

# A Manifesto of Change or Design Imperialism? A Look at the Purpose of the Social Design Practice

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*Social design and design activism are some of the buzzwords being used amongst designers to describe a form of design that seeks to investigate the designer's role in society by tackling community, political, and social issues.*

*Social design is meant to pave the way for design to move away from a Eurocentric discourse, engage communities, spark local innovation, and help increase collaboration between communities, policy makers, and institutions to bring about social change and ideas through design. But there are a number of issues and questions that arise: Where is the context? Why do we continue to design at rather than design with? What are the true intentions of these projects? How can we measure results? Where are the designers from the non-Western world? What does community participation mean? This paper critiques the discipline of social design by highlighting issues through case studies and discourse, and offers solutions on how social design projects can truly begin to engage in debates and shift the discourse to be more inclusive and sensitive.*

**Keywords:** *Social design; design activism*

## Introduction

Recently, terms like social design and design activism – often summarised as ‘design that changes the world’ (Markussen, 2013, p. 38) and are inclusive of all design rather than being restricted to one– have been springing up in debates, articles, client briefs, and academia. Tired of being part of the problem rather than the solution, designers have shifted their priorities, and have now become interested in investigating the designer's role in society by tackling community, political, and social issues, and concerned with issues such as ‘[c]limate change, materials shortages, the

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inequitable distribution of resources...political instability, and globalization...’ (Lees-Maffei, 2012, p. 90).

As social design redirects the discipline and rethinks the design practice, the shift brings with it a sense of responsibility and accountability to communities where the work is taking place, to the design community, and to the role of design and the designer in society. In this paper, I question the intent of design projects branded with the above-mentioned buzzwords and its effects on the communities it seeks to address by examining the methodologies and intentions. I argue that said projects are guilty of ‘design imperialism’ where, rather than helping increase collaboration between communities, policy makers, and institutions to bring about social change and ideas through design, projects exploit the communities in which they pursue the work. Using two concepts from Irani et al. (2010) – engagement and articulation – I conclude with proposed solutions and methodologies that can be implemented in independent projects and higher education design curricula to address this shift in the design practice.

### *The Shift towards Social Design*

The idea of values in design was most highlighted in 1964 when Ken Garland presented his First Things First Manifesto – revived in 2000 by culture jamming magazine *Adbusters*. Since design is a field largely serving industries and corporations, associated with mass production and consumption, First Things First questioned this unquestioned service to clients. The question is: should designers actively engage their societies by concerning themselves with political and social issues? This constant debate in design has recently become more significant. Ou Ning claims, nowadays most artists and designers are quite aware that their creations need to have social relevance – critical implementation has become the trend of current art and design...’ (Ericson, 2011b, p. 190). Institutions across the USA and Europe are catching on as various universities have started engaging in community-centred design projects in the past few years. Although a number of independent organisations and individuals have been initiating workshops and projects worldwide, more recently, schools across the USA have developed graduate programmes dedicated entirely to ‘design for the greater good.’ As the discipline establishes itself within academia, there are three main critiques that should be addressed by the institutions:

### *1) Tuition*

Most private art colleges in the USA, some of which have launched social design programmes, cost over \$30,000 USD per year. This is a huge barrier to most, attracting wealthy, middle and upper class students. What's more, these programmes seek to work with disfranchised, poverty-stricken areas, at times developing new campuses based in those neighbourhoods. This brings up a number of problems for the community, mainly forcing an institution into an area, and lack of access to members of the community to such high priced education. This means that no representative is able to participate in the programmes as students but rather as 'projects.' In my first hand experience studying in a Social Design Masters, I quickly realised that most of the time the community is rarely involved in decision making and they are *planned at* rather than *planned with*. If these programmes set out to work within the communities where they are based, shouldn't the community be more than just a project?

