards human ends is an essential part of our praxiological being.[5] The consequence of this claim is that we are only what we are as a certain kind of being by means of what and how we give form to, organise, and draw significance from the things that constitute our everyday environment. This point signals that design is never simply a means to a productive end but is in fact a much more complex activity with fundamental implications for human ontology.[6] Because designing involves synthesising the many complex and heterogeneous characteristics of a situation into a concrete form, design can also be seen as the activity that makes it possible for form to express or embody the character of a particular relation between people and things and the very means by which things are able to have an effect within such a relation.[7] Dilnot's account therefore provides grounding for the claim that design must be considered in social terms, and conversely that any discussion of sociality ought to take into account the effect of design.

While Dilnot was centrally concerned with design activity, his point concerning design's social relevance can also be connected to developments in the fields of social theory and philosophy. For instance, in his overview of the field of social theory Andreas Reckwitz proposed that modern social theory has produced three distinctive ways of explaining human action and social order: the utilitarian homo economicus, the norm-orientated homo sociologicus, and the 20th century 'cultural theories'. The limitation of this position has been highlighted by Erik Swyngedouw. Using Antonio Gramsci's theory of state/market/civil society interdependency Swyngedouw frames social innovation in more antagonistic terms:

> The socially innovative figures of horizontally organised stakeholder arrangements of governance that appear to empower civil society in the face of an apparently overcrowded and 'excessive' state, may, in the end, prove to be the Trojan Horse that diffuses and consolidates the 'market' as the principle institutional form.[19]

As Swyngedouw acknowledges, this concept of the misrecognised power-political function of civil society was also a key theme in Michel Foucault's studies on biopolitics. For instance, in his lecture series The Birth of Biopolitics Foucault lays out his history of the development of twentieth century liberalism, including its effect on social ordering and the peculiar role of civil society within this order.[20] In his description of liberalism Foucault includes attitudes, practices, methods and procedures of measuring and enforcing the proper intervention of governmental action. To this we might add the engineering, technologies, networks and devices that extended the liberal form of indirect social control.[21] Foucault emphasises that the principle of social regulation pursued within liberal doctrine was not concerned with facilitating the exchange of commodities as such but rather protecting and enhancing competitive enterprise as a mechanism for development.[22] Within liberalism, the provision of welfare in the form of social benefits is a perfectly reasonable practice on the strict condition that it does not equate to a form of collective, redistributive or socialist consumption, and that it addresses the symptoms of absolute poverty only and not any cause that coincides with the ideal conditions for competition.[23] Furthermore, according to Foucault the formation of civil society under liberalism is conditioned by its usefulness as a technique for resolving tensions between the economical and juridical roles of government, as well as a space to engage in shaping daily practices such as health and education.[24]

The mechanisms of control that Foucault observed within liberalism were closely related to his concept of power. Foucault argued that it is a mistake to limit the concept of power to the question of sovereignty, restriction or oppression. Rather he claimed

that power is diffuse, material, and productive, and consequently may just as easily be experienced as a form of choice, truth, need, or wealth.[25] Control within a liberal political order therefore can be seen to operate through stimulating experiences as much as in any authoritarian form of repression. This description has parallels with Slavoj Žižek's ideological explication of the injunction 'enjoy!' – free consumption without an externally enforced prohibition not only authorises solicitation into unsustainable consumption but may also produce a more fastidious and politically debilitating form of self-regulation.[26] This suggests that power antagonisms and techniques of subliminal (ideological) and explicit (police, welfare, social services) control are always constitutive elements within any social relation. As such, the reluctance of social design literature to acknowledge these factors, or, as is the case in EMUDE, to limit discussion to a question of technique – as the efficiency and effectiveness of governance – elides the question of how power itself is materially and symbolically organised and what kind of effects and forms it produces.

An Introduction into the Politics of Design for Social Innovation

An issue that follows from the elision of power in EMUDE is the possibility of imagining a form of action that may be critical for instigating discontinuous change (change that displaces an established structural order for something new), namely, the possibility of political action. As was the case with sociality, politics is yet another complex concept that demands more sophisticated treatment than can be given here. For our purposes though it will be useful to examine some of the consequences of Hannah Arendt's distinction between the social and the political.

