

# Design as Common Good

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Logics of social design

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**Abstract | This paper examines how different institutional social design forms relate to achieving the common good. This paper attempts this using a form of analysis called institutional logics which sees organisational action as existing in a social and institutional context, which shapes organisational and individual behaviours. The paper distinguishes three social design logics embedded within contemporary design in western European and North American contexts: innovation-austerity, deliberation-pluralism and anticipation-utopia, each with a distinct mission, basis of legitimacy, professional identity, emblematic objects and practices, forms of organisation, socialisation mechanisms and strategies. It takes the UN Sustainable Development Goals, a definition of what the common good might look like, and outlines how the three logics play out in relation to them. By so doing, the paper shows there are varied instantiations of professional design acting towards the common good with distinct modes of operation, and sets out directions for future research.**

**Keywords: Social design, Institutional logics, Common good, SDGs, Sustainable development**

## 1. Introduction

If we accept Simon's definition of design that it aims to change existing situations into preferred ones (1996: 111), then it has become clear in the 21st century that while extensive change is required in how societies, communities, businesses and governments are organised to address urgent social, health and environmental issues, the nature and consequences of these changes and the associated preferences are highly ambiguous, contested and complex. Design consultancies – the predominant way that designers are organised to deploy their expertise in the global North – are increasingly engaged to support and enable change, including in domains such as healthcare technologies, behaviours of citizens and customers, and the redesign of public services including through guides (eg Rockefeller Foundation, n.d.) and prizes (eg Currystone Foundation, 2020). In higher education, students, educators and researchers are invited to respond to briefs (eg Royal Society of Arts, 2020) and funding calls targeting sustainability, health and humanitarian issues. Design festivals, museums, exhibitions, events and digital platforms mix opportunities to enact a mode of design as tied up with innovation alongside performing responses to social and environmental issues (eg Broken Nature, 2019). Despite growing critical discussion of assumptions and bias built into the profession's practices, there is intensification of design expertise being reconstructed as "social" including being directed towards the common good.

Such endeavours are hard to articulate, account for and assess, both in terms of process and outcome. If we turn to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2020), on the one hand they can be seen as an emblematic example of commitments towards achieving a shared, or common, equitable, sustainable future. On the other there are inconsistencies and ambiguity in their expression, let alone their implementation (Hickel, 2019). Learning from studies of development, designers might note that projects aiming to address the needs of poor people, especially those in low income countries, often fail to achieve their objectives, may have negative outcomes, and are rooted in the racialised and gendered means of intervening into societies governed by colonial legacies in the global South (Kothari, 2005).

In short, while addressing the common good through design might now be the aspiration of professionals, educators and curators working within diverse institutional settings, their built-in values, practices and accountabilities are rarely examined. This paper attempts this re-examination, by articulating the institutional logics embedded within devices, practices and organisations of contemporary design in western European and North American contexts. By identifying these logics, I aim to distinguish between different forms of social designing, with distinct missions, forms of legitimacy and professional identities. Such analysis will help practitioners and educators locate the practices they are reproducing and be reflexive about how these are negotiated. Second, it contributes to the literature by making distinctions between forms of social design.

To achieve this, the approach taken is a form of analysis called institutional logics. While studies of design culture (eg Julier, 2013) and design ethics (eg Fry, 2008) offered critical and contextual accounts of contemporary practice and modes of organisation, there have been few efforts to identify core logics inside design professions and organisations (eg Durand et al, 2013; Arico, 2018). The institutional logics approach highlights systems of beliefs and values

constructed at the societal level, built into the material and symbolic arrangements of organisations and practices resulting in particular courses of action and forms of agency (Powell and DiMaggio, 1983; Thornton and Ocasio, 1999; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). Such an approach recognises that action exists in a social and institutional context, which shapes professional identities, organisational behaviours and creates opportunities for stability and change.

The paper starts with a literature review of social design, which reveals there are as yet few critical and contextual discussions of this emerging phenomena. Adopting an institutional logics perspective, I delineate three ideal types of institutional logic within the western European and North American social design field. I then take the example of the SDGs as a pre-eminent definition of what the “common good” might look like, to which designers and design firms might address themselves. I outline the ways that the three logics play out differently in relation to the SDGs. By outlining these logics, I show there are varied instantiations of professional design acting towards the common good which have distinct modes of operation and implications. I conclude by identifying contributions to existing knowledge and suggest future research.

