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# Decentralising Design. Raising the Question of Agency in Emerging Design Practice

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**Abstract:** This paper will reflect on some of the key changes that affect design, at a time when this approach is more and more used by Governments and communities around the world to influence what next for our societies. By reflecting on my practice working in a UK based mental health charity to “embed design” in the organisation, the paper will present two key shifts that are happening in design when applied to societal challenges: a shift in meaning, as the design object changes and becomes more associated with practices of policy-making, public engagement and emancipation of marginalised actors; and a shift in agency, towards a new identity for designers and a new sensibility towards issues of power. Based on my practice and reflections I will conclude by presenting three key areas that need to be addressed in order to improve the role of design for next in society.

**Keywords:** Agency, Transition design, Design for mental health, Design in society

## 1. Introduction

Design, as we usually know it, is changing or perhaps has already changed. Already ten years ago Sanders and Stappers claimed that *‘the emerging design practices will change what we design, how we design, and who designs.’* (2008). In this paper I would like to argue that this change is happening as a result of two complementary and opposed centrifugal and centripetal forces. What we are witnessing in fact is, on one hand, an expansive force that generates *from* design, where designers are stretching the boundaries of design practice and reaching well outside the usual fields of operation, for instance by being involved in politics, making publics, or dealing with complex societal issues. On the other hand, as the value of design is more and more visible outside of its usual circles, design practices are being *appropriated* across different disciplines, professional cultures and functions by new actors and agents that use and do design without having ever been trained as designers.

Although coming from opposite sides and from very different motivations, these two forces are conjuring together to bring about dramatic changes around issues of meaning and agency in design. In this article, I will try to exemplify how this change is taking shape in practical terms by introducing

the work I have been leading to embed design in a mental health charity, and I will try to explore what the implications of these shifts could be for design on a theoretical level.

In the first part of the paper I will be reflecting on emerging forms of design that appear to question the role, the identity and the need for design and designers as we know them. Clive Dilnot, in a recent symposium on Intersectionality in Design in Malmö (November 2016), talked about the risk for design to ‘dissolve’, because when designers are working with other professionals and expanding into other disciplines, fields and practice (e.g. design in politics), this risk of design disappearing is a risk that has to be taken.

In the second part of the paper I will turn to the question of ownership and agency in design, as new actors are involved within more collaborative approaches. Serious analysis of agency and power are long overdue alongside more optimistic accounts of collaborative design projects, which are seen most of the times as ethical and good in their own right. And this is partly due, according to Donetto et al, to the lack of critical understanding of *“the different types and facets of power operating within a specific setting, their configurations and their possible effects, the discourses of service user empowerment and democratization of service provision risk being deployed simplistically, thereby obfuscating more subtle forms of oppression and social exclusion.”* (Donetto et al. 2015).

In order to prepare the ground for the analysis of emerging forms of design and for my reflections based on my own practice, I would like to start with some reflections on the role of design within society.

## 2. Design Within Society

A valid starting point to explore the role of design within society is the paper from Clive Dilnot from 1982, in which he explored the role and meaning of design as a ‘socially significant activity’. The reasons to go back to Dilnot’s paper are many. In his account, Dilnot argued for design to be recognised as a distinct form of socially significant activity: a way of thinking, communicating and giving that has profound implications for the human ontology, and which has meaning beyond the realm of materials and the design of products. Also, most of the questions that he raised in 1982 I think have yet to find a satisfactory answer and still deserve to be debated today:

(...) how exactly ‘design’ relates to ‘society’ in our time, to ask for example whether this relationship is an anyway casual on either side – or reciprocal and interactive – ie, does design in any way form society? Or does society impose its form on design? Is design determined by, or relatively autonomous from or wholly autonomous from, society?

(Dilnot, 1982, 140)

Paraphrasing Dilnot, from a recent talk at the Symposium in Malmö, I would argue that there are three possible relationships between design and society (Dilnot referred to politics in his original talk) and these are:

1. Design *and* Society
2. Design *as* Society
3. Design *within* Society

The problem with the first relationship is that it basically conceives design and society as two separate and distinct domains. On the other hand, the second sees design expanding to the point that it encompasses society as a whole, a task difficult to imagine even for the most pretentious of the designers: if we frame design *as* society, the relationship becomes almost meaningless and tells

us virtually nothing about what we are trying to explore. The third relationship is the one I am more interested in, as through it a symbiosis between design and society is developed and established.

