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Activating Design Social.

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Activating Design Social

Peter Hasdell

152–171

Does the social turn in design enable transformative change in design and society? Or is it incremental change, where design confirms existing social systems with little impact? Many claims for design social have been made, often underpinned by the altruism of doing good and social engagement. The recent popularity of social design, design activism, service design, co-design, and commoning, show design as conjoined to other disciplines, but to what end? What role does design play within dialogical pairings? Does the socialising of design diffuse the agency of design to the social sciences? As we interrogate and define, conceptually and in praxis, the hybridisation of two different domains, there is a need to critically engage the question of how to define ways in which design social can become an impactful, rather simply than a consensual, confirmation. In addition this enquiry is to seek out how design social can lead to transformative moments within design practice that impacts design methodologies, social structures and its agencies.

#Anti-Social

#Kitchen

#China

#MingXia

Towards a praxis of 'social design'

Social design is the conjunction of two distinct terms and different domains, one pertaining to the social and the other to the world of design and its artifacts. In practice, *social design* is often deemed to be a design process embedded within a social context, with a commonly accepted mode of operation being a consensual design outcome, rather than on the development of outcomes embedded in a social context that impact both fields. Additionally, we can further note that the retrospective over-simplification of the social and materialisation interactions when viewed through the lens of the final outcome is prevalent. Therefore, it is clear for many critical researchers that design understood as a purely consensual process may result in an ineffectual lowest acceptable outcome approach. This "least offensive" outcome is one that usually leads to incremental improvement rather than being a transformative outcome. This is a critical and important distinction, as it parses between "system improving" (social learning and actualisation) and "system transforming" (social mobilisation and social innovation). Similarly we note that the consensual process or path of least resistance in *participatory design* – commonly employed by *social design* practices, for instance – has been characterised as the "nightmare" of *participatory design* processes. Miessen (2011) argues that consensual *participatory design* is in effect useless, as it maintains the status quo. He further outlines that the complex negotiations, conflicts, and their subsequent resolution and tensions between different forms and domains of knowledge are in fact the critical processes and moments that lead to paradigm shifts and innovations in design. In *social design*, these moments would therefore test – through praxis – the boundaries and limits of design-related knowledge in relation to the social body or to social practices, and therefore would have a higher possibility of "system transforming" outcomes that are better positioned to contribute to, or catalyse, active transformations that go beyond the superficial.

Meissen's contestations have their roots in Chantal Mouffe's (2005) writings on the valence of antagonism and the political. Mouffe, after Hannah Arendt, outlines an inherently political process that engages the ontology of agonistic practices and seeks to define processes of a politic of agonistic pluralism rather than consensual agreement. She calls into question the effectiveness of consensus-driven approaches to planning (politics) that regard this approach as normative. Antagonism, contestation, different points of view and any agonistic encounter however are always a part of social relations. For consensual or agreement politics this is seen as a threat to the existing social order, whilst for the politics of change this constitutes a necessary risk. For Mouffe, conflicts occur at the boundaries of discourse where divergent points of view or ideologies can be found, where these overlap or contest with other entities for example, antagonism may occur. An agonistic approach is therefore more able to deal with difference and conflict. Further noting that an agonistic process is always in the process of definition and change, it allows for the inclusion of diversity and difference within, but at the same time it outlines how pluralism cannot ever account for all differences; therefore participation "must also enable the expression of conflict, which requires that citizens genuinely have the possibility of choosing between real alternatives" (Mouffe, 2014). She goes on to say that the inherent and pervasive indeterminacy of social order necessitates the need for "sedimented hegemonic practices" that "conceal the originary acts of their contingent political institution and that appear to proceed from a natural order". These "contingent practices" maintain their hegemonic order by excluding other possibilities for that social order. Changes to this order constitute threats to that

hegemony and, by implication, to the social structures it embodies. Incremental change in such a context, although an indication of the tolerance or resilience of its social structures, can never intrinsically disrupt the "sedimented hegemony." Using Mouffe's logic, it can therefore be understood that any *social design* processes that operate on a consensual paradigm cannot and will not become agonistically political in such social ordering systems, as they neither challenge the boundaries of the social order nor its internal constitution, but are instead a part of incremental social transformation. The field of design activism – at least in part – may be less of a "contingent practice," and conceptually operates, perhaps, with the intent to initiate change through action, which enables a more agonistic type of practice to occur.