All designing is already “social” in the sense that it is informed by (mis)understandings of the concerns of the people targeted by designers, and of organisations and “society” as well as being carried out by groups of people (Tonkinwise, 2019). Armstrong et al. (2014) noted a social design “moment” emerging from the confluence of new forms of government, digitalisation, and growing urgent issues to which designers address themselves. Koskinen and Hush (2016) distinguished between molecular (small-scale), utopian and sociological forms. Chen et al. (2015) argued that social design works best at the scale of communities. Tonkinwise (2016) emphasised that even though social design emphasises social relations, it does this through having a focus on material objects such relations are organised through. Willis and Elbana (2016) pointed to the limitations of a problem-solving approach in social design and the need to better understand contexts and challenges. Tonkiss (2017) distinguished different forms of “social” in design and architecture including social as context, social as use, social as object and social as process. Arguing that designers should recognise the affective character of their practice, Brassett (2018) noted that the ontological work of social designing reinforces or disavows the various agential possibilities of the types of existence that emerge. Growing concern about equalities (eg Sloane, 2019), Eurocentric thinking (eg Escobar, 2018) and (in)justice (eg Costanza-Chock, 2020) result in accounts of social designing that explicitly engage with political and ethical concerns. Julier and Kimbell (2019) argued that social design is doomed not to be effective until practitioners turn their attention to institutional factors. While such studies have offered perspectives on design towards social ends and via social means (eg Vink et al, 2017), they have not articulated underlying logics in social design.

## **2. Re-assembling social design**

To attempt this, this paper uses a variant of the neo-institutional approach known as institutional logics, developed to analyse organisations as well as at field level. This approach is selected because the aim is to understand the structuring effects of forms of social design in relation to an outcome – the common good – that is both political and social. March and Olsen (1983) proposed that institutions are relatively autonomous, rather than being aggregates of individual behaviours, in making decisions about allocating resources. Powell and DiMaggio (1983) offered an explanation as to why organizations tend to behave in similar ways. Thornton and Ocasio (1999: 804) defined institutional logics as “the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality.” Classic forms of analysis identified “the family”, “the market”, “the state” or “the profession” as institutions; others are empirically derived resulting in classifications across traditional social formations (Thornton et al., 2015).

Several researchers have described mechanisms that make organisations homogenous, while others have studied institutional divergence (Beckert, 2010). Individual organisations may have multiple logics operating concurrently (Besharov & Smith 2014). Other studies used the idea of competing logics to explain how change happens, with implications for how new practices form (eg Lounsbury, 2007). Studying French industrial design firms, Durand et al. (2013) showed they had awareness of multiple logics which the authors defined as modernism, formalism and managerialism. The authors showed that firms with different levels of status combined these logics in different ways to trigger institutional change.

There are few examples to date of design researchers using this approach, all within service design. Kurtmollaiev et al. (2018) argued that material practices associated with service design and ways of working disrupted the institutional logics in organisations it was deployed in. Arico (2018) used institutional logics approach to explain how service design entered client organisations through emerging customer and digital logic. Vink et al. (2019) showed how service design practices alter mental models, which is required for the institutional change associated with service innovation. Sangiorgi et al. (2020) developed a tool for use in redesigning health services, which made different logics visible and negotiable.

In this study, the institutional logics perspective is used to examine social design fields, rather than focusing narrowly on the interactions of designers, or design firms, with clients or partners. Further, the approach used here acknowledges that institutional mechanisms have differential effects in relation to factors such as gender (eg Mackay et al., 2010). This approach will allow me to unpick the political consequences of social design fields aiming to achieve the common good. To create ideal types of institutional logics in social design, I draw on my situated knowledge of contemporary practice accessed through desk research and my participation in projects, events, interviews, and discussions with practitioners, educators and researchers.<sup>1</sup> It requires me to attend to the activities through some voices and perspectives are brought into view while others are marginalised, and how some futures are opened up, while others are foreclosed.

