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IN PURSUIT OF THE VOICES WITHIN SOCIAL DESIGN DISCOURSE

M. H. Buğali, S. Fairburn, and R. Halsall

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ABSTRACT

Design has expanded its scope towards social change and innovation – this is observed to a great extent in the UK in parallel with the ‘Big Society’, but is happening globally as well. The existing literature concentrates on practices, approaches and outcomes, with a desire to understand the implementation and the impact of these social ‘design interventions’. Consequently, what is informing or may inform this practice seems less evident.

This paper aims to raise awareness towards the presuppositions in design practice and research, and proposes the application of Foucauldian discourse theory to uncover and challenge any presuppositions for a more legitimate conduct. The underlying research forms part of a doctoral study that seeks to examine the role of design in society and aims to accommodate the ongoing discussions around the agency of design. The work-in-progress involves an investigation of the three parts of ‘social design dispositive’, based on Jäger and Maier’s (2016) framework, not only to open up new debates in academic design research, but also to provide design practitioners a way to reflect on their work, and ultimately to inform their decision-making process by reinforcing their theoretical foundations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Partially overlapping with the scope of this conference, our paper focuses on the emerging practice of social design, and serves as a provocation to encourage a more critical approach in design practice and research. By using the term social design, we attempt to embrace all sorts of design practices conducted with an intention to address social problems and/or to create social innovations. Although we keep our scope within the confines of the design field, a similar investigation can be done in the field of art as well. Through the performative works of WochenKlausur, Suzanne Lacy, the Artist Placement Group and many others, Kester (2004) gives an account of artists' explorations of a new role as creative facilitators of dialogue and exchange. Like their counterparts in the design field, these artists challenge two aspects of their practice: they see themselves as more than creators of artefacts and experiment on what might be the outcome of an artistic practice, and they negotiate their role and responsibility within society.

There are several presuppositions in the field of social design:

- Various people, communities, or organisations desire social and/or political change.
- Negotiations for change happen in public space through participation.
- The involvement of multiple forces, concerns and actors make the public space agonistic.
- Publics need to be empowered to be able to take part in the co-creation of the public space and the decision-making happening in that space.
- Designers assume a mediation or facilitation role in this participatory process.

Following such presuppositions, many investigations focus on the ways in which designers can mediate and empower. Using participatory methods towards social issues has almost become a default setting for good design. A number of researchers (Agid, 2011, 2012; DiSalvo, 2010, 2012; Fry, 2003, 2011;

Keshavarz and Mazé, 2013; Tonkinwise, 2010; Willis, 2013) express their concerns about the political nature of social design; however, these have not yet gained enough traction in practice.

In this paper, we propose to take a step back, and ask why designers do what they do, before thinking about how they do or should do it. The recent enthusiasm for adopting Mouffe's (2013) concept of 'agonistic pluralism' as a theoretical basis has been a hopeful start in social design research to address the gap in the knowledge around power and politics. However, adopting Mouffe's concept also limits the investigation of design's agency within social and political contexts by dismissing the traditional design approaches aiming at unifying solutions, and poses as prescriptive. A discussion on the tense relationship between design and agonism is out of the scope of this paper. Acknowledging this tension, nonetheless, helps point out one of the reasons that led us to turn to another approach, namely Foucauldian discourse theory, to address the theoretical needs in the social design field.

An exploration into the multivocality that social design aims to support should begin with investigating its own voice - more specifically its discourse, who contributes to its continual production and how -to explore and reveal the situations and boundaries that shape and perhaps even dictate the actions of designers. Underlying this investigation is the recognition that while society is at the core of social design, the politics of social need is the interest of many, and social design almost always takes a side: thus it cannot claim political neutrality (DiSalvo, 2012). This paper offers a foundation in the literature of the political in design and from there it explores the positions of a range of current practitioners and academics. What emerges as an outcome is a proposal for a discursive approach – an approach not only applicable to social design discourse, but as a way for all designers acting and practicing in society to reflect on their work.

