Assemblages of Social Design

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This paper argues that responsible designers are responsive to the needs of the community, detailing how social designers can have a global impact through shaping their localities and therefore challenging the neoliberal economy. The author sees co-design — whether it is social, participatory or community design — as an active agent in initiating the urgent social change needed for political equality, environmental justice and community wellbeing.

Exposition

We do not need more, but better, design. Too many designers are focused on providing slick solutions to a problem, losing sight of the bigger picture. Design affects all aspects of our life, including how, when and what we breathe; ignoring this is what created problems in the first place. Sometimes a solution has to be cumbersome, awkward and rough to satisfy the needs of most people and environments involved (figure 1). This often means that it does not look good and it is not simple, but, if it works, it is good enough (Thorpe & Gamman, 2011).

↑ **Figure 1.**
***Text Illuminations*, Design Research for Change exhibition, 2019 © Nela Milic. This installation is an outcome of the complex interdisciplinary research project, *Art and Reconciliation*, conducted by LSE, King's College London and London College of Communication, funded by the AHRC, 2018.**

Whenever I am caught in the rain on my bike, I am reminded of this. There are no shoes, gloves or hats in which you can ride and be waterproof no matter what the labels say. So, I will give up on aesthetics of my clothing until the problem is solved, but I am prepared for it to never be solved. What I cannot accept is yet another 'innovation' that does not offer solutions, but just seems better than the previous ones. Designers and other 'creatives' are complicit in this 'inventioning' process, alongside industrialists, bankers and merchants, who established consumer culture decades ago. This very culture is still an engine of our dysfunctional economy, supported and upheld by the political establishment (Foster, 2020). Its greedy carelessness for the sustainability of our planet reveals itself through climate change, inequality and health crises, like the current pandemic. A crash is inevitable unless we transform this neoliberal ecology.

For such change to happen, we need to turn to the community. From here we can learn to develop a better sense of care for each other as well as for nature. We can support the knowledge of diverse agents in teaching us about holistic living. As it stands though, we are led instead by corporate information technology giants. We invest more time in learning about machines than about other people, all the while those businesses are learning about us through collecting our data. However, just like political leaders, these technology companies do not know what

to do with this information apart from generate profit. They are bold in their market speculations, take risks by making predictions about our desires and prey on our timid conduct, mapping its trends in order to circulate products.

I am writing this in the midst of the global pandemic caused by the coronavirus. Most world leaders are more worried about the health of the economy than people's wellbeing. Numerous governments consider protecting expansive trade markets a rational, wise and mature approach (Kara et all, 2020), but who will run that economy if people are dead? Those state representatives also claim to follow the science (Devlin and Boseley, 2020), but they are not scientists who can determine what data is worth following. Furthermore, they are unmoved and unchanged by the efforts to protest this status quo.
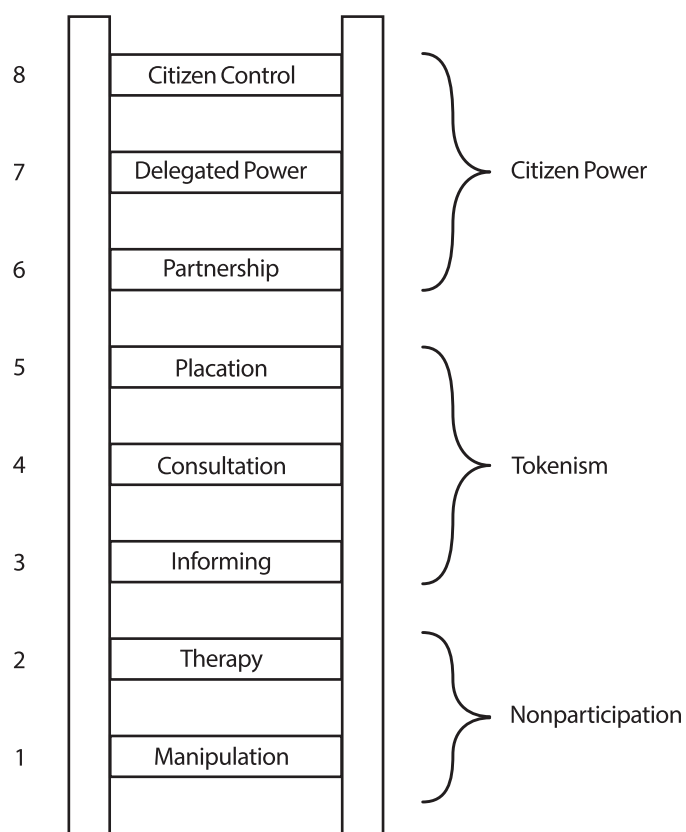
Design and Participation