Design has a long history of social engagement, from William Morris (socialist artist and leader of the Arts And Crafts Movement), to Walter Gropius (founder of the Bauhaus School) and Victor Papanek (to name just a few), but what practical structures, methods and objectives are needed for defining this 'social model' of design has not yet been clarified. If we are to be serious about developing a research agenda of design for next in society, it might be worth looking back into the questions raised by Margolin and Margolin (2002), which I think also touch on more unresolved issues:

“What role can a designer play in a collaborative process of social intervention? What is currently being done in this regard and what might be done? How might the public’s perception of designers be changed in order to present an image of a socially responsible designer? How can agencies that fund social welfare projects and research gain a stronger perception of a design as a socially responsible activity? What kinds of products meet the needs of vulnerable populations?”

(Margolin, 2002, p.28)

As a way of offering points of reflection around these questions on the role of design within society, and around what emerging practices are impacting design itself, I would now move to illustrate my own design practice of embedding design in a mental health organisation.

### 3. Embedding Design in Mental Health

In 2012, I started working with a mental health organisation (Mind) to build on their diffused design capabilities (Manzini 2015) in order to embed design practice and methods alongside their more traditional practice of service users engagement, advocacy and campaigning for social justice. This intervention also aimed at *de-centralising* the role and the agency of designers in the design process, allowing non-designers to reclaim the space of problem framing, issues formation, sense making and creativity.

Mind is a mental health charity that operates in England and Wales, providing information and campaigning for better mental health services and for giving people with mental health experience the support and the respect they deserve. Local Minds are local independent charities in their own right, affiliated to Mind they deliver mental health services are mainly funded by the National Health System (NHS) and Social Care budget. Mind has a long tradition of service users engagement and more than 70% of staff that operates at local Minds have lived experience of mental health. Design seemed to be a perfect fit with the organisation’s values and ethos, as Mind had the unique opportunity to dramatically reimagine the landscape of support experienced by people with mental health challenges. The Mind design programme was initially conceived as a response to national policy initiatives and drivers that in 2012 were re-shaping a new vision for mental health services and framing the ideology of ‘doing more with less’ in a time of austerity. Services were required to become more personalised, delivered at the lower possible cost, and to respond to the double challenge of meeting an increasing demand and an increasing complexity of the issues faced by individuals. All this in a time where the third sector was asked to play an active role in the *retirement* of the State, with its services and funding becoming slimmer and slimmer.

There were several ways Mind could have approached the task of exploring the role of design for collaborative innovation and to design better services, like, for instance, commissioning a design agency around a specific brief or run an exemplar design project. Instead, we made the choice of building on internal diffused design capabilities by running a programme to help non-designers to

use design techniques. This programme supports people with lived experience of mental health and front-line staff in carrying on design research and gathering insights, to provide them alternative ways of developing knowledge and telling the stories of their own experiences of the mental health system.

The rationale behind this choice was not only to maximize the impact of design on the whole organisation, but also to ensure the long-term sustainability of the new approach. More importantly, this intervention aimed at reframing the role of expertise within knowledge production, and, while not being against expertise in itself, to confront expert and trained designers as a source of power and unchallenged authority. The work I started at Mind was very similar to what Arturo Escobar (2012) defines the practice of 'autonomous design', which draws on the following principles:

1. *Every community practices the design of itself:* For most of history in fact communities have practiced a sort of 'natural design' independent from expert knowledge
2. *Hence, every design activity must start with how people themselves understand their reality.* In philosophical terms, this means fully accepting the view that people are practitioners of their own knowledge
3. As designers (says Escobar), we may become 'co-researchers' with 'the people,' but it is the community that investigates its own reality.

In this framework, solutions grow from places and situated identities. Cultivating design intelligence becomes a key aspect of giving to everyone tools and resources to create a public space and initiate discussions about issues affecting individuals and societies. The programme drew on the idea that design can be much more transformative if: it is able to mobilise people's passion and affects, it remains authentic to the lived experience of those that are engaged, it draws on people's knowledge and expertise, it builds on the authority to do things differently which generates from the long-term commitment of being concerned and involved first-hand with the quality of the service and the support.

Responding to the questions that scholars from design studies have previously raised (Dilnot and Margolin) the Mind approach reclaims a key role for society in shaping the meaning and giving forms to design, and not vice-versa, as the object and approach to design are given by the people with lived experience of mental health and by the staff. Such an approach also exemplifies how the role and agency of designers is changing when the latter are involved in a collaborative process of social intervention, and provides an alternative way of framing the public's perception of designers, although not in the way anticipated by Margolin and Margolin, but by turning the perspective on its head: from socially responsible designers to 'designerly aware' social subjects. In the Mind example in fact, designers are *decentralised*: even if Mind is building a small team formed by trained designers, in fact, those have to negotiate their role with business managers, project officers, volunteers and people with mental health lived experience; they need to articulate their value to get involved in new projects, they facilitate and train but also learn and adapt their practice at every intervention. What is also interesting of the Mind example as that, once the organisation recognised the value of the design approach, it decided to build on the internal capabilities and invest in the long-term learning rather than buying external expertise. This was mainly based on a strong vision of what design could do and what place this could have had in the organisation, as illustrated before, but also on an economic evaluation to ensure the sustainability of the programme within the resources the organisation had available to invest.

