

Change agents: designers interpreting 'the social' and 'social' interpretations of design



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Abstract

Designers are a positive breed, and many scholars studying the extensive field of design and its professional history – including some involved with Cumulus Antwerp 2023 – seem to agree that designers can contribute to positive 'societal impact'. In this paper I investigate how these optimistic views of designers' alleged 'social agency' are actually constituted, by describing how – over time – different notions of design have been mobilized in relation to various understandings of 'the social'. In current times of complex, layered, and interrelated crises especially, designers and design theorists need to get their vocabulary straight in order to specify what design *can* actually do – as well as what it *can't*. I therefore argue that to articulate relevant and meaningful roles design might play concerning various problematic entanglements, it is essential to differentiate *problems* that can be fixed, from *issues* that can merely be stabilized (Marres, 2007), and approach both phenomena precisely for what they are. Moreover, by acknowledging that both problems and issues are not a given but rather need to be *constructed*, 'designerly agency' in relation to 'societal change' can be understood as consisting of both the framing, setting and solving of problems, as well as the articulation of issues, through the creation of objects, environments, services and systems.

Author keywords

Design theory; sociology; social theory.

Introduction

Typically, designers are an enthusiastic, future-oriented, and positive breed. And by extension, many scholars studying the extensive field of design and its professional history seem to agree that designers – for better or for worse – can contribute to 'societal change' or, at the very least, emphasize the potential 'social agency' of the design profession as a whole. Numerous publications – not seldom featuring ambitious, if not plain out pretentious, titles – endorse high expectations regarding the agency of designers and their alleged potential for positive impact on 'the social', 'societies', or – even more overwhelmingly – on 'the world' as such (see, for example, Monteiro, 2019; Scalin & Taute, 2012; Van der Zwaag, 2014).

Whether designers are regarded a "class of aware, well-informed, trained and educated people who can navigate ... complexity, negotiating the snaky processes of technosocial change and guiding them toward the sustainable" (Sterling, 2005, p. 75), or understood as 'activists that can disturb ex-

isting narratives' (Fuad-Luke, 2009), the design profession is often held in high esteem regarding its alleged capacities to engender 'societal change'. Accordingly, design scholar Alastair Fuad-Luke (2009, p. xxi, italics in original) describes designing as "an essential human expression that will help us *all* to move towards more sustainable futures" and design critic Alice Rawsthorn (2020, p. 8) states "design has always had one elemental role as an agent of change that interprets shifts of any type – social, political, economic, scientific, technological, cultural, ecological, or whatever – to ensure that they will affect us positively, rather than negatively." These bold claims and statements regarding designers' alleged 'social agency' make one curious how these optimistic views regarding design's positive 'societal impact' are actually constituted. Has contemporary design then really transformed itself from an "agent of capitalism" (Dunne & Raby, 2001, p. 59) – primarily concerned with desirable, but essentially unimportant, superficialities – into an "agent of social change" (Resnick, 2019, p. 15) – a field of practices that concerns itself with the transformation (or even emancipation) of the more substantive facets of life?

In this paper I describe how different notions of design have been mobilized in relation to various understandings of 'the social' during different periods of design's professional history. I will suggest that relations between 'the social' and the ever-expanding realm of design are shaped both by 'solution-oriented' and 'problematizing' approaches – two fundamentally different ways to entangle 'the social' and 'the material' through design. I will attempt to demystify and specify notions of 'social agency' contributed to various design approaches. I will conclude this paper by highlighting a number of key concepts I deem essential to sharpen our vocabulary when addressing (in practice) and debating (in theory) design's potential for 'social agency' or for contributing to 'societal change': the crucial differences between *problems* and *issues*.

Designers interpreting 'the social'

With the fairly recent emergence of terms like 'socially responsive design' (Thorpe & Gamman, 2011), 'design for social innovation' (Manzini, 2015) and 'social design' (see, e.g., Resnick, 2019), one might get the impression that the professional field of design has only just recently 'discovered' its entanglements with social life. However, from its 'modern' emergence in the eighteenth century onwards – characterized by the division of labour (Sparke, 1987, 2010) in which, for designers, the activities of *forethought* and *planning* are often paramount (Buchanan, 1989, 1992) – authors such as

William Morris (1882), Walter Gropius (1935), or Victor Papanek (1971) have written extensively on the 'social aspects' and presumed 'societal impact' of designed artefacts (objects, environments, services and systems), both positive and negative.