I believe that social design supports community development and can restructure the oppressive global market system. This is because working together towards a common goal enhances our sense of purpose, accomplishment and agency and so can and does mobilise social change. It is a vital way to provide care for our society and — contrary to entrenched economic, patriarchal and colonial approaches — it treats people as adults. It allows the community to address its own challenges actively by contributing ideas and placing its members on an equal footing with policymakers, institutions, local governments, etc. In return, the community's engagement with these experts enriches disciplinary fields and provides welcome input from the users of the, then, co-designed products.

↓ Figure 2. Sherry Arnstein's Degrees of Citizen's Participation (1969)© *The Citizens Handbook*

Rather than being empowered by specialists, in social design the community participates on its own turf and terms. Co-designers (community, participatory and/or social designers) facilitate this process of generating communal knowledge. Their involvement with people oscillates between mediation, leadership and participation. These levels shift and sometimes overlap, depending on the intensity of that engagement. As Arnstein explains in "A Ladder of Citizen Participation", "there are significant gradations of citizen participation" (1969:3) and fluctuation is essential in the process of co-design (figure 2).

Without the redistribution of power, participation "is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless" (Arnstein, 1969:2). We know this from a variety of evaluations where we see evaluation form providers tailor answers to suit the funders' agendas. What they

leave out is an empirical record of project participants that is perhaps the richest dataset for the appraisal of a project's value. Arts, crafts, design, local councils and cultural institutions tend to 'follow the science' as instructed by their — mainly government — investors when interpreting their audience's experience of artworks, activities and events. Hence, they conduct surveys, provide questionnaires, measure demographics and calculate results, but these do not yield evidence of the quality of participation nor seek to understand the long-term impact on the very people they took these data from. In this set-up, participation is useful as long as the projects last; it is a means to an end rather than a holistic, pedagogic and communal design practice.

People are able to detect and differentiate between these different degrees of participation as outlined by Arnstein (1969) (figure 2). She suggests that citizens' participation is where their power lies, but both sides of power — the haves and the have nots — tend to view each other as monolithic groups. In the age of social media and liquid capital, this traditional positioning of the two sides of power can be harder to decipher, but that polarity is present nevertheless. The increasing gap between the rich and the poor demonstrates that we are developing common traits with colonial histories (Keely, 2015). If we wish to move from these traditional power dynamics in order to embrace contemporaneity, our actions should reflect the post-colonial rhetoric in which we eradicate bigotry, chauvinism, prejudice, etc. But, if inequality is non-existent, what would social designers do?

Furthermore, professional designers are often seen as well-off because of the costly materials, tools and studios they use and so are associated with industry and commerce, and, indeed, with higher education institutions, which are thought to be privileged places. However, social designers form a distinctive group around calls for social innovation that encompass an interest in both social entrepreneurship, and open technological innovations (The Young Foundation, 2012). As one of those designers, I aim to work with what is already there, to harness people as a resource and focus on satisfying their needs. Similarly, my colleagues come from socially engaged art practices and specific branches of design, like service, participatory or user-experience, and they too employ co-design with the community in order to solve its problems.