This goes to the heart of a critical distinction between *design social* and design activism that Alastair Faud-Luke (2015) outlined. By situating socio-political design practices on a spectrum that ranges from agreement to agonism to antagonism, it allows the placement of *social design* in his schema as between agreement (consensual) and agonism, whereas *design activism* is more likely to be found between agonism and antagonism. As such, *design activism* "contests the paradigmatic" coupling of *design social's* representative community and engages the participatory community of the agonist society and agendas that may "disrupt habitus." Conversely, *social design* is framed in "representative democracy, entrepreneurial logic, diagnostic framing" and by the predetermined paradigm of "public and social good: Consequently, it is difficult to see how it can offer more than incremental innovation to pressing social needs." *Design activism* reconfigures these relationships and the pre-existing social structures, and therefore has more substantial impacts that can transform the social. Faud-Luke further elaborates the notions of consensus and dissensus in these two approaches. Whereas *social design* gathers consensus within the existing social relations, *dissensus* will more likely occur "in dialogue, not in the actions or materialisations of design (-ing)," and its compliance with the normative cultural practices and language. *Design activism* conversely uses practices designed to antagonise and to generate conditions of contestation such that agonism may be regarded as a form of agency directed towards challenging "our existing social 'material and expressive assemblages' … as a means to imagine and enact social change in everyday life practices." Whilst referencing *design activism's* intent, Faud-Luke, in making the distinction between *social design* and *design activism* polarises these, in application and praxis there may well be instances where this distinction is more blurred and less polemical, whilst procedurally engaging both agonistic and agreement practices in the development of the design outcomes. Design is ultimately synergistic, and all design has some relation to the social.

The construction of 'thingness'

Further, it is useful to circumscribe factors that critically contribute to the formulation of *social design* and *design activism* and to extricate possible modalities. Drawing both from the extended domain of the social sciences that includes critical positioning that draws from social and cultural anthropology, ethnography, and philosophy, as well as from the expanded field of design, its processes and relations to the social. As a preface, we can consider the original meaning of the word *thing* as assembly, meaning socius, a place, and the process of assembling. Additionally this refers to a collectively agreed object contested and defined by the social body or community in that assembly. In essence the *thing* in this ancient context is an outcome from a fundamentally agonistic and

social, if not political, process. *Thing,* rather than being an anodyne word, is potent with signification. As Björgvinsson, Ehn and Hillgren (2102) outline in their research on *participatory design* methodology, we should move from a conventional understanding of designing *things* (objects) towards designing *Things* with a capital "T". In part drawing from Heidegger's (1967) seminal reflection on "thingness," they reconsider the etymological meaning of *Thing* as (public) assembly or public space taking place at a certain time and place. Derived from ancient Nordic and Germanic roots, *Thing* describes not only the object, but also social context and gathering place; society's participation in these gathering places and their purpose as common places where disputes were resolved or where negotiations and even conflicts took place between the social (belief) and the material worlds. A *Thing,* therefore, can be understood as the gathering of social and material properties and attributes, and it is also a gathering of people and artifacts designed in a common framework.

