

CRAFTING DEMOCRACY: TOWARDS A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON DESIGN'S CONTRIBUTION TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores emerging design opportunities from the perspective of social and political transformation within the public sphere.

The concept of democracy has been increasingly linked to that of design in recent years. Von Hippel (2005) refers to innovation '*rapidly becoming democratised*'. Leadbeater has argued that the application of new Web 2.0 technologies will provide new opportunities for democracy. A perspective is emerging that user involvement in design and greater customisation in consumption is, by its very nature, democratic.

This paper challenges such assumptions and presents an alternative perspective. It applies the concept of "*craftsmen of democracy*" as developed by political philosopher Hannah Arendt in an analysis of community centred and driven 'design' practices. Design, the paper argues, may not be a helpful or appropriate term for understanding community-driven change, as design is bound with a largely consumerist perspective. Rather, perhaps it is craft, which provides a more useful theoretical framework for understanding and enabling social action. Effective community change, the paper contends, arises when people "get their hands dirty" through natural ideation and dialogical interaction. The paper also develops a recent argument by Sennett (2008) on the nature of craft in which he suggests, "*learning to work well enables people to govern themselves and so become good citizens.*"

Literature review, field case studies and selected interviews have been utilised in exploring how future social design scenarios could be enhanced through the adoption of a craft ethos, better suited to work with higher levels of ambiguity and iteration. Reference to examples that arise from a continuing doctoral research project further elaborates the argument. This paper concludes by hypothesising how democracy may, collectively, be crafted more successfully than it can be designed.

Keywords: Community, Transformation, Well-being

CONSUMPTION → DEMOCRACY?

This paper considers a new role for design that looks to enhance opportunities of socio-political transformation within the public sphere; a role that looks beyond democratisation of the design process, to democracy through design. It discusses the potential of a design application in the creation of spaces within urban environments for people to express and define their needs, hypothesising that public policy and planning initiatives can be bettered through bottom-up processes of organisation and the active engagement of people. This research provides the theoretical foundation of an ongoing doctoral research project.

In *Democracy and Philosophy* (2007), Rorty highlighted a discontinuity in what American, and for the most part European citizens believe 'democracy' to represent. Some see it as constitutionalism, which places power of government in the hands of elected officials. Others believe it to stand for egalitarianism - a belief in social, political and economic equality among people. Real and sustained changes to our patterns of living will require contribution from all levels of society. In exploring potentials for action on increasing

socio-cultural, economic and environmental instability, it seems logical to assess the potential of design process as a tool in enabling people to make explicit their values, thoughts and fears within the context of everyday life.

Industrialisation saw cities grow as populations converged around industry and engineering innovations replaced hand-tools with mechanisation (Hunt, J. W., Richards, D. 1950., McDonough, W., Braungart, M. 2002). As centralised, hierarchical systems of organisation emerged, traditional forms of craft practice struggled to reconcile themselves to mechanisation and centralised systems of manufacture and production (Danilowitz, B., ed. 2000). The mid-twentieth century witnessed the materialisation of design, as a profession through an ambition to realise design process as a rationally grounded entity (Attfield, J., ed. 1999). In 1947 Albers articulated what was by then, an established body of thought.

“The designer of today who is asked to consider this forecast of public reaction is dealing possibly with a fictitious public, a public that is known to him by hearsay... The craftsman of old was in the fortunate position to know his public in the circle of his immediate neighbours.” (Danilowitz, B., ed. 2000. P.40-41)

Modernism adopted an egalitarian perspective for design through utilisation of ‘Good Design Theory.’ It looked to an ultimate type-form, which exploited the potentials of mass-production, balancing quality of materials with economy of cost. With the designer as advocate of ‘good’ taste, this model sought to create an egalitarian, democratic society by increasing collective well-being through the availability of utilities (Attfield, J., ed. 1999., McDonough, W., Braungart, M. 2002., Woodham, J. 1997). Dissemination of meaning therefore, also became centralised, as the designer became an educator of ‘good’ (Attfield, J., ed. 1999., Loos, A., 1908)

As Gowdy (2005) explains, the New Welfare Economics (NWE) framework implemented in the 1930’s, asserted that for well-being to thrive cumulatively through generations, a continued growth in the Gross National Product (GNP) is necessary. Max-Neef (1995) argued that the relationship between utilities and well-being is only valid to a threshold level. Beyond this, environmental and social degradation begin to manifest, indicating that any model, which equates well-being purely to continued economic growth is deficient (Jackson, T., Marks, N. 1999. Komlos, J., Salamon, P. 2008). This thinking represents a shift away from consumption led well-being, to one, which also considers social, political and environmental contexts (Manzini, E., Jegou, F. 2003).