### *2) Separate discipline or an extension?*

It is often the case that the heads of social design programmes come from more traditional design backgrounds, and it's common to attempt to cater projects towards familiar territory. So what does the word 'interdisciplinary' mean in this case? Pines (2011) argues that social design – although filled with good intentions – is redirecting attention from designers who can redefine this profession and making design, rather than social design, as something without value. He suggests that the term itself 'suggests that design isn't social to begin with [...implying] that design for the greater good is more important than traditional uses of design' (Pines, 2011). Pines' statement illustrates the confusion over social design's placement. His essay categorises social design within the confines of graphic design (his training). I would argue that the development of social design does not aim to undermine all the sub-fields of design, rather it is a field of its own – a general, interdisciplinary stream of design focusing on social issues and entails a designer taking on the role of researcher, ethnographer, project manager, author, producer and maker, developing everything from services, processes, and strategies to products.

It is important to bring ideas pushed by social design into design generally, but unfortunately, Pines' confusion over the term is common, even though social design programme language does not place it as a sub-discipline of another form of design (see figure 1).

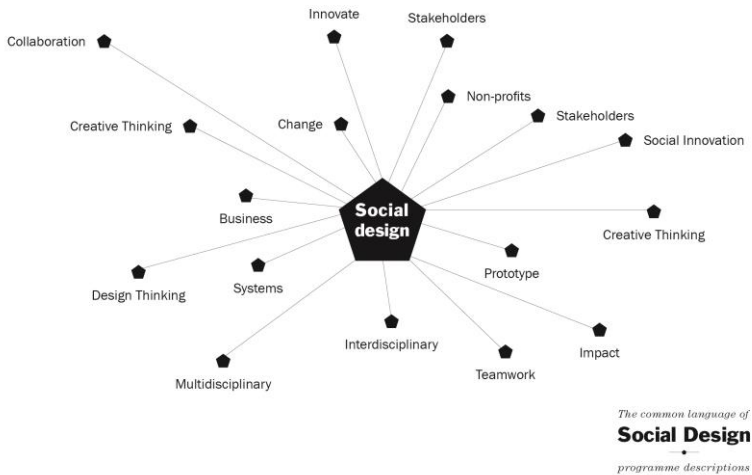


Figure 1 The common language of Social Design programme descriptions.

A solidified definition of what social design is required; this will lead not only to more collaboration with other fields, but help in the understanding of its purpose and goals.

### 3) On a Deadline

The life of projects is another concern with social design projects, particularly with graduate programmes as they are structured around visits by guest lecturers, who come in to pursue projects that are 7-14 days in length, which is not nearly enough time to get fully immersed in the experience. This critique extends to independent projects, which usually last for two weeks annually at most, and every year brings a fresh group of participants. Within graduate programmes, students participate in a few community projects, focus on their thesis, and most likely leave once the programme is complete. What happens to the projects when designers graduate? This renders social design projects as ephemeral, and that defeats the purpose as it prevents measurement. In discussing a project she initiated, Doina Petrescu claims that self-management is an important tactic. When her team wanted to leave the project, they needed to make sure that groups were able to self-manage. Their methodology was to encourage people 'to

progressively learn and take responsibility for different small devices. Rather than one person, there were groups dealing with the kitchen, the library, etc.' (Mazé, 2011, p. 96). A sustained commitment is essential.

### *Centre/Periphery*

Design thinking is everywhere lately, and its popularity has led to the development of 'social' branches of global firms. Furthermore, projects that started off as yearly social design retreats have developed into larger organisations. A perusal of the list of partners, employees, advisors, board members, and collaborators of agencies such as Future Partners (whose projects include several initiatives in largely African-American areas in the USA) and Catapult Design (whose projects have spanned Indonesia, Uganda, Kenya, India, Tanzania, and Navajo, Arizona working with a Native American population) is alarming: everyone on the list is not from or related to the stakeholder, in terms of background, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity.

