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To cite this article: Anne-Marie Willis (2013) Design, Politics and Change, Design Philosophy Papers, 11:1, 1-6

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/089279313X13968799815958>



Published online: 29 Apr 2015.



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## EDITORIAL

# Design, Politics and Change

**Anne-Marie Willis**

When people cite Herbert Simon's definition of design (as they frequently do) as an activity that seeks to Change Existing Situations Into Preferred Ones, this is usually an entrée into what they really want to discuss, which is "how do designers do this?" Here lies the history of the 'design methods' movement that sought to rationalise design as process, and the counter-reaction to it as researchers and designers began to conceptualise their work in terms of human-centred design, participatory design, co-design, design ethnography, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

But what's been overlooked in Simon's oft-repeated definition of design is the change bit – the move from existing to preferred is glided over as if obvious. If pressed to name the gap between the existing and the preferred, those who cite Simon would perhaps say something like – better functionality, performance, convenience, efficiency, aesthetic appeal, and so on. The parameters of change are assumed as given, as issuing from the client, thus they are circumscribed, delimited, not an issue.

Today it is the nature of change that is the issue. The need for significant change has become harder to

ignore as circumstances turn more critical. The design professions, which in the service of capital, ushered in the modern world of manufactured wonders that brought ease, convenience, entertainment, diversion, delight to millions of people, are increasingly having to deal with the negative fallout of this history as it refuses to be consigned to history and as it rolls on to defuture every corner of the globe.

Human capacity to transform the given world via technologies, infrastructures and an economic system that depends on an increasing throughput of manufactured goods to meet short-term ends, gathered pace, unwittingly at first, then knowingly, reeking damage on the fundamental biophysical support required for the continuity of human and other life. That's a one sentence history of anthropogenic climate change. Maybe it's a bit abstract, mega-level, hard to relate to. So here's the human-centred version that puts us in the picture: unfolding over many centuries, unsustainability has become a structural condition, the normality in which we live and which lives in us, as individually and collectively, in sameness, in difference and indifference, we dream and desire, seek to assemble and pursue what we misrecognise as 'the good life'.

Putting these two versions together, what we have is a picture of human development gone disastrously wrong.

Just how bad is the situation? An example. A little over twenty years ago, world governments started to talk about global warming and the need to reduce greenhouse emissions, agreeing that in order to avert climatic disaster in the twenty-first century, global warming should be kept below an average of two degrees Celsius. Governments kept on talking, some of them set modest reduction targets at Kyoto in 1997, but the major emitters, USA and China refused to commit to any reductions. The result? Today, greenhouse gas emissions, rather than reducing compared to the 1990 baseline level, have increased by 50%.<sup>2</sup> 2012 saw the Arctic ice-cap melting at much faster than predicted rates, and climate scientists are now saying that due to failure to reduce emissions, we are now heading towards between four and six degrees global warming by the end of the century.<sup>3</sup>

If this were to be avoided, huge reductions in fossil fuel energy use would be required, and according to the principle of redistributive justice should be born by affluent populations, and usher in major changes in ways of life and a total reconfiguration of the global economy. If existing political institutions have failed to bring about such a massive change, is design, as an intrinsically future-oriented practice<sup>4</sup> the only way forward? This is what Tony Fry has argued (in *Design as Politics*<sup>5</sup>) in the context of our inherently ineffectual political institutions underpinned as they are by weak concepts of sovereignty and freedom. And, taking a longer view – the evolutionary time of our species – (in *Becoming*

*Human by Design*<sup>6</sup>) he shows, in a powerful narrative that traverses evolutionary theory, anthropology, paleontology and philosophy, that the capacity to design has been deeply formative of us as human and as captive to/captivated by our designed worlds within the world, arguing that it is only by design that we can remake ourselves otherwise. Clearly here, design names something much more fundamental, longstanding and significant than the specialized practices that emerged in recent times to serve the growth of a commodity based economy. If design is to be the means towards a radical change of direction of our ourselves and our made-world, if we are to move from the 'existing situations into preferred ones' – it cannot be understood and confined within its current forms. It has to change into a far more ambitious and intellectually informed practice. Epistemologically, design cannot remain stranded between humanities and sciences, turning this way and that, unsure of where it belongs. It has the capacity, still nascent, to leap over them, to become a futural epistemology. Such 'design' would bear little resemblance to what designers currently do; thinking is central to it, though certainly not the 'design thinking' of management and academia.<sup>7</sup>

In all the papers in this issue, we find designers dealing with symptoms of the unsustainable – whether in the form of climate disasters, displaced people or sedentary lifestyles. They discuss a range of situations in which change occurs by design. We're not talking here about trivial change or incremental improvements or attractive new products. While new products, services or aesthetic forms do appear in some of the papers, they are (or can be) subsumed to change at deeper levels. Change from: subordination to empowerment; invisibility to visibility; non-identity to recognition; sedentary to active bodies. Changes in understanding and values and in the relative status of bodies of knowledge. Change from being overwhelmed by multiple problems to enablement by learning how to tackle just one, no matter how small.

In 'Design and Dissensus: framing and staging participation in design research' **Mahmoud Keshavarz and Ramia Mazé** consider the 'social turn' within design (humanitarian, activist, critical, etc) first within the context of Scandinavian participatory design movements of the 1970s, then via extended analysis of a recent project that tested the limits of 'design expertise' within a political activist context. Drawing on the political theory of Jacques Rancière (dissensus) and Chantall Mouffe (agonistic pluralism), they expose consensus-driven approaches (most typical within participatory design) as fundamentally anti-democratic. Their concern is with 'the political' (as opposed to the institutions of politics), the formation of political subjectivities and the conditions by which some 'thing' arrives as a political issue in the first place.