### 3. Articulating three logics

This study distinguishes between three ideal types of institutional logic in social design understood as constructs to enable research rather than a description of the world (see Table 1). The characteristics of these logics draws on several sources in the literature (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008; Thornton, et al. 2012; Boitier and Rivière, 2016). As some researchers have done (eg Durand et al., 2013), this study generates novel terminology for logics that add nuance to the often-used abstractions of “market”, “state” or “profession”, recognising the encroachment of neo-liberalism into professional design practice (Julier, 2017). The framework used identifies core symbolism, mission, source of identity, source of legitimacy, emblematic practices and objects, means of socialisation, basis of strategy and focus of attention in each logic.

The first logic is *innovation-austerity*, in which social design is constructed as being essential to society solving its problems. For designers to be legitimised to work towards this mission, they must be invited to the table and invested in by those with economic resources or symbolic power. Their identity is as enablers of others, helping them achieve their goals, in business, civil society or government including. Common organisational forms in this logic are consultancies serving clients or in-house teams inside organisations. The ways that designers are socialised into this logic include internships, the junior/senior hierarchy in design firms, conferences, and student projects with external partners in higher education. To achieve the mission of enabling clients (whether named as such or not) the strategy is to demonstrate people’s involvement in and buy in of the design process, and to provide evidence that the process has achieved the intended goals. In practice this results in evidencing the design process itself, for example by creating visualisations of people’s experiences of the context, as well as of the designing, and producing design toolkits to make design visible.

Table 1. Logics of social design<sup>ii</sup>

| Characteristic      | Innovation-austerity                            | Deliberation-pluralism   | Anticipation-utopia   |
|---------------------|---|--|---|
| Symbolic analogy    | Product launch team                             | Town meeting   | Creative studio   |
| Basis of mission    | Develop new solutions for society               | Hear/see what matters to people  | Show what could be  |
| Basis of legitimacy | Buy in and investment from those with resources | Connecting with and making visible people with lived experience of social issues | Imagining alternatives and futures beyond what currently exists |

|                               |   |   |   |
|-------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Basis of identity             | Enabling organisations to achieve goals                                     | Convening socio-material publics  | Acting as visionaries outside of norms/frames                                       |
| Emblematic practices/ objects | Visualisations of user journeys, design toolkits                            | Co-creation workshops, manifestos   | Speculative objects/media, visioning workshops                                      |
| Organisational forms          | Consultancies, in-house teams, design higher education                      | Project teams, activist and community groups, digital networks                | Museums, design higher education, boutique consultancies                            |
| Socialisation mechanisms      | Internships, conferences, projects with partners in higher education        | Activist networks, hack days, sprints, occupations                            | Biennales, festivals, events, student degree shows, residencies                     |
| Basis of strategy             | Demonstrating people's involvement and buy in, providing evidence of impact | Demonstrating people's participation, building relationships with communities | Curating/organising/staging events and showcases, gaining mainstream media exposure |
| Focus of attention            | Project delivery, meeting expectations                                      | Authenticity, equity  | Reimagining, exceeding  |

Analogous to a product launch team, this logic is coupled with economic value. Here, design expertise is a necessary contributor to economic growth for example through consultancies being paid fees to enable clients to become more customer-centric, test out ideas before committing to them, and develop new innovations (eg European Commission, 2012; Innovate UK, 2020). In this logic, the common good is achieved through economic growth to meet society's needs, which requires innovation and improvements in productivity.

The flipside of this push towards innovation is the requirement to enact austerity, when governments decide to reduce investments in public infrastructures or where government is absent. Here, social design expertise can be leveraged to redesign public services (eg Design Commission, 2013) or to address humanitarian issues (Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs, 2018). Social innovation – by people, for people, with people – is another response,

resulting in new services and organisations when the state refuses to invest or provide. In this, designers are invited to take on new roles in identifying and “amplifying” local resources and responses, innovating in response to social needs that are not being met (eg Manzini, 2015).

This logic downplays the political conditions in which social design is organised and carried out in service of innovation. Critical voices are tolerated but marginalised; customers and communities are prompted to build “resilience” and to co-produce their own solutions to their needs; change is inevitable and endlessly performed. Designers are advised to think of themselves as responsive, rather than responsible for outcomes they work towards. On the one hand this can be read as acknowledgement of *realpolitik* and the limitations on the courses of actions they can pursue; on the other, responsiveness might be seen as being reactive and tactical, rather than active and strategic in the face of complex, and political issues.