Although the world '...can no longer be structured in terms of the center/periphery relation' but rather 'defined in terms of a set of interacting centers, which are both different from and related to one another...' (Hall, 2001, p. 21), social design projects continue to place

'...Western design companies ... as active agents who guide, serve, embed, build, pay, and staff (the design processes). On the other hand, [non-Western] institutions are represented as those to be passively guided and directed or to serve as sabbatical hosts, sites for capacity building, philanthropic tourist destinations, and support staff for projects' (Tunstall, 2013, p. 236).

Even within projects centred across the USA by US-based organisations, they '...invoke the idea of ... 'here' and 'there', where 'there' is other, apart, and disconnected, stably distanced from 'here' (Irani et al., 2010, p. 1313). Implying an 'otherness', they enact uneven power relations (Irani et al., 2010), framing a privileged (centre) helping the minority (periphery).

### *Project M*

To illustrate this, I would like to discuss Project M, a US based initiative that encourages young creatives to 'think wrong'. Thinking wrong is based on Edward de Bono's idea of lateral thinking, which turns complex situations into what seems like simple solutions. The problem with methods like

thinking wrong is that it focuses on the ideas rather than the validity of such ideas.

Every year, Project M holds a two-week session in Greensboro, Alabama ‘a mental gymnastics camp for young creatives who are already inspired to contribute to the greater good, but are looking for a platform to collaborate and generate ideas and projects bigger than themselves’ (Holden Baker, n.d.). Greensboro, nicknamed the ‘third world of Alabama’ by *the Birmingham News* (Edge, 2010), is a rural, poverty-stricken, African-American town, and perfect for designers interested in ‘doing good’. The programme is open by application, and young creatives are asked to supply a brief explanation of why they are interested in Project M, a 60-second video which should be ‘legendary’, and a portfolio featuring a body of work similar to Project M’s mission (Project M South, 2014). Here, we see that the application focuses entirely on the implementation of ideas rather than their validity. The programme costs \$2,000 USD excluding travel. Judging by the price tag, doing good is a very privileged affair.

The chosen group is invited to spend two weeks immersing themselves in a place – they are advised to meet 10 people, collect 10 stories, photograph, develop a project, and implement it. These ‘blitzes’ – intensive workshops ‘...for prototyping, researching, doing, designing, and exploring that, while thinking wrong, produces a project or service that uses design thinking for the greater good’ (Blitzes & Workshops, n.d.) – are treated like project briefs: reinforcing the idea of a client-based relationship, which forces students to think quickly. This is not a bad thing, but in order to solve larger problems – which are not solved through a ‘blitz’ – it is. Ethnography that is longer than a few hours (and outside a certain radius) just does not fit within the timeline.

Project M has developed a large portfolio since 2003, but by analysing their past activities and advertising material, one has a sense that it is a series of projects that the students themselves want to see including interactive street art projects such as murals, and outdoor chalk boards. The projects, documented via photographs, zines, and videos, express a sense of self-glorification, and having fun at camp.

### *The 10-minute ethnography*

While I was a graduate student in a Social Design programme, we had to develop a project for a 48-hour ‘blitz’ organised by Project M. We were advised to go out and meet 10 people, collect 10 stories, develop a project, and implement it within 48 hours. We were divided into groups, asked to

choose a number between one and 300 and a number between one and ten, then turn to the page of the chosen number in a dictionary and look up the second word down. We then had to take that word and spend 30 minutes free-associating with it, creating a mind map. One project developed by my colleagues for this 'blitz' was a picnic table on wheels painted orange. The table was meant to promote dialogue and positive change by inviting people to have a cup of coffee. There was one problem however: no one in the neighbourhood came to the table because no one really drank coffee.

'Blitzes' are not short-term projects but experiences that satisfy the participants rather than the community. Project M does not necessarily focus on projects that have an afterlife, although they have created a few, which have developed into larger initiatives such as PieLab. As Fry (2007, p. 67) states '...good intentions do not necessarily lead to beneficial consequences. The immediate results of design actions are often not a good indicator of longer-term world-formative consequences'.