Whether through 'top-down,' designer-led 'social engineering' (Argamakova, 2017; Caroll, 2006) or 'participatory design' aimed at 'social innovation' (Manzini & Rizzo, 2011; Mulgan, Tucker, Rushanara, & Sanders, 2007; Thorpe & Gamman, 2011), numerous designers have explicitly sought to engender and/or support 'societal change,' motivated by divergent objectives and interests (Colomina & Wigley, 2016; Van Helvert, 2016; Whiteley, 1993). Bound up with the development of industrial-capitalist societies, design was simultaneously mobilized to create new consumer markets (Whiteley, 1993), to 'elevate the general public's taste' by disseminating 'universal aesthetic values' (Sparke, 1986), and to engender large-scale behavioural change – for example, towards 'a modern way of living' (Colomina & Wigley, 2016; Wilhide, 2016).

Although contemporary design approaches referred to as 'social design' or 'social innovation' often promote 'bottom-up' and 'egalitarian' methodologies that typically involve participatory, open-ended creative endeavours (Manzini, 2016; Manzini & Rizzo, 2011), these present-day approaches just as well seek to "enhance society's capacity to act" (Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan, 2010, p. 3) by engaging with impactful developments taking place within industrial-capitalist societies, such as the restructuring of welfare states (Mulgan et al., 2007) or the local consequences of globally dispersed economic activities (Manzini, 2016). Therefore, from the eighteenth century up until the present day, both through 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches, design has been mobilized as an instrument for *social engineering* – understood here as activities geared towards the "organization of social activity for the solution of existing problems and achievement of specific goals" (Argamakova, 2017, p. 70).

Interpretations of design as a 'change agent' with 'societal impact' align particularly well with the concept of social engineering as the latter notion presupposes a modernistic, mechanical worldview that objectifies social life, and therefore interprets 'the social' as *a mechanism to tinker with*. As many designers – especially those working in fields heavily informed by the sciences – are familiar with navigating complex contexts where research and marketing meet future-oriented creative practices of conceiving, planning and producing (see, e.g., Forty, 1986), their particular field of expertise seems especially promising when it comes to 'engineering the social.'

Against 'the social' as a distinct category

If one speaks of 'social housing,' 'social work,' or 'social design,' 'social' is understood as a distinct class of phenomena existing alongside other categories such as 'ecological,' 'political' or 'commercial.' Employing a less fragmentary and more 'entangled' perspective, however, scholars such as philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour (1984, 1999, 2005) argue that 'the social' cannot, and *should not*, be considered a pre-given category or separate domain as such. By regarding 'the social' a particular *type* of relations that can be set apart from, for example, politics or economics, 'the social' is being mobilized as a specific means to specific ends. Accordingly, also within the realm of design, different approaches and perspectives render 'the social' in various and divergent ways.

Consider, for example, how design is regarded an important contributor to 'social innovation,' a phenomenon understood as "new ideas that work in meeting social goals" (Mulgan et al., 2007, p. 8) and regarded a decisive catalyst "for types of economic growth that enhance rather than damage human relationships and well being [*sic*]" In short: 'social innovation' is considered a means to "tackle social problems" (Mulgan et al., 2007, pp. 5–6) – an objective that is also typically associated with a 'branch' of design referred to as 'social design,' defined by Armstrong, Bailey, Julier, and Kimbell (2014, p. 6) as a field of activities that highlights "design-based practices [geared] towards collective and social ends, rather than predominantly commercial or consumer-oriented objectives." As such, various authors within the realm of design treat 'the social' as a distinct category that is specifically connected to so-called 'social goals,' 'social problems,' 'social innovation,' and 'social design.'