For Arendt, social concerns were synonymous with the classical Greek idea of economics.[27] In ancient Greece, economics referred to the management of material necessity that occurred within the space of the private household. Economics represented a condition of constraint, of base biological processes common to all organic life, and was diametrically opposed to the experience of freedom. The modern idea of the social has affinities with the economic because it implies the reduction of human experience to the form of homogeneous necessity, as in the scientific view of the (singular) human exemplified in universalist models such as Mazlo's hierarchy of needs. Politics however referred to the idea of a coexistence between ontologically different (human) beings that was given definition through the action of individuals in a public space (polis). For Arendt the risky practice of negotiating commonality in difference between free individuals was the condition of an active worldly existence, that is, a world that felt as through it could be re-birthed as something radically different from what it was at the time. However this form of action was

only possible if there was a space within which action could be experienced. The space required for defining a world in common was only possible through the designation of a space between free plural beings, an idea that was difficult to imagine if the meaning of existence and politics was reduced to an issue of life's necessities. A politics that was practiced to ensure freedom rather than life, and that was practiced on condition of a willingness to sacrifice life for freedom, represented a mode of human existence that was radically opposed to economics. Arendt's concern with the modern world was that the social experience had eclipsed the political experience; that economics, the language of necessity, had become the sole measure of human experience. For Arendt, this was the image of the desert-world, a politically barren world populated by riskless escapism and pseudo-activity.[28]

Even with this brief description we can observe a resemblance between Arendt's conception of politics, Foucault's description of the dispersed nature of liberal control, and the elision of power within the EMUDE that calls into question the ability of social innovation to disrupt the continuity of our current situation. Despite the value of the EMUDE approach to understanding sociality and design, the tacit politics of the project appears to be (neo)liberal, both in the character of the economic rationale and the associated reduction of politics to state (economic) management. With its emphasis on diffuse enterprise, active welfare, and interest in the livelihood of stakeholders, the language of the EMUDE findings are remarkably close to much of what Foucault describes as the liberal form of social discipline. This affinity is problematic considering that it is a characteristic of liberalism to tolerate change only in so far as it does not threaten forms of social organisation that protect its fundamental economic interests.[29] The identification of diffused social innovation supports the notion that self-initiated change is possible for people who can (or must) make their own opportunities, but it does not suggest an explicit challenge to a governmentality driven by a productivist agenda. Therefore, because it is concerned with changing the provisions of daily life within (rather than beyond) the strictures of (a)political practices, even an approach as progressive as EMUDE still remains allied to the structural conditions that maintain hegemonic unsustainability.

As an example of design for social innovation, the amenability of EMUDE towards resolving problems within (not against) liberalism, and the reluctance to imagine alternative practices of organising (for) political power is a telling limitation vis à vis the need for discontinuous change. Some of the limitations that stem from not recognising power and politics as agencies within social relations include an inability to differentiate between who/what (as assemblages of individuals and artefacts) can act towards sustainable futures and who/what maintains the status quo, and an inability to work explicitly towards mobilising assemblages of

sustainment against established orders. If this is indeed the case, then it is reasonable to suggest that design for social innovation lacks the kind of political gravitas required to initiate a serious disruption to structural unsustainability.

By drawing a relation between Foucault, Arendt, and the early conclusions that concern the relation of design to sociality, we can observe that design is important for understanding both sociality and politics. Because it gives form to power, conditions of control, and contested ways of living, the character of design practice is inherently political.[30] Ignoring the politics of design(ing) draws the risk of being orientated by default towards the maintenance of existing structural conditions. The suggestion we find in Arendt's philosophy is that because humans only ever have sense of worldhood through their association with things and other people it should be expected that design has a role to play in developing political ontologies, including the kind of radical ontology that is able to recognise and mobilise against the unsustainable.

An inference that follows from both this point and the critique of EMUDE offered above is that designers, researchers, theorists, and educators working within or in association with the field of social innovation must view their practice in terms of its political agency. To offer a sense of what this might mean I would draw a distinction between pragmatic social intervention and a praxiological politics. While the former may allow people to cope more easily with their everyday challenges, the socio-technical assemblages it forms would be politically hetrogeneous and open to manipulation. For instance, within a liberal political order a pragmatic social innovation may be useful for relieving the burden of state expenditure without threatening established power relations or economic interests. A praxiological politics on the other hand, would be concerned with consciously generating politically autonomous socio-technical assemblages that are antithetical to the unsustainable. These assemblages would need to be elastic enough to cope with change and crisis but resistant to political co-option. Designers in this sense, professional or not, may seek to engage at various levels with the political implications of space, visibility, time, labour, consumption, production, finance, exchange, and ownership. Designers might also take on the role of mediating between groups taking action, government institutions, and other significant actors.[31] Furthermore, designers could use their expertise to visualise, advocate and promote alternative social policies, development agendas, and importantly, new ways of practising politics.