### *PieLab*

PieLab, an initiative developed by Project M, has been successful through the creation of jobs and providing a space in Greensboro, although the project itself never had firm business plans or future goals – which according to Bielenberg, was intentional (Edge, 2010). He believed that setting something in motion and leaving the rest to momentum was the way to go (Edge, 2010). Places like Greensboro however do not need interventions, but concrete ideas with feasible plans to help the town grow.

PieLab became a community initiative run by local stakeholders only after an insensitive situation sparked the community to intervene. The incident in question is an example of how participants were completely unaware of their surroundings, designing things relevant only to them and for their amusement. While Project M participants were putting final touches on the new PieLab space, some of the participants created a poster with '...the words: 'Eat pie'', and beneath it, in smaller type, was 'Fuck Cake, Eat Pie' (Edge, 2010).

The community was not amused by the sloganeering, and so Project M's involvement in PieLab slowly dwindled, as the governmental programmes that funded the original members was not renewed, and changes to be more locally sensitive (including services and menu) were made.

### *Lacking Local*

The lack of locality is another issue – particularly with independent projects. Design students and organisations are eager to look outside for socially engaged work, exploring opportunities in India or Kenya rather than in their own backyard. A look at past winners of the Design Ignites Change awards, an organisation that ‘supports creative professionals ... and students who use design thinking...to improve the lives of individuals and communities’ (About Design Ignites Change, 2014), shows an overwhelming number of projects targeting communities in Asia, Africa, and South America. Furthermore, even when designers look closer to home, they tend to focus on communities with the following criteria: run down, poor, and the furthest away from their own personal experience.

Urban LaunchPad (ULP) – whose focus is on smarter cities through data-driven field experiments – launched a project to create a map for Dhaka's bus system. While explicit transportation systems are helpful, and encouraging people to use buses has many benefits, each locality demands a specific approach. ULP's ideas are more commonly found in Western cities, where rapid public transportation networks are older and more established, and whose brands (e.g. London and New York) have become iconic. Cities like Doha and Cairo for example have a network of official buses, which are implicit: those who ride them know exactly where they are going, and are surprised by anyone questioning how they navigate the system. A more explicit transportation system might benefit a city like Doha, where expats represent 85 per cent of the population (Kinnimont, 2013), and it could be argued that many, if they knew how to navigate the system, would likely ride the bus. The same might not be true for Cairo however, where the buses are often associated with a certain social class and cases of sexual harassment (UN Women and the Demographic Center, 2013), and where the idea of making the system more explicit might not be the first issue to tackle. The question that should be posed is does the community need/want this?

A criticism of the Dhaka bus project is the methodology and the method used to raise funds for implementation. On the project's Kickstarter page, ULP wrote that the fieldwork in Dhaka is one of the risks, and that they are fortunate enough to be working ‘...with a local team that is familiar with these trials from a lifetime of experience and flexible enough to adapt as necessary’ (First Bus Map, 2013). The local team is gathering all the data and the necessary information, however, the American company is taking care of the overall project and implementation, i.e. the final result. This reduces the



local team's participation as just that: people on the ground rather than as equal partners in the process.

Furthermore, the project used Kickstarter for funding, which is currently open only to residents of the USA, Australia, United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, and the Netherlands. The team in Dhaka does not have access to the platform, keeping the funds solidly into the hands of the US design company. As Tunstall (2013, p. 238) states, such initiatives

'...transfer the resources of philanthropic foundations and local NGOs to Western design companies. The extent to which this places the initiative in direct competition with local design companies means that while its intentions may be good, its outcomes are likely imperialistic. It resembles what Linda Smith refers to as the new wave of imperialist processes that 'enter with goodwill in their front pocket and patents in their back pocket' (1999, p. 24). Thus ... [such] initiative[s] demonstrat[e] how even a design innovation project with good intentions can be implicated in continuing practices of imperialism'.

