Design as Common Good

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The genealogies and archaeologies of social design – the architectures of the common good

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Abstract | This paper investigates the claim that social design can be defined in terms of its orientation towards the common good. It does this by looking at three canonical texts in social design as set against the socio-cultural contexts in which they were produced: Morris's *News from Nowhere*, Papanek's *Design for the Real World* and Manzini's *Design, When Everybody Designs.* Applying genealogical and archaeological analyses, the paper finds that the conceptions of the common good presupposed in these three articulations are sufficiently different to preclude definitional consensus with respect to social design. Yet, the paper argues, there is enough overlap for social design to be considered a "family resemblance" concept. This need not be a disappointing outcome. Using social design as a family resemblance concept enables us to differentiate some ways of practicing and talking about design from others, even though we are not able to offer a "standard" definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. As a bonus, the notion of social design approached in the terms proposed provides a good heuristic for thinking about the common good: not just how the good is distributed but, crucially, how the commonality is constructed and constituted.

Keywords: social design, common good, family resemblance, genealogy, archaeology

1. Introduction

Social design has made claims to supporting or even constituting the common good (Dorst, Kaldor, Klippan & Watson, 2016). Certainly, it has been one of the concepts used to capture the increasing immersion and involvement of design into the social life and in support of social goals (Resnick, 2019; Margolin & Margolin, 2002). Yet there is a lack of clarity as to what kind of societal vision of a common good might be implied in social design. Presumably, if social design furthers the common good and the common good 'benefits society as a whole' - social design should not be used in support of individual or fractional interest. Has this been always, or ever, the case? If social design is effectively defined as a body of practice oriented towards the common good, interrogating the operative conception of the common good seems crucial.

This paper reflects upon 'designing' the common good by tracing a number of genealogies and archaeologies of social design. Starting with the social-reform vision of building public infrastructures in the Victorian philanthropists and the idea of social design in William Morris' *News from Nowhere* (1890); through Papanek's counter-movement to the corporate, industrial, mass production design on the one hand and the modernist design detached from the 'real world' on the other (Papanek, 1971); to iterations of social design as embodied in the more recent manifestations of participatory design (Manzini, 2015) - the paper interrogates the notions of the social presupposed and the hidden assumptions about the common good thereby entailed. Is the common good presupposed in the different instances sufficiently similar to allow a definitional unity for social design?

The paper proceeds in the following way: first, it introduces the problem of defining social design as it has emerged in the design scholarship in the recent years; then it turns to look at the historical 'vignettes': three texts associated with social design as situated within the historical contexts of their production; it unfolds by asking about the central tenets of the respective "applications" of social design and questions whether there is enough continuity to speak of a geographically and historically unified phenomenon. Even though the paper recognises that it is not possible to find a common "essence" in the historically variable instances that would suffice for defining social design in terms of sufficient and necessary properties, the paper argues that the notion of social design is meaningful and explanatory as a "family resemblance" concept. The paper concludes with the claim that approaching social design using the Wittgensteinian family resemblance paves a way for better informed considerations of the common good in design.

2. Defining 'social design'

It is well accepted that any design operates on the social and through the social and so, without further qualifications, 'social' cannot be a distinctive feature of social design (Julier & Kimbell, 2019; Tonkinwise, 2019). Rather, the existing scholarship suggests that the

distinction comes from the way that the relationship with the social is established, e.g., through attitudes of social, ethical and political responsibility and, in many cases, political engagement underpinning what social designers do. It is in this sense that the term "social design" is used in the design discourse (e.g., Chen, Hummels & Koskinen, 2015; Julier, 2013). This leads to approaches resting on taxonomies where social design is defined in terms of further sub-categories. For instance, Armstrong, Bailey, Julier, & Kimbell (2014) break social design down into: social entrepreneurship, socially responsible design, and design activism but remain silent about what these categories have in common. Indeed, approaches of this kind dominate in contemporary scholarship with the most prominent examples including: "socially responsive design" (Gamman & Thorpe, 2011), "sustainable design" (Issa & Isaias, 2015) and relatedly, the conceptual clustering emerging around "design for sustainability" (Wever & Vogtländer, 2014), "design for public interest" (Abendroth & Bell, 2015). While this strategy of analytic decomposition is implicitly thought to allow more definitional precision with respect to the specific practices, it is not helpful for spanning the broad "church" of social design as the overarching uniting strand is not explicitly articulated.

