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Design and the Political Hot Debate

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The link between design, politics and the political is essentially ontological.

Clearly the politics of design cannot be separated from the economic, socio-cultural, institutional and organisational structures that articulate the relations between governmentality, rulers and the ruled. But this becomes manifest only when design's propensity for service relations comes into play. In this way, design performs a supporting function to political or social organisations that either uphold, or are striving to change, the status quo. *De facto* design politics is action within the design community that simply mirrors the geometry of design's economic service provision. While prompted by concerns and conscience emanating from the consequences of forms of political conduct, the designer is constrained by what the agency of their professional practice can or cannot do. This is to say that the 'designer' is constrained by their very ontology as designer.

In contrast, the designation, 'design and the political' is not circumscribed by the ontological reach of existing design practices, professions or designer dispositions. 'Design and the political' (as opposed to 'design politics')

or ‘the politics of design’) registers a much larger sense of agency that centres on the designed rather than on the designers. This shift can of course be extended into thinking about the ‘designing of the designed’ – which is itself a qualification of the ontological nature of design that places design in dialogue with a number of ways that philosophy has sought to understand the ‘nature of things’ (Martin Heidegger’s questioning of the ‘thinging of things’ being a clear example of this). Once the import of ‘design and the political’ starts to be grasped one begins to glimpse the enormity of its agency as a future-creating or negating force and the extent of its invisibility as such.

If one asks the question – ‘what shapes the future?’ the expected answer will certainly include: science and technology (both of which are served by design); human conduct in war and peace as directed by policies of governments; plus the changing nature of the global and local environment. (In this respect it is worth noting that it has been estimated that globally there are now more environmental refugees than refugees from war – as a result of environmental degradation and climate change with its associated increase in extreme weather events and ‘natural’ disasters). One does not expect design to be nominated as a future-shaping agency of equal significance, yet it is. Across a vast range of scales, every design decision is future decisive. Impacts from the materials we manufacture with; our modes of transport; the way we provide heating and cooling; the kinds of cities we build; the media of communication we employ; and myriad other things, are environmentally and culturally directive. The nature of things we create by design not only transforms ‘our’ world but also transform us (*dasein* and design have completely fused).

Above all, there is one extremely pressing issue, central to ‘design and the political’ (and its invisibility) that begs immediate, serious and continual interrogation – the issue is “how can the ability to sustain being-in-the-world and beings-of-the-world be created, given that the momentum of globalisation and the extension of ‘democratic freedoms’ continue to accelerate material practices and cultures of unsustainability?”. By design ‘we’ make futures that negate the very possibility of ‘the future’, at least for us.

These remarks do not aim to close debate. Rather they herald what will be a continuing discussion of the politics of design in DPP. Obviously it is appropriate for design professions to embrace the politics of design and bring it within the ethical remit of their practice. But this is only one piece of a much larger jigsaw, of which there is still little sense of the overall image to be assembled or the number of its constituent pieces.

In summary, we can say that ‘the politics of design’ is how design is employed, by whom and to what ends. While ‘design and the political’ goes to how the agency of how design acts as (one of) the directional forces that shape human conduct and its material consequences.