Bruno Latour (2005, p. 5), by contrast, states how one might describe 'the social' as "a trail of associations [or] a type of connection ... between heterogeneous elements" that aren't all necessarily 'social' themselves. He argues how 'the social' is shaped by – and constructed through – relations between human and nonhuman elements that make up 'collectives.' These elements – 'actants' in Latour's (1993) words – mutually constitute each other's conditions, whether intentional or unintentional (Verbeek, 2014). Hence, scholars such as Latour (1999) and philosopher Peter-Paul Verbeek (2014) argue that features like 'intentionality,' 'autonomy' and 'agency' – which since the Enlightenment are often considered typically *human* characteristics (see also, Taylor, 2004) – are actually the result of sophisticated interactions between both human beings and nonhuman 'actants,' such as (technological) artefacts. Latour (1993) and Verbeek (2014) therefore put forward that it is untenable to maintain a dichotomy between autonomous human subjects and solitary nonhuman objects, as it is the sophisticated *relations* between human and nonhuman elements that mediate phenomena such as intentionality and agency.

Entangling social and material elements through objects, environments, services, and systems might be considered the core business of designers. This begs the question what specific factors might then possibly constitute '*designerly*' forms of 'social agency'? Do designers indeed entangle 'the social' and 'the material' in specific ways that boost design's potential for 'societal impact'?

Demystifying 'designerly agency': what can design do?

Especially in those branches of design where engineering is a key component, designing is often primarily considered a range of problem-solving activities. This (ubiquitous) solution-oriented perspective on design is underpinned by the stubborn habit to consider even the most complex and layered phenomena *problems* – suggesting that they are *solvable*. Consider, for example, how designers Bruce Mau and Jennifer Leonard (2004, p.18) in their quest for 'massive change' render "the welfare of the human race ... a design project, a practical objective," or how design scholar Elizabeth Resnick (2019, p. 18) describes design as giving "shape and form to the material and immaterial products and services that can address problems and contribute to the well-being of humankind." These optimistic statements explicitly forge links between design and a worldview wherein humanity's welfare and well-being are considered *engineerable objectives*. A modernistic, me-

chanical worldview, moreover, which focus on life's presumed *manufacturability* is often reflected in contemporary design discourse (see, e.g., Escobar, 2017; Fry, 2009).

Accordingly, many (Western) definitions of design(ing) choose to specifically underline aspects such as intentionality, future orientation, and problem-solving. Design is described as "courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones" (Simon, 1969, p. 55) or "the intentional solution to a problem within a set of constraints" (Monteiro, 2019, p. 21). Architecture scholar Samer Akkach (2003, p. 324, italics in original), however, interestingly points out that within the Arab language the relatively young word for 'design' depicts: "an act of determination, of sorting out possibilities, and of projecting a choice. It has little to do with problem-solving ... as the designer (*musammim*) seems to encounter *choices*, not *problems*, and to engage in *judging merits*, not *solving problems*."

This latter – 'Arabic' – understanding of both design and the designer *does* acknowledge intentionality and future orientation as key characteristics of design, but additionally stresses the importance of the many *contingencies* designers encounter within *any* design process. More specifically, it underlines that designers do not work on solving 'self-evident' problems, as it relates the agency of designers to the various contingencies they (un)deliberately may, or may not, *choose* to explore. Contingencies that, after a process of "judging merits," result in "projecting a choice" (Akkach, 2003, p. 324). According to Akkach (2003), therefore, this deliberate navigating and processing of contingencies render *any* act of designing inherently political.

Like Akkach (2003), authors such as Evgeny Morozov (2013, p. 3) problematize the tendency of many designers to first and foremost consider themselves *problem-solvers*, not seldomly unable to resist an "urge to fix problems that don't exist." Morozov (2013) argues that by primarily focussing on 'providing solutions' for situations, inconveniences, or even aspirations, *framed* as 'problems,' designers might consequently pay less attention to *issues*: problematic entanglements or disputes that – following sociologist Noortje Marres (2007) – are *not* necessarily solvable by political or scientific means, but instead need a perpetual exchange of perspectives, perceptions and ideas. In short: whereas *problems* might be fixed, *issues* are controversies that – at best – can only be temporarily stabilized. As such, they require different design approaches.