2. DEFINITIONAL BOUNDARIES

Based on an analysis of thirty-three definitions found in the literature, Ralph and Wand (2009) propose a formal definition for design that is applicable in different contexts, which combines seven essential elements of the design process: 'a specification of an object, manifested by an agent, intended to accomplish goals, in a particular environment, using a set of primitive components, satisfying a set of requirements, subject to constraints'. With this definition, Ralph and Wand elaborate on Herbert Simon's (1988:67) concept of changing existing situations into preferred ones. However, neither Simon nor Ralph and Wand discuss the legitimacy of the constraints set upon the designer. In this traditional model, designers are bound by the rules of others, who hold the power to dictate what is preferred. Willis (2013) points out that this shift from the existing to the preferred is considered as obvious, and clouded with subjective assumptions, which in turn creates an ethical tension in design practice. Recently, design has started to explore 'its potential to instigate meaningful social, cultural and environmental change' (Felton and Zelenko, 2012:3), but to be able to use this potential ethically it needs further reinforcement (Becker, 2012) for its theoretical and political (Tonkinwise, 2010) underpinning.

Chen et al. (2015) report a lack of explicit definitions of the social in social design in the papers submitted for the International Journal of Design's special issue on Social Design and Innovation. This is not surprising, as research often takes a responsive position towards an accumulation in practice, especially in an action-driven field such as design. The practice-led nature of design research provides dynamism and diversity, but on the downside it means that research operates on unstable grounds, with no time to develop theoretical insights, and thus cannot support practice as rigorously as it should. In the absence of an agreed-upon definition for the 'social' in a design context, we use The Young Foundation's

(2012:18) definition for 'social innovation' because it is a term useful to describe the intentions of social design practices:

... new solutions (products, services, models, markets, processes etc.) that simultaneously meet a social need (more effectively than existing solutions) and lead to new or improved capabilities and relationships and better use of assets and resources. In other words, social innovations are both good for society and enhance society's capacity to act.

The Young Foundation suggests that social innovations should target a social need instead of focusing on 'problems', and that using a needs-based approach is more constructive and helps avoid stigmatising. Nevertheless, it is essential to question the context of every social need, as needs are constructed and imposed upon by the dominant culture, and might not in fact be genuine (Fry, 1992). Another one of their assertions is that social innovations develop through the collaborative commitments of several participants, and transforming their outlook permanently during the process (and enhancing their capacity to act) is as important as creating the desired outcomes. Moulart et al. (2005) also emphasise the importance of empowerment through participation in social innovation. They expose the ethical (and unavoidably political) stance of social innovation against the forces of social exclusion. Engaging in social innovation activities, designers indirectly assume this ethical and political stance.

3. PRACTITIONER BOUNDARIES

The roots of social design can be traced back to the 1960s, when the responsibility of the designer first became a main discussion point (Garland, 1964; Papanek, 1972), and the relationship between design and the social has been elaborated by many designers and researchers, especially in the last decade (Armstrong et al., 2014; Blyth and Kimbell,

2011; Chick, 2012; DiSalvo et al., 2011; Ehn et al., 2014; Emilson et al., 2011; Jégou and Manzini, 2008; Manzini, 2015; Margolin and Margolin, 2002; Melles et al., 2011; Morelli, 2007; Thorpe and Gamman, 2011; Tromp et al., 2011). There are different views on the definition and the boundaries of this 'rapidly emerging, though not new' (Agid, 2011:1) direction in design. Kimbell and Julier (2012), for instance, are not too concerned about finding a universal name for this direction; they acknowledge the usage of a variety of phrases such as 'service design', 'design for social innovation', and 'human-centred design' to describe the social design practices¹. Instead, they place emphasis on the importance of the approach and the methods (Kimbell and Julier, 2012:2):

[Social design is] ... a practical learning journey taken by people including managers and entrepreneurs, to create useful, usable and meaningful ventures, services and products that combine resources efficiently and effectively, to work towards achieving desired outcomes and impacts on society in ways that are open to contestation and dialogue.