The second logic is *deliberation-pluralism*, with the mission of bringing into view what matters to society. Analogous to the town meeting, this logic foregrounds and materialises the multiplicity of voices and perspectives in a social world and the potential for being involved in (re)designing. While “human-centred” perspectives are foregrounded in the innovation/austerity logic, within this logic the emphasis is on multiplicity and agonism in social relations (eg Di Salvo, 2012) with the rejection of simplistic accounts of experience. The legitimacy of design professionals in this logic requires a careful calculation. On the one hand, their legitimacy rests on connecting with and making visible and heard people with lived experience of social issues, on their own terms. On the other hand, the power relations in so doing must be negotiated so that the “people” still require the designers to speak for and with them. The basis of professional identity is tied to the convening of publics in ways that are not just “social” (because community organisers and political parties do that already) but “socio-material”, reliant on producing assemblies of people and things in creative configurations (Marres et al., 2018). The organisational forms of this logic include temporary teams gathering for a deliberative purpose, sometimes at the request of government, activist and community groups, and digital networks, which may involve fees and income generation. To achieve the mission of making society visible and heard, the strategy involves demonstrating people’s participation and building relationships with communities as an end in itself. The mechanism for socialisation in this logic requires active participation in community and activist (digital) networks, hack days, or workshops.

While this logic foregrounds multiplicity, this does not map directly onto diversity. There are growing critiques of the gendered and racialised modes of contemporary European and North American design which minimise or exclude perspectives of women and people from Black, Indigenous and People of Colour communities, those with different abilities including neurodiversity, and other characterisations structured as other (eg Escobar, 2018; Costanza-Chock, 2020). Other developments acknowledge more-than human perspectives (Hilgren et al., 2020) attending to living beings, ecologies and planetary constraints, going beyond “human-centred design” narratives.

The third logic is *anticipation-utopia*, which opens up and exceeds current frames about what might be possible in relation to economic growth, social change and sustainable development. While the analogy of this logic is the creative studio, it’s important to note that this logic is

not simply tied to the generative activities that occur during designing. Rather it foregrounds the imaginaries which are embedded in this instantiation of social design, evident in its practices, objects and accounts. Designers' professional legitimacy here is on the basis of going beyond current understandings; what they propose does not have to "work". Their professional identity is based on acting as visionaries outside of current frames. Designers are socialised through higher education including degree shows as well as residencies and commissions associated with exhibition-based organisations. Here the organisational forms associated with this logic such as museums or festivals have diffused forms of income generation including public subsidy, donations or ticketing, rather than fees (although boutique consultancies may have these). Emblematic practices and objects in this logic include speculative designs and media for de-contextualised display in galleries as well as visioning workshops to involve participants to join - albeit briefly - the studio of this social design logic.

In this logic, acknowledgement of the political and economic conditions that sustain such institutional forms is muted. Von Busch and Palmås (2016) noted the idealist tendency in design thinking to sidestep the messy and contested nature of the real worlds designers are invited to reimagine. Seeing design as outside of or beyond current frames downplays positionality.

#### **4. Exploring social design logics in sustainable development**

Turning now to the question of the anticipated common good associated with the SDGs, I examine how social design logics play out in relation to these commitments. Adopted in 2015, the 17 SDGs built on substantial work by activists, civil society organisations and researchers (Filho et al, 2017). The SDGs are intended to provide a framework for policymaking in member states over a period of 15 years to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity – one articulation of the common good. However despite this high level vision, there are a number of problems associated with the SDGs. One is the mutual contradictions between the goals focussed on economy, society and environment (eg International Council for Science and International Social Science Council, 2015; Hickel, 2019). For example, goals aiming at economic growth, if achieved through "business as usual", will result in further environmental damage. A second is the difficulty of modelling and evaluating progress towards them (Spaiser et al, 2017). A third is the fact that despite such commitments, unless there is associated action and engagement with communities and publics (Mensah, 2019) the SDGs will not be achieved. However, in the absence of better shared definitions of common good, the SDGs function as a frame to explore how social design logics are instantiated.