I think this practice very well exemplifies some of the key shifts that are happening in design for next in society and I will now move to expand on this in the following sections.

## 4. A shift in meaning

Answering the simple question of what is design has never been that simple, but neither has ever been as complex as it seems to be nowadays. What is design, how it is done and what are the outputs of a design process (whatever this process implies) are all questions of the design debate that have been re-opened and shed new lights on. Changes are now manifesting on at least three levels: the design object, the design process and the design agency. As the next part of this paper is dedicated to the latter, I would like here to quickly touch on the design object and the design process.

The change in the design object is perhaps the most visible and profound change involving design. Moved beyond designing luxury or everyday products, designers are now designing systems, narratives, debates, but also the condition for the social, emerging publics and alternative futures (Ehn et al 2014). Once hired by agencies, brands and firms with a clear brief and a well recognized professional contribution, designers are currently embedded and commissioned by Governments, local councils and Voluntary organisations for what seems to be a less clear and defined scope. For instance, since design has been introduced in the Mind network, it has been used for redesigning existing services, inform the strategy of the organisation, develop new campaigns, support organisational learning and new approaches to work with, engaging people with lived experience of mental health and involving new partners in alternative ways. This is quite an extensive and versatile list of what the new objects of design could be and quite a different one from what usually designers are associated with. What has also become less clear is what these new 'clients' are valuing the most when they commission a design work, how they understand design and what their expectations are. As the final product loses its centrality, other elements are perhaps gaining more value as for instance the designers' skills and methods, their characteristic way of thinking, their capacity to reflect and their creativity and approach.

As the design object changes though, the design process has to change accordingly. Although several authors have raised questions on whether or not, ultimately, designers have the right set of tools, skills, knowledge and attitude to work effectively within these new fields and organisations (Mulgan 2014; Bailey and Junginger 2014), there is still no clarity around how the training and the processes of these new designers should be improved for them to accomplish their new tasks. One of the explicit attempts to respond to these questions came in 2014 from Carnegie Mellon, where Terry Irwin, Gideon Kossof and Cameron Tonkinwise started interrogating themselves around how the academia could respond to the new challenges and what the role and meaning of design should be. They have been sketching a new design practice and a revised syllabus for the education of the designers that need to operate in transitional times and contribute to imagine the transition of our societies to more sustainable futures. They called this new approach 'transition design' and argued for a different kind of designing '*that is connected to long horizons of time and visions of sustainable futures*' (Irwin et al 2015).

Within the transition design framework, more attention is paid to the personal values and personality traits of designers as their own mindset and posture become an essential component of the design process itself (Irwin et al, 2015). These new designers, in fact, who choose to get engaged with politics and to play an active role in society, have to develop a connection between their own professional activities and their own belief and ideologies, and find ways of giving and receiving,

teaching and learning, in a mutual exchange that can enrich designers professionally and personally, and ultimately enrich societies as well.

We will now move to explore the question of agency and the shift in the identity and the role of designers within the emerging practices of design.

## 5. A shift in Agency

The question of agency in design could be articulated from at least two perspectives: one that looks at the agency of design and the designers (Mazé and Redström 2008, Fry, 2010, Manzini 2015) and another that looks at how design is developing a new sensibility towards issues of agency (and power as well), especially in its more collaborative applications (Kiem 2013, Donetto et al 2015).