Reflecting on his teaching experience in a service design course, Agid (2011, 2012) points out the political aspect of social design. The social is not a politically uniform structure with consensually defined needs and desires. Individuals forming a society rarely agree upon what is good for society (Fry, 1992). The ability to detect and challenge existing assumptions is the first step towards social change. Drawing from the difficulties his students experienced during their service design

¹ Blyth and Kimbell (2012) chooses the term 'design thinking' to explore design practices in relation to social problems. More recently (Armstrong et al., 2014), "social design" has been used as an umbrella term to cover three distinctive accounts in academic literature, namely "design for social innovation" (Jégou and Manzini, 2008), "socially responsive design" (Thorpe and Gamman, 2011), and "design activism" (Julier, 2013; Markussen 2013).

project for former prisoners, Agid (2012:45) asks:

How, for instance, can the students in my class design ideas that don't take the prison as a starting place when many enter the class presuming, without knowing it, that prisons are one clear and permanent piece of their design world, and that the reasons for their existence are unchallenged?

4. THE 'POLITICAL' IN DESIGN

Mouffe (2013) defines the political as 'the ontological dimension of antagonism', and politics as 'the ensemble of practices and institutions whose aim is to organise human coexistence'. Building on these definitions, DiSalvo (2010) and Keshavarz and Mazé (2013) make a distinction between design for politics (improving structures and mechanisms that enable governing) and political design (revealing and confronting power relations and identifying new terms and themes for contestation and new trajectories for action). Fry (2003) approaches the political from a different perspective, and argues 'the politics of design is how design is employed, by whom, to what ends, while design and the political' speaks to 'the agency of how design acts as (one of) the directional forces that shape human conduct and its material consequences.' He then develops this argument further and declares design itself as politics due to its 'world-making'/ 'future-making' aspect (Fry, 2003). This argument is also central to DiSalvo's (2012) case for the agonistic capabilities of 'adversarial design'; design in all its forms is always already political: that rather than merely passively, or neutrally, conveying messages, it actively intervenes to stimulate and produce new meanings. If the political implications are not deliberated thoroughly, design's world-making attempts may lead to undesirable situations (Fry and Dilnot, 2003).

When designers position themselves as neutral agents of change, the intended neutrality does

not grant them relief from serving the existing power structures and creating outcomes contradicting the original aims and intentions (Tonkinwise, 2010). Tonkinwise (ibid.) asserts:

..., what happens if design-based social innovation is not just a way of avoiding conventional, explicit politics, but a way of undermining politics altogether? What if scaling up existing innovations with redesign is not just about helping people temporarily frustrated with the inertial cowardice of elected representatives, but a way to make more or less permanently redundant the need for any government to find a way to negotiate political responses to current crises? [...] The point is: this is a very political position.

Uncovering the political paradigm within social design therefore becomes essential. Such examination can help question the power relations between the design practitioners, the funding bodies or commissioners, and the targeted social units, such as minorities, communities, or societies. It can highlight the issues of legitimacy, and clarify the political language used in social design projects. The next section presents a rationale for applying critical discourse theory as the means to achieve this objective.

5. A DISCURSIVE APPROACH FOR DESIGN

Discourse, defined as the flow of knowledge, determines individual and collective doing and formative action, shapes society, thus exercises power (Jäger and Maier, 2016). Discourses determine how individual and collective thoughts about the world are formulated and acted upon (Rose, 2012), which in turn shapes society, thus exercising power (Jäger and Maier, 2016). Foucault argues that, if unquestioned, discourses creep into our consciousness as absolute, objective truths, and become norms for society, when in fact they are mere interpretations of the world. In line with social constructivist ontology, Foucauldian discourse theory proposes that

there can be various versions of the world depending on personal constructs and discourses, and some of these are accepted as more legitimate due to the support they receive from institutions of power. The reign of a discourse does not last forever, though; discourses are exposed to constant flux. They simultaneously reinforce or erode each other (Wodak and Meyer, 2016).

It is also necessary to understand the meaning of power in this context. Foucault (1996:394) describes power as 'a whole series of particular mechanisms, definable and defined, that seem capable of inducing behaviours or discourses'. Power is the capacity to act in favour of an individual or an institution, even though this act puts others at a disadvantage and receives resistance. For Foucault, power is productive; through discourse it produces our truths, norms, rights, even our identities. Discourses transmit and reinforce power, as much as they undermine and expose it (Foucault, 1978b).