The argument of this paper is that there is a normative orientation towards the common good presupposed in and through the practice of social design. This is what binds together the names that have been associated with socially useful design, such as: William Morris, Walter Gropius, Buckminster Fuller, through Victor Papanek, to Richard Buchanan, John Thackara, Nigel Whiteley and Bruce Mau (Melles, da Vere & Misic, 2011; Gamman & Thorpe, 2011). However, there is no unitary articulation of the common good in question. The next section advances this argument by showing how archeologically and genealogical analyses are useful as a way of disclosing contrasts and similarities between the historically and socially varied forms of social design and how it is related to different notions of the common good operative in those socio-cultural frames.

3. Genealogy, archaeology and the historical 'vignettes'

This paper uses the approaches of genealogy and archaeology as introduced by Foucault (1975 [1977]; 1969 [1972]). The genealogical technique rests on an approach developed originally by Nietzsche (1887 [1996]) which, taking the form of historiographic analysis, is intended to show the contingencies surrounding the formation of notions "we tend to feel [are] without history" (Foucault, 1977). These include God, truth, sexuality, and arguably, social designing. Foucault and Nietzsche agree that genealogy does not stand for the search for origins, nor does it designate a linear development. Rather, the historicising account it offers is inherently pluralistic and intended to undermine the unitary, ahistorical understanding of concepts which are exposed to be products of specific interests operating in specific historical circumstances.

In order to investigate the connection between discursive and nondiscursive practices, Foucault combines genealogy thus understood with the archaeological method (Foucault, 1969). This is done to undercut the possibility – left open by Nietzsche – that genealogy can be performed in terms of subjective meaning transmission (c.f. Latour, 2005). By highlighting

that the discourse and the material circumstances in which it is embedded can be fruitfully compared to bring to light the discursive agendas, Foucault amplifies the potential of his technique to disclose hidden positionalities and power dynamics.

In the three historical 'vignettes' that follow, social design is interpreted using both, the genealogical and archaeological approaches.

3.1 Morris's *News from Nowhere*, 1890

News from Nowhere (1985 [1890]) is a political novel offering an account of utopian socialism. It is narrated by William Guest, a member of the Socialist League who finds himself in the future when key pillars of socialism, including, collective ownership of resources and co-operative oversight of the means of production - have become reality. Responding to what was seen as key criticism of socialism in the Victorian times, namely that it fails to account for what motivates people in everyday endeavours, Morris presents the intrinsic meaning of work and investment in natural beauty as the driving forces of the utopian society. Even though not explicitly concerned with what we would call professional design in modern days, the novel explores types of social organisation and institutional arrangements required for an emancipated society and how these can be delivered through craft and design understood as unalienated labour. Design in this sense is the means of delivery of a common good and an expression of a vision of social harmony where material inequalities have been eliminated.

Even though these themes were echoed in the articulations of the Arts and Crafts movement between 1880 and 1920, when the novel was first published in the Commonwealth journal in January 1890, it quickly won Morris the reputation of a romantic 'uprooted' from the context of the Victorian England. This perhaps was not surprising given that the Victorian structural social reform and massive infrastructure projects undertaken at the time, e.g., slum clearance and the building of the sewer systems (see, for instance, Goldman, 2002) - seemed the antithesis of the agrarian idyl presented by Morris. The vison of social unity imbued with the spirit of collectivism could not seem further away from the reality of the sharp social divisions, perhaps most evocatively captured in Disraeli's trope of "Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets"(2017, [1845]).

While the vision of the common good presented in *News from Nowhere* seemed far removed from the realities of industrialising Victorian England, a closer reading shows that Morris was also a product of his time. Indicatively, the utopian ideals in his novel are framed as a religious epiphany. Indeed, the book was intended to appeal to the religious sentiments of the time and the spirit of philanthropy and charity that went hand in hand with it. Indeed, rather than being radically progressive, a different reading of Morris's novel points to conservation as the anchoring principle. This is consonant with Morris's desire to keep traditional craftsmanship alive while providing access to the benefits of modern design in an

industrial age. In the same way as Ruskin's 1860-62 essays *Unto This Last*, Morris's novel can be read as espousing the conservative - Red Tory - tradition of hierarchy and the established authority, where those who naturally held power had a duty to serve and protect the poor (Blewitt, 2019). This is the deep architecture of the feudal utopia in *News from Nowhere.* This puts a specific reading on the understanding of 'common' in the common good presupposed in Morris's social design.