TOWARD A NEW PERSPECTIVE OF WELL-BEING

Recognition of such alternative contexts is not a new perspective for design. For example, the Scandinavian participatory design movement of the 1960’s sought to incorporate non-designers into the design process, seeking to increase democracy in the workplace (Bjerknes, G., Bratteteig, T. 1995), which Burns et al have argued formed the foundations for contemporary user-centred product and service design. However, in claiming to ‘democratise’ design practices by the incorporation of multi-stakeholder perspectives upstream in the process, the design profession is arguably playing fast and loose with the very concept of democracy (Press, M. 2006). Use of the term ranges from commercially driven product innovation, to public service development (Leadbeater, C. 2008., Von Hippel. 2005). As the fundamental beliefs of the economic model upon which the design industry has been built is called increasingly into question, transparency in process may not be enough.

The DOTT (Design of the Times) 2007 Festival showcased a year of events, exhibitions and community projects within North East England that represented a more radical perspective of well-being and inclusion for design. Driven by the Design Council, the primary aim of the initiative is to address issues of sustainability in a real world context by exploring, *“what life in a sustainable region would look like.”* DOTT covered five aspects of everyday life: movement, health, food, school and energy and placed an emphasis on socio-political transformation through participatory public service and policy development

at a decentralised, community level (Thackara, J. 2007). The project aligned itself with a growing body of thought, that new ways of living will require new models of organisation orientated towards subsidiary processes of consensus and decision-making.

DOTT is a rolling project with a planned ten-year life span. Over this time it will move biannually to different regions of the UK, significantly this will provide a growing base of experiential knowledge. Ezio Manzini (2007) explained at the DOTT 07 community awards that “*well-being is not a product to be consumed but a condition to be constructed.*” However, the complex interrelations of organisational structure and networks of communication make comprehension of contemporary culture an impossible task to achieve from any single perspective - if at all. The construction of conditions of well-being indicates a need for the reassessment of both ‘*who does the designing,*’ (Burns, C. et al) and objectives, pre, during and post process.

MAKING SENSE OF NOW!

Attainment of objective knowledge within a positivist worldview is often realised at the expense of a separation from the subjective uncertainty of daily life (Sanoff, H. 2000). When working in complex social environments pre and post process initiatives may lie in creating spaces for action, (Thackara, J. 2005) a kind of pre-design role, which precedes pre-determined objectives and ultimately convergent processes. For new ways of living to successfully permeate our current socio-cultural environment it seems reasonable that grass-roots innovation beyond recognisable user-groups and those defined by traditional methods of market segmentation will require everyone to be creative (Balcioglu, T (ed). 1998, Papanek, V. 2001). In Tools for Conviviality (1973) Ivan Illich explained a need to develop convivial social tools:

“Convivial tools allow users to invest the world with their meaning, to enrich the environment with the fruits of their visions and to use them for the accomplishment of a purpose they have chosen. Industrial tools deny this possibility for those who use them, and they allow their designers to determine the meaning and expectations of others.” (Illich, I. 1973. P.10)

Two dominant bodies of thought are currently being developed with regard to how this new perception of well-being may be achieved (for examples see Manzini, E., Jegou, F. 2003., Thackara, J. 2007). The first focuses on the construction of visions as imaginary goal posts, allowing us to innovate towards a brighter future. Innovation utilises positive feedback, it looks at what works and builds on it. Manzini (1994) describes this perspective as being necessary in re-centring our world view.

The second ascribes to a greater shift in objective, to equip people with the means to craft their own futures. It focuses on what people do already in their everyday lives. The innovation agency Plot is working with media company BDH on a project that explores “*the potential of pervasive media to support people being happy.*” In doing so they aim to build on what people currently do to make them happy. By asking ‘what makes you happy?’ the project opens up a platform of discussion around a way of being currently in existence (Wildman, G. 2008). Gill Wildman (Interview 2008), explains that re-framing the context of how we look at things is, a design strength, setting the frame around a bigger picture encourages people to see the world in new ways.

CRAFTING SPACE

Glasgow 2020, was a city-wide project that used the medium of story to illustrate that every citizen has the “*capacity and imagination to realise their own futures.*” Hassan et al, (2007) explain in *The Dreaming City: and the Power of Mass Imagination*, that official hierarchical forms of consensus and decision-making have led to disempowerment, disengagement, disbelief, distrust, opposition and confusion.

