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INTRODUCTION

Design Social | Technology • Activism • Anti-Social

**Peter Hasdell
Gerhard Bruyns**

04–13

#Design Social

#Introduction

#Technology

#Activism

#Anti-Social

'Social Design' versus 'Design-Social'

The emergence of social media and the networked society, as exemplified by *The Internet of Things (IoT)* (Ashton, 1999), generates enormous potential that repositions design as a means to synthesise emerging social complexities into new constellations. One of the ways design in this context becomes reconfigured is as the dynamic interconnections of people, practices, and artefacts. The propinquity of this lineage leads to *relational* rather than *objectified* forms of design. Such approaches tend to be process-driven rather than outcome-based, and activate design's potential within both knowledge generation and knowledge transfer processes. This in itself can be understood as "information" or as *design-before-design* and *design-after-design* that provides pathways for innovation in the development of new processes, systems, networked, and relational outcomes (Deforge and Cullars, 1990).

Changes in social systems therefore evolve the ways design develops towards these forms of knowledge, utilising collaborative processes, cross-disciplinary practices (Sanders & Stappers, 2008), and new technologies of the social as a means to interlink these domains. Further, as design disciplines and design schools seek ways to respond to broader social changes, there is a need for a new research praxis to engage design processes in social contexts. More importantly, the contextualisation, codification, and definitions that emerge from this emerging praxis, where design disciplines and the social form new praxis, constitutes the effective merger of both aspects as *Design Social*. This has the capacity to foster new social forms and social design as a knowledge field in its own right. The merging or intersection of two formerly distinct domains should not, in the final instance, become another ill-defined field of speculation that casts no strong shadows. Social media in the long term may

be better understood, for instance, as an anti-social medium. Similarly, the IoT might have a strong role to play in the digital divide despite its apparent promise of integration, breaking down previous constituencies that defined the social within existing hierarchies such as the nation-state, citizenship, and social structures. Instead, it reconfigures the formerly static location-based within temporal and data-driven registers that are more fluid. *You* belong to online communities in this time, but this can change. Positing to what extent the social is a previously engineered construct of the state, it is now being redesigned and reconfigured as a construct that is incorporated and privatised by the service economy? These notions aside, however, critical discourse around this praxis at times seems too suffused with paradigms of positivism, futurism, and the technocratic, particularly as immersed as we are within the rise of social media. How then to approach this somewhat nebulous field, one which is part object, part subject? Moreover, how does the field of design absorb these instances as part of their ways of making, doing, and thinking, not as research by design, or the social, but design being social, first and foremost?

The oversimplification of the social in recent times has been tacked by Mol and Law's approach (Law and Mol, 2002). As such their approach is not grounded in how the social relates to complexity, but how the complexity remains within practice, as examined through interventions in medicine, meteorology, ecology, psychology or market volatility. Problematizing the social remains a key concern as to how its understanding – formative and operative logics – become instrumental in the emergence of a material reality. Additionally, we note in passing the fact that as the social sciences begin to re-evaluate this formerly assumed objectivity, opting instead for embedded approaches such as action research, the necessity for a re-evaluation of critical discourse around such research becomes paramount.

In recent years 'design' itself and its traditional sub-domains have been under a certain amount of pressure that is questioning, eroding and blurring its formerly stable discipline boundaries. As a case in point, participatory design, and the related fields of 'co-design' and 'co-creation', employ methodologies that involve users and stakeholders within the design process as an iterative process of design development (Koskinen & Hush, 2016, Krivy & Kaminer, 2013). Often misconstrued as a purely design approach, participatory design is in fact a "rigorous research methodology" (Spinuzzi, 2005) involving systems of knowledge generation and co-design processes where the interactions of people, design, technologies and practices, steers a course between participants' tacit knowledge and the designer-researchers' analytical or technical knowledge. Used in a broad spectrum of design fields, variations such as participatory planning have become a relatively normal part of urban planning, for instance where social or collective actions have a determining influence on public spaces and amenities, whilst participatory design often engages users and stakeholders within the process. We think here of other concepts where the social and design are challenged in for example the concepts expressed in the notion of 'co-production' (Low and Bruyans, 2012; 272):

*"(...) what allows for things to co-exist with-in context of uncertainty. This is where I would situate the practices of co-production. Previously emphasis fell on 'participatory practices'. Co-production discourses, within a horizon of interconnectivity, the possibilities of bringing people and organizations together to **co-participate**. The challenge is one of how difference might co-exist...Design agency seems to be a very powerful tool, as something that can mediate and allow for something much more profound, as part of the temporal processes of building participatory practices through co-production" (their emphasis).*