### *Corporate design thinking/doing good*

The global creative saving the world has become a brand: who says that you can't shop and do good at the same time? Organisations like COMMON want 'to catalyze a global creative community with the tools, resources and opportunities to design positive social change; all done through the shared values of a collaborative brand' (COMMON, n.d.).

COMMON is attempting to prototype a new form of capitalism by connecting entrepreneurs, designers and creatives to accelerate socially beneficial businesses and ideas using the same power of rule-breaking innovation and thinking differently (such as one-for-one and donation of proceeds models). Unsettling about organisations like COMMON is how aware everyone else has to be about the act of 'doing good'. On their marketplace, visitors can buy a t-shirt that says 'Do shit that matters' which tells others this person is doing good, and that they should to.

The prevalence of 'design thinking' makes designers think society is gaining more respect for design, but in reality it has reduced design's contribution, since design thinking has become a process anyone can do. As design thinking becomes *de rigueur* in business and MBA programmes, design and designers become irrelevant to the process. At times, the 'design

thinker' is a businessman, armed with an MBA, and leading the process (Dupont, 2014).

With increased discussion of accountability, global corporations suddenly have social design branches, seamlessly flowing beside services like strategy, interactive, and branding. Corporations are adopting similar language to social design programmes, highlighting terms like 'collaboration', 'innovation', and providing fellowships. On his blog 'Design4Impact', Vice-President of Frog Robert Fabricant (2010) claims that Frog's work 'avoids the pitfalls of imperialism', declares that local partners are the 'lifeblood of collaborations' and that Frog counts on them to build trust within local communities. A multinational corporation with offices covering the 'global' market in Western Europe, the US, and China, Frog's social wing takes over from the local partners, imposing their 'expertise' and its hefty price tag.

This invasion of design thinking and 'doing good' by corporations has reduced knowledge in design thinking – and the social design discipline – to get rich quick like scheme, as demonstrated by the title of a blog post by Tim Brown, CEO and President of IDEO: 'How to Become a Social Innovator in 7 weeks'. The opening line of the post, just below a photograph of an IDEO employee showing smiling children in traditional clothing and dirty knees something on his tablet, reads:

'We say we practice human-centered design at IDEO, but what does that really mean? Our friends at +Acumen and IDEO.org have designed a free online course to answer that question. Open to anyone anywhere in the world—no prior design experience needed—the class is called 'Human-Centered Design for Social Innovation.' The goal is to teach budding social entrepreneurs how to develop solutions for those who live in such dire circumstances, they may not know where their next meal will come from' (Brown, 2014).

The seven-week team-based curriculum '...brought together over 13,000 people from 134 countries' (Brown, 2014). He continues, 'In about the time it takes to get a passport, you, too, can be introduced to a whole new way to approach the world's toughest challenges' (Brown, 2014). Unfortunately design thinking has become an exploration of opportunities for personal gain, and it's giving design a bad reputation. The word 'change' is thrown around loosely, defined by problems solved with a click of a button, walls covered with a rainbow of post-it notes, and by carrying a notebook. 'The motives of designers of good intent 'in the field' who act without having a

theoretically informed critique of development ... are not challenged' (Fry 2007, 67) – apparent in the Project M and IDEO model which bypasses crucial elements such as informed research and ethnography. Organisations such as COMMON, IDEO, and Project M – who all may be well intentioned and have produced some important projects and prototypes – trivialise design, making it appear merely as style to '...almost all other disciplinary fields of inquiry...' (Fry, 2008, p. 89).

## **Conclusion**

Since social design is in its infancy, addressing the issues described in this paper is realisable in the short-term. I would like to conclude with a few proposals I feel are important for the growth of the field by drawing on the ideas of engagement and articulation from Irani et al. (2010) in their paper on postcolonial computing. Engagement is the idea of '...connecting with users or an application domain in order to understand relevant work or activity' (Irani et al., 2010, p. 1317), while articulation is the manner in which situations are seen and framed by designers (Irani et al., 2010). Although their paper addresses issues in human-computer interaction for development, it is focused on how designers interact with users in both academic and corporate contexts.