In his recent book, Ezio Manzini (2015) outlines some of the key changes in the identity and the role of design when this is used to activate, sustain, and orient processes of social change and social innovation. Although the author does not discard the role of expertise in design, he expands the remit of the discipline and introduces the concept of 'diffused design capabilities', the capacities to design and to collaborate intrinsic to human nature. In this new era when everybody designs, designers are distancing themselves from the demiurgic vision of last century 'big-ego design', where design was the task of very few talented and gifted individuals capable of shaping the world around them in the ways they wanted. At the other extreme of this continuum Manzini posits the new identity of '*post-it* designers' who, born in the era of the expansion of the design methods, find for themselves a very marginal role:

“The problem is that, starting from this intention of countering big-ego design, post-it designs end up by transforming design experts into administrative actors, with no specific contribution to bring, other than aiding the process with their post-its (and at the end, maybe, with some pleasing visualization). In other words, from the post-it design perspective the design process is reduced to a polite conversation around the table of some participatory design exercise. In my view, the social conversation on which the co-design process is based is much more than that.”  
(Manzini 2015)

The risk of the role for designers disappearing seems to be a real one, as exemplified also by the Mind case above, as designers are *decentralised* through emerging design practice, and new subjects arise that can appropriate the designer role, her set of skills and methods. But society still needs designers and there is in fact a lot to do for those that are keen to re-think their identity, that are able to clearly articulate their value and want to advocate for a renewed practice of design that can find its place in society, alongside social sciences and humanities.

“(…) design finds itself in an identity crisis. (…). Perceived as a holistic makeover, design has become a panacea for whatever ails. Politically neutral, never demanding, the popular perception of design threatens to override its criticality and obscure its capacity to engender *agency*, in the best sense of that word”

(Yelavich and Adams, 2014 p14)

As mentioned earlier, an unsophisticated understanding of questions of power and agency from within the design field ultimately limit the capacity of design and designers to affirm this new role for themselves (Blyth and Kimbell 2011, Kiem 2013, Donetto et al 2015). The question of agency is one that cannot be given for granted or ignored, especially when design practitioners are involved in societal issues where dynamics of exclusion and *self*-exclusion are at play, which can prevent people

to act in their own interest, as exemplified very well in the case of mental health where asymmetry of power persists within a medical model of society (Foucault 1995).

In my experience with Mind, I have made this mistake myself, as I assumed that it would have been sufficient to give to people with lived experience of mental health the design tools and skills, for them to carry out their own design research and analysis and develop alternative solutions to radically re-think the mental health system. But agency is not something that necessarily comes with design, as the obstacles for this are many and complex. Even if my work had the best intentions, in some instances it ended up by just producing a shallow analysis and ingenuous ideas that did not expose the real issues and failed to engage with more radical alternatives and solutions. What I was witnessing in my practice working within the mental health system was the frustrating reality of the disempowering effects that prolonged inequality can generate on people: a sense that they are in need of help, that they are not well enough to know what is best for themselves, and not in the position to take control and take decisions to shape their lives. What this meant in practice was that, by assuming equal agency, as for instance during co-design workshops, de-facto my intervention was marginalising the people I wanted engage actively in the design process. This is an area I am currently experimenting with in more recent interventions: 1) by focusing more on the role of storytelling to let emerge and invite reflections on the individual and collective experiences of suffering and of exclusion as political categories, and 2) by encouraging and nurturing the passionate side of politics and conflict by explicitly adopting a framework that draws on people's assets and on personal and cultural biographies as sources of inspiration for political acts.

## 6. Design for Next in Society

The general urge towards envisaging new systems of thinking and doing capable of making sense of the changes that we are experiencing on social, economical, political and environmental level is what seems to affect the ways the field of design is changing. As there is an increasing demand for design from new political and social actors, two distinct possibilities materialize: according to one scenario, design as we know it becomes irrelevant, as it fails to redefine its identity in ways that can prove helpful in times of transition; an alternative scenario sees design adapting and responding to how things are changing around it, not being afraid of radically re-thinking some of its key characteristics. A lot has already changed but more changes need to happen in order for design to be able to respond to the next challenges ahead.

As a way of opening a debate around ways of rethinking the role of design for next in society, I would now sketch, although very briefly, some areas to look at.

Based on the argument that I have illustrated and on the reflections on my practice in the mental health field, I would argue that in design for next in society:

1. The designer's identity cannot be given for granted anymore. Who designs and what makes somebody a designer is not a clear-cut definition. Especially in the field of social design or design activism, new actors are appropriating the label of designers for themselves. Also, trained designers that operate in these emerging areas need to find ways to engage in their work their values, ideology and mindsets (Irwin et al 2015) and think about themselves as professional but in a more holistic way;
2. Design cannot remain naïve around questions of power. It needs to acquire a distinct political dimension by acknowledging its role as a practice of reconfiguration of power relationships and by developing a new understanding of questions of agency through a cross-disciplinary effort (Donetto et al 2015);



3. The 'project' as the traditional space and temporal frame for all design interventions need to be rethought. When they operate within the political and social arenas, designers need to carve for themselves a more engaged role and elaborate a serious commitment that takes the life-time as its temporal reference and cannot be limited to the space of the single intervention.

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