3.2 Papanek's *Design for the Real World: Human Ecology and Social Change*, 1971

Design for the Real World is often seen as the canonical design text challenging consumerist design culture and a staunch defense of socially useful design. Papanek's oft quoted claim is that design should serve the people, not the commercial interests of the corporates, nor some idealised vision of the agrarian past or socialist utopia. Indeed, confronting the real world means working with the actual conditions, such as the limited resources and social inequalities. Alongside the 'sensitivity' to the changing realities in which designers operate, the strand running across Papanek's book is the sustained focus on the ecological or ethical responsibilities of the designer. The vision of the common good emerging is thus one contingent of the changing historical realities but underpinned by social and environmental concerns.

The 'origin' of Papanek's thinking remains disputed. Whereas, Margolin (1998) situates Papanek's book as a follow up to the student movement of the 1960s; Clarke (2018) places him within a much more complicated linage of 'émigré discourse' with links to the participatory design legacy. In this context Clarke emphasises Papenek's unease with the post-colonial design discourse and the modernism implicit in the Ulm school as carried over from Bauhaus (Clarke, 2018). This underscores an interesting tension where, on the one hand, Papanek's *Design for the Real World* is read as part of the heroic, activist, post war narrative of design; on the other hand, as problematising the expertise of designer and the blurring of the distinction between the user and the professional expert.

Retrospectively, it is however apparent that the *Design for the Real World* has left unchallenged the client service framework dictating the terms of engagement in the consumer culture (Margolin, 1998). With Papanek's legacy assimilated into the post-war North American narrative of heroic mass culture, the prevailing premises of design practice as complicit with industrialism and the economic prowess of the US at the height of its imperialist aspirations was not threatened. It could be that the ambition to reform design practice from within design practice was doomed to fail from the start. The charge remains that while presented under the banner of democratisation and inclusion, *Design for the Real World* advocated using the expertise of one group, namely professional designers with a specific outlook, to drive social change. In doing this the 'architecture' of the collective good underpinning Papanek's vision of social design is still very much the few to the many model of transmission.

3.3 Manzini's *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation*, 2015

The starting point of Manzini's social design is that the design of products, services and systems has to include the people who have a stake in it. In this, Manzini can be seen as going to the historical roots of the participatory design in the Scandinavian workplaces in the 1970s. The simple aspiration back then was to make sure that trade unions were included in the creation of systems that would affect their members and so, the question was how to design process that would ensure this. Manzini's post-industrial Italian translation of this finds a radical articulation beyond the workplace. Manzini argues that not just the 'professionals' but 'everybody' designs and they do so in every domain of their life, including but not limited to their workplace.

In the introduction to *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation* Manzini writes:

> "This book talks about design and social change in a connected world in transition toward sustainability: a world in which everybody constantly has to design and redesign their existence, whether they wish to or not; a world in which many of these projects converge and give rise to wider social changes; a world in which the role of design experts is to feed and support these individual and collective projects—and thus the social changes they may give rise to." (Manzini & Coad, 2015, p. 1)

Manzini's vision of social design is robust in that it is not so much about making socially progressive ideas more mainstream and subverting the corporate, mass culture narrative this way; rather, what is at issue is instituting new social relations and infrastructures which make everyday and everybody's designing mainstream. In the words of Chen and her co-authors, Manzini "urges designers to create new social forms rather than be content with socially responsible design, which follows Papanek and Whiteley in targeting market failures" (Chen, et al., 2016, p.2). This chimes well with the spirit of social innovation embraced by Manzini (see for instance, Mulgan, 2012) which came to signify the ambition to empower individuals and communities to create new collaborative structures responding to the perceived simultaneous failure of market capitalism and the welfare state (see for instance, Nicholls & Murdock, 2012).

When analysed against the historical background of its production *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation* could be perceived as a radically democratic attempt to turn designing inside out and to support social designing where the common good is delivered according to the 'architectural conceits' of the many and not the few. And yet, this universalist aspiration fails. Indeed, the claim that 'everybody designs' has been criticised for its lack of awareness of the power structures and the de facto inequalities to individual's ability to act (Tonkinwise 2016), as well as on the ground of falsely claiming that the values articulated in design are the value that design actually delivers (Ehn, et al.,

2014). The universalist ambition of Manzini is thwarted by the reality where, to use the language of the capabilities framework, not all capabilities can be turned into actual functionings (Sen, 2005). The failing of *Design, When Everybody Designs* may well be due to not paying enough attention to the socio-material conditions grounding the possibility of social change. The common good thereby presupposed seems strangely resonant with the utopian vision advocated by Morris more than 100 years before.