The Social Designer

In *Design for the Real World* (1984), Victor Papanek wrote about the social and moral responsibility of all designers when it comes to considering their impact on the planet. He framed this responsibility as a professional obligation to design with environmental and social consciousness. He believed that designers should marry economic and social wants as well as provide the strategy, technology and aesthetics for them. That is the sphere of 'social innovation' (which may be the wrong term because nothing new has been produced, but already

available assets are utilised differently). Undeniably, it could be a cause of animosity and tension if a designer is parachuted into a community rather than being local. However, to think that designers have power just because they lead workshops, consultation or the design making process, is to undermine the community itself. People have resources, capacities and trades that are as valuable as designers'. Indeed, they can provide huge benefits to projects, but can ~~also~~ impact them negatively too.

↑ **Figure 3.**
Days of Remembrance **project workshop, Belgrade 2011 © Marijana Simu, Kulturklammer. Remembrance Map, by Vračar's residents, developed as a result of gathering documents from citizens' personal and family archives as well as conversations and collaborations with project participants.**

In my mapping projects for *Kulturklammer — Centre for Cultural Interactions* in Belgrade (figure 3), I aimed to highlight the significance of public reminiscence, collective memory and intergenerational exchange in placemaking. The elderly, as community custodians of social memories, have taken a prominent place in the project and, once they realised this, some began asserting nationalist, militant and authoritarian narratives upon our agenda. It was difficult to keep their friendship and continue annotating urban landscape and architectural developments in this charged political space that brought to the fore the dictatorship we all lived in.

Still, facing fellow collaborators and nurturing honesty, however uncomfortable, is a gift in the process of social design. The community's responses to 'wicked' problems are often not welcomed easily, but they can be eye-opening and aid the struggle with everyday matters. Through community workshops in which we designed a social history map of the city, I found ~~amongst~~ hairdressers, plumbers, IT professionals, and travel advisers, shared passions for yoga, cycling and recycling. Those connections kept me happy, healthy and comfortable as they provided security and a sense of belonging — even with my profession, often thought of as something between the local teacher and social worker. The crucial term here is 'local', as it denotes a familiar presence and a welcome addition to the residents' 'table'.

We — designers — share our space with the community. Together, we make a place. That place can demarcate a territory or a field of study, as in the case of the Space and Place research hub I coordinate at London College of Communication (LCC). The hub gathers together scholars, artists and design practitioners interested in exploring discourses around placemaking. Our approaches range from service to participatory arts and design because we believe that 'place' requires interdisciplinary exploration with its makers: local people who carved it out of the trajectories, interactions and connections in their habitat.

Conclusion

Social design can provide access to communities and to their place. It is no wonder that local authorities, housing developers and policymakers employ it and look to artists and designers to negotiate with the community. Both 'creatives' and the community are aware of this, so workshops can be a stimulating battleground where artists, designers and people who participate in making find ways to influence the governance, the feel and the look of their place.

My work in this area stems from memory studies, where I investigate the possibility of delivering informal histories in order to support communities with tracing their collective heritage, rather than accepting official narratives. This is particularly important in post-conflict zones, where the work on memory of place has healing qualities, but it has to be done sensitively and with assurances that no more damage will occur. I learnt about the value of participation in those contested terrains and was enticed by its potential to influence, challenge and inform local political systems through valuing and encouraging residents' input into city affairs. Unfortunately, in this instance, nothing managed to immediately replace or advance what was there already because participation had a plethora of interpretations — from taking part in the regime corruption to joining the ruling party. Nonetheless, the community encounter was nourishing better and more effective attempts of social transformation for the future.

↓ **Figure 4. Contested site of Old Fairgrounds complex Belgrade 2019 © Dr Nela Milic. Staro Sajmiste is the former Nazi concentration camp in Belgrade that housed artists after WWII as well as the Roma community, until recently, when it became a target for ruthless commercial redevelopment.**

That is why it is essential that we keep using social design, trying to find ways to work together with or without the powers that be. We should start with our own backyard, maintaining the relationship with the community around us and supporting already existent, inclusive and nurturing local work. We should not forget our roots either. Conscious of how little power Belgraders still have, I stand behind activists who are protecting their city heritage from the national government charging over the landscape, arts and architecture, eradicating traces of both their and my past (figure 4) in the name of a neoliberal economy. In order to make space for a better world that we are yet to design with each other, we need to know what to preserve, but also what must fall.

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