

Designing future practices

Notes for talk at MakingCraftingDesigning symposium, Akademia Schloss Solitude, February 2011. Please note this is not a published paper. An edited book may result from the symposium, with chapter based on this talk.

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Introduction

The question I want to pose today is, what is it that designers are designing when they do design? We think we know the answer to this because it's clear that many designers design things: stuff. The tangible and digital objects that are part of day-to-day life.

But in the past decade something has been happening in professional design practice, and in other fields that traditionally we didn't think of as design, that makes it important to revisit this question.

- There are design agencies that say they help tackle big social challenges.
- There are design entrepreneurs who set up new ways for public services such as the police to engage with the public.
- There are consultancies using design-led approaches to design new social ventures to reduce dependence on the state.
- There are multi-disciplinary teams who say they use a design process to re-think environments, products, experiences, and curricula for schools.
- There are people working in international security who want to work with professional designers to redesign disarmament programmes within the UN context using local knowledge to design local action.
- And of course there are conferences and workshops at which people come together to try to make sense of all of this.

Ways of thinking about what designers design

First let's review some of the different ways of thinking about what designers design.

1. The first is the artefact-centred approach. This is embedded in the ways that most Western design education is currently taught, as you can see from this slide from a well-known art and design school. This institution offers post-graduate courses based on different kinds of designed thing, from communications to textiles to products.

Although there are projects and indeed courses that challenge this convention, with moves to “post-disciplinary design” or to a generalised “design thinking”, the artefact-centred categorization is broadly true. To be more accurate, the focus of design is not just an object, but the object *and* a user’s engagement with it. An echo of this object-based division of design is the idea of there being “four orders” of design which are signs, things, actions and interactions which are thought of as placements for design activity (Buchanan 1992; 2001).

However there are a number of problems with this approach. The most important is that a focus on specific types of thing, such as a toothbrush, can miss the situated nature of our engagements with designed things in relation to many other things in our social worlds. Taking one type of artefact and idealised user in isolation from the practices and contexts that link it to many others, amputates many of the important sets of relations that make things meaningful and purposeful.

2. A second way of thinking about what designers design is to say they design systems. This has been developed by scholars and practitioners influenced by anthropology and sociology over the past two decades. Key names here are Pelle Ehn, Winograd and Flores, and Lucy Suchman, and others working in the communities known as Participatory Design (PD) and Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW), working mostly on the design of computer-based systems. Their insights came from studying not just artefacts – although those are important – but what people do with them, in spite of them, around them and in relation to them. The focus on users’ work practices shifted attention away from artefacts to the idea of designing systems that are both social and technical. An important idea here was that agency was distributed – it wasn’t just the user that mattered (privileged by a humanistic or rational approach), or the artefact (as hoped for by some designers), but rather the integration of people and things in places in relation to many of other socio-material arrangements that constitutes the world of design.

I cannot hope to summarise this huge body of work. But I will refer to a paper from 2008 by Pelle Ehn, in which he does so, and directly addresses the evolving object of design. Using Wittgenstein’s language games, Ehn talks about design games and focuses on two kinds of game. The first design game is what happens in design projects, when the focus is *design-for-use* before use. The tradition of Participatory Design with which he was very involved in developing has a strong focus on designing with people and understanding their uses of things. The second design game takes place *after* a design project, at what Ehn calls “use-time”, when the designers are finished with their work, and are possibly even dead, but still people are using their designs. Thinking ahead to use-time, the object of design is then to create design games which users will engage with in their own ways, understanding that this can never be final or complete.

Although this is useful, there are still questions to explore. One is how to conceptualize in more detail design-after-design: what happens when users engage with designs and infrastructures after project time, at use time; and what happens when they engage with artefacts in quite different contexts to the ones

the designer imagined and designed for. A first question is working out an analytical category that helps us think about what that future use is. Can we talk about designing design games when the actors are extremely dispersed in time and space? A second question is, how do some kinds of usage stabilise and become routine? A third is, how do different timeframes affect the idea of designers designing design games for design by others after design?

3. In search of ways of understanding this better, I have been drawn to work by scholars in the social sciences who offer another way of thinking about the social world in which designers design, specifically theories of practice. Key writers here are Theodore Schatzki and Elizabeth Shove, drawing on earlier work by thinkers such as Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens and also Heidegger.

Now, Ehn's work is centrally concerned with use as practice, based on the idea that it is through our practices that we construct reality. Further, he says "As designers we are involved in reforming practice" (Ehn, 1988: 147). But he stops short of saying this is what designers design.

In what follows I will aim to show why thinking about designing future practices offers something useful to theories of design, and suggest what the consequences might be.

Designing future practices

The proposition I want to explore is that what designers are designing is future practices. I want to see what the opportunities might be of thinking of design in this way.

There is not time to go into practice theory in detail. One important idea is that practices are made up of several elements, which cannot be taken in isolation. Andreas Reckwitz (2002) describes practices as "a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge" (Reckwitz 2002: 249). A second idea is that practices are dynamic – they can change over time as different elements change. A third is a focus on routines – the repeated, mundane activities that constitute the social world.

As Elizabeth Shove has pointed out in her work on the environmental impact of everyday practices of consumption, new designs for power showers lead to much higher individual water consumption at a time when authorities in many countries want us to conserve water. But instead of looking at bits of what goes on in showering in isolation, Shove argues that we understand how the contemporary practice of showering has come to be – combining both materials, stories and images, and knowledge and skills. Trying to change one of these, without attending to the other entwined elements of the practice, is, she argues, unlikely to be successful.