3.4. Common threads?

It might be questioned whether the three "vignettes" discussed above represent an exhaustive and comprehensive account of social design and indeed, whether speaking of social design is justified in relation to these three accounts. In the absence of any alternative viable definition of social design, the application of the term social design can only follow the already established convention and these authors are considered canonical in much of the existing scholarship (Melles, da Vere & Misic, 2011; Gamman & Thorpe, 2011). Others may query whether focusing on the specific texts diverts attention from the kind of practices which are legitimately the site of social design. It is true that the ontology of social design bridges discursive and non-discursive realities: it Is a term applied to a way of doing things and a way of describing this doing. Indeed, the three authors discussed above were selected in virtue of being both: commentators and practitioners. The choice to use the genealogical and archeological methods underscores further this hybridity of the term social design as something expressed through discourse and instantiated in reality through practice. And so, this objection can be rebutted. Perhaps the most interesting reservation to the approach proposed here concerns the question of what is gained from establishing that historically differentiated uses of social design are underpinned by different visions of the common good? The answer is that enough unity has been established to consider social design as a family resemblance concept and in this sense, as an explanatorily useful category.

4. Social design as a family resemblance concept

Writing in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein provokes his readers to consider the example of games: board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. "What is common to them all?" — he asks and proceeds to use the metaphor of fibers to explain:

> […] as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres." (§67) (Wittgenstein, 2009 [1953])

Wittgenstein argues that some concepts apply by virtue of such an overlap of characteristics and similarities rather than a set of necessary and sufficient properties. In other words, a family resemblance concept has an open-ended set of identifying features, such that not all

the features need be instantiated for the concept to apply. Rather, the contingencies of overlapping characteristics form a pattern in use which allows for phenomena to be identified as falling under certain categories and for meaning to attributed through use. The overview of what might be considered three canonical instances of social design presented in this paper indicates that social design is plausibly such a concept.

This paper has suggested that the orientation towards the common good may be a characteristic of social design and yet, the visions of common good presupposed were shown to be too different to offer a clearly defined thread running across all the instances. In a nutshell, all three examples discussed made assumptions about the common good but in each case, the commonality presupposed was constructed differently: in the case of Morris, it was a stipulative ideal of a solitary visionary pronouncing a highly hierarchical society; for Papanek it was a prerogative of a professional group opposing the encroachment of the corporate world; for Manzini the 'architecture' of the common good was universally extended to all but only as a theoretical postulate and not a practical reality. Yet, even though the articulations of the common good are shown to be historically and geographically contingent, the similarities between the cases are sufficient to ensure that the concept of social design is meaningfully applicable across these three instances. Indeed, these three cases are instructive not just with respect to understanding the concept of social design but also, as a way of forcing reflexivity and reflection upon the understanding of the common good. In other words, what has been demonstrated is that the application of the concept of social design is an indication that *some* common good is at issue and thus, if we want to understand more about the constructions of the common good - investigating these instances is a good start.

5. Concluding remarks

Perhaps not surprisingly, the concept of social design as applied in the three accounts considered here: Morris's *News from Nowhere*, Papanek's *Design for the Real World* and Manzini's *Design, When Everybody Designs* - is shown to function more like a Wittgensteinian family resemblance concept than a clear designation. While the concept can be characterised in terms of an orientation towards the common good, the visions of the common good presupposed in these accounts are sufficiently different to preclude any standard definition. There is no "essence" uniting these uses and so, no definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions can be offered. Unlike natural kind terms, e.g., cooper, the meaning of social design is contingent of socio-cultural contexts which have different conceptions of the common good. This however does not mean that the term social design has no explanatory power. Firstly, identifying several genealogies and archaeologies within the social design discourse allows us to interrogate the historical continuity in the use of the concept that displays enough overlap to make the term meaningful. (This in spite of the fact that social design is approached as contingently constructed in different socio-material frames, or what Clarke and Star (2008) would call different 'social worlds'.) This analysis

reveals that there is enough overlap in use to show that the concept of social design is useful to differentiate certain *family* of practices from others - not *all* design is social. This in turn prepares the ground for more careful choices as to whose vision of the common good should be actualised through the practice of social design.

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