However, these processes are often touted as an appropriate conceptual and methodological approach for social design, often lead to the uncritical and lowest common denominator outcome for design whereby the positivistic outcomes of the process overtake. As mentioned by Mouffe (2007) and also Miessen (2012) criticisms have been drawn on the positivistic and sometimes simplistic nature of participatory design, which led to the lowest consensual outcomes in recent years. As such, the definition of both the uncritical design process methodologies and design outcomes require reconsideration, as well as the roles of users, participants, and designers in the process. To illustrate this, Bjögvinsson, Ehn and Hillgren (2012) write that participatory design should move from a conventional understanding of designing things (objects) towards designing "things" (socio-material assemblies), closely allied to the concept posited by Latour (1999) of *Socio-Material Assembly*. The reformulation in which design is understood as a contextual practice that engages the social, working "in an economy of reciprocity" as commented by Janzer and Weinstein, (2014), generates design-research processes aimed at social innovation, which also points toward the latent neo-colonialism of such practices. The inherent social enterprise and knowledge transfer processes can become strategic directives. As such, these may be able to motivate, to instigate, and drive larger social changes through design and possibly lead to paradigm shifts in the silo-like definitions of conventional design practice. An extended definition of participatory design is therefore a "constellation of design initiatives aiming at the construction of socio-material assemblies where social innovation can take place" (Manzini & Rizzo, 2011).

Design in a social context is a complex mesh of tangible and intangible factors. Social forms, social networks, information, contexts, and

people, are able to frame design processes and praxis within inter-disciplinary constructs – or as Low refers to them – as horizontal entities of agency. As difference, the user and designer alliance, remains vertical in comparison. Moreover, this allows for the engagement of a wide range of different sectors, groups, and stakeholders in dynamic communities of practice that can lead design beyond its linear and limited capabilities into new forms of a social as well as a design praxis, whereby design is co-dependent on synthesis as well as analytic practices. Still, who really benefits from this? In what ways does design really impact the commons? What is its effect on transformation within the political and the social in as much as either the emergence of the “commons,” as a form of democratic agency in the design fields, or the production of different conditions and concepts are applicable to both design and the social. The question of rights and agency within design, to use and access information and resources, is often promised but rarely delivered. For instance, given the pervasiveness and ubiquity of social media and, what might constitute positions – if any – of resistance or difference in social design as manifested by the internet of things, is nothing more than an affirmation of a previous status quo. In a post-Snowden era, are there in fact positions of resistance within the technocratic digital domains, or does social design point only towards the acceptable and permitted users, subscribers, and the already incorporated? To state that certain social technologies have had a profound impact on political life, citizenship, identity and social belonging is undeniable. Yet, what are the critical tools available to design that directly alter the manner in which we conceptualise change? Or how can the transformation of “social” and “design”, as an interlinked concept of *design-social*, become a potent tool for change rather than as an incremental adjustment?

As a triangulation aimed at the problematising and seeking of critical discourse within the design-social framework, this issue considers a triad of *Activism*, *Technology* and the *Anti-Social*. At its core, the work discussed here aims to challenge the apparent ease with which the design and the social have amalgamated whilst being adapted by many in certain guises and formats within the disciplines of design itself. The trilateral frame here remains a deliberate move away from the “rubrics of everything”, from the internet of things to debates surrounding participatory, collaborative, “co” instances, and the uncritical acceptance of the technological in every aspect of the social.

Firstly, evident in both Hong Kong as well as further afield, the emergence of activism has impacted the entanglement of design with the social. Whether in its micro-forms or as a means to engage the power of the “civic” and the digital citizen, the importance of design-social in activism, irrespective of material formats, remains a key point of concern. As de Costa and Philip (2008) point out, the entanglement of socially grounded practices, for example in writing literature, sciences, or art as activism, have exploited the availability of “sudden” and “cheap ‘do it yourself’” media for information exchange, co-influencing ideas and concepts that is reminiscent of secretive resistance movements of Communist Eastern Europe. They continue:

“Artists have actively taken part in scientific political and technical controversies forging modes of representation and intervention that synthesize practices from science and engineering and producing fields such as biological art” (da Costa and Kavita Philip, 2008, xix).

The present-day challenges made to intellectual and experiential capacities – between theorists, designers, philosopher and artists – not only confronts the possibilities of social media as

activism, it constitutes how design-social is absorbed into the ebb and flow of De Certau's *Practices of Everyday Life* (1984) (*ibid.*). We also note the emergence of *hacktivism* (Jordan, 2004) that can be characterised through practices that seek disruption, feed misinformation, and create avatars, fluid identities, or subversion of increasing ubiquity of the digital realm.