A recent book that also draws on Chantal Mouffe's agnostic pluralism is Carl DiSalvo's *Adversarial Design*, reviewed here by **Matt Kiem** ('If political design changed anything, they'd make it illegal'). After his initial enthusiasm, he finds the book wanting, partly because of its "disastrously simplistic conception of democracy" as well as its framing of design.

Anthropogenic climate change effects are already evident and will increase. Cyclones, hurricanes, floods and forest fires are sudden in their arrival but long term in their consequences, unsettling populations both spatially and psychologically. **Guilherme C. Meyer and Alice T Cybis Pereira** worked with some of the 233 families still living in temporary shelters more than two years after a major flood and landslides in the state of Santa Caterina in Brazil. Their paper ('Design and ethnography on a post-tragedy scenario: an intervention in the Itajaí Valley') gives an account of the multiple problems faced by these temporary communities and how, through a participatory design process, one problem was selected and worked through via the design of an artifact as a proposed change-agent and an object of critical engagement.

**Filipe Campelo Xavier da Costa and Celso Carnos Scaletsky** consider 'Road Running as a Designed Experience' investigating the exponential growth of this activity in Brazil, as in many other countries. They discuss the multiplicity of designed goods and services that have accompanied this growth and the extent to which these may have accelerated the activity. What is the attraction of running? The activity itself? The social dimension (running clubs, training groups, organized events)? The challenge to continually improve one's performance? Feeling healthier, more alive? All of these and more. Their findings on runners' motivations and their framing of the discussion in terms of experience design indicate further opportunities for popularising pleasurable activities that sustain – in this case, self-production of physical well-being.

That we need designed products and services to rediscover the innate capacities of our bodies (which over millions of years of evolution became designed for movement) indicates one of the significant losses incurred by the evolution of our techno-socio-economic systems over a far shorter time span. This is evidenced with even more force in the final paper, by **Fernando Secomandi** ('Thinking through the Service Interface: a study of Philips DirectLife') which focuses on an IT product/service designed to get us moving. There is some irony that this goes by the name of DirectLife given it's a highly mediated way of discovering what should be obvious to us as embodied creatures. But Secomandi's detailed study of users of this service and their interactions with its interfaces shows that the 'direct' is more 'directive', and contains useful insights for the design of services intended to change behaviors towards sustainment.

## Notes

1. This history is insightfully summarized in *Design Research Through Practice: From The Lab, Field, And Showroom* by Ilpo Koskinen, John Zimmerman, Thomas Binder, Johan Redström and Stephan Wensveen published by Morgan Kaufmann/Elsevier, 2012.
2. Economic growth in China, other parts of Asia, South America and Africa are the reason for the increase. While Kyoto Protocol signatories reduced their emissions collectively by 16 percent, this was due not to virtuous actions, but to the collapse of industries in eastern Europe and the recent global economic crisis. In 1990 the US accounted for two thirds of global emissions, now it contributes less than fifty percent. Since 2000 carbon dioxide emissions in China have nearly tripled. But this has to be seen in the context of the migration of heavy industry from developed to developing countries which make products that get shipped to wealthy nations. Quirin Schiermeier, 'The Kyoto Protocol: hot air' *Nature*, 28 November 2012. [www.nature.com/news/the-kyoto-protocol-hot-air-1.11882](http://www.nature.com/news/the-kyoto-protocol-hot-air-1.11882) (accessed 12/12/12).
3. Dr. Jim Yong Kim, President of World Bank, is hardly a radical. This is what he wrote in his Foreword to a recent report: "It is my hope that this report shocks us into action. Even for those of us already committed to fighting climate change, I hope it causes us to work with much more urgency. This report spells out what the world would be like if it warmed by 4 degrees Celsius, which is what scientists are nearly unanimously predicting by the end of the century, without serious policy changes. The 4°C scenarios are devastating: the inundation of coastal cities; increasing risks for food production potentially leading to higher malnutrition rates; many dry regions becoming dryer, wet regions wetter; unprecedented heat waves in many regions, especially in the tropics; substantially exacerbated water scarcity in many regions; increased frequency of high-intensity tropical cyclones; and irreversible loss of biodiversity, including coral reef systems. And most importantly, a 4°C world is so different from the current one that it comes with high uncertainty and new risks that threaten our ability to anticipate and plan for future adaptation needs. *Turn Down the Heat: why a 4 degree Celsius warmer world must be avoided: A Report for the World Bank* by the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and Climate Analytics, Washington DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, November 2012.

A footnote to a footnote: As I write this, much of south-east Australia where I live, is experiencing temperatures above 40 degrees Celsius and raging bush fires. Hobart, the southernmost, and therefore coolest, city today recorded 41.3 degrees, its highest temperature in 120 years of record keeping.

4. "When Herbert Simon famously defined design as an activity that tries to turn existing situations to preferred ones, he pointed out

a crucial feature of design — it is future-oriented. Designers are people who are paid to produce visions of better futures and make those futures happen.” Koskinen et al, *Design Research Through Practice*.

5. Tony Fry, *Design as Politics*, Oxford: Berg, 2011.
6. Tony Fry, *Becoming Human by Design*, London/New York: Berg, 2012.
7. When asked his view of design thinking, Tony Fry said recently ‘I’m more interested in teaching designers how to think.’