“The language of the official future inhabits a separate world, which is not the same world as the people of the city... While Glasgow’s future might be insulated from the everyday lives and aspirations of the city

its people and its costs are not.” (Hassan, G., Mean, M., Tims, C. 2007)

Political theorist, Hannah Arendt considered problems of understanding and subsequent disparities in thinking to result from a loss of the public sphere and thus, a common world (Arendt, H. 1953). The consideration Arendt gave to craft making in conjunction with human *action*, as a means of enabling socio-political transformation, provide insights useful to the changing nature of design in a time of ‘*structural crisis*.’ (Manzini, E. 1994) *Labour, work and action* are the components which constitute Arendt’s meaning of the *world*. The world of human activity is different from the natural environment – *earth* (Hinchman, L. P., Hinchman, S. 1994). While our bodies belong to the *earth* our activities belong to the *world*. In *labour* she describes us a being most like animals (*animal laborans*) because it is a necessary activity through which we meet our basic homeostatic needs. *Labour* is an invariable, infinite process to which we are tied by the laws of nature. In it we are not free.

In *work*, through *techne* (craft) and *poiesis* (to make) we create; our outputs last beyond the point of creation. We become *homo faber* (man the maker) – a builder of walls both materially and transcendentally, which divide the human *world* from the natural *earth*, providing a common framework through which *action* can unfold. We can control *work*; in it we have some element of freedom. It is *action*, which Arendt describes as the pinnacle of human activity. In *action* we are free, but its manifestation requires a ‘*space of appearance*’:

“The space of appearance comes into being whenever men are together in a manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is the various forms in which the public realm can be organized” (Arendt, H. 1958. P. 28).

Arendt asserted that public spaces of appearance are platforms, upon which the foundation of a common world may be built, in which human beings can come together to “*disclose their identities and establish their relations of reciprocity and solidarity.*” *Action* therefore has a reciprocal, iterative relationship with work, as *homo faber* must craft the conditions for *action*, *action* must precede further *work*:

“Action and speech need the surrounding presence of others no less than fabrication needs the surrounding presence of nature for its material, and of a world in which to place the finished product. Fabrication is surrounded by and in constant contact with the world: action and speech are surrounded by and in constant contact with the web of acts and words of other men.” (Arendt, H. 1958. P.26)

THROUGH EXPERIENCE

Increasing opportunities for organisational change will require motivation that extends beyond economically driven perspectives, to ones of social quality and democratic freedom. In a paper on *Transformation Design*, the Red Unit of the Design Council describe an emerging area of design, which applies design process and thinking to complex social problems. By placing users at the beginning of the development of new service scenarios they acknowledge a need to address the complex, non-linear, iterative, adaptive nature of social organisation. Transformation Design, as described by the Red Unit acknowledges, that any solution must go on working long after the project ends. Consequently they aim to provide tools and frameworks for adaptive change within organisation (Burns, C., Cottam, H., Vanstone, C., Winhall, J. 2006).

A new design role that seeks to enhance socio-political transformation within the public sphere may build on the work currently being done in the field of transformation design. However, looking beyond recognisable user groups and those defined by traditional methods of market segmentation toward the messy complexities of everyday life in urban environments presents new challenges for design.

As *homo faber* we employ our critical abilities. It is these abilities which allow us to look beyond the ‘*how?*’ and into the ‘*why?*’ (Sennett, R. 2008) Critical engagement with our *world* comes through conversation. In conversation we are free to be deprived of this space deprives us of our ability to make sense of our

world and impedes any creation of the new. Changes to our patterns of behaviour will require us to look to new ways of living. So when considering this in conjunction with reactivation of the public sphere it appears democratisation of the design process does not extend far enough to attain true socio-political transformation (Press, M, 2006). In process we are not free, process is measurement, it provides a means to an end. Feedback loops within process are ultimately contained within the act of creation, whether it is a product, a service, or an experience. The meaning that the output holds becomes a feedback for the Meta stage of the *world*. As Wheatley (2005) explains, “*Life always reacts to directives it never obeys them.*”

It is *action* that provides a framework for change. *Action* supports the transient nature of meaning as it flows through a free and open public sphere. Each time we come together in a “*space of appearance*” we have the opportunity to contribute to a collective framework of thought – a truly egalitarian perspective. In reframing the problem, designers have the ability to look beyond current epistemologies of practice to new ways of living. A new design role in this context appears to require a return to *homo faber* in crafting platforms upon which a ‘*common world*’ may be built, signalling an epistemology of design through experience as opposed controlled experience.

The theoretical foundation this paper outlines will serve as a basis in the development of pilot approaches undertaken in urban environments which look to nurture collective engagement of people in subsidiary, bottom-up processes of consensus and decision making. At a juncture in our history when consumerist promises for well-being are proving at best illusory, and the prospects for a new progressive politics that spans both Europe and North America are the best for over a generation, then there is a value in developing ‘Arendtist’ perspectives and practices for design. This could offer the foundations for a new and truly transformational design.

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