Second, the inclusion of the technological in this design-social interconnectivity challenges the merger of design with the social and its various output formats. The reorientation of "life sciences", in either the explicit or discrete junctions of the political, social, science, and design applications bring into question the use of technology when addressing the social valance, in any embodiment of the use of a new mobile device, "app", or virtual reality experience. Further, linked to the aforementioned conditions of activism, technology intended to facilitate participatory or collaborative conditions remains questionable in application through its manners of "democratising" design, and the explicit links between what constitutes "humans", "machines", and "work practices" (Berg, 1998). In confirming Berg's position, we are left to once again question if an alternative portrayal of *technology* and *praxis* relies solely on an ontological difference or, whether revisiting technology in terms of human endeavour yields an alternative technology-politics in terms of the social.

Third, the antithesis of the social that is represented here as the third and final triangulation point, is defined as the *anti-social*. With the overemphasis of the social in terms of its *bringing together of users, stakeholders, agents, and their respective agencies*, the discussion remains tautological. David Lockwood's original text *Some Remarks on the Social System* (1956), highlights the varying constellations in which the social emerges. He quotes both Karl Marx and Talcott Parsons¹ (1991), and places emphasis on the

social through varying relations and production processes. For Marx, the social remains a question of competing economic interest groups. For Parsons, it is defined by a difference of individuals in terms of social superiority and inferiority based on a dominant system of values that are socially driven (*ibid.*, 138). The inclusion of the anti-social is not a call for a return to equate design-social with a new interpretation of Marxist or Parsonian socio-economic perspectives, nor does it attempt to politicise design. Its inclusion is meant to highlight how design positions respond to pressures from within the social, linked to the social, but what is de facto anti-social. The rise of mobile phone addiction (Ling, *et al.*, 2005), the influence of social media on violence (Barker and Julian, 2001), and rise of the "startchitect" (cf. Kanna, 2011) all in some way or another represent a sub-condition that underscores the design-social question.

Re-visitation of nuance and seeking differences in opposed position situates *activism, technology, and the anti-social* as complementary proxies to larger design issues and the notion of design-social. Moreover, this idea adds to an on-going discourse that seeks difference through practice, that become tactical and critical intrusions into the field that equally manifest either theoretically or through their application.

Design-Social contributions

This issue on *Design-Social* contains 12 contributions from a range of discourses.

Arie Graafland's contribution to the design-social issue, questions the use and role of the social through his concept, the *socius*. His overview of mapping practices reframes the various "how" and "why" of a number of socially driven approaches to mapping, which goes beyond a mere discussion on "technique". He highlights how this has impacted the

pedagogical structures in tertiary institutions such as The Delft University of Technology and their city driven agendas.

Khaya Mchunu and **Kim Berman** examine the arts and visual participatory methods as a tool to facilitate the experience of rural design actors in a co-design process. The use of a “collective” process that involves hand crafting to reveal the development of their personal agency, constructs forms of ownership through design. Their work advocates the use of arts and visual methods to enhance capacities of reciprocity, creative thinking, and ownership through the co-design process.

Gerhard Bruyns’ paper links the design of the social to the urban scale, and in particular socially inspired urban models. His overview of the urban sociologists and their influence on the formulation of urban models highlights the impact of the social within spatial planning of cities and territories. The conclusions reached expose the gradual omission of the social within planning and, as a consequence, what other forces take over in its place. The work calls for a need to reposition a social program in planning at governance, territorial, and neighbourhood levels.

“Activist Artists”, **Kacey Wong’s** pictorial essay, addresses an ongoing debate into the use of social media as a platform for activism. The work highlights the *technological* versus the *untechnical*, locally mechanised by activist-artists in their specific ideological plight. The work forms a commentary on what types of technology are currently in use and through which media.

Luke Tipene’s pictorial essay addresses a unique category of architectural drawing that depicts spaces that *cannot* physically exist. It suggests that this specific mode of drawing

plays a significant role in the production of meaning for the social, by portraying ephemeral characteristics of social relations. Harnessing Michele Foucault’s heterotopic mirror and Henri Lefebvre’s notion of the production of space, Tipene challenges the aspects of the ephemeral and the social through each of the six images he discusses.

Patrick Healy examines the Temple of Zeus at Olympia by Max Raphael. The Temple of Zeus at Olympia is often cited as the canonical example of the Doric temple architecture. Raphael examines how a particular design can have such far-ranging influence, to which end he elucidates the relationship of design to the activity of a participatory and democratic process specific to the Greek polis. Healy discusses a highly dialectical analysis of the various forces at play in both construction and the elaboration of the spatial artefact, in the view to advance the academic understanding of “classical art” by addressing the social, spiritual, and material dimensions at play.