In other words, "*Thingness*" is very closely allied to the concept of *socio-material assembly* posited by Latour (1999). This concept Latour characterises as "a collective of humans and non-humans;" whereby the collective gathers social and material (artifact) relations within an assembly that is closer perhaps to a contemporary form of ethnography (Figure 1). As part of this collective condition, our participation, gathering, and engagement in the material world form a series of complex and dynamic interactions. The *socio-material assembly* can be seen as a subset or relative of Latour's notion of the *quasi-object* (1991), as a class of entities that does not exclusively belong to one knowledge domain but instead describes the relations between the social and its objectified production (design for instance). The quasi-objects are neither just objects nor just social relations or subject, and therefore assume a kind of codetermination between the social subject and the objectified as its foundation. In design terms, the *socio-material assembly,* like the extended understanding of *Things,* shifts emphasis from the conventional understanding of *social design* towards the non-hierarchical performative or relational. Distinct from more conventional approaches, this has the capacity to build in uncertainty and unexpected outcome, or perhaps indeterminacy and risk into the process that could lead to system transformation as well as social mobilisation and innovation.

Latour further elaborates the quasi-object in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991) as a necessary extension of his theory (really this is a manifesto) of the *parliament of things*. He argues that the dualism and dialectic structural classifications between subject and object, on the one hand, and between nature (science) and culture (politics) on the other, belong to the modern era. He contests that this dualism is false in its premise. The constitution of the *parliament of things* would instead define "humans and non-humans, their properties and their relations, their abilities and their groupings" as various hybrids. He argues that modernity to a large part has not dealt well with the hybrid conditions that might be subject and object at the same time, the modern constitution thus generates for "... the expanded proliferation of the hybrids whose existence, whose very possibility, it denies." The Parliament of Things would therefore allow for the "meticulous sorting of quasi-objects to become possible ... [within which] ... the continuity of the collective is reconfigured ... Natures are present, but with their representatives, scientists who speak in their name. Societies are present, but with the objects that have been serving as their ballast from time immemorial." Bennet (2010) in *Vibrant Matter* furthers Latour's theoretical concepts by situating the issue of quasi-objects within a political-ecological framework that raises questions concerning our material existence. She discusses how to engage a "vitality of matter" with respect to moving our socio-cultural tra-

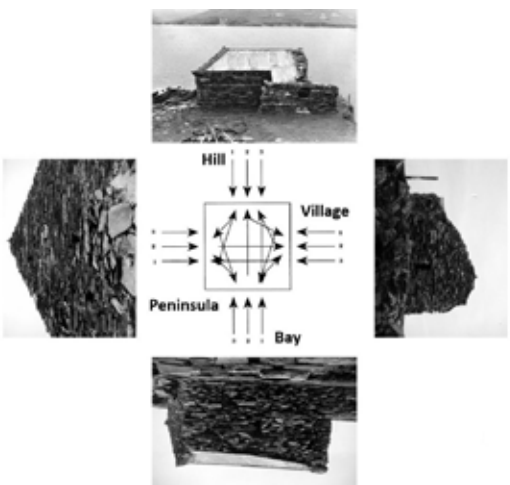

Figure 1 (this page, top): In both Miaoxia community projects, a pig "thing" was slaughtered on the morning of the inauguration, carried to the village temple and then to the buildings, before being butchered and served up at the village feast. Source: *Author.*

Figure 2 (this page, bottom): Stonehouse schema and list of things and demands. Source: Author.

Figure 3 (pages 157, top): Miaoxia community kitchen built in 2015 (foreground) and guesthouse (background) finished in 2017. Source: *Author.*

Figure 4 (pages 157, bottom): Miaoxia community kitchen. Source: *Author.*

jectory towards ideas of ecology. Using notions of "actant" from Latour, and drawing on concepts of the vitality and "thingness" or "thing-power," she references agency and the ideas of assemblage by Deleuze and Guattari where "The locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group." In politicising matter, she effaces the dichotomies between the organic and inorganic, life and matter, and the animate-inanimate and argues for the endorsement of a "definition of politics as a political ecology and a notion of publics as human-nonhuman collectives that are provoked into existence by a shared experience." The unstated implications of this are that design and its social milieu, be it in the process of designing or the impacts of design beyond its inception, can be conceptually and practically understood as an ecology in and of itself. Design understood in relation to its social context needs to be intrinsically connected to the social process as a type of design ecology (Tilder 2009), for instance, or a complex mesh of tangible and intangible factors, social forms and networks, information and interconnections of contexts and people. Therefore the politics of change and of materialising this change are inescapable, but are as yet ineffective, or at best latent within most approaches to *social design*, despite the intentionality of the designer. From both Faud-Luke and Latour, it can be deduced that the significant intent of *design activism* and the *parliament of things* is akin to *social innovation*. In other words, its imperative is to be able to effect social transformation through design itself.