Problematic entanglements such as inequality of opportunity, poverty, or discrimination are so intricately complex and layered that they might – for better or for worse – be temporarily stabilized, but are very unlikely to be permanently fixed or solved by political or scientific means. This, however, does certainly *not* imply that these controversies fall outside of the scope of the subject matter which designers might work on. It just means that the approaches, aims and purposes within this particular field of political design work should be different. Addressing issues through design does not require a *problem-solving*, but a *problematizing* approach. As issues are *not* self-evident facts, designers can play meaningful roles in both supporting their construction and sustaining their articulation.

Problems versus issues

Art historian Claudia Banz (2018, p. 91) warns designers not to oversimplify problems or even *create new ones* by "incorrectly describing or delimiting the actual issue." As such, Banz (2018) underlines that problems and issues are distinct phe-

nomena that are not self-evident consequences of particular circumstances, but instead come into existence through the purposeful activities of *problem setting* (Schön, 1983), and *issuefication* (Marres, 2012, 2014).

Social theorist Donald A. Schön (1983, p. 40, italics in original) describes 'problem setting' as "a process in which, interactively, we *name* the things to which we will attend and *frame* the context in which we will attend to them." In short: a situation first has to be understood, acknowledged, and framed as *a problem*, before it actually *becomes* one. Likewise, Noortje Marres (2007, p. 768) argues that "before a problematic entanglement counts as a matter of public concern, it must be actively articulated." Again, while both problems and issues are actively constructed, problems might be solvable by political or scientific means, whereas issues can merely be stabilized. Thus, besides providing solutions for situations that have been actively 'set' as problems (Schön, 1983), designers also have roles to play in the articulation of *issues* and the sustainment of a perpetual exchange of perspectives, perceptions and ideas regarding these controversies.

Problematizing design practices

Within the ever expanding realm of design practices and design discourse, one can identify several approaches that *do* explicitly oppose solution-oriented and problem-solving perspectives, and instead use designed objects, environments, services, and systems as a medium to address issues. Approaches that seek to *cause* friction, instead of to *prevent* it; approaches that purposefully employ design as a discursive catalyst, as a means to 'challenge mainstream perspectives,' 'raise awareness' about values and beliefs, or 'critically assess mass production and consumerism' (see, e.g., Malpass, 2017; Thorpe, 2012; Whiteley, 1993).

Designers and educators Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (2001, 2013) refer to a particular breed of these 'alternative' design practices as 'design fiction,' 'critical design,' or 'speculative design' – polemical forms of design that seeks to engage people with the political connotations and social contexts of designed artefacts. Design scholar Carl DiSalvo (2012, p. 35) describes a number of these overtly political practices as 'adversarial design' – design approaches that employ "a tactic of exposing and documenting the forces of influence in society and the means by which social manipulation occurs." Still other authors use labels such as 'interrogative design,' 'reflective design,' or 'design activism' to depict design practices that explicitly seek to bring about "dissensus through aesthetic activity" (Markussen, 2012, p. 45; Tharp & Tharp, 2018). Notwithstanding the wide variety of terms used to describe them, the various 'alternative' design practices in this field typically do not focus on *problem-solving*, but instead are geared towards *problem setting* (Schön, 1983) and *issuefication* (Marres, 2012, 2014). Moreover, beyond partaking in the mere *construction* of problems and issues, many of these design approaches actively support the perpetual exchange of perspectives, perceptions and ideas regarding these concerns, controversies and disputes.

Keeping it real

In current times of complex, layered, and interrelated crises especially, designers and design theorists need to get their vocabulary straight in order to articulate what design *can* actually do – as well as what it *can't*. In their enthusiasm to solve

problems, designers should be weary not to become instrumental in disguising the complexity, dynamics, and interrelatedness connected to issues. Primarily framing the renewable energy transition as a design project and engineerable problem, for example, might steer attention away from crucial related factors such as capitalist modes of production, consumerism, and geopolitics related to critical mineral resources needed for renewable energy technologies (see, e.g., Boehnert, 2018; Thorpe, 2012).