Simone AbudMaliq Simone’s text investigates what the social does in its “lived” context as phenomena. The simultaneous oscillation in a number of worlds, crystallises a need for adaptable research methods. With Indonesia as case, his text discusses habitual ecologies in both the superblock as well as the slum. His position on the social commences with an investigation of household strategies, in how these acquire, finance, adapt, and inhabit residential space as a range of flexible tools for the social. In this light, design is fundamentally tied to the decisions and strategies of the social.

By questioning the concept of the *Visual Soliloquy*, **Marko Stanojevic** ameliorates the introverted conditions of design and how the same intentions are materialised in communication design. The pictorial essay

represents a series of graphically designed works, each with a specific personal intent yet, driven by other notions and types of societal conditions. The work remains part and parcel of the question of the anti-social in its premise and in its manner of internalised “self-branding”.

Using the design-build work conducted over many years, **Peter Hasdell** repositions the role of social in design processes. The replacement of the participatory approach within design, with action-led-social initiatives, and the necessity of negotiation as a paradigm shift finds a particular valance in specific communities. In parallel, this approach induces new socially derived knowledge transfer skill sets, which were not initially imagined.

Jamie Brassett seeks to clarify the social’s position against the “different ethics”, through the work of Spinoza and Deleuze. The article calls for an affective design, that operates through the process of establishing ethical ontologies. As such, his contribution aligns affective, ethical, and ontological design for social bodies. This text forms an important contribution, and explores the more philosophical position within the design-social question, and the importance of other tangential forms of research to help provide alternative positions to both design and the social.

Hanna Wirman’s contribution discusses existing digital games developed in Hong Kong that serve the local community. The work addresses educational, social, and environmental issues, and discusses the fourteen existing game domains, each with their particular themes and learning outcomes.

The discussion concomitantly points towards the potential of games as social innovations for both Hong Kong and urban social landscapes further afield.

Finally, **Lukáš Likavčan** presents the idea of multispecies diplomacy within the framework of unstable and violent political geographies of the Anthropocene. By clarifying the notions of sympoiesis and habilitation the text then delves into conditions and intricacies in the current militarisation of the environment, and therefore the militarisation of the design-social. The paper further addresses the design-social relationship in terms of its conclusion on ecosocialist politics that engage in multispecies diplomacy.

In its totality, and through this broad spectrum, we hope to elude to other voices within this realm of design-social approaches. Moreover, in this overview we hope to foster new perspectives on the question of design-social, amalgamate new possibilities of research, and more importantly, develop new avenues for design and its dependency on the social.

Notes

1. Parsons original work on *The Social System* was published in 1951 in London by Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd.

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Bio

Peter Hasdell is an architect and academic who graduated from the AA and University of Sydney. He has taught and practiced in more than six countries including Australia, the UK, Sweden, Canada, China and Japan and has taught in the Bartlett School London, University of East London, Columbia University NY, KTH Stockholm, Berlage Institute Rotterdam, HKU, Manitoba and other schools. Associate Dean, Associate Professor, Discipline Leader for E+I, Director of the Design Social research initiative and year 4 Capstone Coordinator. With more than 20 years teaching, he has expertise in the fields of architecture, urbanism, participatory design, public art practices, interactive arts, environmental design and social design. His most recent publication is entitled *Border ecologies : Hong Kong's mainland frontier* (2017, Birkhauser).

Dr. ir. **Gerhard Bruyns** is an architect and urbanist. He is Assistant Professor of Environment and Interior Design, School of Design at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong. His research deals with the aspects of spatial forms and how this impacts both the formal expression of the city and societal conditions that are compressed into an urban landscape driven by speculation and excess. He has published on design strategies for neoliberal landscapes, exploring what this means for concepts as the 'square foot society' and models of urban dwelling and planning. In 2012 he co-edited *African Perspectives [South] Africa. City, Society, Space, Literature and Architecture* (010 Publishers: Rotterdam) part of the Delft School of Design Publication Series. In 2015 he was co-editor of Issue #16 of Footprint: Delft Architecture Theory Journal entitled: *Introduction: Commoning as Differentiated Publicness* (2015, Jap Sam Books).



Image 1 (this page): Temple Street design-social-activism, year 1 students Environment and Interior Design, School of Design, the Hong Kong Polytechnic University: Source: *Daniel Elkin (and Peter Hasdell), 2018.*

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