"Stonehouse", a social and physical construction in the Shetland Islands, was a ten-day workshop in 1993 made with forty participants under our tutelage.[1] Four different groups of participants constructed identities and embodied these within the dynamic process of the construction of a stone house. Each group was responsible for the construction of one wall and for negotiating relationships with all other groups. Neither designs nor plans were given at the start, and no sole designer was responsible. Instead, design was reconfigured as a relational process whereby the form and outcome of the house resulted from the negotiations, contestations, dynamics, and social relations between the groups that occurred during the construction process. The dialogical process and the continual articulation through multiple negotiations was essential, such that the building of a social construct was inextricably connected with the building of the house and the finished construction registered the conflicts, agreements, and social relations of the groups.

To affect this, we initiated the following framework: Firstly the division of participants into four groups that reflected four typical environmental aspects of settlement and landscape. Secondly, we initiated a totemic system of "things," where each "thing" identified conditions representative of the group and their context to use later to issue "demands" (Figure 2). Thirdly, each group was able to "project" their design agenda for the house by making "demands," or in other words, instructions based on the qualities of a "thing" on another group during the construction process. Periodically a "demand" was formulated by each group and issued to another group. The receiving group had to implement the demands, and in turn could issue demands to other groups. The things and the demands did not dictate form, but prescribed relations, functions or possibilities and, in some cases, simply antagonised another group.

The strength or weakness of the resulting stonehouse and its articulations, for instance corners, windows, doors and other features, reflects the nature of the relationships between groups. A strong, well-constructed corner represents the good social relations between groups, and conversely, the poorly constructed corner is the outcome of group conflicts and disagreements. As a crystallised outcome, this meant that the coherence or fragility of parts of the stonehouse

Figure 5 (page 158, top): Outdoor cinema screenings, Miaoxia, summer 2017. Source: *Author.*

Figure 6 (page 158, bottom): Miaoxia community guesthouse construction process. Source: *Author.*

Figure 7 (this page): Miaoxia community guesthouse carpentry work. Source: *Author.*

Figure 8 (opposite): Miaoxia community guesthouse view of bathroom with library above. Source: *Author.*

manifested the relationships between groups and the social construct they engendered. The finished stonehouse and its details are thereby a record of the negotiations of differences and these dialogues, and the house as an emergent result, reveals the resolution of tensions annealed in stone.

The claim here is that *social design,* and perhaps all design, need to be understood as a "relational" design process (Ehn 2008) that connects social context, socio-material implications, and their associated bodies of knowledge in the design process. This needs to impact both social structures and design processes. Ehn elaborates that this process necessarily needs to consider, before and after the normative design cycle, the "design before design" and the "design after design," as outlined by Björgvinsson et.al. (2012), and not as a process of "projecting," but as a process of *infrastructuring* that allows for the continuation of the *socio-material assembly* before and beyond the design cycle itself. *Infrastructuring* thus positions the notion of design and its impacts, use, and evaluation within a social context. In effect, this extends the conceptual framework of design beyond the specific outcome and finished product of the design or design process itself. It can be noted that this is increasingly the case for specific types of artifacts such as mobile devices in today's context that are defining new forms of socio-design ecosystems and new practices. A viable re-evaluation of *social design* conceptual frameworks and methodologies therefore repositions it within complex social processes (Hasdell, 2016); in which design outcomes become the formation of *socio-material assemblies*, constructed within a dynamic, changing, or active context. Feedback within these systems and practices is essential.

Social design activism or design in a social context?