As such – instead of using the two terms interchangeably – I deem the conceptual differences between 'problems' and 'issues' fundamental for design discourse in order to articulate specific, relevant, and meaningful forms of 'designerly agency' in relation to 'societal change.' When problematic entanglements such as inequality of opportunity, poverty, or discrimination are approached by the design community *precisely for what they are* – inherently complex and layered controversies underpinned by a perpetual exchange of perspectives, that are therefore unlikely to be settled permanently – they can be addressed by specific forms of design work accordingly. Instead of proposing 'solutions,' designers rather have roles to play in engendering and/or sustaining public engagement with these issues.

Consider, for example, how designed artefacts by companies such as *Fairphone* or *Tony's Chocolonely* contribute to the issuefication of, and public engagement with, conflict-ridden supply chains. While the latter company uses design to forge relations between the hitherto 'innocent' chocolate bar and contemporary forms of slavery, the former business' brand name and its alternatively designed products render all other smartphones potentially 'unfair.' Beyond setting an issue and 'raising awareness,' however, the artefacts these companies design and mass-produce facilitate publics engaged with conflict-ridden supply chains with new ways to address their concerns. By employing design to entangle the social and the material in specific ways, these businesses have rendered using a specific smartphone or eating a particular bar of chocolate, a material form of political participation (see also, Marres, 2012).

Whereas *Fairphone* and *Tony's Chocolonely* are hopeful that their (future) products and services might be part of some sort of solution by engendering 'systemic change' (see, e.g., Georgi, 2022; Ibrahim, 2019), other designers use their professional skills to imaginatively entangle the social and the material into artefacts that do not seek to provide any solutions whatsoever.

Design supporting spaces of contest

When it comes to addressing *issues*, designers have a role to play in supporting the perpetual exchange of perspectives, perceptions and ideas concerning these disputes and controversies. Design projects such as *Smogware* – in which crockery is finished with a glaze that contains particulate matter 'harvested' from urban environments (Carlson, 2022) – or *the Rain Project* – in which unfiltered rain water collected from multiple locations is converted into consumable popsicles (Tharp & Tharpe, 2018) – provide publics with new ways to articulate their concerns with the issue of environmental pollution. Ways, moreover, that are not solution-oriented, but

rather seek to "establish linkages among objects, people, and actions to create open, interpretive, and participatory spaces of contest" (DiSalvo, 2012, p. 93).

In short: one might understand 'designerly agency' in relation to 'societal change' as consisting of both the framing, setting and solving of *problems*, as well as the articulation of *issues*, through the creation of objects, environments, services and systems. More importantly, however: in order to address them in *relevant* and *meaningful* ways – and thus neither frame trivialities or critical parts of social life as 'problems' (Morozov, 2013), nor create new problems by ignoring underlying issues (Banz, 2018) – it is important for both designers and design theorists to acknowledge that problems might be *fixed*, but issues – that need a perpetual exchange of perspectives and therefore can never be permanently settled – can merely be *stabilized* (Marres, 2007). Therefore issues especially, need to be approached by the design community *precisely for what they are*. Instead of proposing 'solutions,' designers have roles to play in underpinning public engagement with these disputes, and supporting the perpetual exchange of perceptions and ideas regarding these controversies. Designers can use their expertise in entangling the social and the material through the creation of objects, environments, services, and systems, to imaginatively shape new and alternative ways for publics to address their collective concerns.

Conclusion

In this paper I have described how design has been mobilized in relation to different interpretations of 'the social' in a number of divergent ways. Ways that describe various assumptions regarding the notion of designers as 'change agents' with 'societal impact.' Ways, moreover, that suggest both *problem-solving* and *problematizing* design approaches. In current times of complex, layered, and interrelated crises especially, designers and design theorists need to get their vocabulary straight in order to articulate what design *can* actually do – as well as what it *can't*. Let us therefore refrain from describing even the most complex and layered phenomena as *problems*, suggesting that they are *solvable*. Instead – in order to articulate relevant and meaningful roles design might play concerning various problematic entanglements – it is essential to differentiate *problems* that can be fixed, *from issues* that can merely be stabilized (Marres, 2007), and approach both phenomena precisely for what they are. By acknowledging that both problems and issues are not a given but rather need to be *constructed*, 'designerly agency' in relation to 'societal change' can be understood as consisting of both the framing, setting and solving of *problems*, as well as the articulation of *issues*, through the creation of artefacts.

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