Compared to other types of discourse studies, Foucauldian (critical) discourse analysis offers a unique approach due to its problem-oriented nature and its interest in social inequality. It aims to deconstruct the structures of power, ideology, dominance, discrimination and legitimisation hidden in discourses, and to make the researcher's own position and interests explicit through a reflective process (Wodak and Meyer, 2016). In the next section, we present a particular framework from critical discourse studies, namely dispositive analysis, to apply the critical discursive approach within the design field.

6. DISPOSITIVE OF SOCIAL DESIGN

According to Foucault (1978a), discourses are comprised of textual and non-textual elements (i.e. language vs. object). Jäger and Maier (2016:113) develop this conception further into a three-part structure, a 'dispositive':

A constantly evolving synthesis or interaction between linguistically performed practices (or discursive

behaviour, i.e. thinking, speaking, writing based upon a shared knowledge pool), non-linguistically performed practices (or non-discursive behaviour, i.e. doing things based upon knowledge) and materialisations (manifestations of knowledge, i.e. natural and produced things).

Dispositive analysis is particularly suitable for the design field, as it incorporates the material characteristics of design into a theoretical examination. Here we explain how it is applied in the doctoral study that informed this paper to investigate the 'social design dispositive' through three sets of texts.

First, we have selected five seminal books from the design literature as examples of linguistically performed practices. The origins of social design discourse are traced in these books, each from a different country. The historical, political and cultural contexts in which these books are situated play a significant role in the development of the discourse in question. The texts cover a period between early 1970s and today and are selected according to their influence on the discourse, which was observed through a preliminary review of the literature. The selected texts are:

- Victor Papanek, 1972 (2nd ed.: 1985). USA. Design for the Real World.
- Pelle Ehn, 1988. Sweden. Work-oriented Design of Computer Artifacts.
- Nigel Whiteley, 1993. UK. Design For Society.
- Tony Fry, 2011. Australia. Design as Politics.
- Ezio Manzini, 2015. Italy. Design, When Everybody Designs.

Secondly, we have collected accounts by social design practitioners of their non-linguistically performed practices. The echoes of the social design discourse are reviewed through the interviews with the practitioners, who consume and interpret the

existing discourse, and contribute back to its continuous development. Twenty practitioners have been chosen for the research according to the location of their practices (UK-based), prior experience in social design projects and career directions (with an emphasis on social motivation).

For the last part of the analysis we have gathered visual, textual and material outputs from social design projects. This multimodal analysis looks at the material language of social design projects, and how design practitioners communicate the discourse with the wider society. To be able to analyse the relationship between non-linguistically performed practices and their materialisations, we asked the interviewees what they would consider as typical outputs of their projects - thus far, these have included posters, leaflets, websites, workshops, products, service blueprints, project reports and exhibitions. Having the two parts of the analysis situated around the same individuals gives a better opportunity to examine how discourse is constantly evolving through the interaction between design practice and its outputs.

7. ORIGINS OF AND ATTITUDES IN SOCIAL DESIGN

In this section, we present preliminary findings from the first two parts of the analysis, which focuses on four main aspects of the texts:

- Context (cultural scene, background of the author, genre of the text)
- Form (structure, style, vocabulary, rhetorical means)
- Content (themes/concepts, discursive constructions, latent elements)
- Ideology

The books selected for the first part reflect the negotiation between the need for change in and the limits of the (social, political and economic) system they are situated in. Papanek pioneers the sustainability discourse in the design field by drawing from the ecological movement that emerged in

the 1960s. He points out the environmental and social impacts of design and uses apocalyptic and moralistic language to create a sense of guilt and responsibility. Relying on rhetorical elements, he does not abstain from demeaning anyone who follows the consumerist system. Ehn, on the other hand, presents a case for participation in the Scandinavian context. He provides insights into how and why participatory methods were originally developed and exemplifies the application of these methods. Participation in this context is strongly linked to ideals of 'social democracy'. Instead of regarding the users as 'moral weaklings ready to accept whatever specious values' are imposed by consumerism (Papanek, 1985:20), Ehn argues that their input in the design process should be considered as legitimate, even indispensable.