In search of new practices that span between *design social* and design activism, the author conducted a number of collaborative research projects in the village of *Miaoxia* in rural Sichuan, Peoples Republic of China. This involved two disciplines, the Applied Social Sciences and Spatial Design, and their related research methodologies. The team utilised *action research* that provided the "software" as community engagement and social organisation, and design, which provided the "hardware" outcomes through *participatory design* processes. As designed outcomes, this resulted in community projects that initiated and activated physical and social change, if not innovation, which enabled villagers to develop new social systems and collective organisations that radically restructured the ways they live. The repositioning of design within dynamic social processes, as a *socio-material assembly* or as design *together* with its social changes, expanded the agency of design in this context. These projects are a fusion of social design and design activism, which engaged *consensus and dissensus* at various times in their development. Further, it can be contested that they embody properties towards a kind of ethnographic *Thingness* as they are deeply rooted within cultural practice, but also carry with them the seeds of new ideas, relations, and systems that are new modalities negotiated with, and in the context of, the village assembly. That is, they belong and are alien to the village at the same time.

To contextualise the work in *Miaoxia*, it can be seen that rural community development remains a critical issue in China's ongoing socio-spatial transformation. In recent decades the rural village has been impacted by transformations in socio-cultural systems and economic shifts. This is evident in the increasing patchwork

suburbanisation of the rural environment and loss of farmable lands (Guldin 1997), as well in the corporatisation of agriculture, the dilapidation and depopulation of villages, and the loss of agrarian practices and skillsets. Depopulation, for instance, goes hand-in-hand with the massive rural-urban migration and the development of urban villages in cities elsewhere, which is inextricably coupled with the increase in left-behind children whose parents have sought employment in other provinces (Friedman 2005, Lin, 2009, Xuefei 2013). For instance, there are an estimated 60 million left-behind children in China out of the 600 million rural populations. The quarter century of modernisation of China has clearly impacted local economic wellbeing, social systems, and development in rural areas. This was recognised under the policy of Construction of New Socialist Countryside that arose from the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-10), which addressed accrued imbalances from previous plans. In particular, it identified rising rural inequality, the need for a new economic framework, revised tax and subsidies, provision of community services, education, and for sustainable development approaches. Since this policy was affected there have been few tangible benefits other than improved roads. The suburbanisation of village farmlands continues unabated, and the hollowing out and left behind children still exist, if at a slightly slower rate than previously. In *Miaoxia,* as in many other villages, most working age adults have left to seek employment in cities elsewhere. The remaining villagers include around 200 left-behind elderly and 75 left-behind children. This aging community and its physical environs has become dilapidated, with substandard living conditions. The village houses and facilities accordingly suffer numerous problems that include poor sanitation, poor hygienic conditions, lack of public space, and very little social or economic provision.

For *Miaoxia,* design was used to activate change to the current state of the village with little means to maintain its former agrarian practices that were disrupted by earthquakes, together with aging hollowing-out and decline. The resulting design and implementation of a community kitchen, and a later community guesthouse, enabled the development of social enterprises that extended the village's capability for revenue generation through cultural festivals and community events. These new systems, run by a cooperative group of elderly villagers, provoke and activate untapped village capabilities to deal with economic decline, thereby activating change in social, economic, and environmental organisation of the village. Consequently, a transformation from cultivation to culturation is in the process of occurring, in which agrarian values and village cohesion is maintained and strengthened. More significantly although they can be seen as *social design*, both new initiatives are, in effect, forms of design activism that instigate social transformation in the village and its social and economic systems, as well as its forms of governance and servicing. They are unavoidably political in their nature, and rather than consensual (although parts of their design process were clearly consensual) are generally agonistic in operation, practice, and context, and are underpinned by strong family ties.

Conflict of design or the design of conflict?