### *A definition/a job description*

Like design, social design is not easily defined – '[d]oes the term denote activism in pursuit of social change, conducted through the medium of design? Or does it refer to activism intended to reform design itself? Or both?' (Lees-Maffei, 2012, p. 92). This confusion over the definition reduces social design to an extension of sub design fields. Designers working in the space need to acknowledge that interdisciplinarity and inviting non-designers into the equation means that in order for design to be '...recognised and taken as seriously as it should be' designers need to stop talking only amongst themselves (Fry, 2008, p. 89).

A clearer definition will help establish the field – particularly as more students graduate with degrees in social design and begin the job search. Social design has the opportunity to involve designers in the decision process. Currently, designers are called in for finishing touches, rather than being considered to participate in major decisions. Without further knowledge in fields that are directly implicated in the work they produce, this will continue to take place. Urban planning, education, migration, public

health, and affordable housing are some of the areas where social designers can be valuable assets. Governments, NGOs, policymakers, and decision-makers need to create roles for social designers that goes beyond aesthetics, but these opportunities will not be created unless social designers encourage a culture of criticism, validity, and examination, and an understanding of the issues and contexts they are immersed in.

### *Stress the Local*

Locality and the translocal are, according to Petrescu, important because it isolates you and minimises your task (Mazé, 2011). Some institutions are committed to local initiatives and the community where they are based, but often organisations look outward. In discussing the difficulties of being socially engaged, Mattsson and Zetterlund claim it requires 'a great knowledge plus massive and very long-term commitment. Otherwise, it is easy for this engagement to have an 'us' and a 'them', in which 'they' are more or less invisible in the process, which is defined by 'us'' (Ericson, 2011, p. 54).

Insights from postcolonial studies and STS studies are encouraged as they speak to local practices, '...while at the same time recognizing the ways that those localisms are conditioned and embedded within global and historical flows of material, people, capital, knowledge, and technology' (Irani et al., 2010, p. 1316).

In being more locally-centric, Irani et al.'s (2010) 'engagement' is applicable. Engagement encourages design research, feedback, deployment, and maintenance. It reframes the project to one that is mutual – '...acknowledg[ing] users as active participants and partners rather than as passive repositories of 'lore' to be mined' (Irani et al., 2010, p. 1318). Mutual engagement can remove the 'us' and 'them' factor if designers make the effort to understand various social, economic, and political issues relevant to the place, exhibit an attention to research, a knowledge of local values and customs, and most importantly to stop thinking of the community in which they are working in as passive recipients but rather as collaborators.

### *Publishing Findings and Research*

Social design projects should not have the aim of winning prizes and awards. Due to the lack of critique in design, they go on to collect their awards without being questioned. What's more, zines used to document social design projects are an exercise in self-congratulation: acting more as minuscule monographs that prioritise photographs of people having a good

time and slogans over publishing findings from the project. Without proper findings and research, particularly in a field that is user centred, we are unable to determine the value of such projects, nor are we able to measure its impact and what lessons can be taken from it. As social design settles within academia, projects need to be more than just about having a good time helping people – ‘Design is both a social process, with implications for others who are participants to that process, and also brings something new into the world that may have social force’ (Polaine, 2013).

### *Do not make social design trendy*

‘It is not about being hip or cool, nor is it about being seen as creative or being a problem-solver. It is not about the objects and images associated with one’s name nor about having articles written about oneself in glossy magazines. Rather it is about something profoundly unfashionable. It’s about being serious’ (Fry, 2008, p. 12).

The direction which social design is taking is turning it into something trendy. Designers should not think of what they personally would like to see in that community or of the awards, but by articulating the requirements of the individuals or community they are working in based on their needs, opportunities, wants, constraints, and desires (Irani et al., p. 2010), an the life of the project.

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