Whiteley shares similar themes with Papanek, but he uses a more cautious language, void of provocations and strong rhetorical means. His critique revolves around environmental issues, the responsibility/ethics of design and feminism. He openly expresses his 'secular liberal pluralist' position and that he does not share 'old-fashioned Left-Wing authoritarian views' (Whiteley, 1993:167). He aims to demonstrate the necessity of a 'political initiative', but like Papanek he does not explain what designers' role would be in that political initiative. Fry is the most courageous of all; he dares to take a step further by developing a framework for change, after presenting a critique of the dire environmental and political situation. He dismisses democracy and liberalism, and proposes an authoritarian system for a fully sustainable society. In a way, he focuses on designing politics instead of politicising design. His boldness in expressing political views differentiates him from other authors, but also makes him most vulnerable to criticism.

Lastly, Manzini establishes a case for the social aspect of sustainability. Although he acknowledges the existence of the economic,

political and cultural forces in play, he refrains from making political statements. For him, an analysis of the 'enemy forces' lies beyond the role of a 'reflective designer' (Manzini, 2015:27). Rather than proposing a radical road map like Fry does, he opts for a safer option and uses the 'island-archipelago' metaphor to convey his belief in small changes that would eventually lead to a major transformation. We argue that this belief resembles the self-regulation logic behind the free-market system and supports the current conditions, where the concept of participation is removed from its original social democratic context and used as a means for legitimising neoliberal agendas.

The design practitioners reflected on some of the contradictions and unresolved issues in these texts during the interviews:

- Designer identity: difficulty in defining their professional practice and identity. For them, there is a glaring difference between having a 'purpose or meaning' in their practice and working solely to make money. They position themselves away from profit-oriented projects, and look for ways to sustain themselves by using their skills for social change. Some of them consider this as an 'instinct'.
- Ideals vs. reality: the designers reflect on the dilemma between their 'instincts' and the market conditions. They follow the evolving discourses in the design literature, and try to shape their practices accordingly, insofar as the market permits. This is an ongoing struggle.
- Design practice: the majority of the interviewees acknowledge the disappearing boundaries between design sub-disciplines such as product, graphic, fashion or service design. When asked, they find it difficult to explain 'what' they do professionally.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Foucault (1972:49) describes discourses as 'composed of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations); but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is more that renders them irreducible to the language and to speech. It is this "more" that we must reveal and describe.' It is this more that scholars like Fry and Tonkinwise point out as a missing piece in design research; this more is what could help design research investigate and differentiate between social design and neocolonialism (Janzer and Weinstein, 2014). In this paper, we present a methodological proposal to achieve this aim.

The present focus of the design field on the methods of social design projects bypasses an initial discussion on the 'source of power' behind the decision about what is desired or not. Additionally, a comprehensive review of the current literature on social design projects reveals a gap in the knowledge concerning the political agency of design and a lack of a theory for change (Agid, 2011; Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Blyth and Kimbell, 2011; DiSalvo, 2010, 2012; Fry, 2003, 2011; Keshavarz and Mazé, 2013; Tonkinwise, 2010; Willis, 2013). By applying Foucauldian discourse theory and a framework based on Jäger and Maier's (2016) dispositive analysis, this ongoing research endeavours to address this gap.

We should conclude by highlighting one limitation of the discursive approach. Foucault acknowledges that his position is not outside the ideas and practices he is analysing. 'He is not claiming to speak from a position of 'truth' – he is aware of the fact that he himself as a subject can only speak within the limits imposed upon him by the discursive frameworks circulating at the time' (Mills, 1997:33). In this sense, critical discourse analysis does not help us establish truths, but rather enables us to discover and push the limits of our knowledge.

BIOGRAPHY

Hilal Buğalı is a PhD candidate at Gray's School of Art, RGU. Her research focuses on the genealogy of socially motivated design and its influence on current design practice. Other research interests include design theory, critical discourse studies and sustainability.

Sue Fairburn is a Design Lecturer and Researcher at Gray's School of Art, RGU. She works between the boundaries of the body and the environment. Her research focuses on design in social contexts and design for extremes. She is deeply curious about design, and works and publishes across disciplines.

Robert Halsall is a former Reader and Senior Lecturer at Aberdeen Business School, RGU. His research interests encompass critical management and organisational studies, critical and cultural theory, particularly in the German tradition, and latterly the work of Peter Sloterdijk. Recent publications include articles on corporate cosmopolitanism, nation branding and cultural models in the financial crisis.

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