The *Miaoxia* projects aligned both social and physical outcomes in ways that do not privilege one over the other. Notionally, the *action research* facilitated the negotiation and restructuring of dormant social engagements into social enterprises through shared and mutually beneficial outcomes, whilst the *participatory design* enabled stakeholder engagement with the design, construction, and project realisation

processes. However, in practice, as evidenced by key moments in the design processes, the negotiations and contestations that arose at key moments both activated by the designers and evidenced within the process are messy and complex. Consensus can quickly shift to dissensus. Utilising *participatory design* processes as a framework to engage, it became apparent in *Miaoxia* that this methodology facilitates but has its limitations. Even given that the current tendency in *participatory design* shifts emphasis from the user as a "carrier of needs and problems" to an active design member who is a "non-design expert" with local knowledge, skills, organisational capabilities, and entrepreneurship. As the design researchers' roles adjust to become facilitators of specific design knowledge transfer processes and in this reformulation, design is understood as a contextual practice that engages creative communities working "in an economy of reciprocity" (Janzer & Weinstein 2014). Such *participatory design* projects can potentially generate design outcomes involving social innovation in which social enterprise and knowledge transfer can become the strategic directives and motivation to instigate and drive social change through design. This process can indicate a convergence of *participatory design* and *social design* and lead to possible extended definitions of *participatory design* as a "constellation of design initiatives aiming at the construction of socio-material assemblies where social innovation can take place" (Manzini & Rizzo 2011). However, in practice this is insufficient by itself and risks remaining in the consensual *social design* paradigm trap becoming merely an outcome of a social process Miessen (2011). Clearly in *Miaoxia* the process of designing community projects cannot be disengaged from either the social enterprise that provides the software or from intangible, but significant, factors such as the increased village cohesion that resulted from the project process. But what distinguishes these projects in *Miaoxia* from remaining in the incremental change approach of social design is their transformative engagement with the social and the economic. In other words, they activated social change and opened possibilities for social innovation in the village.

Likewise, recent developments in *action research* put greater emphasis on social enterprise, development of new social forms and organisations, concordant with wider societal changes. These help move the conceptual focus from a reflective practice towards a projective one, but one which is embedded in a social context. The method used in *Miaoxia* was *participatory action research* (PAR), which has been used by community workers to strengthen and support the capacity of communities to grow and change (McTaggart, 1996; Zuber-Skerritt, 1996). Within *Miaoxia* this was effected by having social workers embedded in the village who live, work and research, but as well initiate, facilitate, and become very active members of the community, helping to initiate social change and organisation. Whilst *action research* emphasises activist participation as "communities of inquiry and action," that evolve as the community of co-researchers grows or changes (Reason and Bradbury, 2008), the capacity to evolve is generally absent from *participatory design* approaches that are not well equipped to evaluate impacts and social change after the "design process" is concluded. Within a design context, the reflective practices developed within *action research* often engage the projective practices of *participatory design* as an "oscillation" between "knowledge generation and critical informed reflection" (Froth & Axup 2006, Schon 1983, O'Brien 1998). In *Miaoxia,* this was at times a symbiotic process, and at other times an agonistic one, whereby divergences reflected differing value sets, not only between knowledge domains but also with the social and procedural aspects of the project process.

As outlined in detail elsewhere (Hasdell 2016), for *Miaoxia* not all steps are consensual and not all are antagonistic. The processes are never as clear as the conceptualised cyclical development model suggests. In fact, the steps of design initiation and design development, the various participatory cycles, final design solutions, as well as design implementation provide a whole range of complex negotiations and social situations that change according to group dynamics, collective mood, misunderstandings, disagreements, that may be affected if not derailed by who has the loudest voice, design anxieties, fear of new ideas, and many other variables. Even the group members may change between cycles and affect the social dynamics. All of these required a series of linked and complicated negotiations in a constantly changing situation, which necessitated the participants to be flexibile or adaptabile through ad-hoc or on-the-spot solutions to concerns at times, and at other times it required the project leaders to refocus the project framework to enable participants' greater understanding or positioning with respect to the key issues. In *Miaoxia* the critical inflections during the process can be easily understood as key moments of crisis and conflict that radically shifted the project direction and development. It can be observed that these inflections tested the processes of actualisation of change and transformation in the village and the real world dynamics and parameters –both tangible and intangible - that can so easily disrupt these. The dynamics only become more predictable in later stages of the design process, once the new forms of social order are in place. This negotiated process, a transitional *Parliament of things* that allowed a transition of the structures and organisational matrix of the village, such that the villages initiated specific systems of profit sharing and service provision for the infirm and elderly.