The idea of practices, therefore, presents a way of ordering what happens in the future in relation to designed artefacts. It shifts attention away from infrastructures or design games that some designers had a hand in designing. In the future, at use time, there are people and their bodies and minds engaging with stuff within particular sets of relations, which constitute particular meanings. Design is always unfinished because practices mobilize artefacts and people and bring them into new kinds of relation with one another.

Ways of revealing practice

Most designers don't think about their work in this way, although there are inklings of it. The consultancy IDEO, for example, talks in terms of cell-phoning, rather than cell-phones. But in general the default concepts in contemporary design practice are things, users, and contexts, but not social structures and ordering.

I want to offer up an artefact from professional design practice, which is heading in this direction, specifically the customer journey map created by designers of services.

Service designers see their work as concerned with designing all the tangible and intangible elements of a service, both the digital and material touchpoints and scripts within the service encounter. Although service designers do not talk in terms of designing practices, all the elements I outlined earlier are there in the customer journey map – there are people, minds, knowledge, stories, artefacts, structure and agency. The customer journey map is not the only artefact that is required to do this design work, but it is one that tries to articulate the multiple dimensions of using a designed thing in practice, and understanding these routines to be situated, embodied and relational.

I think this view of what designers design is relevant not just to designers of services but to designers of products, communications, buildings and also policies and strategies. It does not diminish the need to pay attention to artefacts – far from it – but it understands the meaning, value and effects of artefacts to be constituted in practice in relation to bodies, minds, stories and knowledge.

Practices presenting a choice

I said earlier that Ehn's work was based on the idea of practice but that he drew back from stating that designers design practices. For Ehn, what designers design are cultural-material design games (1988; 2008). The context of his early work was a Scandinavian approach to system design that found ways to involve workers in the design process for political reasons. This involved doing system design differently to serve the users – to make the resulting computer artefacts work better in relation to people's work practices ie to design new computer artefacts that fit with practices, and sometimes creating new ones.

In contrast, Tony Fry (2007; 2009) has argued designers should design new practices to change habitus, to use Bourdieu's term. Fry's concern is how design

is implicated in making an unsustainable world. Designers need to understand the effects of their stuff on the world and their role in reproducing a way of living which is not sustainable, and to change it into one that is. His response is to propose a “redirective practice” with the ambition of designing another habitus, so that as humans we have a different way of being-in-the-world.

So here is an interesting dilemma – whether to design future practices that are based on how people are now, as Ehn argues, or whether to design future practices that change how people are in the future, as Fry suggests. The former comes out of a Scandinavian commitment to a particular kind of democratic participation; the latter emerges from a deep concern with whether there will be a future in the future. Both are political but each has quite different implications.

Clearly there is no right answer to this, but even framing the question highlights the importance of design’s role in world-making.

Implications for teaching and learning and practice

Briefly, I finish with some suggestions about how this approach might change how designers practice and how they are educated.

Although some designers have been moving towards a kind of dematerialized design thinking or to trans-disciplinary design, away from objects, people still need to design stuff. So my proposal is, that designers design stuff but understand the objects they make to be part of existing practices or involved in creating new routines in the future that are unfinished, contingent and, importantly, to some extent unknowable.

The practice-based approach affects how designers of stuff conceive of what they are doing in these ways:

1. It draws our attention to how new designs can create new meanings, knowledge and skills, and potentially new ways of being in the world.
2. It highlights the unintended consequences of designs, which cannot always be known in advance, yet for which designers might consider themselves accountable.
3. It emphasizes the dispersed agency of the various actors that constitute future designs: and makes the designed stuff always in relation to other stuff and people.
4. It raises questions about the time-frames over which designers’ work has effects.

How to bring these ideas into teaching and learning? I speak as someone who for over five years has been teaching exactly this approach to MBA students taking my elective in design. As managers and entrepreneurs, these students are already doing a kind of design activity although they rarely think of it like that. They design products, services, projects, ventures and organizations which create new kinds of practice involving both bodies, minds, things, agency and so on, disrupting existing practices and seeking to modify or replace them with a new kind.

Among other things in my class I

- (a) Disrupt the conventions of the lecture theatre arrangement designed for Harvard Business School style case teaching by having students arrange themselves as they want to around the room creating visual artefacts together in teams, a symbolic disruption of one form of education by another;
- (b) Create opportunities for people from non-design backgrounds to understand the importance of material artefacts in organizations and their various instantiations as products and services within organizational practices; and
- (c) Give them opportunities to use designerly methods such as mapping the service journey or visualizing the service ecology.

Whether this approach is taught to MBAs or to more conventional design students, one important question is then what kinds of knowledge are required. I would say a passing knowledge of sociology and anthropology is essential now that design has gone irretrievably social. But if you trawl the websites of design schools, the Venn diagram you usually see shows intersecting circles labelled “design”, “business” and “technology”. Ignoring the social worlds in which designed artefacts acquire their value and meaning is a weakness in much current design education.

Conclusion

To conclude, I have argued that although we still fall back on the idea that designers design stuff, it’s more than time to bring in work from Participatory Design, CSCW and other design-based fields that have drawn extensively on anthropology and social studies of science. The contributions here have included attending to users’ work practices; to see agency as distributed; and to be concerned with thinking about design-after-design at use time. I then explored work from theories of practice that offer a slightly different way of thinking about the things that designers design emphasizing routinised ways of doing things – the habits that we take up and the habits that take us up. I believe this is a resource for designers – whose stuff already has unintended consequences. Thinking in terms of future practices offers one way of bringing these more directly into view. However whether designers want to change practices to serve people better, or change practices to change people, is a question that designers must answer for themselves.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Simon Blyth and Cameron Tonkinwise for their feedback on earlier drafts.