Intersecting the first social design logic I proposed, innovation-austerity, with the SDGs sees the social as an object for design (Tonkiss, 2017). This is evident in toolkits to aid governments to achieve sustainable development or outsource previously public services to community groups (eg OECD, 2020) or platforms to support problem-solving (eg OpenIDEO, 2020). In design higher education, students are offered as unpaid labour to toil on public



problems on the basis that they achieve their learning outcomes. In-house designers or external consultants are positioned as enablers of organisations working towards the SDGs, including through designers from the Global North being paid to find “solutions” for the poor communities in the Global North or Global South, switching economic for social value as if these can easily be swapped over. This logic downplays the inherent contradictions in the SDGs and contested pathways to implementation, as well as the politics of establishing such projects and negotiating between conflicting agendas (eg Mission Oriented Innovation Network and Design Council, 2020).

In contrast, in the second logic, deliberation-pluralism, the contradictions in the SDGs are something to organise around, a starting point for dialogue. In this logic, the social is activated as context and as process (Tonkiss, 2017). Practices here include running workshops and using digital platforms to bring publics into view, acknowledging conflicting stakes in the issues associated with the SDGs and responses to them. The process of making publics is itself a social good, and part of the requirement to deliver the SDGs (Mensah, 2019). Through a strategy of demonstrating involvement or formation of publics, democratic ambitions associated with the SDG are foregrounded. To enact this logic requires that designers have a focus of attention on equity, and are conversant with the requirement to be attentive to institutional conditions in which designing takes place and how they structure and limit possibilities (Keshavarz, 2018).

Social design in the form of the third logic, anticipation-utopia, intersects with the SDGs in different ways. In this logic, the social is activated as projections of use (Tonkiss, 2017). Creating and showcasing ideas matters more than implementation. Here professional identities of social designers as thinking beyond current frames are embraced to propose new visions and responses to urgent issues, often neglecting the lived experience and expertise of people within an issue. With a strategy to capture the social imagination through creative display, this logic can be seen as connecting with the espoused intentions of the SDGs while at the same time bypassing complexities and conflicts around implementation.

By mapping social design institutional logics in relation to the SDGs, distinct forms of practice and organisational action can be identified. Noting that institutional logics can explain both how things come to be similar, as well as how they change (Beckert, 2010), the value of this analysis is to ask how homogenisation or change are achieved in social design and their consequences. Second, this analysis highlights that organisations may well have more than one logic running concurrently (Besharov & Smith 2014). Identifying how these logics relate to one another – which are central and which are marginal, and the extent of their mutual alignment – can help participants assess the possibilities and consequences of particular courses of action (Sangiorgi et al, 2020).

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper aimed to develop new understandings of design and the common good by applying the institutional logics perspective to distinguish between specific material and symbolic

configurations within social design. Having proposed three ideal types of social design logic, it showed how different formations might respond to the common good embodied in the SDGs. Examining the intersections between these logics in instantiations of social design enables nuanced assessment of associated aspirations, accounts and claims.

The paper's contributions are at three levels. First, it has aided understanding social design by specifying the practices, identities, sources of legitimacy, types of organisation and strategies through which different forms of social design are (re)produced. A limitation here is privileges associated with my particular institutional setting and networks which make some forms of practice more visible. The second contribution is methodological, through the use of institutional logics to analyse how professional design is enacted in social design, building on recent work in service design. The third contribution is to identify future research. One approach is to take this provisional framework and test it empirically. Another direction would be to identify the circumstances shaping conflicts between logics, how organisations and teams negotiate between them, and with what consequences. Further, the links between critical design studies and the institutional logics approach could be developed.

Rather than asking which social design logic is more or less likely to achieve the common good, identifying these logics brings into view the different ways that ethics are constructed, and inequalities are reproduced in particular practices and organisational arrangements. If fields of social design are indeed to achieve the common good, what kinds of institutional form and logic need to be designed?

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#### **About the Author:**

**Lucy Kimbell** has published on design thinking, service design, social design and design for policy. Her activities span research, knowledge exchange, teaching design thinking to MBA students, PhD supervision and activism. She is an experienced co-investigator on large-scale, cross-disciplinary projects.

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<sup>ii</sup> The title of the paper is inspired by Barry et al. (2008).