Obviously external agents (social workers and designers) who come into a context such as *Miaoxia,* who bring new mechanisms of engagement, modes of mediation, and ideas may disrupt the pre-existing patterns. This clearly adds to the underlying complexity. *Participatory design* and *action research* processes are not simple in such contexts, even in small communities. The disparities of value sets and knowledge domains means all parties and stakeholders will have very different interpretations of community and self-interest at different moments in the process. In actualisation, the complexities of negotiating land-use, sharing collective responsibilities, identifying roles, the formation of social enterprises, or the development of common understandings (linguistic and in terms of design language) for shared visions and project briefs, in effect activated and negotiated very different levels of complex knowledge translation, exchange (on multi-lateral levels between different knowledge domains).[2] In collaborative project situations such as *Miaoxia,* commonalities in communication and knowledge transfer may facilitate better integration, but the definition of new practices of *social design activism* were marked by the moments of agonistic negotiation and near conflict. In fact, it is these critical inflection points that define new domains, and help to push *participatory design* out of the "problem-solution" consensual paradigm. Furthermore, the knowledge generation resulting from these processes can be an outcome that indicates not merely data but new pathways, connections, and social constructions that potentially open up new hybrid fields of knowledge.

The temptation to see the processes in *Miaoxia* as simple, because it is in a small, rural context, miss out on the underlying complexities in pro-cesses between disciplines, cultures, socio-economic classes, technology, process, and praxis and all the associated knowledge transfers that were necessary on many different levels, from

the tacit to the conceptual, between domains and languages as well. Drawing from *Miaoxia,* we can see the complex engagement and intertwining of the social and the physi-cal within some of these complex registers. Firstly, it needs to be stated that there were no permissions sought or granted for any of these outcomes. Secondly, that the development of the initial project focus went through many distinct variations and different sites before negotiating the agreed direction and brief, and the social enterprise and cooperative framework through multi-level engagement of both social workers and designers. This negotiation eventually aligned the social stakeholders together with the desires for specific income-generating spaces and facilities. As a second illustration, a discussion later in the kitchen project on whether the main space should be divided between the kitchen and the dining area (a cultural issue because most rural buildings are functionally separated into discrete rooms) or whether it should be kept open to provide a social space with a fireplace for the winter, was debated at length and was approached with a mix of discussion and design strategy. The final outcome was to postpone this decision for six months so the villagers would use the space during the winter and see the benefits to keeping the space open themselves; a process that took many meetings to determine, as it went counter to commonly understood social and cultural norms in the village.

It is also worth noting that many *participatory design* projects undergo stages of indeterminacy and uncertainty. This can be in the definition of outcome or within the complex processes engaged to different degrees in the different stages of design, due to the complex nature of participation and divergent stakeholder views. The importance of knowledge (generation and transfer) as parts of the interconnection of the social and the design process on the one hand, and between the different heterogeneous fields of knowledge and the negotiations these entail, cannot be understated in a project such as *Miaoxia*. They act as conduits through which the formerly discrete fields of knowledge require often-complex processes of translation and negotiation, for instance, between the tacit knowledge of a craftsperson and the theoretical knowledge of a scholar. The processes therefore foster exchange between different stakeholders, participants, and researchers on many different registers. Further, if the recombination of different knowledge fields generates new forms of knowledge that can (but do not always) contribute to the ecology of knowledge, *social design* can help structure and materialise this as outcome and process.