Conclusion

The objective of the paper was to register the need to examine the relation of design to sociality both as a question in itself and in relation to the politics of sustainability. The mainstreaming of social innovation discourse makes this a topical subject but beyond the

immediacy of these developments there is an obvious need for the rigorous examination of the social significance of design. This agenda must be driven by the need to understand the kind of designing required in order to achieve social relations that are more sustainable and more equitable. As a contribution to this agenda I have argued that power and politics are significant blind spots in the theory of design for social innovation. Furthermore, I suggest that this oversight has the potential to limit the ability of actors to instigate discontinuous change in the interest of sustainability.

Regarding social innovation itself, the idea of innovation not simply being a technical phenomenon is important to engage with as it signals that the sociality of things and people should be a matter of interest for designers and design researchers. As such I have also suggested that design should be considered within any approach to social innovation because designed artefacts are a necessary element of sociality. However, regarding the need for discontinuous change, a significant limitation in current approaches to design for social innovation is its political amenability. Rather than being a sign of success, the fact that social innovation has been so widely adopted as a legitimate development practice may indeed be a sign of its usefulness to established political orders. For those who recognise the need for discontinuous change this amenability suggests that social innovation is politically inert and therefore lacks the ability to galvanise action against structural unsustainability. Social innovation is evidently a useful way to produce valuable 'social' outcomes, but so long as it persists in trying to achieve its objectives via apolitical means its potential to instigate radical change will continue to be compromised.

Notes

1. Social innovation is understood as the development of novel social arrangements that meet everyday needs. Social innovation may include other forms of innovation but it is not necessarily driven or reliant upon technological change. For a useful overview of the social innovation literature see Jürgen Howaldt & Michael Schwarz. Social Innovation: Concepts, Research Fields and International Trends. Dortmund: International Monitoring. May 2010, p. 15. For other introductory definitions of social innovation see Geoff Mulgan, Social Innovation: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Be Accelerated. Skoll Center for Social Entrepreneurship. Working Paper, 2007. Available at http://www.youngfoundation.org/files/images/03_07_What_it_is__SAID_.pdf, and Frances Westley & Nino Antadze, 'Making a difference: strategies for scaling social innovation for greater impact', The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal, Vol. 15(2), 2010.

2. See for instance Tim Brown & Jocelyn Wyatt, 'Design Thinking for Social Innovation', Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2010, pp. 31–35. For popular commentary on these developments see Bruce Nussbaum, 'Is humanitarian design the new imperialism', Co.Design, www.fastcodesign.com, 7 July 2010, viewed 14/8/2010, Cameron Tonkinwise, 'Politics please, we're social designers', Core77, www.core77.com, 1 September 2010, viewed 2/9/2010, and Kevin McCullagh, 'Is it time to rethink the t-shaped designer', Core77, www.core77.com, 24 September 2010.

3. This would include work by many significant thinkers in the traditions of philosophy, social, cultural and media theory, including Marx, Heidegger, the Frankfurt School, French theorists such as Lefebvre, Certeau, Bourdieu, Baudrillard and many others.

4. Clive Dilnot, 'Design as a socially significant activity: an introduction'. Design Studies 3: 2, 1982.

5. Dilnot, op cit., p. 145.

6. For another argument regarding this point see Anne-Marie Willis, 'Ontological designing – laying the ground'. In A. Willis (Ed.), Design Philosophy Papers: Collection Three. Ravensbourne, Qld: Team D/E/S, 2007, pp. 80–98.

7. Included within the varieties of effect that a form may have is the experience of being out of joint with the dynamic of a situation. This may occur because of 'bad' or inappropriate design or because the situation itself has changed, as for instance when a previously ubiquitous object or practices become obsolete or anachronistic because of changes to technological infrastructures as was the case with food preservation, letter writing, typewriters, floppy disks, and analogue televisions.

8. Andreas Reckwitz, 'Toward a theory of social practices: a development in culturalist theorizing'. European Journal of Social Theory. 5: 243, 2002, p. 243–263.

9. For instance, Comfort, Cleanliness, and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality. Oxford: Berg, 2003, and The Design of Everyday Life. Oxford: Berg, 2007.

10. For more on this point see Carleton Christensen, 'The material basis of everyday rationality – transforming by design or education?', in A. Willis (ed.), Design Philosophy Papers: Collection Three, Ravensbourne, Qld: Team D/E/S, 2007, pp. 40–53.

11. Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

12. "Society and technology are not two ontologically distinct entities but more like phases of the same essential action", 'Technology is Society Made Durable' in A sociology of monsters: Essays on power, technology, and domination.

J. Law (ed.). London: Routledge, 1991, p. 129. See also 'Where are the missing masses? The sociology of a few mundane artifacts' in Shaping technology/Building society. W. Bijker and J. Law (eds). London: MIT Press, 1992, pp. 225–258.

13. Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social, p. 5.
14. The effect of material and expressive qualities is a reference to a distinction made by Manuel DeLanda in A New Philosophy of Society. London: Continuum, 2006. The notion that objects come into existence through assemblage and dispersal also shares affinities with the Deleuzian concept of territorialisation and deterritorialisation. For an attempt by Latour to engage more directly with design see 'A cautious prometheus? A few steps toward a philosophy of design (with special attention to Peter Sloterdijk)', Keynote lecture for the Networks of Design meeting of the Design Historical Society, Falmouth, Cornwall, 3 September 2008.
15. Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, trans. R. Nice, Routledge Kegan Paul, 1986.
16. Manzini, Creative Communities. 'Executive summary: creative communities and the diffused social enterprise. The socio-technical innovation in bottom-up perspective', in Creative Communities. Towards Active Welfare and a Distributed Economy, 2006, p. 7. Accessible at http://81.246.16.10/videos/EMUDE/EMUDE%20final%20report.pdf.
17. "Diffused social enterprise: this is diffuse enterprise that auto-produces social quality, where the term 'diffuse enterprise' indicates people who, in their everyday life, organise themselves to obtain the results they are directly interested in; and the expression 'to auto-produce social quality' refers to the process whereby, through actively seeking to resolve their problems, people enhance a project that has the side effect of (more or less deliberately) reinforcing the social fabric." Manzini, Creative Communities, note 3, p. 8.
18. See for instance Eivind Stø & Pål Stradbakken, 'Political challenges: to create frameworks of social enterprises', in Creative Communities, pp. 160–162.
19. Erik Swyngedouw. 'Let the People Govern? Civil Society, Governmentality and Governance-Beyond-the- State'. Paper submitted to: URBAN STUDIES (special issue SINGOCOM) c2004. Available at HYPERLINK "http://socgeo.ruhosting.nl/colloquium/humboldt.pdf. p.42" http://socgeo.ruhosting.nl/colloquium/humboldt.pdf. p.42. See also Erik Swyngedouw, 'Governance innovation and the citizen: the Janus face of governance-beyond-the-state', Urban Studies 42: 11, 2005, pp. 1991–2006.
20. Michel Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

21. Chris Otter. 'Making liberal objects'. Cultural Studies 21: 4, 2007, pp. 570–590.

22. "In other words, what is involved is the generalisation forms of 'enterprise' by diffusing and multiplying them as much as possible, enterprises which must not be focused on the form of big national or international enterprises of the type of big enterprises of the state. I think this multiplication of the 'enterprise' form within the social body is what is at stake in neo-liberal policy. It is a matter of making the market, competition, and so the enterprise, into what could be called the formative power of society." Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, p.149.

23. Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, pp. 203–206.

24. Foucault The Birth of Biopolitics, p. 295 and Erik Swyngedouw, 'Let the People Govern?', p. 14.

25. "In other words, rather than ask ourselves how the sovereign appears to us in his lofty isolation, we should try to discover how it is that subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts etc." Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977. Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980, p. 97.

26. Slavoj Žižek, 'Superego and the Act: A lecture by Slavoj Žižek', August 1999, www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/the-super-ego-and-the-act/, viewed 6/5/2011.

27. See The Human Condition, Chicago: The University of Chigago Press,1998, and The Promise of Politics, J. Kohn (ed), New York: Shocken Books, 2005, particularly the chapter 'Introduction into Politics', pp. 93–200.

28. See 'Epilogue' in The Promise of Politics, pp. 201–204.

29. Tony Fry, Design as Politics, Oxford: Berg, 2011, p. 219.

30. Tony Fry, 'Design and the political', Design Philosophy Papers, Issue 6, 2003/04. See also Design and politics op cit.

31. For an example of what this might mean see Louise Crabtree, Sustainable Housing Development in Urban Australia: exploring obstacles to and opportunities for ecocity efforts, Australian Geographer 36: 3, 2005, pp. 333–350.