Towards design social ecologies

The wider rubric of *social design* in Manzini's (2011) view is the tendency of design to become networked as a mix of material and immaterial systems connected to places and people. He suggests that design approaches can become socially innovative or transformative as cultural practices and agencies developing "open design programs," "distributed design agencies," or "design lab networks." Further, as design disciplines seek ways to respond to broader social changes, there is a need for new tools, methodologies, and frameworks to engage and embed transformative design processes in social contexts, and in new modes of practice. His premise is that this emerging context impacts the professional and academic boundaries of design disciplines and social practice. It can be argued that Manzini embraces the altruistic aspects of social design and maintains its systemic properties over its transformative potentials, the contestation here is that this thinking needs to go much further.

Loosely drawing from Ivan Illich' renowned writings and critique on the technocratic society and the need for a concept of conviviality (Illich

1973), we can pose the question of: How are we to see the transformation and impacts of design social? Are its various outcomes measurable, quantifiable? Do its temporal lived dimensions reveal the manifest outcomes of social design, or, for that matter, design activism as significant, impactful, and how? Further, how are we to understand the properties of thingness – both as social assembly and as a thing with meaning? Does this represent a social assembly or a quasi-object that are in part social construct and in part the manifestation of design outcome as in places like *Miaoxia*, irrespective of whether it is design *for* or *with* the social?

I contest that design and its social milieu, when considered together, should be considered not only as conjoined in process or concept as the field of social design implies, but implicated within each other symbiotically as a kind of synthetic design social ecosystem. This parallels the idea of a "second nature'" that I have written elsewhere (Hasdell 2006).[3] Understanding the social as a complex milieu – as an environment within which design engages and forms new relations and engagements allows us to position design social as going beyond the linear concept of infrastructuring, in the formation of a design ecology – as referenced earlier – one in which the new design becomes a constituent part that operates within the social milieu in the best of cases. This integrative approach, as the consideration of inputs and outputs, stakeholders, regulatory or feedback systems involving different knowledge fields in a continual process, becomes integral to the specific project development. Through the nuanced integration of the different domains and socio-material assemblages, the situating of resultant processes and contributing outcomes constitute a form of an ecology of practice for social deign or design activism, able to be active and innovative in both the social and in design. These generate a web of different situations, negotiations, intersecting or contradictory knowledge fields, and at the moments of indeterminacy indicate the outer boundaries of the body politic and the intersection of the known and the unknown.

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Notes

1. The author, together with Anders Johansson and Tim Jachna conducted this in 1993 as part of the EASA summer programme.

2. Note that locally specific socio-cultural modes and practices are coupled with the complexities of social structures, kinships, hierarchies and values in both intangible and tangible forms. Specifically in *Miaoxia* villagers have 70 years of experience negotiating the ever shifting centralized policies and their impacts determined by the Government and their local representatives during each 5 year plan. The various rural and urban policy shifts that occurred and are still occurring keep the agrarian communities in a constant state of flux. Their resilience and adaptability should not be underestimated.

3. Reference can be made to the conversation theory as developed by the cybernetician Gordon Pask. His approach, whilst cognizant of the fields of computing and electronics chose to focus instead on human social interaction and the importance of feedback and disagreement through his 'Conversation Theory.' Notably the collaboration between the architect Cedric Price and Pask illustrates the possibility of an "underdetermined" socially transformative architecture, one arising from the dialogical. In such an approach the design of "calculated uncertainty" arises whereby the architect or designer cannot predetermine outcomes. Instead a degree of indeterminacy allows for uncertainties in program and changes of use during the 'life' of the building. This essentially "discards the traditional role of the architect as form and function giver and allows people the freedom to control and shape their environment and choose the ways and means to do so." Haque, (2007), The Architectural Relevance of Gordon Pask, in Architectural Design, vol 77, issue 4, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., London.

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Notes

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Figure 9 (this page): Miaoxia community kitchen built in 2015 (foreground) and guesthouse (background) finished in 2017. Source: *Author.*

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